Gender

Sustainable development requires the full involvement of men and women in ensuring economic, cultural and ecological vitality. To realise this, important changes are needed to ensure equitable and secure access to and control over resources and economic opportunities, and the full and equal participation of women in sustainable development decision-making as it is generally women and girls who are disadvantaged. Special efforts are needed to strengthen national capacities to plan, implement and monitor policies and programmes that mainstream gender concerns and correct disparities in decision-making power and access to resources, rights, and entitlements for women.

Economic Opportunities

While women's employment has increased in the last two decades around the world, considerable differences persist with regard to the quality, job security, and conditions of pay between female and male workers. Women often work in the informal sector where there is greater insecurity and lower earning capacity. In all sectors, women often earn less than men for the same work, and have fewer opportunities to improve their skills.

Meanwhile, women's increased involvement in paid work has not significantly reduced their share of unpaid domestic responsibilities. Unpaid work ranges from care of children, the elderly and the sick to fuel, water and fodder collection, and subsistence agriculture. While this work is not economically valued, it is a crucial element in sustaining family livelihoods and managing the ecosystem diversity.

Access to Resources

In contrast to the full set of responsibilities they carry, many women around the world are often denied the basic opportunities to meet their own needs and interests, and to contribute fully to sustainable development. Persistent gender gaps exist in access to:

Food and Nutrition

From girlhood to womanhood, females in many societies are fed last and least. Hunger increases children's vulnerability to micronutrient deficiencies, infectious diseases and common diseases such as measles, diarrhoea, respiratory infections and malaria, often leading to permanent mental and physical impairment or death. Malnutrition often follows an intergenerational cycle, with many women entering pregnancy malnourished. Mothers who are poorly nourished face an increased risk of maternal death, stillbirth, and early neonatal death; their infants are at increased risk of low birth weight, premature birth and/or cognitive impairments.

Education and Literacy

Education benefits girls in life-altering ways - leading to improved health, lower infant mortality, lower fertility rates, greater economic opportunities and public and environmental stewardship. Yet while the "gender gap" in education has narrowed over the last decade, in many countries, female children still do not have the same access to education, literacy and training as do males.

Females account for 60 percent of children out of school, while two out of every three illiterate people in the world are women.[1] Female children are often taken out of school at an early age to perform household duties, care-giving responsibilities and economic tasks or for other social factors.

Land and Credit

National laws and local customs often deny women the right to secure title or land, and where women have ownership rights, huge inequalities in access still exist. Women are estimated to own less than two percent of the world's property, even though they grow a substantial proportion of the world's food.[2] Restrictions on women's land rights hinder their ability to access other resources and information. For example, land title deeds

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[1] UNESCO, Educating Girls and Women, Education for All 2000 Assessment (Paris: UNESCO, 2000).

[2] Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) Women and Food Security accessed online at www.fao.org.

are the main form of security to secure loans and credit, and security of tenure is amongst the most important of all housing rights.

Decision-making

> "No government can claim to be democratic if half of its population is excluded from decision-making."-Kofi Annan, UN Secretary General, New York, October 2000

Persistent gender inequalities continue to leave women without an equal voice in the decision-making processes that impact their lives and their environment. Increasing workloads as well as gender biases exclude women's participation in decision-making processes from local levels to the ranks where national and international development policies are determined. Moreover, women are also significantly underrepresented in corporate decision-making and in trade organisations such as the World Trade Organisation.

Income

Failure to provide equal opportunities and access to resources has made women in many parts of the world more vulnerable to poverty than men. Women represent as much as 70 percent of the world's absolute poor - living on one dollar a day or less. Poor women are disproportionately found as heads of single parent families (female-headed households), where they are often disadvantaged both socially and economically.[3]

International Commitments

Since 1992, gender has been an explicit part of many key United Nations conferences, including the: 1992 Conference on Environment and Development, 1993 World Conference on Human Rights, 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, 1995 World Summit for Social Development, 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, 1996 Conference on Human Settlements, 1996 World Food Summit, and subsequent five- and ten-year reviews.

Recommendations from these conferences formed the basis of the 2000 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These Goals, affirmed in the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) Plan of Implementation, aim to promote gender equality and empower women, including to: "Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and to all levels of education no later than 2015." This goal supports commitments made earlier in the same year at the 2000 World Education Forum in Dakar.

UNESCO's Role: Gender and Education for Sustainable Development

UNESCO has long recognised the importance of promoting gender equality in and through education. UNESCO works with UN agencies, Governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and other stakeholders to strengthen national policies and programmes to ensure women's and girls' right to education and to develop teaching materials that are sensitive to the learning needs and styles of both males and females. Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) is an important part of this process. ESD reorients education toward a vision for society that is not only ecologically sustainable but also one which is socially, economically and politically sustainable. ESD builds on basic education to plan curriculum with a gender perspective in all subject areas and content themes. In this way, people of all ages can be empowered to develop and evaluate alternative visions of a sustainable future and fulfil these visions through creative and cooperative processes.

UNESCO has a dual role in relation to ESD: first as a substantive implementer of ESD - accelerating education reforms and coordinating activities of multiple stakeholders to implement ESD at international, regional, and country levels. Second, UNESCO also acts as the lead agency in the promotion of the Decade on Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014). The Decade offers an opportunity for UNESCO and its partners to advance progress made in human resource development, education and training to achieve development that is people-centred, equitable and sustainable.

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[3] UN, The World's Women: Trends and Statistics *(New York: UN, 2000.)*