



## A Critical Study of United Nations efforts for Gender Equality

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### Abstract

Gender equality means that women and men, girls and boys have equal conditions, treatment and opportunities for realizing their full potential, human rights and dignity, and for contributing to and benefitting from economic, social, cultural and political development. Gender equality is, therefore, the equal valuing by society of the similarities and the differences of men and women, and the roles they play. It is based on women and men being full partners in the home, community and society. Equality does not mean that women and men will become the same but women and men become equal in rights, responsibilities and opportunities will not depend on whether they are born male or female. Gender equality implies that the interests, needs and priorities of both women and men and girls and boys are taken into consideration, recognizing the diversity of different groups and that all human beings are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations set by stereotypes and prejudices about gender roles. Gender equality is a matter of human rights and is considered a precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable people centred development. Gender equality is the process of being fair to men and women, boys and girls, and importantly the equality of outcomes and results. Gender equality may involve the use of temporary special measures to compensate for historical or systemic bias or discrimination. It refers to differential treatment that is fair and positively addresses a bias or disadvantage that is due to gender roles or norms or differences between the sexes. Equality ensures that women and men and girls and boys have an equal chance, not only at the starting point, but also when reaching the finishing line. It is about the fair and just treatment of both sexes that takes into account the different needs of the men and women, cultural barriers and discrimination of the specific group. When United Nations established gender equality programming came into existence. Important examples include gender mainstreaming, gender analysis, prevention and response to gender-based violence and sexual exploitation and abuse, promotion and protection of human rights, empowerment of women and girls and gender balance in the workplace. Gender programming response means paying attention to the unique needs of females, valuing their perspectives, respecting their experiences, understanding developmental differences between girls and boys, women and men and ultimately empowering girls and women. UN spread Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA) that is to empower people (rights holders) to realize their rights and strengthen the State to comply with their human rights obligations and duties. States obligations to human rights require them to respect, protect and fulfill women's and girls rights, along with the rights of men and boys. When they fail to do so, the United Nations has a responsibility to work with partners to strengthen the capacity to more effectively realize that duty. This paper assesses the United Nations Agenda, with a focus on its gender-related goals and objectives. This paper explores the key challenges in achieving the international goals and commitments in the area of gender equality and the empowerment of women. This paper critically analysed the initiatives of United Nations for gender equality.

**Keywords:** gender analysis. gender violence. sexual exploitation. patriarchy. division of labour. gender justice. discrimination. cultural barriers. rights holders. biological difference. women suffrage. women empowerment

### Introduction

Gender refers to a set of qualities and behaviors expected from a female or male person by society. Gender roles are nurtured or learned, are socially determined, and can evolve over time. In contrast, an individual's sex has traditionally been thought not to change, being based on biology. In other words gender is the result of social institutions and is a learned behaviour, whereas sex was a biological category. Thus gender is a social construction and a product of nurturing, while sex is a fixed biological given and a product of nature. Traits like nurturing, connectedness, aggression, linear thinking, activity and passivity have been described as purely the result of gender. Physical attributes like breasts, vaginas, labia, estrogen, testosterone, penises, testicles, semen and reproductive capacities have been labelled as sex. Feminists make a distinction between sex (which is a biological fact about the individual), and gender, which is a human artefact. The masculine and feminine genders are shaped by society and culture. Gender is a social

and cultural construct, which distinguishes differences in the attributes of men and women, girls and boys, and accordingly refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women. Gender based roles and other attributes, therefore, change over time and vary with different cultural contexts. Gender Socialization is the process of girls and boys, women and men learning social roles based on their sex, which leads to different behaviours and creates differing expectations and attitudes by gender. An example is that concept that girls and women do more household chores, such as cooking and cleaning, while boys and men do more work out of the home. Gender roles often lead to inequality. The concept of gender includes the expectations held about the characteristics, aptitudes and likely behaviours of both women and men.

The concept of gender came into common parlance during the early 1970s. It was used as an analytical category to draw a line of demarcation between biological sex differences and the way these are used to inform behaviours

