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Office for ECOSOC Support and Coordination

Achieving Gender Equality, Women's Empowerment and Strengthening Development Cooperation

DIALOGUES AT THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL



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The fourth domain for gender equality: Decision-making and power⁶

BY MS. FRANCES STEWART

Chair of the Committee for Development Policy

There has been progress towards meeting the goal of promoting gender inequality and the empowerment of women but important gaps remain; and this progress is being threatened by several intersecting crises, such as the world financial crisis and recession and threats to food security, under the looming shadow of climate change and the crisis of human rights and security.

The Gender Equality Task Force of the MDGs identified three domains: *the capability domain*, notably girls' and women's education, training and health; *access to resources*, notably to assets, including land and finance; and employment; and *the security domain*: protection from violence of all sorts (political, criminal and domestic).

I would add a fourth: The domain of *decision-making and power* (the task force included this in access to resources).

In each domain, there has been advance but large gender gaps remain.

First, with respect to the *capability* domain, there has been considerable progress globally and, in most parts, of the world.

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) shows that the ratio of girls to boys in educational attainment has risen everywhere: in 1970, it was 0.2 in South Asia and by 2010, it was nearly 0.6; in Africa, it rose from 0.3 to 0.65; and in Latin America, from 0.75 to 0.9.

But there are still unwarranted gaps. For example, in Pakistan there is 40 per cent female literacy compared with 77 per cent male; in Uganda, 66 per cent compared with 82 per cent; and in Ethiopia 23 per cent compared with 50 per cent.

⁶ Ibid.

It is difficult to exaggerate the importance of female education – it contributes to health and nutrition of the family, as well as family incomes, and economic productivity. The one characteristic shared by all the best human development performers is a high ratio of female to male education. *The promotion of female education must be a priority everywhere.*

Secondly, on *access to resources*: in many countries, women traditionally had no land ownership rights; and financial credit too was almost exclusively available for males only. Here too there has been progress.

While early land reforms were all directed at men – for example, in Zimbabwe 98 per cent of resettlement permits were held by men - in the last decade, many countries introduced land reforms to guarantee women's right to own or inherit land and prohibiting gender-based discrimination, e.g. the 2004 Family Law in Mozambique; a 2003 law in Vietnam; and reforms in India and Rwanda.

But many of these reforms are more theoretical than real, and women are prevented from exercising their rights by custom and hierarchies. While the reforms are necessary, women need support to benefit fully from them. *Better access to law and the creation and strengthening of women's associations are needed to help women improve their access to land rights.*

Microcredit is often targeted at women and has hugely improved gender balance in access to small amounts of credit – with the Grameen Bank leading the way and covering millions of women in Bangladesh. This has been duplicated all over the world. Microcredit has not greatly enriched women, but it has empowered them on a small scale, and has had positive results in health and nutrition. *It needs to be complemented with improved access to good productive technologies and to markets.*

In contrast, medium- and large-scale, bank credit remains almost exclusively male. Unequal access to land and other assets makes women a much worse prospect for formal sector loans. *Policies are needed to improve women's share of formal sector medium-size loans.*

As far as *employment* is concerned, women now form 40.5% of the global work force (2009), a small increase over the previous decade. Women work in less well paid occupations (18% in industry, compared with 26% men), and a much higher proportion in agriculture. They are to a greater extent in vulnerable occupations and forms of employment than men.

Women's *pay* is universally below that of men for same jobs. Over the world as a whole, women's total earnings range from 16 to 74 per cent

of men's. *Gender discrimination in employment and pay should be outlawed.* While women have increasingly taken on paid employment outside the home, their responsibility for household work has changed very little. Consequently, women generally work much longer hours than men. *There is a need for much greater support for the care of children and the aged.*

Probably, the least progress has been made in the *security domain*. Data on wars and violent conflicts show a decline from the mid-1990s, but violence remains unacceptably high and women are often prime victims. Moreover, there appears to have been a growth in international crime networks, with a growth in illicit trafficking of drugs and people. The trade in women for sexual exploitation is estimated at \$3 billion per year.⁷ Domestic violence represents the greatest threat to women: surveys show that across countries from 16 per cent - 50 per cent of women have been assaulted at some point in their lives. Domestic violence is generally thought to lessen, as women become more educated and empowered, especially as they gain greater rights to land and home ownership. Today, it remains a huge concern for many, many women – half or more of women in some societies.

In the fourth domain, *decision-making and power*, there has been a rise in UNDP's gender empowerment measure (GEM) in every region (this includes political participation and decision-making; economic participation and decision-making power; and power over economic resources).⁸

Women's representation in parliaments has risen from 11 per cent in 1975 to 19 per cent today, with advances at the local level, too. In 25 countries, women became a speaker or presiding officer of parliament for the first time in the last decade. There has been some progress in the private sector, too. But women are still grossly underrepresented in power. *Measures are needed to increase women's capacity AND to require more equal representation in positions of power.*

The worst situation with respect to all four domains is among women in deprived groups: they face treble deprivation: (i) as members of a deprived group; (ii) through general gender-based societal inequalities; and (iii) particularly strong gender discrimination within the group.

