

Helpdesk Research Report

Global progress of the world's girls and women

Claire Mcloughlin, GSDRC, University of Birmingham

02.10.2015

Question

Please review global reports on girls and women and prepare a 2-4 page overview which highlights i) global trends, ii) where progress has been made and where it is slower, including in relation to DFID's strategic vision priorities, and iii) emerging global priorities for multilaterals.

Contents

1. Overview
2. Table of progress in priority areas
3. Emerging priorities for multilaterals
4. References

1. Overview

This report provides a brief overview of global progress on gender equality, drawing on recent global reviews. Available data indicates that remarkable progress has been made in some areas, but has been slow or stagnant in others. Findings are summarised below.

Where has progress been made?

- **Education enrolment (primary):** Substantial progress was made between 1990 and 2012 in closing the gender gap in primary enrolment, and two thirds of all countries in the developing world have now achieved gender parity in this area (UN, 2015). This has brought significant gains in women's literacy. Youth literacy rates are estimated to be 93 per cent for young men and 90 per cent for young women, globally (UN, 2015, p. 27). However, a large number of children (mostly girls) remain out of school and secondary enrolment lags behind. Furthermore, progress in enrolment has not been matched by progress in quality (UNESCO, 2015).
- **International normative frameworks:** Considerable progress has been made at the international level in developing high-level legal and normative frameworks that recognise and reinforce the centrality of women's rights. For example, gender-based crimes (e.g. sexual violence) were

recognised as crimes against humanity in the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court in 1998 (UN Women, 2014).

- **Legal frameworks supporting women in conflict:** Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) recognised the necessity of women's participation in conflict prevention, conflict resolution and all aspects of post-conflict peacebuilding. A further six resolutions have since been adopted to support ending sexual violence in conflict, women's participation in all stages of peace processes, and the provision of multisector services for women (UN Women, 2014).
- **Women's political participation:** Women are now considerably better represented in local and national governments, often as a result of quotas and parity laws, than was the case in 1995. Women's representation in national parliaments is more evenly spread across regions than it was in 1995, when Europe was far ahead in the world rankings in this area. In 2015, the top ten countries were spread across sub-Saharan Africa (4), Americas (3) and Europe (3) (UN, 2015, p. 31). Although there have been gains in women's representation in national parliaments in many countries, women remain significantly underrepresented at the very highest levels of political leadership (UN Women, 2015b). Also, progress has slowed down since 2014, suggesting initial gains from the narrow focus on electoral quotas are tailing off and additional measures are now needed to support women's participation in all spheres of public life (UN, 2015).
- **Maternal mortality:** The maternal mortality ratio is declining globally, and the number of deliveries attended by skilled health personnel is increasing, though there are vast discrepancies between urban and rural areas (UN, 2015). There has been a significant increase in the number of women using contraception in all regions since 1990 (ibid).

Where has progress been slower?

- **Gap between commitment and action:** The Beijing+20 review highlighted persistent gaps between international and national laws and their implementation (UN Women, 2015b). The UN itself has been criticised for side-lining urgent issues such as sexual and reproductive rights in lieu of geopolitics (UN Women, 2014, pp. 6-7). Whilst there has been significant progress in legal provisions for women, for example in their right to own assets, discrimination in the law remains pervasive, particularly in the area of family law (UN Women, 2015b, pp. 36-37).
- **Social norms:** Persistent discriminatory norms are widely recognised as the underlying reason for stark gaps between rhetorical commitment to gender equality and equality in practice. In the labour market, for example, stereotypes about suitable occupations for women and men maintain a division of labour and affect prospects for pay and promotion, even where legal provisions are in place (UN Women, 2015a). Likewise, even where women have equal legal rights to land, or freedom from domestic abuse, discriminatory practices, stigma or shame restrict women from claiming these rights in practice (UN Women, 2015b). Patriarchal norms restrict women's freedom of association and their capacity to benefit from economic growth.
- **Violence against women and girls (VAWG):** Data is limited, but suggests intimate partner violence persists at alarmingly high levels globally. Harmful practices such as female genital mutilation (FGM) have started to decline in some contexts for younger girls, but remain prevalent in others (UN Women, 2015b).