and competencies, which are then assigned as either masculine or feminine. The purpose of affirming a sex/gender distinction was to argue that the actual physical or mental effects of biological difference had been exaggerated to maintain a patriarchal system of power and to create a consciousness among women that they were naturally better suited to 'domestic' roles. In a post-industrial society those physiological sex differences which do exist become arguably even less significant, and the handicap to women of childbirth is substantially lessened by the existence of effective contraception and pain relief in labour. Moreover, women are generally long outliving their reproductive functions, and so a much smaller proportion of their life is defined by this. Ann Oakley's pathfinding text, *Sex, Gender and Society* (1972) lays the ground for further exploration of the construction of gender. She notes how Western cultures seem most prone to exaggeration of gender differences and argues that the "social efficiency" of our present gender roles centres round women's role as housewife and mother. There is also the more vaguely conceived belief that any tampering with these roles would diminish happiness, but this type of argument has a blatantly disreputable history and should have been discarded long ago'. Simone de Beauvoir had explored this distinction in *The Second Sex* two decades previously with her statement that "One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman". The majority of feminists in the 1970s seemed to embrace the notion of gender as 'construct'. However, Shulamith Firestone is one exception who suggested in *The Dialectic of Sex* that patriarchy exploits women's biological capacity to reproduce as their essential weakness. The only way for women to break away from the oppression, she argues, is to use technological advances to free themselves from the burden of childbirth. She advocates breaking down the biological bond between mothers and children.

Gender inequality is a social problem which causes unfair treatment in society between different genders. Gender inequality is obviously an urgent problem in the world. Despite the fact that its volume much decreases, it still exists and makes a lot of people suffer its consequences every day. Women and girls represent half of the world's population and, therefore, also half of its potential. Gender equality, besides being a fundamental human right, is essential to achieve peaceful societies, with full human potential and sustainable development. Moreover, it has been shown that empowering women increase productivity and economic growth. Gender based role means social and behavioral norms that, within a specific culture, are widely considered to be socially appropriate for individuals of a specific sex. These often determine the traditional responsibilities and tasks assigned to men, women, boys and girls. Gender socialisation is a process of girls and boys, women and men learning social roles based on their sex, which leads to different behaviours and creates differing expectations and attitude by gender. An example is that concept that girls and women do more household chores, such as cooking and cleaning, while boys and men do more work out of the home. Gender roles often lead to inequality. Gender norms are ideas about how men and women should be and act. Internalized early in life, gender norms can

establish a life cycle of gender socialization and stereotyping. Women in development approach is based on the concept that women are marginalized in development-oriented interventions, with the result that women are often excluded from the benefits of development.

Unfortunately, there is still a long way to go to achieve full equality of rights and opportunities between men and women. Therefore, it is necessary to end the multiple forms of gender discrimination and secure equal access to quality education and health, economic resources and participation in political life for both women and girls and men and boys. It is also essential to achieve equal opportunities in access to employment and to positions of leadership and decision-making at all levels. The UN Secretary-General, Mr. António Guterres has stated that achieving gender equality and empowering women and girls is the unfinished business of our time, and the greatest human rights challenge in our world.

UN support for the rights of women began with the Organization's founding Charter. Among the purposes of the UN declared in Article 1 of its Charter is "To achieve international co-operation, in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion." From the beginnings of the United Nations, in 1945, women tried to participate within the organization and to make their presence felt in the content and implementation of human rights instruments and mechanisms. Within the UN's first year, the Economic and Social Council established its Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in 1946 as the principal global policy-making body dedicated exclusively to gender equality, advancement of women and ensuring gender neutral language in the draft Universal Declaration of Human Right. Its first Chair was Bodil Bootstrap of Belgium with the mandate of promoting women's rights all over the world. CSW promoted the explicit inclusion of women's rights into the UDHR and makes recommendations to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) on urgent problems requiring immediate attention in the field of women's rights.

The landmark Declaration, adopted by the General Assembly on 10 December 1948, reaffirms that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" and that "everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, birth or other status."

As the international feminist movement began to gain momentum during the 1970s, the General Assembly declared 1975 as the International Women's Year and organized the first World Conference on Women, held in Mexico City. At the urging of the Conference, it subsequently declared the years 1976-1985 as the UN Decade for Women, and established a Voluntary Fund for Decade.

In 1979, the General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which is often described as an International Bill of Rights for Women, and are often called the "Magna Carta for the human rights of women. it is essentially a bill of rights for women which sets forth internationally accepted standards for achieving their equal rights. Those states that endorse it recognize that discrimination against women is a social problem which

requires urgent solution. They are obligated to pursue a policy of eliminating discrimination against women and to report on their progress. This document is the most important human rights instrument for the protection and promotion of women's rights and the first document which explicitly recognises women as full human beings. CEDAW contains civil and political rights as well as economic, social and cultural rights, uniting human rights which, for example, in the International Covenants are divided into two categories.

