



Women's changing equation with the UN

The role of women at and with the United Nations has been through flows and ebbs. Over time, women have gradually strengthened themselves with their networks and grounded knowledge—and states have taken note, or the movement has made the state take note, of their collective strength.

However, during this evolution, the UN group of institutions has lost its space as a critical entity, as the game-changer that it was during the 1970s, 80s and 90s. With the growth of globalisation and the increasing power of the private sector, of multinational corporations and international capital on a global scale, governments and intergovernmental organisations like the UN were pushed backstage. In the process, they have lost their power to negotiate for justice.

It is evident in the world around us that the UN's mandates are not working in various areas—from internal conflicts in Syria and Palestine to wars within regions, from the economic crisis of 2008 to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDG).

The year 2015 will be the end-point of the MDG programme initiated by a special advisory board, The Millennium Project, headed by economist Jeffery Sachs and commissioned by the United Nations Secretary General in 2002. A lot of activity has since ensued, but the programme has also been criticised on various counts—including its monitoring frameworks and goals—by the women's movement, especially in relation to the Goals' indicators. The indicators were mostly limited to women's reproductive experiences; the role of women as economic agents and political citizens was largely ignored.¹

Now, as the momentum is building to re-envision the period after 2015, a more vigorous process of consultations is underway, which includes various sections of society and encompasses regional, subject-specific efforts.²

However, in this essay we argue that international goal-setting and monitoring of progress, as was done for the MDG, is an inappropriate method of stimulating programmes for the removal of poverty or for stimulating energy among state parties. This approach often ignores not only the fact that a particular state may not have a political economy base or the wherewithal, but also that the state may have other priorities and other ways of reaching the goals of equality and justice.

It is unfortunate that despite so much energy—academic and activist—by the feminist movement for more contextually-tethered macro policies and goals, the same rhetoric and substance is being rolled out again. For example, in preparation for 2015, the Commission on the Status of Women (of the UN Economic and Social Council) at its annual meeting in New York in 2014 has proposed gender equality as the goal to be worked for.³

But feminists have by now extensively debated why gender equality as a goal is inappropriate. It ignores the context of the political economy and policies which marginalise/impoverish women. Instead, new ideas are emerging from feminist academics on how to bring women's experiences of the economy as well as their views on economic policy, into prominence.⁴

It is our view that the understanding and responses to gender inequality have to be situated within the context of other forms of inequality, and that efforts to promote gender equality cannot be separated from efforts to promote a more equal world for all.

In an article, economist Stephanie Seguino and her co-authors emphasise the role of stratification along multiple trajectories—race, class, and gender—in contributing to economic crises and in shaping distributional dynamics.⁵ They underscore the long-term effects of the 2008 crisis on well-being, highlighted in the research done by feminist economists on social reproduction, but often missed in the macroeconomics literature.

Many global reports, prepared by organisations like the World Bank and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), also show that not much has changed for women in the last five decades, since the UN was activated

Reporting on progress

A scan of the progress of almost all indicators shows little or no change over the last 40 years, especially in the condition, entitlements, and capabilities of women. Papers written by economic statisticians, as well by feminist groups, speak of significant

improvements on some fronts like education. But in others areas such as work, violence, and survival, the change is highly unsatisfactory.

Serious issues of concern remain, especially the adverse sex ratio at birth and growing domestic violence against women. The levels of decision-making and political participation remain marginal. In the economic sphere, absolute female work participation rates are declining and the numbers of women in the workforce have fallen. Contract-based work has narrowed the field of opportunity for women.⁶

Global and national reports on the progress of women make disappointing reading. UN reports too spell out the lack of impact:

“Women continue to be absent from key decision-making forums...which further perpetuates gender inequality...Constraints faced by women include their *disproportionate concentration in vulnerable forms of work*, occupational segregation, wage gaps and the unequal division of unpaid domestic work...

Women in many parts of the world continue *to face discrimination in access to land, housing, property and other productive resources* and have limited access to technologies and services that could alleviate their work burdens. Unequal access to resources limits women’s capacity to ensure agricultural productivity, security of livelihoods and food security and is increasingly linked to poverty, migration, urbanization and increased risk of violence.”⁷

“Women account for *two thirds of the world’s 774 million adult illiterates*—a proportion that is unchanged over the past two decades. Gender disparities in adult literacy rates remain wide in most regions of the world...While rates of women exposed to violence vary from one region to the other, statistics indicate that violence against women is a universal phenomenon and women are subjected to different forms of violence—physical, sexual, psychological and economic—both within and outside their homes.

