

Gender Roundtable

What are the key gender justice issues today?

Kate McInturff (Research Associate, Canadian Center for Policy Alternatives, Ottawa): There has been a lot of talk about ‘big data’ and how wonderful it is and I think it’s actually quite concerning that we’ve seen not only the CEO of Unilever, Paul Polman, on the SG’s High Level Panel on the Post 2015 Agenda, but now this new panel of private sector CEOs who will serve as a leadership advisory group for UN Women. Perhaps I’m being too cynical but I think the interests these corporations have in big data is not only to know more about gender inequality and address it, but in selling more soap and the like to more women.

The key with big data is to make sure that the data is open and transparent, and that it’s also being returned back to the people’s lives that are being described in the data. I’ve heard representatives of the high level panel talk about how they’re going to collect data on the poorest, most vulnerable, most marginalized people but there’s no talk about how we return the data to those people. I think that would be a note of caution going forward.

Barbara Adams (Senior Policy Advisor, Global Policy Forum, New York): I think we have some crucial issues in terms of inequalities. We’ve been talking about gender inequalities from a gender justice point of view for a long time. This is now more and more on the agenda, but it tends to be there without specificity and it tends to be emphasized only from an income angle. We need to keep looking at how we measure inequalities, income and non-income, very specifically. What I think is at stake at the moment is the future of the approach to development and what is happening is that it is becoming more and more voluntary, more and more private, very short-term interventions where we can get immediate results. It is totally undermining the rights agenda. Even though we keep on saying rights, when you actually look at the practice, we’re increasingly just signing up for what you can do.

It is the same when it comes to inequalities among nations. In the UN debate on the Sustainable Development Goals, developed countries insisted that a stand-alone goal to ‘reduce inequality within and among countries’ proposed by developing countries to address such inequalities be merged into the goal on poverty, to read: “End poverty and reduce inequality in all their dimensions everywhere.” Despite the word ‘everywhere’ developed countries prefer to address inequalities within a goal on extreme poverty that does not commit them to reduce inequalities at home or help bridge the gap among nations.

Gigi Francisco (General Coordinator, Development Alternatives with Women for the New Era (DAWN), Manila): There is a tendency by states now to use ‘women’s rights’ versus ‘women’s human rights.’ And this totally negates the bodily rights and the sexual rights of women. ‘Women’s rights’ could mean anything under the sun. I also think it’s quite dangerous how governments play women’s rights vs women’s human rights in actual negotiations. This brings back everything that we had fought for in terms of the expansion of women’s human rights—particularly in the area of bodily rights. There is also backtracking in the area of discrimination against women and on the basis of sexual orientation and diverse gender identities. The concept of discrimination is now limited to women in terms of equality with men. And once again this is a very dangerous retrogression of not just women’s human rights but people’s human rights.

We also need to study the political economy of conflict—not just inter-state conflict, but also the increasing conflicts over natural resources, over energy resources as well as the impact on climate change and disasters. So, a big area for us at this point is looking at how the political economy of conflict affects women from all sides.

UN Women Announces Private Sector Leadership Advisory Council

The invitation-only Council is comprised of chief executives whose companies “demonstrate a strong commitment to supporting women and girls,” according to the UN Women press release. It will offer advice in three areas: accelerating women’s economic empowerment, ending violence against women and increasing funding for UN Women.

1. Mr. Jean-Paul Agon: Chairman & Chief Executive Officer, L’Oréal
2. Mr. Dominic Barton: Chief Executive Officer, McKinsey & Company
3. Mr. Lloyd C. Blankfein: Chairman & CEO, Goldman Sachs Group, Inc.
4. Ms. Maureen Chiquet: Global Chief Executive Officer, Chanel
5. Mr. Mark Cutifani: Chief Executive Officer, Anglo American plc
6. Mr. Rick Goings: Chairman & Chief Executive Officer, Tupperware Brands Corporation
7. Mr. Christopher Graves: Global Chief Executive Officer, Ogilvy Public Relations
8. Ms. Sally Kennedy: Chief Executive Officer, Publicis Dallas
9. Mr. Muhtar Kent: Chairman & Chief Executive Officer, The Coca-Cola Company
10. Mr. Paul Polman: Chief Executive Officer, Unilever

