

UNWOMEN

Committee Background Guide

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About this committee

In July 2010, the United Nations General Assembly created UN Women, the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women. The creation of UN Women came about as part of the UN reform agenda, bringing together resources and mandates for greater impact. The main roles of UN Women are:

- To support inter-governmental bodies, such as the Commission on the Status of Women, in their formulation of policies, global standards and norms.
- To help Member States to implement these standards, standing ready to provide suitable technical and financial support to those countries that request it, and to forge effective partnerships with civil society.
- To hold the UN system accountable for its own commitments on gender equality, including regular monitoring of system-wide progress

Defining women and poverty

Poverty has various manifestations, including lack of income and productive resources sufficient to ensure a sustainable livelihood; hunger and malnutrition; ill health; limited or lack of access to education and other basic services; increasing morbidity and mortality from illness; homelessness and inadequate housing; unsafe environments; and social discrimination and exclusion. It is also characterised by lack of participation in decision-making and in civil, social and cultural life.

Women and poverty

More than 1 billion people in the world today, the great majority of whom are women, live in unacceptable conditions of poverty, mostly in the developing countries. Poverty has various causes, including structural ones. Poverty is a complex, multidimensional problem, with origins in both the national and international domains. Women bear a disproportionate burden of the world's poverty. Statistics indicate that women are more likely than men to be poor and at risk of hunger because of the systematic discrimination they face in education, health care, employment and control of assets. Poverty implications are widespread for women, leaving many without even basic rights such as access to clean drinking water, sanitation, medical care and decent employment. Being poor can also mean they have little protection from violence and have no role in decision making.

Six out of ten of the world's poorest people are women who must, as the primary family caretakers and producers of food, shoulder the burden of tilling land, grinding grain, carrying water and cooking. This is no easy burden. In Kenya, women can burn up to 85 percent of their daily calorie intake just fetching water. Yet some 75 percent of the world's women cannot get bank loans because they have unpaid or insecure jobs and are not entitled to property ownership. This is one reason why women comprise more than 50 percent of the world's population but own only one percent of the world's wealth.

Girls account for the majority of children not attending school; almost 2/3s of women in the developing world work in the informal sector or as unpaid workers in the home. Despite greater parliamentary participation, women are still outnumbered four-to-one in legislatures around the world. Equality between men and women is more than social justice - it's a fundamental human right. But gender equality also makes good economic sense. When women have equal access to education, and go on to participate fully in business and economic decision-making, they are a key driving force against poverty.

Women with equal rights are better educated, healthier, and have greater access to land, jobs and financial resources. By enhancing women's control over decision-making in the household, gender equality also translates into better prospects and greater well-being of children, reducing poverty of the future.

Gender equality and women's empowerment is central to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Yet, while there are some positive trends in gender equality, there are still many areas of concern.

Women and economic empowerment

Women are often paid less than men for their work, with the average wage gap in 2008 being 17 percent. Women face persistent discrimination when they apply for credit for business or self-employment and are often concentrated in insecure, unsafe and low-wage work. Eight out of ten women workers are considered to be in vulnerable employment in sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, with global economic changes taking a huge toll on their livelihoods.

The current financial crisis is likely to affect women particularly severely. In many developing countries where women work in export-led factories, or in countries where migrant women workers are the backbone of service industries, women's jobs have taken the greatest hit. The International Labour Organisation estimates that the economic downturn could lead to 22 million more unemployed women in 2009, jeopardising the gains made in the last few decades in women's empowerment.

In many countries, however, the impact goes far beyond the loss of formal jobs, as the majority of women tend to work in the informal sector, for example as domestics in cities, and do not show up in official unemployment numbers. Economic policies and institutions still mostly fail to take gender disparities into account, from tax and budget systems to trade regimes. And with too few seats at the tables where economic decisions are made, women themselves have limited opportunity to influence policy.

In addition, all types of conflict, displacement of people and environmental degradation have undermined the capacity of Governments to meet the basic needs of their populations. Transformations in the world economy are profoundly changing the parameters of social development in all countries. One significant trend has been the increased poverty of women, the extent of which varies from region to region.

Women, water and education

Lack of access to basic sanitation infrastructure disproportionately impacts women and puts them at risk of violence and assault when there are no facilities in their homes. Lack of safe, private toilets at schools is one of the reasons for high drop-out rates amongst girls and is a major impediment to girls' education.

The lack of access to drinking water also disproportionately affects women and girls. In many countries, women and girls carry out most tasks related to water. Lack of access to drinking water increases their burden and reduces their time for other activities, such as going to school or earning an income.

Globally, it is estimated that women spend more than 200 million hours per day collecting water. This burden could increase significantly in coming years. By 2030, nearly half the global population could be facing water scarcity, with demand outstripping supply by 40 per cent. One in every three people already lives in a country with moderate to high water stress.

