

POLICY BRIEFING

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2016 Status of Women Empowerment in Asia

Asian Women Parliamentarian Caucus (AWPC) Meeting Outcomes at the 4th International Women Deliver Conference

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THE NORM FOR UNIVERSAL WOMEN'S RIGHTS

There have been many attempts made over the decades to normalise women's rights from global commitments via international law to regional declarations to national/local policy adaptations. Yet the norm still lacks universal adherence, especially in practical policy applications. In fact, gender discrimination is woven through these legal and social norms instead. Women's human rights therefore still remain elusive across most discussions, making the achievement of gender equality across sectors a moving goalpost for many stakeholders. As of data from 2014, 52 countries have yet to guarantee gender equality and require deep, legal, legislative and constitutional reforms to ensure women's rights.

The realisation of women's rights and empowerment also requires the acknowledgement that women's rights are key to the functioning of democracy and deliverance of well-being for all its citizens. Empowerment for women cannot take place without rights and these rights cannot be instated without political will. The global push for the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) asks for States' recommitment towards this very outcome, via goals number 5¹ primarily, complemented by other goals such as 1, 3, 10, 16 and 17. Acknowledging the intersectionality of women's rights across the various goals is definitely a step in the right direction. However, achieving the SDGs will require concerted political action in leadership, commitment and accountability, only if women empowerment is already understood as a pre-condition.

POLITICS OF AGENDA SETTING

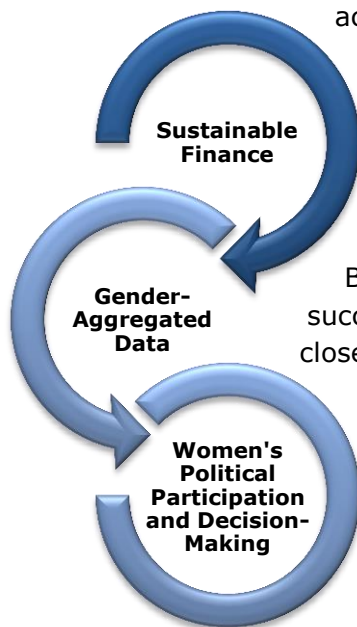
The global gender equality gap persists for many reasons and it primarily centers on i) the lack of funding, ii) data and iii) inclusion of women in the processes and institutions that matter for sustainable development. In this policy briefing, we address the political actors on why and how they may approach these three main areas of intervention when it comes to normalising

¹ SDG 5: Gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls is known as the stand-alone gender goal because it is dedicated to achieving these ends. SDG 5 proposes a range of targets to end discrimination, violence and harmful practices, recognise and value unpaid care work, participation and leadership in decision-making and universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights.

and campaigning for gender equality in political parties, policy and institutional processes as well as civic spaces.

Sustainable Financing and Partnerships

Considerable challenges remain in Least Developed Countries (LDCs) where economic growth is highly volatile due to vulnerabilities caused by economic activities of industrialised and emerging economies, natural disasters, conflict, violence and disease pandemics. This impacts inflows of capital and many LDCs remain heavily dependent on Official Development Assistance (ODA), which cannot meet all the investment requirements of the SDGs.



Closing the Information Gap with Data

Better information and knowledge exchange are critical to scaling-up successes. “We can’t close the gender gap we all aspire to close unless we close first the data gap,” Melinda Gates, told the Women Deliver conference in Copenhagen. “We live in an information age ... but we don’t have all the data we need to know how to fulfil the great promise [of the SDGs]. You have to collect data if you are to know how to act on data.”

Strengthening Women’s Role in Political Processes, Laws and Institutions

Pace of achieving political equality is slow. It would take more than 30 years (double the life of the SDG framework) to reach gender parity in decision making. Additionally there is a question of multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination that can only be addressed with political rights.

A. TRANSFORMATIVE FINANCING FOR WOMEN EMPOWERMENT

Admittedly, there is much to do about creating the economic incentive for governments to invest in allocating more funds and projecting the appropriate follow-throughs for girls’ and women’s development and inclusion in the national economy.