At the individual level, women’s lack of access to and control over resources limits their economic autonomy and increases their vulnerability to economic or environmental shocks. Existing statutory and customary laws still restrict women’s access to land and other types of property in most countries in Africa and about half the countries in Asia.”⁸

“Women...are more likely to be unemployed than men, dominate the unprotected informal sector, are more likely than men to be in part-time formal employment in most high income regions, spend more time than men in unpaid care-work globally, have lower levels of productivity and earn less than men for work of equal value and are

poorly represented in public and corporate economic decision making. Women workers in rural and urban areas have also been hard hit by the current financial and economic crisis, volatile food prices, the energy crisis, export driven agriculture and subsidized imports.”

Time use studies in 30 developed and developing countries show that despite women’s increasing labour force participation, they devote more time than men to housework and childcare, with differences ranging from about 50% more in Cambodia and Sweden to about 3 times more in Italy and 6 times more in Iraq. But in no country do women spend as much time as men in market work.⁹

International Labour Organisation evidence from 83 developed and developing countries shows that women earn between 10–30% less than men.¹⁰

The role of globally connected women’s networks

Questions about the relevance of the UN system, especially its development wing, are also important to ask at a time when the number of globally connected women’s networks is growing. Using the power of the internet, these networks mobilise facts and provide a voice, and often help in the process of changing laws at the international as well as national levels.

Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) is an example of a network that grew out of regional mobilisation rather than being UN-led. It is now a worldwide coalition of institutions and individuals concerned with improving the status of women in the economy’s informal sector, including a branch for home-based workers in South Asia as well as a waste pickers’ network in Latin America and the Caribbean.

In some instances, women have taken control of resources and of managing economic entities in developing countries. A prime example in India is the Self-Employed Women’s Association (SEWA), a trade union of self-employed and home-based workers. The association owns a bank and provides health insurance and retirement benefits to working women in rural India.

Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), founded in 1984, is a feminist network of women, researchers, and activists from the economic South. The contributions of DAWN to the discourse on women and development not only altered its intellectual underpinnings, but also shifted the creativity and the intellectual leadership from the “patrons” in the North to the “clients” in the South.

The International Association for Feminist Economics (IAFFE)—a continually expanding group of scholars, policy professionals, students, advocates and activists from 43 countries—has also been a valuable counter to global economic reasoning and its unchallenged power.

Another network, the Casablanca Dreamers, founded in 2006, composed of leaders from UN agencies as well as feminist scholars, authors, and activists from across the world, critiqued the development framework used by the UN, including the goal of gender equality, and came up with a new message: “Getting the Fundamentals Right: Women, Water and Wealth.” It focuses on women as change-makers—water is symbolic of a fundamental issue that has political, social economic, health, cultural, and environmental ramifications, especially for poor women; wealth refers to macroeconomic paradigms. The underlining argument was the need to unpack the fundamentals—the constructs and concepts that inform policies and actions—and rebuild from the basis of knowledge that women provide.

Networks such as these, as well as others, support and reinforce each other and provide a formidable defence against powerful agencies. Regional networking is growing because it demands fewer funds emphasises the real issues of geography. But inter-regional networking and struggles against the state and its policies are also strong and effective, often even more effective than UN resolutions.

For example, in 2010, a campaign by the WEIGO Network and Homenet Thailand resulted in the ratification of the Homeworkers’ Protection Act. The legislation provides for the protection of wages, and occupational health and safety, among other measures, and impacts about 2 million workers in Thailand.

Women’s networks as transnational political actors can give sustained inputs to the political process and keep cross-national interests alive. The energy therefore must be shifted from the UNDP to regional economic associations as well as new formations like BRICS, and the stronger voices from earlier alliances like G77 and NAM.