Research shows that increasing women's representation in governments and decision-making —one of UN Women's key priorities— makes a difference. For example, in India, the number of drinking water projects was 62 per cent higher in areas with female-led local councils than in those with male-led councils. Yet, women's participation in decision-making on water and food management remains low and women are not sufficiently prioritised in water policies, programmes and infrastructure. Today, women hold less than six per cent of all ministerial positions in the field of environment, natural resources and energy and they are underrepresented at lower levels as well. Now is the time to take action and prioritise women and girls in the provision of drinking water and sanitation for all. This was reaffirmed last year at Rio+20 as a key component of sustainable development.

Women's land & property rights

In many countries around the world, women's property rights are limited by social norms, customs and at times legislation, hampering their economic status and opportunities to overcome poverty. Even in countries where women constitute the majority of small farmers and do more than 75 percent of the agricultural work, they are routinely denied the right to own the land they cultivate and on which they are dependent to raise their families.

Ownership of land and property empowers women and provides income and security. Without resources such as land, women have limited say in household decision-making, and no recourse to the assets during crises. This often relates to other vulnerabilities such as domestic violence and HIV and AIDS.

In regions of conflict, the impact of unequal land rights has particularly serious consequences for women — often the only survivors. In conflict and post-conflict situations, the number of women-headed households often increases sharply as many men have either been killed or are absent. Without their husbands, brothers or fathers — in whose name land and property titles are traditionally held — they find themselves denied access to their homes and fields by male family members, former in-laws or neighbors. Without the security of a home or income, women and their families fall into poverty traps and struggle for livelihoods, education, sanitation, health care, and other basic rights.

In recent years, international agreements have repeatedly reiterated the importance of women's land and property rights. The Beijing Platform affirmed that women's right to inheritance and ownership of land and property should be recognised. The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) has underscored it, referring to rural women's rights to equal treatment in land and agrarian reform processes. Women's property rights are an implicit part of achieving the Millennium Development Goals, specifically Goal 1 on eradicating extreme poverty and Goal 3 on gender equality.

UN Women advocates for women's land and property rights as part of its core strategy to enhance women's economic security and rights and reduce feminised poverty. There is a strong focus on ensuring that women benefit from equal rights to property under the law, as well as in actual practice at the grassroots level.

Women migrant workers

Globalisation has contributed to an increasing flow of migrant workers from countries with limited economic opportunities to fill gaps in nations with a dwindling labour supply. While globalisation may foster the acceleration of trade and investment, it does not create an environment that protects migrant workers' economic, social and physical security. This is even more so when it comes to women migrant workers, whose numbers have been increasing, now constituting 50 percent or more of the migrant workforce in Asia and Latin America.

By creating new economic opportunities, migration can promote economic independence and status for women workers, who provide safety nets that sustain communities at home. Studies indicate that migrant women workers contribute to the development of both sending and receiving countries. These monetary investments — used for food, housing, education and medical services — along with newly acquired skills of returnees, can potentially contribute significantly to poverty reduction and the MDGs.

Yet, while migration can bring new employment and opportunities, it also bears great risks for women. Female migrants often work as domestic workers or sex workers — in unregulated informal sectors that do not fall under national labour laws. Migrant women routinely lack access to social services and legal protection and are subjected to abuses such as harsh working and living conditions, low wages, illegal withholding of wages, premature termination of employment and sexual slavery.

Gender and food security

FAO estimates that around one billion people are undernourished, and that each year more than three million children die from undernutrition before their fifth birthday. Micronutrient deficiencies, which affect about two billion people, lead to poor growth, blindness, increased severity of infections and sometimes death. The root causes of world hunger - including rural poverty, population growth and environmental degradation - are exacerbated by the global economic slowdown, volatile food prices and the impact of climate change.

In developing countries, rural women and men play different roles in guaranteeing food security for their households and communities. While men grow mainly field crops, women are usually responsible for growing and preparing most of the food consumed in the home and raising small livestock, which provides protein.

Rural women also carry out most home food processing, which ensures a diverse diet, minimizes losses and provides marketable products. Women are more likely to spend their incomes on food and children's needs - research has shown that a child's chances of survival increase by 20% when the mother controls the household budget. Women, therefore, play a decisive role in food security, dietary diversity and children's health.

But gender inequalities in control of livelihood assets limit women's food production. In Ghana, studies found that insecure access to land led women farmers to practise shorter fallow periods than men, which reduced their yields, income and the availability of food for the household. In sub-Saharan Africa, diseases such as HIV/AIDS force women to assume greater caretaking roles, leaving them less time to grow and prepare food.

Having an adequate supply of food does not automatically translate into adequate levels of nutrition. In many societies women and girls eat the food remaining after the male family members have eaten. Women, girls, the sick and disabled are the main victims of this "food discrimination", which results in chronic undernutrition and ill-health.