Zahra Bazzi (Programme Manager, Arab NGO Network for Development, Beirut): It is important to include women's rights and gender inequality specifically in the Post 2015 process to boost all aspects of women's rights. In the Arab region, women have always been at the heart of the civil society movement and have played key and active roles in the recent revolutions and uprisings. Arab countries signed and ratified all the international agreements on women's rights, including CEDAW and the Beijing Platform for Action—albeit with important reservations which we are trying to get lifted. Yet discrimination is ongoing.

Hanaa Edward (General Secretary, Iraqi Al-Amal Association, Baghdad): Discrimination within the constitution and laws—this is really what we are fighting against, especially in Arab states, where we are trying to review our constitutions and also to revolutionize personal status laws and the penal codes. These are really essential in the region, not only in Iraq. Recently, we have been fighting against the draft bill on Personal Status, which gives the legal right for a girl under nine years old to be married.

The breakdown in the rule of law is key at this time. We are seeing impunity for human rights violations, denials of access to justice, corruption and weak institutions of the state. The breakdown of peace and security leads to the increase of physical and sexual violence. This is now quite systemic, going beyond violence against individuals, already quite awful, to be part of deliberate efforts to dehumanize whole populations, and is a major priority for us.

The increasing power of tribes during unstable or transitional periods is also a priority. The tribes justify discrimination, polygamy and early and forced marriage by customs, traditions and religion. And even in Iraq we can speak about FGM in the Kurdistan region where about 72 percent of females are subject to this.

Akua Opokua Britwum (Convenor, Network of Women's Rights in Ghana, Accra): Our main concerns have been around women's leadership in institutions, including in government, such as the women's machinery in terms of policy and monitoring the adherence of the state to women's human rights

commitments. We have been struggling with how to strengthen these institutions to play a policy monitoring role and also to deliver in terms of women's concerns.

We perceive in Africa, and particularly in West Africa, the absence of consistent national policies to address women in the informal economy. Access to reliable income is one of the major ways to address inequality. When social protection and income support policies are linked to employment, women in the informal economy fall out. Most social protection is based on access to a consistent income. So we have to take on the issue of women in the informal economy, and place it squarely on the agenda.

We have been struggling with how cities can be developed in a way that recognizes the fundamental rights of women to carry out their activities in dignity, free from harassment. We are also struggling around security and the increased insecurity in West Africa—for example, how to stop the harassment of women at the border as a fall-out of trade policies that do not take women's activities into account.

Tanya Dawkins (Executive Director, Global-Local Links Project, Miami): In addition to these policies that have the potential to wipe out overnight the little access to funds and business that women have—is there a corresponding conversation about the social protection that women who were being placed in that situation would require?

Akua: There are conversations around social protection—in particular, around pension schemes and how they can provide for self-employed women. In Ghana there is a pilot scheme for the informal economy where workers can contribute to a pension. But what we are asking is that pension schemes be designed to protect those who are not able to make contributions.

Hanaa: In Iraq, which is an unstable situation, there is insecurity. But this is what I really feel so proud of: in the parliamentary elections in May, we elected 83 women. We have the electoral quota, which is in the constitution. But out of these 83 women, 22 of them were over the quota. They surpassed the quota. This is really a success for gender equality. Especially because they

earned the trust of the citizens. We feel that this was the first step. Concerning executive power—it is still the case that women are missing there.

Tanya: I've heard a lot of resonance around the theme of security. Security at multiple levels: economic, personal/physical, and, it wasn't articulated this way, but literally the security of democracy and democratic practices. There are assaults coming from so many different directions. For example, the changing face of civil society in places like the UN. And by changing face I mean the legitimization of multinational corporations, as just the same as civil society organizations working at the community level.

A subtext of what many have said is the issue of where accountability comes from, especially in this period when the trend is to move towards “let's celebrate what we can do and the rest we will figure out in the future”—as opposed to having increasingly ambitious and binding commitments and having the adequate accountability mechanisms to measure them.

