

A Global Goal on Gender Equality, Women's Rights and Women's Empowerment: From the sidelines to the centre

Lakshmi Puri, UN Women, Assistant Secretary-General of the UN, May 2013

Hardly a day goes by without a news story on some violation of women's rights. In recent months, appalling incidents of violence against women and girls, from Delhi to Johannesburg to Cleveland, have sparked public outrage and demands to tackle these horrific abuses.

In Bangladesh and Cambodia, the shocking loss of life by garment factory workers, many of them women, sparked global debate on how to secure safe and decent jobs in our globalized economy. In Europe, the disproportionate impact on women of austerity cuts, and the use of quotas to get more women on corporate boards continue to make headlines.

Even though women have made real gains, we are constantly reminded how far we have to go to realize equality between men and women.

World leaders recognized the pervasiveness of discrimination and violence against women and girls when they signed onto the visionary Millennium Declaration in 2000. Among the eight Millennium Development Goals, they included a goal to promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

With these goals set to expire in 2015, we are now in a race to achieve them. We are also in the midst a global conversation about what should replace them. It's time for women to move from the sidelines to the centre.

In a new post-2015 development agenda, we must build on the achievements of the MDGs while avoiding their shortcomings. Everyone agrees that the goals have galvanised progress to reduce poverty and discrimination, and promote education, gender equality, health and 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, mobilize much-needed resources, and stimulate new laws, policies, programmes and data.

But there are glaring omissions. Noticeably absent is any reference to ending violence against women and girls. Also missing are other fundamental issues, such as women's right to own property and the unequal division of household

and care responsibilities.

By failing to address the structural causes of discrimination and violence against women and girls, progress towards equality has been stalled. Of all the MDGs, the least progress has been made on MDG5, to reduce maternal mortality. The fact that this has been the hardest goal to reach testifies to the depth and scope of gender inequality.

To make greater progress, UN Women proposes a stand-alone goal to achieve gender equality, women's rights and women's empowerment that is grounded in human rights and tackles unequal power relations. We envision three areas that require urgent action.

First, ending violence against women and girls must be a priority. From sexual violence in the camps of Haiti and Syria and the Democratic Republic of the Congo to intimate partner shootings in the United States and elsewhere, this violence causes untold physical and psychological harm. It is one of the most pervasive human rights violations, and carries tremendous costs for individuals, families and societies.

Second, women and men need equal opportunities, resources and responsibilities to realize equality. Equal access to land and credit, natural resources, education, health services including sexual and reproductive health, decent work and equal pay needs to be addressed with renewed urgency. Policies, such as child care and parental leave, are needed to relieve working women's double duty so women and men can enjoy equality at work and at home.

And third, women's voices must be heard. It is time for women 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.

Any new development agenda must be grounded in human rights agreements that governments have already signed onto. This includes the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action, and UN resolutions, including the recent agreement of the Commission on the Status of Women on eliminating and preventing all forms of violence against women and girls.

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, to universal social protection and social services, to security and justice reforms that end impunity for violence against women and girls. The activism of the women's movement everywhere has 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 and equality. A strong global goal can push our societies to the tipping point of rejecting violence and discrimination against women and girls and unleash the potential of half the population for a more peaceful, just and prosperous world and a sustainable planet.