

# **PARTNERING WITH CIVIL SOCIETY TO OVERCOME CHALLENGES AND DRIVE IMPLEMENTATION FOR PLANET 50-50**

– PHUMZILE MLAMBO-NGCUKA,  
UNDER-SECRETARY-GENERAL OF THE UNITED  
NATIONS AND EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR  
OF UN WOMEN

## **INTRODUCTION**

At the heart of the women's movement and the quest for gender equality are the personal lives and stories of millions of people around the globe. These stories speak of hope, change and transformation during the longest, broadest, most transnational movement for fundamental equality the world has ever known. They belong primarily to women, but are also about men, and they span the course of centuries. They are stories about the way individuals experience and express power in their lives, relationships and communities. The journey of the women's movement is made up of tales of the reshaping of the power structures that govern human interactions.

Many of these stories belong to the voices of civil society activists, who have been spearheading the women's movement for over a century and continue to stand firm on its frontlines. Civil society has helped to advocate for issues such as the right to vote and stand for office, the redistribution of unpaid care work, the closure of the gender wage gap, the elimination of violence against women, and the promotion of women's ability to act autonomously, own property and make decisions about their children. Many of these issues continue to be priorities for action today. For example, women still do 2.5 times as much unpaid care work as men and make an average of 24 per cent less for the same work; around the globe, some 35 per cent of women live with sexual or physical violence, usually at the hands of an intimate partner, with this number rising to 70 per cent in some societies; and a 2016 World Bank study found that 155 countries still have at least one concrete legal difference in the treatment of women and men. Through a united front, strategic partnerships and advocacy, following the roadmap laid out in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, these injustices can be redressed for millions of women and girls.

## **ACTIVISTS AT THE FOREFRONT OF PROGRESS**

Activists from women's movements have proved a powerful political force for global good. Their work to influence the political agenda has important spillover effects on numerous aspects of society. By directly advocating for more women leaders, affirmative action mechanisms that support female candidates and the reform of laws that discriminate against women and girls, civil society activists are the change-makers of the women's movement.

Activists are quite literally helping to change the face of politics, incrementally but steadily. Fifty years ago, it was very unlikely that a woman would be a head of state, and even today, women have held the highest political office in only 50 countries. Currently just 22 countries boast a female head of state, but civil society activists around the world are working to transform biased perceptions of how women lead, and to increase that number to parity. It is essential that when women are in positions of power they use that authority to achieve greater gender equality and support women's rights.

Civil society is also advocating to increase the number of women parliamentarians from the current 22 per cent, as of August 2015. One effective way to do this is through the use of quotas and affirmative action programmes. Along with global declarations and resolutions, pressure from women's groups has helped dozens of countries to augment their number of female representatives in national assemblies. As of January 2015, women comprised over 30 per cent of parliamentarians in 41 single or lower houses of parliament, a number that is widely considered an important benchmark for women's representation. Out of the 41 countries, 34 had put in place some form of quota to provide space for women's political participation. These are important milestones on the way to our ultimate goal of gender-equal parliaments.

Civil society has also played a key role in reversing gender discrimination by helping to implement legal and constitutional reform. According to the UN Women Report, *Progress of the World's Women 2015-2016*, "as of 2014, 143 countries guarantee equality between women and men in their constitutions; 132 have equalized the minimum age of marriage (without parental consent) at 18 years or older, protecting girls from early marriage; at least 119 have passed legislation on domestic violence; and 125 have passed laws to make workplaces and public spaces safer for women by prohibiting sexual harassment."<sup>1</sup>

In the all-important realm of family law, which is often highly tied to religion and custom, and codifies cultural discrimination, there has been less progress. However, analysis of data across 71 countries over 30 years suggests that the influence of autonomous feminist movements has been an important factor when reform has been successful.

By creating partnerships and alliances with other actors, including government officials, lawyers, politicians and development practitioners, women's groups have been able to make political inroads in both democratic and authoritarian countries. They have had significant impact on areas of law such as women's right to work, the prohibition of discrimination, the promotion of gender equality in the workplace and the adoption of maternity and paternity leave.