- Gender gaps in labour force participation and employment rates declined only marginally, according to research done by the International Labour Organisation (ILO) in 2015. Between 1995 and 2015, the global female labour force participation rate decreased from 52.4 to 49.6 percent. The corresponding figures for men are 79.9 and 76.1 per cent, respectively. Worldwide, the chances for women to participate in the labour market remain almost 27 percentage points lower than those for men. In regions where gender gaps in participation have been high, they have remained so. In Southern Asia and Eastern Asia, the gap has grown even wider. Women’s lower participation rates translate into fewer employment opportunities, with little variation over time, which negatively affects women’s earning capacity and economic security.

MAKING GENDER EQUALITY A PRIORITY:

*To mark the commitment of ILO constituents to gender equality and as the organisation approaches its centenary in 2019, ILO has launched the **Women at Work Centenary Initiative** with the objective of taking stock of the status and conditions of women in the world of work, and identifying innovative action that could give new impetus to the ILO's work on gender equality and non-discrimination. It aims to engage ILO constituents, civil society and all women and men in concerted action to achieve full and lasting gender equality and non-discrimination. The Women at Work Centenary Initiative is therefore key to delivering on the transformative SDG agenda.*

- Increasing gender parity in education attainment for example does not prevent women from being concentrated in middle to lower-paid occupations, which reflects traditional gender stereotypes and beliefs about women's and men's aspirations and capabilities.
- Adopting gender-responsive budgets is insufficient if there is a budget deficit, and research has shown that in some instances the deficit can go up to 90%.
- The quality of women's jobs remains a challenge. More women work in the informal sector or in unpaid care work sectors, which directly affects women's access to quality work and social protection. In Southern Asia itself, a high proportion of women work as contributing family workers – 31.8% and as own-account workers – 47.7% respectively. If women's informal labour were recognised and they were to participate in the economy at the same rate and level as men, there would be a \$28 trillion increase in global GDP by 2025.
- Foreign aid providers often lack gender equality as an indicator. Even the implementation of the SDGs lacks reference to funding.

Work-family policies aligned with international labour standards can help to remedy inequalities and to transform the gender-based division of labour at home. Additionally, promoting equal remuneration for work of equal value through wage transparency, training and gender-neutral job evaluations can significantly help to identify discriminatory pay practices and unfair pay differences. In addition, countries need to support adequate and inclusive minimum wages and to strengthen collective bargaining as key tools in efforts to address low pay, improve women's wages and hence gender wage gaps.

BILL & MELINDA
GATES foundation

BRIDGING THE DATA GAP:

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has committed \$80 million to help plug the gaps in data on women and girls that is needed to meet the UN target of achieving gender equality by 2030. This will support national statistics offices to collect and refine reliable information on the contribution women and girls make to society and the barriers they face in fulfilling their potential. Specific areas that need more data include the amount of unpaid work women carry out in the home and gender-based violence, often regarded as too difficult to collect.

Therefore, political actors need to understand the long-term macroeconomic benefits for gender sensitive budgeting, provision of social protection and normalising the shared responsibility within households to support women's empowerment in the economy and other sectors. Political actors need to continuously lobby for public support and a combination of official finance providers (i.e. aid, philanthropic funds, public/private development finance flows) to finance sustainable development and manage risks. Recent McKinsey Global Institute (MGI) research calculated the economic potential of women and making progress towards the SDGs will require \$1.5 trillion to \$2 trillion in incremental annual spending on essential services in 2025. The potential economic gains could be six to eight times the outlay. Therefore, summarily, data, along with finance, technology, capacity building and partnerships will be essential to financing women empowerment.

B. CLOSING THE INFORMATION GAP WITH DATA

Gender-aggregated data is necessary in tackling the issues impacting women but with the lack of data, or rather the misguided framing of data sometimes, proper policy interventions or even community engagements are not carried

out as effectively as it should. There is insufficient data to build a baseline for almost 80% of the indicators for SDG 5. Improving data disaggregation will therefore be fundamental for the full implementation of the SDGs in order to provide better gender statistics; evidence based localisation and ground breaking gender indicators to measure violence against women for example. Better data management will have the biggest impact on the civil and political participation of women and girls. Overall, the SDGs have 230 global indicators and have a follow up review mechanism in place. These indicators however are not fully applicable to all national contexts. As such, additional indicators for regional, national and subnational monitoring will be developed in due course. But countries have primary responsibility for follow up and review of progress made in the process of implementing the SDGs. The political will has to come from political actors in national and local governments to implement substantive change.