The Convention regulates issues related to the public as well as to the private lives of women. Several articles deal with the role of women in the family and society, the need to share responsibilities within the family, and the urgency to implement changes in social and cultural systems that attribute a subordinate position to women. Only through such elementary changes can the recognition of the human rights of women be brought about on the global level. As of May 2012, 187 states have ratified the Convention. Numerous Islamic states have made partly far-reaching reservations to the CEDAW obligations. The CEDAW Committee puts particular emphasis on the withdrawal of the reservations which prevent the full enjoyment of the rights of women contained in the Convention. Discrimination against women is defined by Article 1 of the Convention as "any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field."

In its 30 articles, the CEDAW explicitly defines discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination. The Convention targets culture and tradition as influential forces shaping gender roles and family relations, and it is the first human rights treaty to affirm the reproductive rights of women. CEDAW obliges its states parties to embody the principle of equality of men and women in their national constitutions or other appropriate legislation and ensure the practical realisation of the principle of equality. States adopt appropriate legislative and other measures, including sanctions where appropriate, prohibiting all discrimination against women and establish legal protection of the rights of women on an equal basis with men.

Five years after the Mexico City conference (1975), a Second World Conference on Women was held in Copenhagen in 1980. The resulting Programme of Action called for stronger national measures to ensure women's ownership and control of property, as well as improvements in women's rights with respect to inheritance, child custody and loss of nationality.

In 1985, the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, was held in Nairobi. It was convened at a time when the movement for gender equality had finally gained true global recognition, and 15,000 representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) participated in a parallel NGO Forum.

The event was described by many as "the birth of global feminism". Realizing that the goals of the Mexico City Conference had not been adequately met, the 157 participating governments adopted the Nairobi Forward-

looking Strategies to the Year 2000. The document broke new ground by declaring all issues to be women's issues.

The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, went a step further than the Nairobi Conference. The Beijing Platform for Action asserted women's rights as human rights and committed to specific actions to ensure respect for those rights. Get involved with UN Women's Generation Equality campaign to mark the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is the principal global intergovernmental body exclusively dedicated to the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women.

The CSW is instrumental in promoting women's rights, documenting the reality of women's lives throughout the world, and shaping global standards on gender equality and the empowerment of women.

On 2 July 2010, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously voted to create a single UN body tasked with accelerating progress in achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. The new UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women – or UN Women – merged four of the world body's agencies and offices: the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues, and the UN International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women.

Spearheaded by the United Nations, the international community agreed in 2015 on 17 Sustainable Development Goals to pursue over the next 15 years. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) reaffirmed and invigorated UNICEF's work on gender equality, especially around the rights and empowerment of adolescent girls. The needs and rights of girls are encapsulated in Goal 5: Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment and cut across the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

The United Nations is now focusing its global development work on the recently-developed 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Women have a critical role to play in all of the SDGs, with many targets specifically recognizing women's equality and empowerment as both the objective, and as part of the solution.

Sustainable Development Goal 5, to "Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" is known as the stand-alone gender goal, because it is dedicated to achieving these ends. Deep legal and legislative changes are needed to ensure women's rights around the world. While a record 143 countries guaranteed equality between men and women in their Constitutions by 2014, another 52 had not taken this step.

Other SDGs targets and indicators that resonate with UNICEF's gender equality work are -

Goal 3: Good Health and Well-being - reduce maternal mortality, end preventable deaths of newborns and children under 5, ensure access to sexual and reproductive health and end HIV and AIDS and other diseases.

Goal 4: Quality Education - universalize access to quality education, from pre-primary to tertiary levels, with a specific mandate to redress social inequalities undermining access to educational opportunities.

Goal 6: Clean Water and Sanitation - specifically calls for paying attention to the needs of women and girls.

Stark gender disparities remain in economic and political realms. While there has been some progress over the decades, on average women in the labour market still earn 20 per cent less than men globally. As of 2018, only 24 per cent of all national parliamentarians were female, a slow rise from 11.3 percent in 1995.

The UN system continues to give particular attention to the issue of violence against women. The 1993 General Assembly Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women contained “a clear and comprehensive definition of violence against women [and] a clear statement of the rights to be applied to ensure the elimination of violence against women in all its forms”. It represented “a commitment by States in respect of their responsibilities, and a commitment by the international community at large to the elimination of violence against women”.

Violence against women is a pandemic affecting all countries, even those that have made laudable progress in other areas. Worldwide, 35 per cent of women have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner violence or non-partner sexual violence.

In September 2017, the European Union and the United Nations joined forces to launch the Spotlight Initiative, a global, multi-year initiative that focuses on eliminating all forms of violence against women and girls. The International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women is observed on 25 November.

International Women’s Day is observed annually on 8 March. International Women’s Day first emerged from the activities of labour movements at the turn of the twentieth century in North America and across Europe. It is a day, observed by many countries around the world, on which women are recognized for their achievements without regard to divisions, whether national, ethnic, linguistic, cultural, economic or political.

