

DAWN's Contribution on Social Equity, Gender Equality and Women's Human Rights

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If development is to be sustainable for all, it is necessary to address social inequalities within the goals of economic and social development, and environmental sustainability. Social inequalities are a systemic and recurring source of often long-held socially-constructed discrimination, disempowerment and deprivation that deny people their human rights. Almost twenty years after governments agreed by consensus to the Beijing Platform for Action, gender-based discrimination and inequality persist in many societies, compromising the rights of women and girls to a happy, healthy and peaceful life.

Gender inequality expresses itself in different dimensions: economic, political, social and cultural. For women in the South, it is important to understand the inter-linked sources of this injustice. The disempowerment of women begins at the most intimate and personal level. Lack of control over their bodies, reproduction and sexuality, their constraints within limited socially ascribed roles of mother and wife, and their subordination under men within households are important to underscore. Economic policy makers continue to show bias favouring a male breadwinner and assume that the “worker” is male and has a “wife” who will tend to the family’s care. In this model women are assumed to bring only “supplemental” household income, despite worldwide data showing that households now depend on two income earners. Women continue to lack equal access to and control over financial, natural and other material resources, as well as facing sustained discrimination and segregation in labour markets. The interweaving factors of family, kinship and societal structures and economic relations underpin the unequal representation of women’s voices in both private and public spheres. This exacerbates continuing exclusion from political participation and leadership, and persistence of violence against women and girls in the household, workplace and public spaces. Discrimination through laws, based on cultural and religious values, that are not respectful of human rights continue to deny women and girls access to justice, and similarly penalize social groups such as those with diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, persons living with HIV/AIDS, people with disabilities, minorities, and others.

We highlight here some of the most significant sources and manifestations of gender inequality in this period of financial globalization. We identify the key priorities that the SDGs should consider in framing goals and specific targets to overcome social inequalities, and environmental degradation and to move forward to a more equal, equitable and human rights-based society.

Gender inequality is not an unintended consequence of economic development. On the contrary, it is firmly rooted in the current dynamic of global capitalism. In this period of predatory financial speculation and recurrent financial and economic crises, addressing gender inequality requires us to examine and anticipate impacts of macroeconomic policy and regulation on poor people. The political economy of development; the scope and composition of public expenditure; the features of public revenue collection; the impact of sector policies on employment; the profile of social policies, all take place in a gendered

terrain, where women remain by and large economically subordinated to men and therefore are affected differently by finance-driven globalization.

The **sexual division of labour** (both paid and unpaid), which is at the core of gender-based economic inequality, is changing much too slowly. Women still face the heaviest burden of unpaid care work in all societies. This violates women's rights and affects their wellbeing, and also prevents women from fully participating in the labour market. Thus, women remain over-represented in precarious lower income work such as services and manufacturing that are too often found in the informal sector, with the worst working conditions and non-existent social protection. The gender wage gap, while narrowing in some countries, remains intense and widespread in the economic South. Huge barriers in accessing decent work also prevent many women, including migrant workers, from enjoying social protection, keeping them excluded from accessing a variety of benefits, especially pensions in old age. Women, in addition, are still discriminated against by economic, legal, social and cultural norms that limit their access to and control over financial assets and natural resources, especially agricultural land, fisheries and aquaculture and that prevent them from developing their own enterprises and economic strategies that have been shown to be more sustainable, and compatible with the protection of the environment.

As a result, **poverty** remains deep and almost inevitable for millions of women and girls in the economic South. Some governments have responded by making women primary beneficiaries of conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs. While these programs entail women's access to regular financial resources that are tied to the health and education of their children, they are generally designed as a poverty alleviation program without any linkage to other sectors such as employment and enterprise development. As such, CCTs can end up reinforcing women's caring role and dependence on government, while at the same time moving them further away from decent paid work, and sustainable livelihoods.

Feminization of migration is also explained by the feminization of poverty, the development of global care chains and the overexploitation of women from the economic South. Migrant women and their families (especially dependent children and elder people) are among those most vulnerable to sustained violation of their most basic human rights.

Sexual and gender based violence remains persistent all around the world. Legal norms and government practices may themselves reinforce different forms of sexual and gender-based violence. Government programs to eliminate violence against women and girls may not even exist, or may in many cases be insufficiently funded and inefficiently implemented, partly due to male resistance from members of the bureaucracy, police, military and judiciary. Police and security forces and judicial systems, that should provide legal protection and justice to survivors, have often failed to respond to the needs of survivors or inadequately worked to end impunity for perpetrators of gender-based violence.

The lack of social, physical and sexual autonomy of women and girls is evident in the denial of their **sexual and reproductive health and rights**. Comprehensive sexuality education is restricted and sexual and reproductive health services are inaccessible or inadequate. Excessively high rates of unwanted teenage pregnancy, maternal mortality, and HIV/AIDS infection highlight the urgency to address unmet needs for quality, comprehensive and integrated SRH services including safe and effective contraception, especially for the poorest 40% of the population, and the most marginalized and disadvantaged groups such as

women living in hard to reach and rural areas, migrant women, adolescent girls, women and girls at risk of or living with HIV/AIDS, women with disabilities, women with diverse sexual orientation and gender identity, trans people and intersex people, and indigenous people.

Women also lack access to **political participation and public decision-making**. Despite some progress in women's representation at the parliamentary level (mainly due to quota and TSM strategies), women still occupy a very small proportion of electoral seats, from the local to the national levels, with great unevenness between regional and international arenas. In some regions there are still states with few if any women representatives in national legislatures. This is the result of the many restrictions women face, including substantive discrimination, the heavy burden of family and social responsibilities, limited access to information and political resources, as well as facing many forms of violence and harassment when they run for office.