Both these associations made rousing calls this year. G77 called for accession from the UN, and at the Algiers ministerial conference of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in May 2014, former South African President Thabo Mbeki pointed out that the G77+China was established to “provide the means for the countries of the South to articulate and promote their collective economic interests and enhance their joint negotiating capacity on all major international economic issues within the United Nations system, and promote South-South cooperation for development.”¹¹

Another important example of a regional economic association is CELAC, a grouping of the leaders of Latin America and the Caribbean. At its second summit in Havana, Cuba, in January 2014, CELAC members declared their region a “zone of peace.” The summit also focused on a number of important issues that the people of Latin America have for long demanded must be addressed, such as inequality, hunger, and poverty. It was at this summit that Chilean president Michelle Bachelet said: “Governments must address all inequalities, including gender divisions, urban-rural disparities and the injustice faced by the indigenous people and afro-descendents.”¹²

It is in this wider context that the fervour about post-MDG 2015 must be located, and diffused. New structures and processes have to be evolved which are more relevant to current concerns, globally and locally. Inequality--and its impact on economies—is especially crucial in this rethinking. Various reports show how inequality has been responsible for the recent economic crisis and the fragility of the world economy.

A report titled *Inequality Matters* presents data on the increase in inequality within nations and globally.¹³ It argues that “In addition to inhibiting economic growth over time, inequality can also generate greater market volatility and instability,” because it impacts the generation of finance-driven business cycles. The report also speaks of a relationship between inequality and the onset of economic recession. It provides evidence that both the Great Depression of the 1930s and the 2007-2008 Great Recession were preceded by a sharp increases in income and wealth inequality, and a rapid rise in debt-to-income ratios among lower-income and middle-income households.

Another report, *Humanity Divided*, discusses how the sharpest increases in income inequality have occurred in those developing countries that were especially successful in pursuing vigorous growth and managed, as a result, to graduate into higher income brackets.¹⁴ “Economic progress in these countries has not alleviated disparities, but rather exacerbated them,” the report states. It suggests that there is evidence to show that “Increases in inequality over the last two decades were mainly on account of trade and financial globalization processes that weakened the bargaining position of relatively immobile labour vis-à-vis fully mobile capital.”

Oxfam, an international confederation of NGOs, has made one of the most pertinent comments on the subject. It says that the persistence of poverty is the outcome of unequal economic power.¹⁵

However, into this gloom, a call that can provide the breakthrough comes from ILO’s strong argument: “It is time to reconsider the validity of these pro-capital distributional policies, and to examine the possibility of an alternative path, one based on pro-labour

distributional policies, accompanied by legislative changes and structural policies that will make wage-led growth regime more likely, that is, pursue what we call a wage-led growth strategy, which, in our view, will generate a much more stable growth regime for the future.”¹⁶

The UNCTAD’s 2010 report carries this forward to macro-economics’ reasoning that supports the proposal for a wage-led growth track, with the argument that “Wages would have to be perceived, not just as a cost of production, but as a major source of aggregate demand, such that rising wage bills can actually propel economic recovery in slumps, and generate conditions for stable growth. The inability of economic growth to create sufficient decent work to meet the requirements of the labour force is a major part of the problem.”¹⁷

Thomas Piketty’s book, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*, is a powerful addition to these arguments. He says that the capital-led mode of engineering economic growth has neglected labour—the other crucial factor of production. He also points out that as developing countries become industrialised, inequalities deepen instead of decreasing. In the developed capitalist world, he writes, “The prospect of slower economic growth in the years ahead combined with the political domination of the super-rich in our political systems threatens to make these extreme inequalities even more grotesque.”¹⁸

In conclusion, this essay argues for a significant shift in the linking of women to the mainstream. These links must be derived from feminist thought and from reasoning based in experience. It must be a contribution rather than an intervention.

It is not enough to call for the participation of women in existing patterns of market-based production, or for the empowerment of women within the current paradigms of development, or for gender mainstreaming within prevailing configurations of institutional power. It is the forms of production, the paradigms, and the institutions themselves that must be questioned and transformed, through changes in the ideas that generate economic policies as well as through social mobilisation.

As noted economist Amartya Sen has said: “Women should be seen not as patients whose interests have to be looked after, but as agents who can do effective things—both individually and jointly. We also have to go beyond their role specifically as ‘consumers’ or as ‘people with needs’, and consider, more broadly, their general role as agents of change who can—given the opportunity—think, assess, evaluate, resolve, inspire, agitate, and through these means, reshape the world.”¹⁹

Feminist groups all over the world are now involved not only in resistance movements as they were in the past, but also in remaking policies and laws, and at the high end of economic transactions. Their influence on the status of women can be much greater than a UN bureaucracy and UN-generated ideas.

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