



Poverty Eradication and Women's Economic Empowerment

Eradicating poverty is a political project, in the sense of disrupting existing power relations. We will need a new set of relationships between people and the state to end corruption, between states, between the private sector and the public sector, between business and labour, between women and men.

Notwithstanding high levels of economic growth in Asia, many have been left behind. In too many countries, poverty persists and economic growth has been accompanied by rising disparities in income and opportunities. The global story of growing income inequalities is also observable in Asia, where 0.001% of the population owns 30% of the region's wealth.

This inequality is a gendered experience. In addition to socio-economic inequalities, deeply entrenched socio-cultural values and practices confine most women to the margins of the economies. Recent reports from UN Women and ILO show:

- a. Over the past few decades, globally women's labour force participation has stagnated, and the gender gap in labour force participation rates remains very high at 27 percentage points. And we have seen in countries like Japan that access to education, while a prerequisite, does not guarantee equality of opportunity or value in the labour market.
- b. Women are over-represented in informal employment, enduring poor and sometimes dangerous working conditions, lack of social protection, and low pay.
- c. The global gender pay gap is significant at 23 percent – this discrimination robs women of the ability to adequately support themselves and their

families, to pull themselves out of poverty, enjoy an adequate standard of living and save for retirement.

All of this also limits women's access to assets and resources such as land, technology and credit.

Alongside income poverty, because of the structure of gender and social norms, and responsibilities for the care economy, women are also time poor. Across South Asia, women report doing more unpaid care and domestic work than men. For example, in Pakistan, rural women do almost 5 hours of unpaid care and domestic work per day compared to 0.5 hours for rural men. Likewise, across East Asia, women, we have the same reality. And often it is hard to tell where reproductive ends and productive begins as so much of what women do, particularly in the rural sectors is at that nexus of subsistence economy.

So women labour without love, labour without value and labour without reward.

In meeting SDGs, we are called upon to better understand, from these spaces that we occupy, how macroeconomic policy can be an instrument of justice, by promoting inclusive growth and by distributing and redistributing its benefit more widely.

We know that state expenditure on universal education and health has transformative potential for redressing historical exclusion. We know too the social protection is pivotal in ensuring decent work, but that if not extended to the majority of workers who are in the informal economy, the structure of inequalities will not change.

And we know that labour protections are at the heart of the labour market equality agenda. Working conditions matter and the state has obligations to protect the rights of workers by ensuring that non-state actors are regulated through minimum wages and a social protection floor.

The state must ensure equal access to productive resources, land, credit, technology. And that revenue generation, through taxation, should be progressive, ensuring that those who benefit the most, contribute fairly to the common good.

In this regard, we must also ensure that trade policies not facilitate tax avoidance and evasion; not allow foreign direct investors to circumvent labour and environmental protections and to thwart democratic decision making processes.

And we understand that unpaid work, the backbone of the productive and reproductive spheres must be recognized, reduced and redistributed. Actions should include:

- policies that enable women and men to reconcile family-work responsibilities, such as paid maternity and parental leave;
- investments in infrastructure, such as water and sanitation and electrification, especially in rural areas;
- and significant scaling up of care services, to provide child care and care of the sick and elderly.

Investments in care services can have a triple dividend – first, ensuring better public services; second, providing greater support for the unpaid care work that is done within the home; and third, making care services an engine for the generation of decent employment for women and men working in the care sector.

In Addis Ababa last year, Member States agreed on a global framework for financing sustainable development. UN Women strongly advocated for the ***Addis Ababa Action Plan on Transformative Financing for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment*** which proposes a number of strategic policy options to mobilize resources at national and international level. Let me address four of these:

First, **all policy actions at the national level must be used to mobilize resources** for gender equality. These include realigning macroeconomic policies to increase fiscal space, improving tax compliance, and addressing both the implicit and explicit gender biases in tax systems.

It is equally important to ensure that resources generated through tax are used to advance gender equality and women's rights. **Implementing gender-responsive budgeting and strengthening accountability mechanisms will ensure more efficient, transparent, and effective financing.**

Second, **States must** take measures to eliminate gender based discrimination in access to and control over bank loans, mortgages and other forms of financial credit, **and** giving women full and equal access to economic resources, including the right to inheritance, right to land ownership, natural resources and access to technologies.

Third, official development assistance can provide additional sources of revenue for gender equality and women's empowerment. All developed countries should meet their commitments and ensure a stronger focus on gender equality in their ODA.

Fourth, for financing for gender equality to be truly transformative it requires efforts by all actors to address both the **structural causes and consequences of gender inequality**. This cannot be done without the full and equal participation of **women and women's organizations** in decision-making at all levels. And while States have the primary responsibility to deliver results for women, **private finance will play an important role in financing the 2030 Agenda**. Pay your taxes and pay decent wages.

It has become fashionable to state that gender equality is not just the right thing, it is also the smart thing. In that invocation of the smart thing, we are being told that an equality which increases women's income will also increase their consumption and drive economic growth. Yet we also know now how extreme

production and consumption is at the epicentre of the climate change catastrophe heading our way.

And so we need to think about women's empowerment, women's economic empowerment beyond the release of consumer demand.

We know that what we seek to do is to disrupt power relations- between women and men. We also need to disrupt the primacy of capital over community; to reach a distributional justice that is informed by planetary limits as well. This is not only about the economy, but about the politics and culture of the economy and the environment.

The agenda for change, the imperative of change, is indeed, involving everyone with common and differentiated responsibilities. And while we think about being the change we need to see in the world, we cannot do this naively, thinking that change is an individualistic project or one that will come at the pace needed with tweaking of existing systems.

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