Kate: One of the common themes is the adoption of the language of “women's rights” in the place of the actual empowerment of women. I've seen that in Canada's foreign policy. We've just had a huge global conference on Maternal and Child Health here in Canada. And our government has made another significant financial commitment and the government's commitment of funds, while very welcome and it is going to some marvelous programmes, precludes any funding for access to abortion.

If you look at all of the money being spent thus far, which amounts to over USD billion, a tiny fraction of it, goes towards any kind of family planning; in spite of all the things we know, not only about the reproductive rights guaranteed in the Cairo Declaration, but just the basic science of reducing maternal and child mortality, which the WHO has stated very clearly requires access to reproductive health services, including family planning and abortion.

For me that is a very clear example of a kind of “we are here for women” rhetoric that is actually quite disempowering. It also puts civil society in the awkward position of

having to say “we are against this, but we are for this.” Obviously, we are in favour of reducing maternal and child mortality, but doing it at the expense of sexual and reproductive rights is nonsense.

Barbara: We are seeing the erosion of the commitment to the rights approach, accompanied by a kind of agenda or narrative capture. The Canada example is a very interesting one, because the Canadian government pledge is actually not to a multilateral process that has any accountability mechanism attached to it, but is to another one of these “coalition of the willing” types of partnerships. It’s a very interesting way in which

governments like Canada are actually moving public funds, accountable presumably at the end to Canadian taxpayers, into an initiative with corporate partners, self-selected participants. The accountability is only to that partnership and it is totally divorced (unless it is in the partnership agreement) from the UN, and human rights, CEDAW, the Cairo Declaration, the Beijing Platform for Action and so on.

It is a really good example of the slip-page away from the commitment to rights, to a whole voluntary form of governance, where you are doing forum shopping and you have governments choosing which forum they want to be held accountable to.

Basically the one in which, you know, there is no real monitoring or challenge.

Gigi: The issue of intergenerational leadership in the feminist or women’s movement is also a concern here. With the backlash and derogation in human rights we feel that there are perceived difficulties in terms of true feminist leadership in the women’s movement.

Akua: Women’s groups need to strengthen accountability, to build civil society and the women’s movement worldwide, to develop strategies to make national governmental and international agenda setting mechanism responsive and answerable to women. ■

From the Social Watch national reports....

Afghanistan

UN estimates put school attendance in Afghanistan at about 6 million children, of which only one third are girls. Half of the school children attend classes in tents. Girls walking to or from school risk being assaulted with acid. Teachers have been killed and parents who allow girls to attend school have been attacked. Eighty-seven percent of Afghan women are illiterate.

Canada

Employment rates for working age Aboriginal men are 15 percent lower than for their non-Aboriginal counterparts in Canada. Aboriginal women’s employment rates are 5 percent lower yet. For every dollar earned by white Canadians, racialized Canadian workers earned only 81 cents. For every dollar earned by men in Canada, women earn 77 cents (working full-time).

South Korea

The female share of government officers increased from 34 percent in 2003 to 42 percent in 2010 in South Korea, but only 2 percent of board members of listed companies are women and no company has at least three female directors. In 2007, 49 percent of college graduates were female. However, Korea registers a gap of 39 percent between men and women’s salaries, double the OECD average.

Iraq

Although they are illegal under 15 years of age and between 15 and 18 years require special authorization from a judge, early marriages are still frequent in Iraq. Many girls between 11 and 15 years old enter into marriages outside the court in religious communities. An estimated 5 percent of girls marry before they are 15 years old and 22 percent before 18 years. Those girls sink into an illegal status that deprives them of education and health. On the other hand, tribal leaders justify the usual practice of forced marriages on traditional and cultural grounds.

Ghana

Despite free health care for pregnant women, maternal mortality ratios are still high in Ghana. According to the Ministry of Women and Children’s Affairs only one fourth of women in the lowest income quintile attend a health facility during childbirth. In rural areas, poor women, who tend to have large families (4-6 children) cannot access the free health services.