Besides International Women’s Day and the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women, the UN observes other international days dedicated to raising awareness of different aspects of the struggle for gender equality and women empowerment. On February 6, the International Day of Zero Tolerance to Female Genital Mutilation is observed, February 11 is the International Day of Women and Girls in Science, June 19 is the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict, June 23 is International Widows’ Day, October 11 is the International Day of the Girl Child and on October 15 the International Day of Rural Women is observed. UN issued Gender Inclusive Language Guidelines for Gender-inclusive language. Given the key role that language plays in shaping cultural and social attitudes, using gender-inclusive language is a powerful way to promote gender equality and eradicate gender discriminations.

Women’s rights have been at the heart of a series of international conferences that have produced significant political commitments to women’s human rights and equality. Starting in 1975, which was also International Women’s Year, Mexico City hosted the World Conference on the International Women’s Year, which resulted in the World Plan of Action and the designation of 1975–1985 as the United Nations Decade for Women. In 1980, another international conference on women was held in Copenhagen and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women was opened for signature. The third World Conference on Women was held in

Nairobi, with the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women having begun its work in 1982. These three world conferences witnessed extraordinary activism on the part of women from around the world and laid the groundwork for the world conferences in the 1990s to address women’s rights, including the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 (see below). In addition, the rights of women belonging to particular groups, such as older women, ethnic minority women or women with disabilities, have been also addressed in various other international policy documents such as the International Plans of Action on Ageing (Vienna, 1982 and Madrid, 2002), the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action (2001) and the World Programme of Action concerning Disabled Persons (1982). The United Nations has also maintained and strengthened its support for all women. It must show leadership by mainstreaming and prioritizing gender equality in all its work. It must ensure that its efforts are as coherent and effective as possible in support of women’s empowerment and in the promotion of women’s rights and security. Collective efforts of the United Nations and its Member States, hundreds of millions of women are now free from discrimination and violence, enjoying their right to education; employment and participation. Many women now occupy leadership and decision-making positions. Human rights system of the United Nations has created a supportive environment, where rights are monitored with transparency and accountability, and state parties submit their reports to the treaty bodies and to gether they engage in a constructive dialogue. As state parties exert tireless efforts to honour their commitments, statistical averages are no longer accepted, as they hide disparities that deprive the most vulnerable of equal opportunities. Such transparency has enabled us to focus on the rights of those at risk, with women and children at the forefront. The system has also revealed linkages and interdependence between their rights. Universal Periodical Review has reinforced this direction. Many States were accordingly encouraged to enforce legal frameworks to protect the rights of women and children. Adequately mandated and well-resourced national entities were established to monitor such rights; National Action Plans were formulated; the role of civil society recognized and viable partnerships established. Participation of women and children has emerged stronger in making decisions that affect their lives, coalitions supportive of their rights have been established and strengthened.

In conclusion we can say that the United Nations, more than any other institution, has provided the foundation upon which human hopes and aspirations rest. A number of supportive documents, declarations, charters, and covenants have been created over the years, resulting in an impressive body of international law. Human rights system under United Nations is built upon the notion of an organized state, a society that is obligated under human rights law to provide its citizens with freedom from violation of each individual’s rights. State is required to create conditions under which its citizens can fulfill the needs expressed in the human rights system. That includes, but is not limited to, the right to work, to have adequate food, to education, to shelter, and to health. These international agreements require that human rights are expressed concretely in the real lives of the people. The dream remains unattainable if societies cannot overcome the general condition of poverty

among its members. Poverty is not only the denial of human rights relative to the fulfillment of basic human needs. It creates conditions which negate all human rights. A poor person has no rights at all, regardless of what is in print. Such is the situation of the world of women who represent the vast majority of the poor in every country. Equality between women and men and eliminating all forms of discrimination against women are fundamental human rights and United Nations values. Women around the world nevertheless regularly suffer violations of their human rights throughout their lives, and realizing women's human rights has not always been a priority. Achieving equality between women and men requires a comprehensive understanding of the ways in which women experience discrimination and are denied equality so as to develop appropriate strategies to eliminate such discrimination. The United Nations has a long history of addressing women's human rights and much progress has been made in securing women's rights across the world in recent decades. However, important gaps remain and women's realities are constantly changing, with new manifestations of discrimination against them regularly emerging. Some groups of women face additional forms of discrimination based on their age, ethnicity, nationality, religion, health status, marital status, education, disability and socioeconomic status, among other grounds. These intersecting forms of discrimination must be taken into account when developing measures and responses to combat discrimination against women.

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