C. STRENGTHENING WOMEN'S ROLE IN POLITICAL PROCESSES, LAWS AND INSTITUTIONS

Structural and capacity gaps remain apparent for women's political advancement. As for the SDGs, critical metrics for women's participation in political life and public decision-making are missing and need to be rectified:

- Representation of women at national or local government level lacks an aspirational target in the SDG targets.
- Metrics for measuring women's levels of influence or power, especially in traditionally male dominated fields like political parties, security, judiciary, etc are non-existent.
- The need to build capacities of women to be effective in leadership roles have to be addressed.

For female political leaders to be effective, they need to learn the rules, use the rules and change the rules by:

- Enhancing institutional/procedural representation via reconfiguring power structures and developing alternate perspectives, networking, experiential sharing, working on one's own political effectiveness within political groups and parties as well as specific political arenas and institutional settings.
- Influencing output and discourse via cross party alliance building for legislation and policy-making, being proactive in framing issues by linking them to non-gendered debates and alliances, using the public space to raise concerns and get on the parliamentary agenda.
- Establishing supportive institutional structures such as political party women's wings or temporary quotas within parties to raise the visibility of women in key political institutions and positions.
- Further strategising on the obstacles that impede changes to the overall power of political patriarchy, moving beyond elite politics and the challenges of counter-movements by flexibly addressing different policy stakeholders and audiences through adequate reference

frameworks to be able to follow through with policy/legislative changes and also ensure proper implementation across society and polity.

GOING “GLOCAL” – TRANSFORMING GLOBAL KNOWLEDGE INTO LOCAL EFFORTS

It was disconcerting to hear of rising religious radicalisation and growing human rights abuses towards women in countries like Afghanistan, Pakistan and Indonesia, during the country reporting session at the Asian Women Parliamentarian Caucus (AWPC) meeting in Copenhagen this May. There was therefore consensus on the need to implement the principles behind the SDGs at the local level, especially, through public education of both citizens and decision-makers, as well as promote more women in political leadership by way of political party trainings and/or cross-party alliance building. Members of the caucus shared legislative and institutional best practices across Asia. Following are some examples:-

- *Philippines* – Using international standards set by the ILO on maternity leave provisions, Senator Pia Cayetano sponsored and lobbied for the “100 Day Maternity Bill”, which was successfully passed in 2015;
- *Pakistan* – Understanding the need to work collectively towards strengthening women’s rights in Pakistan, MNA Asiya Nasir was one of the forerunners in setting up the Women Parliamentary Caucus (WPC) at the national parliament and shared the outcomes of its legislative successes with its more recent “Women Protection Bill passed in 2016”;
- *Malaysia* – Member of National Parliament, YB Fuziah Salleh, one of the core trainers of her party’s women’s wing training initiative – SRIKANDI, shared the importance of engaging young women in capacity building and leadership training through grassroots initiatives.

As a post-meeting outcome, AWPC members from Bangladesh, India and Indonesia for example, pledged to lead the SDG discussion back in their respective parliaments and address practical policy approaches for concrete follow-ups in securing women’s empowerment in Asia.

CONCLUSION

As part of Konrad Adenauer Stiftung’s regional effort to support building the capacities and effectiveness of female parliamentarians, the AWPC provides a platform for the network to come together annually to share best practices in legislation and country experiences especially in regards to women’s political participation and empowerment. Meetings in conjunction with the 4th *International Conference: Women Deliver* offered tangible possibilities to discuss future initiatives to support national and consequently regional developments in women’s rights. The caucus will be pushing for stronger institutionalisation at the country level, by way of parliamentary caucuses, stronger party wing structures and more importantly mobilisation of resources and individuals to drive the change at the local level.