



It is time to change the narrative about women's potential and role in contributing to a prosperous world.

Photo: Fikerte Abebe/UN Women

NO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT WITHOUT WOMEN!

Thanks to the relentless efforts of women's rights advocates from across the globe, the commitment to gender equality features prominently and comprehensively in the 2030 Agenda, cutting across every issue. But gender equality is far more than just a human right to be achieved in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). For without it, we won't be able to master the enormous challenges that humankind faces today.

By Letty Chiwara

In September 2015, the 193 Member States of the United Nations adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Comprising the 17 SDGs, 169 targets and 232 indicators, the 2030 Agenda tackles a broad range of global challenges, aiming to eradicate poverty, reduce multiple and intersecting inequalities, address climate change, end conflict and sustain peace. Building on the commitments and norms contained in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action of the United Nations (1995) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (UN CEDAW, 1979), the 2030 Agenda has a clear message: *“Development will only be sustainable if its benefits accrue equally to both women and men; and women's rights will only become a reality if they are part of broader efforts to protect the planet and ensure that all people can live with dignity and respect.”*

Unlike the Millennium Development Goals, there has been broad local ownership of the SDG agenda, and with that have come concert-

ed efforts by all actors, government, donors, and indeed civil society organisations to ensure that their investments and actions “leave no-one behind”. This principle of the SDGs is very relevant to the recognition that the world will not be able to address all the development, humanitarian, climate change, security and social challenges if development plans and actions leave out half the population – who are the women and girls. Women's role in achieving the SDGs is no longer questioned – it is a priority!



The gender discrimination still holding too many women back is holding our world back, too.

Gender equality is a right. Fulfilling this right is the best chance we have in meeting some

of the most pressing challenges of our time – from economic crises and lack of healthcare to climate change, violence against women and escalating conflicts.

Not only are women more affected by these problems, they also possess the ideas and leadership potential to solve them. The gender discrimination still holding too many women back is holding our world back, too. It is only by ensuring the rights of women and girls across all goals of the Development Agenda that we can achieve justice and inclusion, build economies that work for all, and sustain our shared environment now and for future generations. Here are some examples.

It is a well-documented fact that in most of the world, and particularly in Africa, more than 70 per cent of agricultural production is in the hands of women. A McKinsey report reveals that the economy in sub-Saharan Africa stands to grow by USD 300 billion through greater overall inclusion of women as employees,

entrepreneurs and leaders. As a significant and often dominant group involved in agriculture and household activities, women are at the forefront of efforts to push widespread adoption of clean energy technologies and practices designed to mitigate the effects of climate change, as a United Nations Women Watch report demonstrates. This applies equally to efforts to drive community involvement in environmental conservation. Similarly, as borne out by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), women's involvement in national and multinational policy dialogues on issues of climate change and environmental protection can lead to more socially relevant and impactful programmes.



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A 2015 UN Women's analysis of 40 peace building processes since the end of the Cold War shows that, in cases where women were able to exercise a strong influence on the negotiation process, there was a much higher chance of an agreement being reached than when women's groups had only weak influence or none at all. Where women were strongly influential, an agreement was almost always reached. It also became clear that peace agreements were

64 per cent less likely to fail when civil society representatives participated. Moreover, women's participation increases the probability of a peace agreement lasting at least two years by 20 per cent, and the probability of a peace agreement lasting 15 years by 35 per cent.

The participation and leadership of women in politics contributes to democratic governance and decision-making. Mixed-gender governments, parliaments and cabinets are more effective because they make informed decisions that consider a broad range of experiences and needs – hence ensuring that “no-one is left behind” in government policies, programmes and budget allocations. Women continue to play a critical role in public discourse and civil society; they have been at the forefront of many historic movements, including those advocating for basic human rights and universal suffrage, and continue to present a strong force in these spaces.

WHERE DO WE STAND?

The insights are there. But what does equal participation of women look like in reality? In 2015, the whole world came together to review 20 years of the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA). While some progress has been reported, sadly no country in the world has so far achieved gender equality. The UN Secretary General's Report confirms that if progress continues at the same pace, it will take more than 88 years to achieve gender equality in the world.

The Beijing+20 report revealed some progress on removal of discrimination in laws and adoption of new laws to promote gender equality and girls' enrolment in primary and secondary education, and to address violence against women and girls. Women's participation in the labour force has also increased in some regions. Harmful practices, such as female and child genital mutilation and early enforced marriage, have started to decline in some contexts. There have been important gains in women's representation in national parliaments in a number of countries. As reported in the UN Secretary General's Report of 2015, women's representation in national parliaments has been steadily increasing over the past 20 years. The global picture for 2014 is that women occupied 23 per cent of the seats in single or lower houses of parliament, up from twelve per cent in 1995. Significant normative advances have been made in the global agenda on women, peace and security. For example, in Africa, 19 AU Member States had, by 2015, developed and adopted National Action Plans in line with UN SCR1325 (Security Council Resolution 1325). Others, like Namibia, have a National Gender Policy and Action Plan with a specific chapter on women, peace and security.