- **Conflict-affected countries:** These countries perform worse than others on many gender indicators. For example, VAWG increases during and after conflict, women's participation in decision-making is lower in conflict-affected countries, and the share of parliamentary seats occupied by women is four points lower here than the global average (UN Women, 2015b, p. 23). Yet data indicates that multilaterals are not prioritising gender in conflict. Only 5 per cent of OECD-DAC aid allocated to conflict and post-conflict countries in 2012 positioned gender equality as a principal objective (UN Women, 2015b, p. 24).
- **Women facing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination:** Global statistics can mask inequalities between subgroups of women and girls. Insufficient attention has been paid to the disparities among women and girls due to level of education, economic status, age, experience of conflict, where they live (urban versus rural) etc. These differences produce inequalities in education, maternal mortality and access to services (UN Women, 2015b). Women with disabilities, indigenous women, migrant women and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender women are particularly disadvantaged (ibid).
- **Women's labour market participation:** A smaller proportion of men than women participate in the global labour force, though the gap has marginally narrowed over the past two decades. Women's share of wage employment has risen over the last 25 years, albeit at a slow pace. Among those that are employed, women are more likely than men to be in precarious and unsafe jobs in the informal market and lack security of employment, social security or secure incomes (UN Women, 2014, 2015a). In every region of the world, working women earn less than men.
- **Women's overall health:** The narrow focus has been on reducing maternal mortality rather than improving women's health across the life cycle (UN Women, 2015b). Access to antenatal care remains well below target, especially in rural areas, and women are more vulnerable than men to the risk of HIV infection (UN Women, 2015b).
- Overall, efforts to address gender inequalities are **struggling to keep pace with population and demographic changes**. This means that even in areas where we see relative improvements in indicators, the absolute number of women and girls facing discrimination, health risks, or early marriage remains higher now than ever (UNICEF, 2014).

2. Table of progress in priority areas

EDUCATION	
Girl's enrolment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The gender parity index in primary education rose from 0.86 to 0.97 between 1990 and 2012 (UN Women, 2015b, p. 13). ▪ Gender parity in secondary education improved from 0.77 in 1990 to 0.96 in 2012 (UN Women, 2015b, p. 13). By 2012, 36 per cent of developing countries had achieved gender parity in secondary enrolment, versus only 4 per cent at tertiary level (UN, 2015, p. 29). ▪ An estimated 58 million children of primary school age are still not in school, the majority of which are girls (UN Women, 2015b, p. 45).
Quality of learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The UN estimates that 250 million of the 650 million children of primary school age are still not learning basic skills in reading and mathematics (UN Women, 2015b, p. 15).
SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH	
Maternal mortality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ The MDG on maternal mortality was not met. However, the number of women dying in childbirth declined by 45% between 1990 and 2013 (UN, 2015, p. 5). Most of this reduction occurred since 2000.
Assisted deliveries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Worldwide, the proportion of deliveries attended by a skilled health person increased from 59 per cent in 1990 to 71 per cent in 2015 (UN, 2015, p. 5). Still, more than one in four mothers is without access to essential medical care when giving birth in the developing world. ▪ There is wide variation between rural and urban areas. Only 56 per cent of births in rural areas are attended by skilled personnel, compared with 87 per cent in urban areas (UN, 2015, p. 38).
Antenatal care	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ MDG monitoring data showed only 52 per cent of women living in developing countries received the four antenatal visits recommended by the WHO (UN, 2015, p. 41).
Contraceptive use	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Contraceptive use among women aged 15 to 49, married or in a union, increased from 55 per cent in 1990 worldwide to 64 per cent in 2015 (UN, 2015, p. 5). ▪ Globally, the number of women living with HIV is increasing. Young women are now more likely than their male peers to become infected with HIV and currently account for 52 per cent of all people living with HIV in low and middle-income countries (UN Women, 2015b, p. 15).
Child marriage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Globally, the prevalence of child marriage for girls under age 15 is declining. Since 1980, it has reduced from 12 per cent to 8 per cent (UNICEF, 2014, p. 5). Worldwide, 250 million women currently married entered into union before age 15. ▪ High population growth means high numbers of girls are still at risk of being married before 18. The poorest girls, and those living in rural areas, are most at risk (UNICEF, 2014). Even if progress continues, the total number of women married as children will still be around 700 million in 2050 (UNICEF, 2014, p. 6). ▪ Globally, the birth rate among adolescent women is declining modestly from 59 births per 1,000 girls in 1990 to 51 in 2015 (UN, 2015, p. 42).
FGM/C	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Prevalence declined globally from around 53% to 36 per cent of adolescents and young women aged 15-19. Nevertheless, the number of cases is