⁷ UNODC 2010.

⁸ Political participation and decision-making, as measured by women's and men's percentage shares of parliamentary seats; economic participation and decision-making power, as measured by two indicators – women's and men's percentage shares of positions as legislators, senior officials and managers and women's and men's percentage shares of professional and technical positions; power over economic resources, as measured by women's and men's estimated earned income.

For example, in Guatemala, female indigenous mean years of schooling is just 1.3 years compared with 4.6 for non-indigenous females and 5.5 for non-indigenous males.

It is necessary to improve the position of indigenous groups generally as well as of women, if this problem is to be tackled.

In summary, despite progress on all four domains since Beijing, women are not fully mainstreamed in development policy. And there is a danger that continued progress is being threatened by several intersecting crises prevailing in the world today. These are affecting both men and women. But women are especially vulnerable.

Crises are likely to have different implications for women and men due to pre-existing structural inequalities on several counts: the gender division of labour within the home and in the labour market; gender inequalities in access to assets and resources, and; gendered social norms, which constrain women's access to resources to markets, education, health, and so on. The weak positioning of women in economic, legal, political and socio-cultural spheres also renders them more vulnerable and less resilient to shocks.

Crises are generally regressive and tend to accentuate existing inequalities. The experience of past crises has revealed several significant channels of gender impact. First, cuts in social spending led to significant increases in the burden of unpaid work borne by women which compensates for the loss of public provisioning. This adversely affected their ability to participate in skill training, employment and other activities. Second, labour market restructuring led to an increase in the role of women as "labour of last resort" concentrated in low-wage jobs lacking social benefits. Third, tensions from economic hardship and shifting gender roles in the family gave rise to domestic and other forms of violence against women.

The assessment of how crises impact on gender and the design of necessary policies to offset negative impacts are compromised by severe gaps in sex disaggregated data. Additionally, data that are available undercount women's work and engagement in productive activities. Women's substantial contribution to housework and care activities tends to be unvalued or undervalued in national accounts and undercounted in labour force statistics. Women are largely represented in the informal sector, therefore, they do not show up in employment and unemployment statistics and do not have access to formal safety nets.

We must note the huge variability in the costs of crisis, in general, across the world; and in the costs for women and the poor, in particular:

- Some economies soon recovered (Brazil, China and India), partly due to Keynesian stimulus packages. The recovery, however, has often been uneven, with recovery in the financial sector but not in investment and employment. The stimulus packages were biased in favour of the financial sector, which caused the crisis in the first place.
- Fiscal stimuli aimed at restoring growth can have different gender and other distributional consequences, depending on their design. In practice, the stimulus packages showed little, if any, gender sensitivity. In fact, the main components of the various stimulus packages seem to still reflect “gender stereotypes” in policy-making. Packages stress public investment in physical infrastructure but little emphasis on social infrastructure, which has higher concentration of female workers and can help to free women’s time from non-remunerative activities. Moreover, the dominant perception of women as farm helpers and not as main farmers affects the way in which assets, information and productive inputs are directed to farming families.
- Stimulus packages should be designed to protect a wider range of workers or unemployed with emphasis on the low-income segments. Emphasis should be placed on strengthening the social infrastructure, the provision of care for young children and old persons, health and education services and specific segments of physical infrastructure, such as water and energy supply.
- Some economies had good social protection systems before the economic crisis so people (particularly women) had access to support during the crisis. For example, through the *familia bolsa*, in Brazil; conditional transfers in Mexico; the National Employment Guarantee scheme in India; and a variety of pensions and other forms of social support in Costa Rica. The lessons from previous crises are that it is necessary to have such schemes in place in advance and they need to have comprehensive coverage; most schemes introduced after a crisis erupts are too late and too small.
- Governments and the international community should use the ongoing intersecting crises as an opportunity to mainstream gender-related objectives in policy-making.
- National development policies should give greater priority to improvement in the direct access by women to land and assets. Governments can also play a major role in this by enforcing inheritance laws, authorizing purchase or lease of land by women and directly transferring land to them.

- Monetary authorities need to guarantee microfinancing programmes sponsored by financial institutions or to provide sufficient liquidity to commercial banks which have microcredit programmes. Microcredit is often a lifeline for low-income women and their families. Women's access to credit, beyond microcredit, needs to be facilitated.
- The role of international cooperation is critical. Most of the poorest countries are aid dependent and are under IMF programmes, which tend to constrain public expenditures on social services. Official development assistance (ODA) is expected to decline in 2010, and it is disappointing that only an additional \$50 billion was earmarked to low-income countries in the package negotiated by the G20 in April 2009.
- The major danger is that a new round of cuts in developed countries will threaten global recovery and will be followed by cuts in developing countries; aid will be cut; and progress that has been made for women (and on other MDGs) may be seriously impeded.