

SUSTAINABILITY PAPER

What does sustainability mean for women?

The rise of extremism, escalating violent conflict, recurrent and deepening economic crises, volatile food and energy prices, food insecurity, natural disasters and the effects of climate change have made women more vulnerable and increased inequalities. Gender discrimination compounds other forms of disadvantage – on the basis of socio-economic status, geographic location, race, caste and ethnicity, sexuality or disability – to limit women’s and girls’ opportunities and life chances.

Conflict affects women, girls, boys and men differently. The impact of a conflict is often measured by casualties, most of whom are men and boys. But the consequences for women and girls, such as gender-based violence, may not be immediately visible. Women and girls face heightened risks due to displacement and the breakdown of normal protection structures and support. They also face increased care-related tasks such as providing food and water and caring for the sick. Moreover 80 per cent of the more than 42 million refugees and people displaced by conflict worldwide are women and children.

Women and girls are more at risk during and after natural disasters than men. In general natural disasters kill more women than men. Disasters such as droughts, floods and storms kill more women than men due to structural gender inequalities. Studies show that girls are given less food when it is scarce, boys are generally given preferential treatment in rescue efforts, and girls are more likely to be pulled out of school. In disasters and conflict situations girls may be forced into marriage or suffer sexual abuse – during natural disasters the incidence of rape and sexual exploitation increase.

Globally women earn on average 24 per cent less than men and are less likely than men to receive a pension. This translates into large lifetime inequalities in income between women and men. Yet in all regions women work more than men – on average they do at least two and a half times more unpaid care and domestic work than men, and if paid and unpaid work are combined, women work longer hours than men in nearly all countries. Women’s involvement in this work varies greatly across countries depending on the extent and coverage of public services such as water and sanitation, energy, health and childcare and likewise elder care. Care of the sick and elderly impacts negatively on women’s employment options.

Crisis and austerity are jeopardizing women’s economic and social rights. Their effects have been less acute in developing countries. There have been cutbacks in governments spending



on welfare services and benefits in Europe. In developing countries cuts have affected subsidies on food, fuel, electricity and transport and threatened the expansion of emerging social protection programmes.

Investments in electricity and energy infrastructure are essential. Some 1.3 billion people lack basic electricity to light their homes, while almost 3 billion people rely on solid fuels for cooking and heating. Women and girls spend many hours collecting wood, charcoal, animal manure and crop residues for this purpose. Traditional biomass-burning cook stoves are the main cause of indoor air pollution, which is responsible for more than 4 million deaths annually, but in addition this means unpaid work limits the time women and girls have available for paid work, education and leisure. Governments need to invest in basic infrastructure and services (water and sanitation, health, electricity and clean cook-stoves) to reduce women's unpaid care and domestic work burdens and liberate time for productive activities and leisure.

Despite significant progress nearly a billion people do not have access to water from a protected well, a protected spring, collected rainwater or a tap. Over 2.5 billion people still have no access to sanitation facilities such as flush toilets, composting toilets or ventilated improved pits. 700 million use shared facilities, which is a problem for women and girls due to their lack of privacy and safety. In addition not all women and girls are able to manage menstruation hygienically and with dignity, many are forced to use unhygienic sanitary protection such as rags or newspaper and the like. This constitutes an obstacle to girls' school and work attendance. Thus better access to water contributes to an increase in women's productive activity as well as girls' school attendance.

Thirty-five per cent of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual violence, but some national studies make mention of 70 per cent of women who have suffered some type of physical or sexual violence in their lifetime. Between 40 and 50 per cent of women in the European Union experience unwanted sexual advances or other forms of sexual harassment at work. Moreover trafficking enslaves millions of women and girls, who make up about 55 per cent of the estimated 20.9 million involved in forced labour worldwide and 98 per cent of those forced into sexual exploitation.

Workplace violence against women in any form is a glaring violation of decent work and a severe signal of gender inequality. Mining is a prime example of embedded discrimination across cultures and hostility against women, and the continuous struggle to overcome this gender oppression is the responsibility of both men and women.

Research points to the link between HIV and violence, both as a risk factor for infection and as a consequence of being identified as being HIV positive. Women's low status and powerlessness are direct causes of HIV infection, including their inability to negotiate safe sex. Globally there are 16 million women living with HIV or 50 per cent of all adults living with HIV. The WHO calls



HIV/AIDS the leading cause of death for women of reproductive age in developing countries. Governments increasingly recognize the importance of gender equality in national HIV responses.

Biological differences between women and men as well as socially determined differences in their rights, roles and responsibilities have an impact on their health risks and status. Although women tend to live longer than men, they do not necessarily enjoy more well-being. Lack of control over resources, the burden of unpaid care and domestic work and gender-based violence all undermine women's health. Reproductive health needs, including information about reproductive hazards, access to modern contraceptive measures, and safe abortions if necessary, are particularly needed. Women's health needs may be neglected because their lives are not valued, and men are given preferential treatment in the allocation of health resources.

Realizing women's rights at work requires that women can access employment with decent pay, safe working conditions and social protection. However in large parts of the world employment does not meet these criteria. Informal work is the norm in developing countries, which means that these workers are more likely to live in poverty than formal workers. Moreover gender inequality is a major cause and effect of hunger and poverty – it is estimated that 60 per cent of the chronically hungry are women and girls. In South Asia, sub-Saharan Africa and East and Southeast Asia more than 75 per cent of all jobs are informal. Seventy-three per cent of the world's population have only partial or no social protection. Most of them are women.

Gendered hierarchies within informal employment mean that men dominate in the more protected and better paid jobs at the top, while women are over-represented among the least secure and lowest-paying jobs at the bottom. Even among informal self-employed workers women tend to be clustered in less well paid activities. In waste collection for example men usually collect the higher value scrap metal, and women collect less valuable plastics and cardboard.

The boundaries between formal and informal employment are disappearing especially as a result of outsourcing. Outsourcing is common in industries and jobs where women work such as catering, cleaning and care work. In developed regions informal employment is often referred to as non-standard or atypical employment. In the OECD countries since the economic crisis informal employment has been on the rise. Women make up two-thirds of workers on involuntary temporary contracts. Precarious work in all of its forms is a problem for all workers, but it is a particular problem for women.

Policies must aim to increase the returns on informal work, improve working conditions and eliminate the violence and abuse faced by these workers. Social protection needs to be extended to them in the form of health care and pension schemes. Occupational health



regulations should cover these workers and take the particular hazards faced by waste pickers and home workers and others into account.

Gender stereotypes feed occupational segregation and channel women into a limited set of jobs that reproduce their caring roles and are thus undervalued. Hierarchies in the workplace are often maintained through violence in the form of bullying and sexual harassment, which reinforce male power and keep women from moving up or into non-traditional jobs. Trade unions have not always been inclusive of women nor taken their concerns seriously. Women have thus faced a struggle to be heard and recognized both by employers and trade unions themselves.

Involving women's organizations in policy design and implementation will ensure that gender concerns are adequately addressed. Thus gender equality will be a factor to contribute to human development and sustainability, for the inequalities among social groups, men and women, rich and poor women are an obstacle to development. Reducing gender disparities supports economies and makes societies stronger.