	<p>increasing overall as a result of population growth (UN Women, 2015b, p. 46).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> UNICEF estimated in 2013 that more than 125 million girls and women had been subjected to FGM across 29 countries in Africa and the Middle East (UN Women, 2015b). Prevalence rates vary significantly from country to country (e.g. 98 percent in Somalia, less than 2 percent in Uganda and Cameroon) (PRB, 2014). Some countries have seen a decline in cutting of young girls aged 15 to 19 (Egypt, Sierra Leone, Kenya). Elsewhere, the practice shows no sign of being abandoned (e.g. Burkina Faso) (PRB, 2014).
WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT	
Labour force participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The global labour force participation rate for women aged 25-54 is 64 per cent, compared with 94 per cent of men (UN Women, 2015b, p. 25).
Women's wage employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Globally, there has been an increase in the number of women in paid employment outside the agricultural sector (from 35 per cent in 1990 to 41 per cent in 2015) (UN, 2015, p. 7).
Vulnerable employment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The proportion of women in vulnerable employment fell from 59 per cent in 1991 to 46 per cent in 2015 (UN, 2015, p. 5). Women with advanced education have higher rates of unemployment than men with similar levels of education (UN, 2015, p. 8). In 2012, 24 per cent of women workers worldwide were contributing family workers – with no social protection, limited income, and often poor working conditions - compared with 8 per cent of men (UN Women, 2015b, p. 28).
Women's pay	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Working women earn less than men. The UN estimated in 2015 that women earn on average 24 per cent less than men globally. Gender-based occupational segregation is prevalent in all regions, and female-dominated professions tend to attract lower wages (UN Women, 2015b, p. 27).
VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS	
Prevalence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> WHO data indicates up to 35 per cent of women worldwide have experienced either physical and/or sexual intimate partner or non-partner violence in their lifetime (WHO, 2013). There is currently no global data showing trends over time (UN Women, 2015b).
Trafficking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Women and girls are more likely to be trafficked than men and account for 75 per cent of all people trafficked (UN Women, 2015b, p. 21).
ENABLING ENVIRONMENT	
Women in parliament	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The average proportion of women in parliament nearly doubled from 11 per cent in 1995 to 22 per cent in 2014 (UN, 2015, p. 31). Still only one in five members of parliaments are women (UN, 2015, p. 5).
National gender machineries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender-responsive budgeting is increasing, but only around a third of countries have dedicated gender desks within their national statistical office (UN Women, 2015b, pp. 33-34).
Laws and norms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Universal ratification of CEDAW has not been achieved, and many countries have maintained reservations on Article 16 (marriage and family life).

3. Emerging priorities for multilaterals

New global challenges threaten to derail progress on gender equality (UN Women, 2014). A number of key concerns emerged from the Beijing+20 review. The spread of extremist groups propagating ideas that are contrary to women's rights threatens to further restrict women's autonomy and access to basic goods and services. Women's unequal access to land, water and productive assets increases their vulnerability to climate change. Conflict halts or reverses gains in gender equality, putting women at heightened risk of violence and HIV. The financial crisis and subsequent austerity measures further threaten resourcing and jeopardise progress. Women's low level of participation in decision-making across all areas is also a great barrier to progress, and lacks consistent action. Furthermore, there is an absence of strong accountability mechanisms at the national level, particularly where private sector actors are assuming a larger role in the public sector (UN Women, 2015b, pp. 49-54).