Questions for Research:

1. What are the key issues for your country and region?
2. What action has your country taken to promote the eradication of poverty for women on a national and international level?
3. How is your country promoting the health, nutrition and emotional well-being of women?
4. How is your country promoting equal social protection and employment rights?
5. How is your country promoting the economic and educational empowerment of women?
6. Do national policies take account of women?
7. Does your country keep and submit data on the well-being of women?
8. What are your country's priorities? What new legislation, treaties and actions are possible?
9. Who will be your strongest allies in committee?

Gender refers to the roles and responsibilities of women and men and the relationship between them.

Gender Mainstreaming is the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action. It is a strategy for making women's as well as men's concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, and evaluation of policies and programs in all political, economic and societal spheres, so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated. The ultimate goal is to achieve gender equality [by transforming the mainstream].

Delegates... how can we:

Support women's fundamental role in food security? Women are the cornerstones of food production and utilisation. With more equitable distribution of assets, such as credit, improved seeds and fertilizer, and information and technology, women can achieve significantly higher agricultural productivity.

Eliminate legal restrictions? In order to overcome feminised poverty, legal restrictions that perpetuate poverty must be addressed, such as: rights to own, inherit and acquire property and land and to retain property brought into marriage; limits on access to reproductive health information; rights to access credit; rights to birth registration, travel abroad, and a passport.

Guarantee equal social protection and employment rights for all? Whether in the formal or informal economy, women need equal protection of their rights and entitlements as workers, equal adherence to labour standards and conventions, and a safe workplace free of harassment and violence.

Enforce women's rights and enable claims to realise those rights? Legal reforms can only translate into greater food security and reduced poverty if they are enforced.

Through harmonising statutory and customary laws, promoting legal literacy, and helping women make land and other claims, women's roles as important economic actors in the household and the community can be supported and protected.

Upgrade women's skills and protect assets so they can compete in the modern global economy? Only through continual investment can women move up the value chain and seize opportunities in this era of globalisation. In many cases, the opposite is happening; lack of women's ownership over the land they farm can lead to eviction of female subsistence farmers from areas turning to commercial crops.

Educate women? A one-year increase in schooling of all adult females in a country is associated with an increase in Gross Domestic Product per capita of around \$700.3 In addition, educated mothers place higher value on schooling their own children, improving productivity in the next generation.

Higher education tends to be associated with higher labour productivity, greater ease in finding formal sector employment, and higher income.

Expand paid work opportunities for women? Access to paid work offers income and much more. It often allows fundamental shifts in gender relations--- greater sense of self-worth and societal respect, a say in critical life choices such as postponing the age of marriage, and a greater role in household decision-making and ability to speak out against abuse.

Share caring and household work? In virtually all countries, women work more hours per day than men, disproportionately caring for children, the sick, and the elderly and managing food, cooking and many household affairs.

This time poverty can limit their ability to generate income, build literacy and other skills, and participate in community affairs.

Gender-responsive budgets 'Gender Mainstreaming'

Gender-responsive budgeting is not about creating separate budgets for women, or solely increasing spending on women's programmes. Rather gender-responsive budgeting seeks to ensure that the collection and allocation of public resources is carried out in ways that are effective and contribute to advancing gender equality and women's empowerment. It should be based on in-depth analysis that identifies effective interventions for implementing policies and laws that advance women's rights. It provides tools to assess the different needs and contributions of men and women, and boys and girls within the existing revenues, expenditures and allocations and calls for adjusting budget policies to benefit all groups. Gender-responsive budget analysis, along with legislation, and other practical policy measures can address gender bias and discrimination.

Information specific to the causes of poverty for women:

<http://www.unwomen.org/>

[Women and Poverty](#)

[Women and Health](#)

[Women and the Economy](#)

[Women in Power and Decision Making](#)

<http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment>

<http://www.globalpovertyproject.com/infobank/women>

[http://www.unifem.org/gender issues/women poverty economics/index.html](http://www.unifem.org/gender%20issues/women%20poverty%20economics/index.html)

[http://www.cpahq.org/cpahq/cpadocs/Feminization of Poverty.pdf](http://www.cpahq.org/cpahq/cpadocs/Feminization_of_Poverty.pdf)

http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/ourwork/povertyreduction/focus_areas/focus_gender_and_poverty/

http://www.un.org/womenwatch/directory/women_and_poverty_3001.htm

<http://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2013/mar/26/empower-women-end-poverty-developing-world>

Women, land ownership, food security and economic empowerment

[Women and Rural Development](#)

[Gender Equality and Food Security – Women's empowerment as a tool against hunger](#)

[Governing land for women and men](#)

[Gender and Land Rights Database](#)

[Fourth United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries, 2011: UN Women Key Messages](#)

[Infographic: The female face of farming](#)

[2009 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development Women's Control over Economic Resources and Access to Financial Resources, including Microfinance](#)

The World's Women reports are prepared by the Statistics Division of the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) at five-year intervals, starting in 1990.

