

NTS Bulletin March 2016**Towards gender equality in the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda**

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On 25 September 2015, countries across the world adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Summit. The agenda comprises of a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that aims to end poverty, fight inequality and injustice and tackle challenges posed by climate change by 2030. The SDGs, which were built on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), seek to tackle the root causes of global inequalities.

Gender in SDGs

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda is seen as an important milestone in the gender equality discourse. SDG 5 highlights the significance of achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls. It provides a critical opportunity to increase the collective ambition of key stakeholders and to expand the current scope to improve the status of women across the world.

Ensuring universal access to special healthcare needs of women, financing women's equal rights to economic assets and addressing life-threatening challenges such as female genital mutilation, and enabling women to take more decision-making roles in the government are some of the important targets highlighted in SDG 5 that will help move the gender equality agenda forward.

The MDGs have been critiqued for not doing enough to improve the status of women and girls. Gender inequality concerns as an integral part of achieving the other MDGs should have been better explored. Moreover, issues such as child marriage and the valuation of women's work were overlooked. The SDGs on the other hand have incorporated a comprehensive list of targets on sexual and gender-based violence and exploitation against women and girls, the political, economic and social rights of women, sexual and reproductive rights, access and rights to paid employment, unequal division of unpaid care and domestic work, public participation and policies and legislation on gender equality. It aims to build on existing achievements so as to end discrimination against women and girls.

Realising gender equality

There have been encouraging signs on the commitment of states and key stakeholders on SDG 5. During the initial stages of drafting the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda, the first consensus among government and civil society groups was reached on this particular goal. However, a key setback to progress is the language tacked on the SDGs. For example, one of the SDG 5 targets is to 'Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, as well as access to ownership and control over land and other forms of property, financial services, inheritance and natural resources, in accordance with national laws.' However at times, national laws exclude women from these economic rights.

In Indonesia for example, President Joko Widodo's ideas of only exporting skilled labour will have negative repercussions on the financial situation of women and their families, and the country's economy as the remittance of funds from foreign workers is significant. According to the International Labour Organization, an estimated 6 million Indonesians work overseas, a vast majority of the workers being domestic helpers. Depriving women from the chance to work abroad decreases their job opportunities and increases their vulnerability. Also, countries like Cambodia and Laos have very low representation of women in their parliaments. The lack of female representation in leadership roles in the government means that it is more likely that discussions on women's rights and issues be pushed aside. These challenge what has been set out in SDG 5.

However, all is not lost. The Protection of Women Against Violence Bill 2015 that was passed in Pakistan's Punjab province last month was a landmark decision that has put women's rights at the forefront. The Act, which shows distinct support for SDG 5, gives legal protection to women from domestic, psychological and sexual violence. It has also called for the creation of a toll-free abuse-reporting hotline, women shelters and district-level commissions to investigate reports of women abuse.

In Southeast Asia, the 'Southeast Asian Women's Caucus on ASEAN', made up of more than 100 organisations and networks in the region, engage with ASEAN to push for regional gender sensitive policies. Recently, the group submitted the 'Vision 2025: ASEAN Women's Blueprint for Alternative Regionalism' to the ASEAN High Level Task Force with the aim of articulating their own vision for the ASEAN post-2015 agenda.

What needs to be done

At an international level, gender sensitive indicators could be created to assess the progress of previously endorsed gender-specific agreements and conventions such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

At the regional level, more can be done to address the challenges faced by women and girls, trapped in conflict zones or being smuggled or trafficked out of volatile areas. Currently, only the Philippine and Indonesian governments have a National Action Plan (NAP) on women, peace and security, each being implemented to different degrees. Implementing a regional action plan addressing vulnerabilities of women and girls in conflict/disaster settings will be an important step forward to protect these women and girls impacted by conflict / natural disaster situations.

Work can be done to further improve existing initiatives by moving beyond dual notions of gender (i.e. men and women). One way that this can be done is by identifying the differences between gender blind, gender neutral, gender specific and gender transformative indicators. There is also a need to design policy frameworks that not only focus on impacting women based on 'cause-effect' assumptions, but goes beyond that by altering society's perspectives on women and girls, and build their collective power. This will indeed be a more sustainable empowerment process.

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Events & Announcements

- 18th International Conference on Water, Sanitation, Food Security and Waste Management, 16–17 May 2016, Montreal, Canada.
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