Priorities for the future generally centre on addressing areas where progress has been slow to date and where there are persistent barriers to progress. In addition, there is convergence around the need to:

- **Create better access to decent work:** Reducing gender pay gaps and redistributing unpaid work are among the key concerns to promote women's economic empowerment (UN Women, 2015a). The Beijing+20 review called on states to expand minimum wage legislation, paid maternity and parental leave, and extend social protection to informal workers (UN Women, 2015b, p. 29).
- **Address discriminatory social norms:** More action is needed to change underlying discriminatory norms that restrict women's human rights within the family and workplace. This can be done through media and outreach campaigns that mobilise both men and women (UN Women, 2015a).
- **Improve the enabling environment:** Several agencies call for gender-responsive social policy (e.g. creating social protection floors), increased national accountability for action on gender equality, and enhancing women's participation at all levels of decision-making (UN Women, 2015b; UNESCO, 2015). The persistence of discrimination and gender bias remains a major barrier to women's political participation, and there are now calls for a more comprehensive response involving more capacity building and training to support women's substantive contribution to political life (UN Women, 2015b). In addition, national-level institutions that could advance gender equality continue to be underfunded, operate with insufficient technical capacity, or face problems of insufficient political backing. Where institutions have been set up to promote gender equality, there has been no substantial progress in their mandate or resourcing over time (UN Women, 2014).
- **Tackle violence against women and girls:** Legal and policy frameworks to prevent violence against women need to be strengthened, and VAWG criminalised. More also needs to be done to provide high quality services for survivors (UN Women, 2015b). Norms that permit violence against women are considered the major obstacle to progress (UN Women, 2015b).
- **Collect better data:** Data limitations make tracking women and girl's progress problematic. Trend data is limited, especially in areas not monitored by the MDGs, for example prevalence of violence against women and girls, or women's time use. Poverty data is often collected at household level, masking gender differences in the impact, severity and incidence of poverty (UN, 2015).

4. References

- PRB. (2014). *Female Genital Mutilation/Cutting: Data and Trends Update 2014*. Retrieved from <http://www.prb.org/Publications/Datasheets/2014/fgm-wallchart-2014.aspx>
- UN. (2015). *The Millennium Development Goals Report*. Retrieved from New York: [http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20\(July%201\).pdf](http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/2015_MDG_Report/pdf/MDG%202015%20rev%20(July%201).pdf)
- UN Women. (2014). *Report of the Expert Group Meeting on Envisioning Women's Rights in the post-2015 Context* New York, 3- 5 November 2014. <http://www.unwomen.org/~media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/59/csw59-egm-report-en.pdf?v=1&d=20141219T220253>
- UN Women. (2015a). *Progress of the world's women 2015-2016: Transforming economies, realising rights*. Retrieved from New York: http://progress.unwomen.org/en/2015/pdf/UNW_progressreport.pdf
- UN Women. (2015b). *Summary report: The Beijing Platform Declaration and Platform for Action turns 20* Retrieved from http://www.unwomen.org/~media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2015/sg%20report_synthesis-en_web.pdf?v=1&d=20150226T215547
- UNESCO. (2015). *Education for all 2000-2015: achievements and challenges*. Retrieved from <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0023/002322/232205e.pdf>
- UNICEF. (2014). *Ending child marriage: Progress and prospects*. Retrieved from New York: http://www.unicef.org/media/files/Child_Marriage_Report_7_17_LR..pdf
- WHO. (2013). *Global and regional estimates of violence against women: Prevalence and health effects of intimate partner violence and non-partner sexual violence*. Retrieved from Geneva: http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/10665/85239/1/9789241564625_eng.pdf

Suggested citation

Mcloughlin, C. (2015). *Global progress of the world's girls and women* (GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 1283). Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham.

Further information

See related report: Mcloughlin, C. (2015). *Regional progress of the world's girls and women* (GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report 1922). Birmingham, UK: GSDRC, University of Birmingham. <http://www.gsdrc.org/publications/regional-progress-of-the-worlds-girls-and-women/>

About this report

This report is based on four days of desk-based research. It was prepared for the UK Government's Department for International Development, © DFID Crown Copyright 2015. This report is licensed under the Open Government Licence (www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/doc/open-government-licence). The views expressed in this report are those of the author, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of GSDRC, its partner agencies or DFID.

The GSDRC Research Helpdesk provides rapid syntheses of key literature and of expert thinking in response to specific questions on governance, social development, humanitarian and conflict issues. Its concise reports draw on a selection of the best recent literature available and on input from international experts. Each GSDRC Helpdesk Research Report is peer-reviewed by a member of the GSDRC team. Search over 400 reports at www.gsdr.org/go/research-helpdesk. Contact: helpdesk@gsdr.org.