In order to effectively address inequalities, particularly gender inequality, the SDGs must place gender equality and women's human rights at the centre, as well as cutting across all dimensions of the post-2015 framework. The specification of goals, targets and indicators must do the following:

1. Address the structural foundations and sources of gender inequality and injustice

- Macroeconomic policies, including government expenditures and revenue, fiscal, monetary and trade policies, as well as sector policies (for agriculture, fisheries and aquaculture, and other industries and services) should be consistent with social equity and gender equality, environmental sustainability, and human rights goals. It is an error to implement macroeconomic policies that focus on growth rates, trade volumes and financial targets alone without explicit social and environmental goals that aim first of all to improve people's quality of life, and maintain a sustainable ecosystem. In particular, economic investments and public policies should guarantee people's economic and social rights, rather than being driven by the financial interests of large corporations.
- Access to economic assets should be democratized. For this, inheritance, ownership, and financial rules and regulations norms should be revised and transformed so as to address structural barriers to women's access to and decision-making over financial, natural and other economic resources.
- Inequity and inequality cannot be tackled just by attending to their manifestations, but instead by attacking their most profound sources. Redistributing wealth, opportunity, and power are key actions in this regard. For women, this includes reducing the heavy and inequitable burdens of unpaid care work.
- All public policies, including macroeconomic policies, should be evaluated for their impact on gender equity and equality, and data and statistical systems must be geared for this.
- Environmental degradation seriously damages people's livelihoods and very survival, and enormously challenges women's ability to feed and sustain their families and communities. It can no longer be dismissed or downplayed as an externality in economic, social development and human rights. Climate change, ocean acidification and environmental degradation call for an

approach to sustainable development that recognises boundaries to the biosphere. These boundaries cannot continue to be violated by economic and environmental business-as-usual if we are collectively to step back from dangerous and critical biosphere thresholds or 'tipping points'.

2. Transform the sexual division of labour by expanding care services and redistributing paid and unpaid work

- A fairer and more just social organization of care is needed in order to redistribute care responsibilities and the burden of paid and unpaid work. Expanding public care services and making them accessible to the needs of diverse households, is a key component of any redistribution strategy.
- The economic value of unpaid care work should be made explicit and considered in macroeconomic accounting and policies. The best way of recognizing the contribution of unpaid care work to economic development should be tailored to each national situation.
- Work-life balance policies should be fostered in every country and for all citizens. These can include flexible workplace hours, extension of maternal, paternal and parental leave, improving care services, and adapting the organization of paid work to enable men and women to equally value and perform care work that new technologies now make possible. The length and pattern of working hours must be reconsidered in order to expand possibilities of time allocation for care work, and to diversify women's ability to allocate time to both paid and unpaid work.

3. Remove persistent gender discrimination in the labour market and improve access to, and decision making over resources and economic assets

- Persistent mechanisms of gender discrimination in the labour market should be removed through a variety of measures, such as: enforcing standards and laws that penalize sex-segregation and gender-based discrimination at work; adopting legal frameworks and promoting concrete regulatory mechanisms for monitoring and implementation so as to guarantee equal pay for equal work; providing incentives for employers to expand jobs for women in sectors where gender disparity is wide; providing start-up incentives and resources for women-led businesses and training for women.
- Social protection institutions should be improved and expanded, especially in countries where informal work represents a large share of total employment. Here, a rights-based social protection floor may represent an innovative framework to advance universal social protection.
- Access to social services, including healthcare, education, water, sanitation, housing, transport subsidies, energy, child and elder care, should be expanded. Public social investment should also guarantee the quality of those services, as well as their adaptation to the needs of diverse women and girls, of all ages;
- Gender issues and women's needs should be included in trade union agendas, and in collective bargaining processes.

4. **Guarantee women's sexual and reproductive health and rights as human rights**

- Undertake legal reforms in order to guarantee on an urgent basis the sexual and reproductive rights of all people, especially girls and women, and on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Address social, legal and policy barriers that prevent women and girls from accessing reproductive and sexual health services such as discriminatory laws, parental or spousal consent requirements, stigma, social and cultural norms.
- Health care services must be adapted to different women's needs in line with the protection and promotion of their human rights. Comprehensive and integrated SRH services (including at a minimum contraception, safe abortion, maternity care, prevention and treatment of sexually transmitted infections including HIV, sexuality education, and prevention and treatment for survivors of violence including rape) must be accessible to all.
- Provide comprehensive sexuality education for all adolescents above the age of 10 in order to empower especially young girls, and to promote values of respect for human rights, tolerance, gender equality and non-violence among all adolescents and youth, in and out of school.
- Prevent and eliminate all forms of gender-based violence. Laws and their inter-sectoral implementation must be strengthened in order to protect and effectively support women and girls survivors and guarantee their universal access to essential health services. Policy and legal reforms are needed in many countries in order to end the impunity of perpetrators, including those in positions of authority such as security and police, teachers, and religious personnel, who are responsible for violence against women and children.

5. **Guarantee women's political representation and participation**

- Structural barriers to political representation and participation of women must be systematically addressed. Legal norms and every day practices that prevent women's political participation should be reformed.
- Temporary special measures (such as quota mechanisms) may be adopted in order to support the rise of women in political leadership and decision-making. Government commitment is needed in order to guarantee transparency, access to information and effective participation of women in different levels (executive and parliament, national and local), including decision-making processes and budget planning and accountability.
- An environment that is free from gender-based violence and harassment is essential in order to guarantee women's participation, at both the political and community levels.