

Gender Equality

Striving for Justice in
an Unequal World


EXECUTIVE SUMMARY





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Executive summary

After Beijing: Uneven progress in an unequal world

Ten years after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing an important question that many women's organizations around the world will be asking is how much has been achieved in the past decade? For those interested in the quest for gender equality, the answers are difficult to find as well as being ambiguous.

There have clearly been some notable gains for women over the period: increased visibility in elected assemblies and state institutions; some closing of gender gaps in primary, and to a lesser extent secondary, school enrolment; a larger female presence in the labour market and in labour flows that cross international borders; and lower fertility rates.

Such changes in women's lives are associated with the social transformations that attend economic development, but they are not simply the by-product of economic growth. In many instances change in women's social position has been instigated or accelerated by state reforms and social movements. Women's movements, both national and transnational, took advantage of the changed political context of the 1990s to advance women's rights. One of the remarkable achievements was in bringing issues of sexual and reproductive health and rights, violence against women, and inequality of power in gender relations to the centre of global and national debates.

The persistence of gender inequalities

Such positive outcomes must be qualified in the light of continuing gender inequalities, and a less than favourable economic and political environment.

Despite women's greater numerical presence in the world of work and in the domain of politics, the narrowing of these broadly defined gender gaps conceals marked gender asymmetries and segmentation, which place limits on women's access to income, authority and power. Declining fertility continues to improve women's life chances in their reproductive years in many countries, but in some countries it has also been associated with an increase in artificially high ratios of males to females in the population, because of discriminatory behaviour towards females. At a more general level, the ambivalent nature of women's achievements is illustrated in the "feminization" of the labour force, whereby women's access to paid work has increased in most countries, but coincided with a deterioration in the terms and conditions of work for many.

There is no single explanation for these various outcomes. Gender inequalities are deeply entrenched in all societies, and are reproduced through a variety of practices and institutions, including policy interventions. A question posed in this report is: what contribution does development policy make to bringing about favourable or unfavourable conditions for achieving greater gender equality?

The disabling policy environment

The neoliberal economic agenda, which rose to dominance in the early 1980s, was centred on fiscal austerity, and the strengthening of private property rights and profit-driven markets, and called for the “rollback” of the state. While inflation was brought under control in many countries, price stability was achieved at the expense of growth and job creation. Financial crises and economic volatility became more frequent, and income inequalities widened all over the world.

In the absence of adequate safety nets, economic liberalization placed the livelihoods of low-income households under severe stress. Under conditions of economic hardship, low-income women became increasingly visible as economic actors outside the household sphere, as casual agricultural labourers, in the overcrowded urban informal economy, and as migrants. Meanwhile, the creeping commercialization of welfare services, particularly in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, meant that poorer households had to adjust by shifting more of the care into the household and onto the shoulders of women and girls.

The social crisis that has continued to hit many parts of the world has been expressed most dramatically in civil unrest and political turmoil, including outbreaks and continuations of civil wars, in which underlying economic and social distress are among the causal dynamics. In such zones of insecurity and pervasive violence, few escape the disastrous impacts of warfare, whether or not they are actively involved as combatants.

Bringing gender back in

The analytical approach advanced in this report assumes that societies, their social relations, economies and power structures contain deeply etched gender divisions, in the same way that they reflect class, ethnic and racial divisions. Inequalities based on sex are a pervasive feature of all societies; they are the product of socially constructed power relations, norms and practices.

While there is increasing concern with gender inequalities in some arenas—at the intrahousehold level in particular, as well as in the legal domain where “traditions” and “customs” have an important role to play—the attention paid to gender

in public policy is often selective. The resulting silences and omissions are revealing: for example, markets and macroeconomic flows (trade, capital) are not always subjected to gender analysis, the implicit assumption being that they are essentially benign and gender-neutral. However, the report finds that this is true neither of the economy nor of the family; nor do states, communities, political parties or “progressive” social movements necessarily operate in gender-neutral ways.

The analysis undertaken by the report is largely of social relations, and particularly gender relations, across a wide spectrum of institutions. The primary focus, however, is on women, understood as differentiated by class, race, ethnicity and caste. It is important to keep the spotlight on women, in view of the recent shifts in thinking (and language) both in development bureaucracies and in some strands of academic research, which have sometimes inadvertently overlooked the continuing significance of women’s subordination. This does not imply that men are invariably advantaged, even if they might be, in relation to women. Masculinist cultures can be counter-productive or even destructive for men, and while men are the main perpetrators of violence, both domestic and public, they are also the main victims of violence outside the domestic sphere. Nor does the emphasis on women’s subordination imply a static picture of unchanging gender relations: rather, it is important to acknowledge that gender hierarchies constantly change as old forms dissolve and are recreated.

Current policy agendas: Implications for gender equality

The political and policy context of recent years has presented some new opportunities, as well as challenges, for the attainment of gender equality and women’s rights. The fact that social policies and “good governance” reforms are now high on the development policy agenda seems to offer an important entry point for addressing gender-based inequalities in access to resources and services, and gender-specific capacity and accountability failures on the part of the state.

The now dominant policy package—known as the “post-Washington consensus”—does however retain some of the

core elements of economic orthodoxy, supplemented by the “good governance” agenda of democracy, “participation” and “community ownership”. Behind the apparent consensus forged by a shared vocabulary of “poverty” and “social protection”, conflicting understandings of social policy vie for attention, based on different values, priorities and understandings of state responsibility. Similarly, while a broad understanding of the “good governance” agenda would embrace political liberalization, human rights, and address the problems of social inequality as part of a fundamental commitment to democracy, critics contend that such governance reforms have in fact been dominated by the imposition of undifferentiated and abstract blueprints for institutional reform. This has tended to exclude gender equality. However some governance reforms, in particular the decentralization of political power to local government bodies and municipalities, seem to have facilitated women’s political representation at the local level, with the potential to impact favourably on policy. Such positive outcomes may be difficult to achieve where traditional patriarchal systems at local levels resist women’s active presence in local power structures.

Indeed, a phenomenon to emerge with particular force in recent years is that of “identity politics”, especially in the form of movements that mobilize around ethnic, racial and religious identities. While there have been tensions between some versions of identity-based claims and notions of gender equality, these are not necessarily irreconcilable. But some radical attacks on human rights and women’s rights agendas have resulted from the resurgence of religious identities that include the

governments compromise the interests of their citizens to accommodate global forces, is unlikely to be a world that secures gender equality. For this reason, women’s rights activists have increasingly been devoting more of their attention and energies to the larger structures of global power, and the evolution of problems of global injustice relating to macro-economic trends. Global economic justice is also central to the achievement of women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights. Yet bringing the interdependence between global economic justice and gender justice into sharper focus for policy makers is no easy task, and once achieved, requires considerable effort to bring about gender-sensitive policy change.

Moreover, the global political environment in which economic justice and gender justice have to be negotiated has been less favourable in recent years. Human rights and women’s agendas, and the entire multilateral framework within which the gains of the 1990s were made, have been weakened by the current global political crisis occasioned by terrorism, militarism, war and unilateralism. If gender justice is not to slip yet further down the agenda, women’s movements will require new alliances with governmental institutions, social movements and political parties.

SECTION 1: MACROECONOMICS, WELL-BEING AND GENDER EQUALITY

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