## SIGNIFICANT CHALLENGES REMAIN

While the women's movement has brought us many stories of hope and success, there remain critical challenges that we must work together to overcome. Many of the women who have worked to usher in change for gender equality have pushed forward in environments that have been less than favourable. Furthermore, despite the adoption in 1995 of a landmark document in gender rights, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, no country in the world has achieved gender equality and many are still far behind. The positive changes that have brought more equality and opportunity for women and

1 'Progress of the World's Women 2015-2016. Transforming Economies, Realizing Rights', UN Women, <http://bit.ly/1E9fo0L>.

girls are counterbalanced by statistics that reveal inadequate progress. Further, these changes are not consistent, may not be sustainable and are certainly not irreversible.

For example, while constitutional and legal reform is usually a precondition for change, it is not enough alone to achieve substantive equality, which requires that proper implementation is ensured. The legacy of historical inequalities, structural disadvantages, gender differences and the uneven way that laws and policies are implemented mean that good laws are not enough to ensure that women are able to enjoy the same rights as men. In countries that have legislation that should ensure equality between women and men, discriminatory attitudes and social norms often prevent proper implementation. Further, there remains an unresolved clash between modern laws and customary practice that has robbed many women of the benefit that should come from gender equality legislation. To achieve true and lasting gender equality, both direct and indirect discrimination must be addressed, specific policies and programmes that redress women's disadvantages should be adopted, and institutions and structures that reinforce and reproduce unequal power relations need to be transformed.

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Another significant challenge is that many states are now promoting a security agenda, which has led to new and increasingly fierce attacks on democratic actors and democratic space. Civil society, and in particular women's rights activists and other social justice actors, face serious threats to their work and lives. The very legitimacy of their political work is being challenged as being anti-government, which makes it liable to draw legal action. Many groups are being starved of resources and political space and access. Addressing this diminishing space for civil society must be a top priority.

Many parts of our world are also in the throes of violent crisis, which demands a united front. Around the world, a poisonous discourse of intolerance, fear and exclusion has put women's rights squarely in its crosshairs. In the last few years, a number of societies have become more insular and intolerant, and governments have become increasingly authoritarian, squeezing civic spaces and cracking down on the debate, dissent and critique that is vital to women's rights and social justice movements everywhere. At the same time, the world is struggling with how to calibrate a response to the vast numbers of refugees and migrants seeking a better and safer future. In 2014, the total number of displaced people reached 59.5 million, the highest level since the Second World War. The plight of those left behind, who are too old, too young or too infirm to travel, is not made any less significant by its routine appearance in news media.

## LOOKING FORWARD: THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Such global challenges only amplify the need to work for a fair world within and between countries, and among peoples. The current climate demands a unified voice and a powerful counter-story of peace, gender equality, sustainability and shared prosperity that benefits the many excluded peoples of the world.

Fortunately, such a story already exists. Its message is woven throughout the words of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which is arguably the most ambitious agenda for human progress that the world has ever seen. The 2030 Agenda

provides an aspirational roadmap to move forward on 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets that are universal and grounded in human rights. With a historic standalone goal on gender equality and women's empowerment (Goal 5), as well as related gender equality targets underlining the other goals, the Agenda calls powerfully for gender equality. The promise of the 2030 Agenda was echoed at the 2015 Global Leaders Meeting on Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment: A Commitment to Action, held at the United Nations, where heads of state and government from around the world gathered to make commitments to action for gender equality in their countries. Since then some 91 world leaders, at the time of writing, have made concrete commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment.

In 2016, focus turns to beginning to implement these commitments, measure progress, and make concrete steps towards meeting the goals by 2030. Civil society, particularly women's organisations, will play a key role in holding governments to account for the full implementation of commitments on gender equality and women's empowerment, and compliance with the 2030 Agenda. Inclusive processes and structures are needed so that women's civil society organisations (CSOs) - from grassroots to regional and international levels - can participate effectively in the Agenda's implementation and monitoring.