Overall progress, however, has been unacceptably slow, with stagnation and even regression in some contexts. Change towards gender equality has not been deep enough; nor has it been made irreversible. Discrimination in the law persists in many countries, particularly in family law. Women's increasing educational

WOMEN TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES: A SUCCESS STORY FROM ETHIOPIA

Kamso Bame is a widowed mother of twelve in Wabi Batu village of Dodola District in the Oromia region of Ethiopia. Her husband, who died six years ago, used to cultivate the family's farmland with a pair of oxen. After his death, she sold the oxen to continue supporting the family and for a while, this affected their main source of living: farming. However, Kamso's membership in a village-based Abdi Boru Women's Cooperative supported by the Rural Women Economic Empowerment Joint Programme (JPRWEE) – a global initiative by several UN organisations – was key to unlocking her opportunities in many ways. Through the co-operative, Kamso was able to move from the hard labour of ploughing with oxen to cultivating the land by a tractor which is owned and leased to members by the co-operative. *“Before the death of my husband, when the rainy season came I remember him spending three to four days ploughing the one hectare of farmland. Every day, he and the oxen used to come home exhausted. Today it is different as I am privileged to farm the same land with the tractor and it takes a maximum of three hours,” she testifies with pride and joy.*



Kamso, second from left, appreciating the new technology with some of the co-operative members.

Photo: Fikerte Abebe/UN Women

attainment and rising participation in the labour market have not been matched by better employment conditions, prospects for advancement and equal pay. At the current pace of progress, it would take more than 75 years to reach equal remuneration for work of equal value. Too many women remain without access to decent work, are denied equal rights to inheritance and property and are vulnerable to poverty. Women's disproportionate share of unpaid care work continues to limit their enjoyment of human rights in several areas. Violence against women and girls persists at alarmingly high levels in many forms in public and private spaces. Unacceptably high levels of maternal mortality persist in some regions. Women's already limited presence in decision-making at all levels is frequently subject to setbacks. Women remain significantly underrepresented at the highest levels of political leadership, as an article in the *American Political Science Review* reveals.

CRISES RAISE VULNERABILITY OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

In recent years, progress on gender equality has been held back by forces in the global political and economic landscapes that have been particularly hard to mitigate or combat. The World Bank Global Monitoring Report (2007) underlines that women in conflict and fragile situations are disadvantaged in three major ways: less access than men to rights (equality under the law), limited access to resources (equality

of opportunity) and, lack of voice and agency (political equality). By the end of 2013, 51.2 million individuals were forcibly displaced in the face of persecution, conflict and violence – the highest number in the post-Second World War era. Conflict related sexual and gender-based violence, including the continuing occurrence of rape, harassment, sexual slavery and forced marriage, remains a serious concern. All forms of violence against women increase during and immediately after conflict as part of a continuum of violence. Sexual violence remains underreported because of the fear and trauma faced by survivors and witnesses. Victims may be confronted with severe stigmatisation as well as limited availability of services providing help. Additionally, in 2013, 96 allegations of sexual exploitation or sexual abuse by soldiers were made across all United Nations entities. In 2014, reports surfaced that the crimes had been committed by soldiers deployed by the African Union.

Global financial and economic crises, volatile food and energy prices, and climate change have intensified inequalities and vulnerability, and have had specific and almost universally negative impacts on women and girls. Women are still among the poorest of the poor and are traditionally in charge of their family's water and food supply, healthcare and education of



children. In times of climate crises, women are often hit hardest – during droughts, they walk further to find water; in famine, they eat less to feed their family; and when natural disasters strike, children cannot attend school,

leaving their mothers to care for and educate them. Despite women being more likely to act as positive agents of change by taking actions that reduce their environmental impact, they have the least input in planning, policy development and decision-making, a UN Women report reveals.

Inequalities and gender-based violence are also reflected in the context of migration. A woman's decision to migrate can, for instance, be due to gender inequality in the country of origin, for instance in the form of unequal job opportunities and exposure to gender-based violence. It is also well-documented that many female migrants face gross violations of their rights because they are vulnerable to unscrupulous recruiting agents and traffickers. They face a high risk of physical, emotional and sexual violence at the hands of recruiting agents, employers and public officials, while access to justice for survivors of violence is severely hindered. But gender has an impact on all aspects of the migration experience of both women and men, as the Report by the UN Secretary General on Violence on Migrant Workers demonstrates: "Gender affects reasons for migrating, the decision of who will migrate, the social networks migrants use to move, experiences of integration and labour insertion in the destination country, and relations with one's country of origin."

Changing the narrative about women's potential and role involves a shared responsibility to demonstrate women's successful strategies and innovative practices not only in transforming their lives but also in contributing to a prosperous and peaceful world. This is the only way the world can truly achieve the ambitious Sustainable Development Goals by 2030.

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WHAT NEXT? PRIORITIES FOR FUTURE ACTION

1. A holistic review and reform of national economic and social policies taking cognisance of the invisible economy of women's unpaid care and domestic work is needed. Principally, macro-economic policies can and should support the realisation of gender equality and women's empowerment commitments.
2. Translate wealth into job creation by and for women. Addressing women's high poverty and unemployment rate requires expanding gender-sensitive business development opportunities and promoting women entrepreneurs and their access to finance and other productive assets, including land and technology.
3. Fast-track efforts are required to enhance girls' education, especially at the secondary and tertiary level, and to increase the number of women and girls in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM), finance and innovation.
4. Peace is a necessary enabler to unleash women's potential. For sustainable and inclusive economic growth in Africa and around the world, there is need for peace and promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment.
5. Harnessing diverse cultural heritage as a driving force to address deeply entrenched inequalities perpetuated by traditional norms and practices cuts across all actions as an indispensable element for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE).
6. A critical mass of male champions can drive a real change and impact for GEWE. Stakeholders should pledge to raise "HeforShe"s that support GEWE at different levels across the whole world.
7. Robust, well-resourced and accountable national institutions can catalyse the formulation, implementation and monitoring of gender responsive policy and programmatic interventions and the realisation of the GEWE commitments.

For references, see online version of this article at: www.rural21.com