

Gender and the right to development

Human rights framework and global political commitments

The Declaration on the Right to Development states that the right to development is to be applied without discrimination based on race, sex, language or religion. Article 8 (1) of the Declaration makes specific reference to women, stating that “effective measures should be undertaken to ensure that women have an active role in the development process”.

The right to development (RtD) is a right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized. (Article 1, Declaration on the Right to Development)

Gender equality and empowerment of women are central to economic and human development in a country, not just in terms of integrating women in development but in influencing the broader development agenda. The Declaration on the Right to Development emphasizes non-discrimination and makes specific reference to the active role of women in the development process in Article 8 (1).

RtD advances development as a holistic concept, involving not just economic development, but also: improvement in the well-being of all women, including the realization of human rights and promotion of gender equality more broadly; absence of violence against women (all forms of violence, including structural and economic); and inclusion and participation of women in all aspects of the development process from planning to outcome.

Education is a key driver of social change and economic growth, and its importance for achieving gender equality has been well-recognized.¹ Nevertheless, women’s educational attainment does not necessarily translate into improved employment opportunities.² Among the 20-24 year-old population, women continue to lag behind men in labour force participation in all regions.³ In the labour market, unequal pay, occupational exclusion or segregation into low skill and low paid work limit women’s earnings in comparison to men. Women’s lack of representation and voice in decision-making bodies in the community and the state perpetuates discrimination.

Education and work can act as multipliers in terms of increased influence and decision-making by women in the household. Especially in the context of poverty or in attainment of the Millennium Development Goals, maternal health, children’s education and child nutrition are all outcomes of complex processes that begin often in the household and how limited resources are accessed, allocated and used.

¹ See Report of the Secretary-General on Beijing 15+ at <http://www.un.org/Docs/journal/asp/ws.asp?m=E/2010/4>

² Report on the online discussion on gender, education and employment, 7-20 July 2010, United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women

³ World Bank (2008), Ready for work

In terms of the right to development, for education for girls and women to translate into full employment and decent work, the following issues require urgent attention:

- Ensuring that girls' complete not just primary school, but have access to higher education, including training and skill development
- Access for women to adult literacy programmes and non-formal education
- Combating of gender stereotypes both in educational curriculum and settings and in tackling gendered division of labour (namely, which roles and activities are deemed appropriate for women and men or the relatively low value given to women's work for example at home, women seen as fulfilling a 'reproductive' role and men as 'productive')
- Access and availability of inclusive financial services and facilities to promote entrepreneurship
- Equal pay for work of equal value, right to decent conditions of work and equal (substantive) access to work benefits, promotions, bonuses and social security
- Protection against violence and harassment in schools, in the home and in the workplace
- Increased value to be accorded to women's productive roles in the informal sector and subsistence agriculture