The practical steps needed on the road to achieving the new Sustainable Development Agenda can be broken down from the global level to the grassroots.

At the global level, the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) is an important theatre for advocacy and activism. It is the foremost global intergovernmental body that brings leaders together to make the decisions that provide direction on the gender equality agenda. In 2016, UN Women hosted the 60<sup>th</sup> Session of the Commission on the Status of Women – CSW60. With a priority theme of 'women's empowerment and its link to sustainable development', the CSW60 specifically focused on the role of women in implementing the 2030 Agenda, and examined progress on 'the elimination and prevention of all forms of violence against women and girls' as its review theme. With some 4,100 representatives from more than 540 CSOs in attendance, civil society's contribution to CSW60 and the realisation of its outcomes was evident, and vital.

The Agreed Conclusions adopted by Governments at CSW60 affirmed the need for a gender responsive approach to implementing the 2030 Agenda. They highlighted the importance of gender mainstreaming and evaluating progress, and recognised the importance of tackling intersecting challenges relating to indigenous women, disabled women, rural women and young women. Crucially, the Agreed Conclusions also re-affirmed the role of feminist and women's and community based organisations, and acknowledged the challenges faced by women human rights defenders.

Despite the recent climate of intimidation for activists, productive interaction with governments, with space for autonomy and criticism, has been one of the hallmarks of the global women's movement. Strategic alliances, including within national governments and parliaments, can help women's movements reach their goals. Collaboration and autonomy will need to be re-examined, so that engagement with state actors can lead to a discussion on human rights as political discourse. In addition, an increase in electoral quota systems can engage even more women in the political process. Training and capacity building are needed for current political party members and women parliamentarians on issues such as gender equality, advocacy and political participation.

Strategic alliances with the media, as well as effective use of new media, also provide key opportunities. Recent crackdowns on free press and journalism offer a cause for much concern, and more needs to be done to identify spaces where the freedom of expression is threatened, and efforts need to be stepped up to protect journalists who cover women's rights and gender equality in oppressive environments. Further, change must also come to the media that people consume daily. Evidence has shown that entertainment and news media play a central role in creating and sustaining perceptions and attitudes, and in shaping social norms. Women must be equally represented in the media, consulted as experts in their fields and reflected in news stories.

Finally, the transnational discourse on substantive gender equality issues needs to be built up from the grassroots. This requires that all stakeholders work collectively. It means working across generations and constituencies to build the solidarity that can overcome siloes and individual agendas to build a collective and common vision of justice, equality and shared prosperity. It is not productive to preach only to the converted. It is critical to reach out to non-traditional constituencies, such as men and boys, youth, the military, academics, media, faith based groups and trade unions. Creating a politics and culture of gender equality means forging inclusive partnerships and strategies with diverse constituencies; it means recognising that men, faith actors and the private sector can all be feminist. Broader civil society can also be part of the solution, opening the space for greater women's political activism and women's civil society.

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## CONCLUSION

Moving forward in making the story of the 2030 Agenda a collective reality, a number of practical questions require attention. For instance, what does redistributive economic justice look like? How do we get there? How do we make social policies affordable in countries and communities where they are most needed? How do we advocate for minimum wages, and access to quality, affordable education that teaches equality? How do we address improved conditions of work for women overall? How do we share unpaid care work so that men, women, families and communities benefit fairly from labour, and so that the results of labour reward all? What will it take to institutionalise zero-tolerance of violence in state policy, and what will implementation look like? And how in a threatened, insular environment can women's movements reorganise to reach across boundaries to new movements and new constituencies, and use new technologies?

The answers to these questions, manifested in concrete action, require a collective response: an inclusive, multi-generational women's movement that is consciously fostered as a political force to promote the global good. Securing a safe, open and active space for women's rights activists is key to keeping the stories from the women's movement going, growing and becoming ever more inspiring.