

Equality and empowerment



■ Andean women wait in line to enter a bank in Celendin, in Peru's northern region of Cajamarca

Discrimination against women and girls must be tackled. Gender equality will benefit families, societies, economies and governments

By **Lakshmi Puri**, Deputy Executive Director, UN Women

Today, the majority of the world's poor people are women. Despite progress in the articulation of their rights and legal advances, discrimination against women remains entrenched in all spheres of life. This is holding back economic and social progress for all. The new international development framework, building on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), provides an opportunity to place women's rights and gender equality at the centre of international efforts to tackle poverty and inequality and promote inclusion and sustainability.

The discrimination faced by women is manifested in stereotypes about gender roles; gender-based violence; lack of recognition of reproductive rights; women's marginalisation from decision making; and unequal access to productive resources, such as land and credit, and to economic opportunities such as decent wage employment. It is also found in the unequal division of labour within the household, with women assuming a disproportionate share of taking care of the children and the elderly or sick, fetching wood and water, and preparing food. This burden, which is too often neither valued nor

recognised, leads to lower levels of education for women and to an inability to seek better employment opportunities.

By breaking the cycle of discrimination against women in the home, economy, politics and society, we can strengthen women's economic independence and bargaining position, and spur greater progress. Mounting evidence shows that investing in women and promoting their rights is not only the right thing to do; it is essential for sustainable development. Women put their income back into their families and communities, driving down rates of hunger, illiteracy and mortality, and raising levels of productivity and economic growth.

A World Bank study found that managers could increase worker productivity by 25 to 40 per cent by eliminating discrimination against female workers and managers. The *Harvard Business Review* looked at 215 Fortune 500 companies over 28 years and found that organisations with a higher number of women executives performed better in terms of profits as a per cent of revenue, assets and stockholder equity, by a range of 18 to 69 per cent.

A Goldman Sachs study reveals that reducing barriers to female labour force participation would

increase America's GDP by 9 per cent; the Eurozone's GDP by 13 per cent; and Japan's by 16 per cent. And the UN Food and Agriculture Organization has found that giving women farmers the same access as men to seeds, tools and fertiliser can raise total agricultural output in developing countries by 2.5 to 4 per cent, which could in turn reduce the number of hungry people in the world by 12 to 17 per cent.

Global development frameworks can provide the impetus for international and national efforts to address these barriers. The MDGs have galvanised progress to reduce poverty and discrimination, and to promote education, gender equality, health, safe drinking water and sanitation. The goal on gender equality and women's empowerment tracked progress on school enrolment, women's share of paid work, and women's participation in parliament. It triggered global attention and action. It served to hold governments accountable, mobilise much-needed resources, and stimulate new laws, policies, programmes and data.

The post-2015 development framework must build on this progress and go further to address structural causes of discrimination and inequality. This includes ending violence against women and girls, guaranteeing women's right to own and inherit land and property, and the need to address the unequal division of household and care responsibilities that hold women back from full economic, political and social participation.

Persistent inequality

Today, no country in the world can rightfully claim that it has achieved equality between men and women. Gender wage gaps persist around the globe, with women being paid some 10 to 30 per cent less than men for comparable roles. Women continue to be under-represented in positions of power and over-represented in vulnerable employment. An estimated one in three women worldwide will suffer some form of gender-based violence during her lifetime. And 800 women die every day due to childbirth and other pregnancy-related complications.

To make greater progress, UN Women proposes a stand-alone goal to achieve gender equality, women's rights and women's empowerment, which is grounded in human rights and tackles unequal power relations. Addressing the structural causes of gender inequality and realising women's rights is essential for sustainable development.

We envision three areas that require urgent action. First, ending violence against women and girls must be a priority. It is one of the most pervasive human rights violations, and carries tremendous costs for individuals, families and societies. Violence against women and girls is a manifestation of gender discrimination that seriously inhibits their abilities to enjoy rights and freedoms on the basis of equality with men and boys.

Second, women and men need equal opportunities and women's economic empowerment is essential. Equal access to land and credit, natural resources, education, health services, including sexual and reproductive health and rights, decent work and equal pay need to be addressed with renewed urgency. Policies, such as childcare and parental leave, including for men, are needed to promote equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men in caregiving and domestic work. This will relieve working women's 'double burden', so women and men can enjoy equality at work and at home.

Third, women's voices must be heard. Women are entitled to participate equally in decision making in the household, the private sector and institutions of governance. Despite progress in recent years, women comprise just 20 per cent of parliamentarians and 27 per cent of judges. For democracy to be meaningful and inclusive, women's voices and leadership must be amplified in all public and private spaces.

UN Women is already working to support this agenda in very concrete ways. For example, in 2012, UN Women supported 67 countries in advancing women's economic empowerment. Working with a variety of partners, our programmes promote women's ability to secure decent jobs, accumulate assets, and influence institutions and public policies determining growth and development. One critical area of focus involves advocacy to measure women's unpaid care work, and to take actions so women and men can more readily combine it with paid employment. In all our economic empowerment programmes, UN Women reaches out to women most in need, working closely with civil society. Particularly marginalised groups include rural women, domestic workers, some migrants and low-skilled women. Our aims are higher incomes, better access to and control over resources, and greater security, including protection from violence.

There is plenty of evidence to show that countries with a higher status of women also enjoy higher levels of social and economic performance. There is also evidence to guide countries on what works, from equitable labour market policies, to the removal of discriminatory laws and policies, from universal social protection and social services, to security and justice reforms that end impunity for violence against women and girls. The activism of women's movements everywhere have been critical in demanding and driving change in all of these areas.

The discussions to shape the post-2015 global development agenda offer a real opportunity to drive lasting change for women's rights, empowerment and equality. A comprehensive global goal on gender equality can galvanise efforts, rejecting discrimination against women and girls, and unleash the potential of half the population to fully contribute to a more peaceful, just and sustainable world. ■

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