

Calling on the UNHRC: Integration of a Gender Perspective Throughout Its Work

For the last two decades, DAWN has been engaged in generating a Southern feminist perspective on the global political and policy environment. Its aim in the Human Rights Council is to contribute to expanding the policy space for incorporating gender perspectives into the diverse and interrelated human development and human rights themes.

Beyond efforts to integrate a gender perspective in select areas of the Special Procedures, however, much more remains to be done (see Prasad, Sandeep, "Integrating a Gender Perspective in the Work of the Council and Its Special Procedures," www.cwgl.rutgers.edu/globalcenter/policy/unadvocacy/HRCgendinteSept%2008.doc). Mandate holders and the Special Procedures system as a whole must improve their work by more consistently illuminating the negative effects of unequal gender power relations on the fulfillment of human rights for all. The following are ways by which this can be done:

- **Strengthening of local to global connections in an effort to bridge global discourses and local realities.** This panel can recognize the crucial role that the Special Procedures plays by bringing human rights abuses experienced at local levels to the attention of the Council, and by raising awareness of local actors about the debates taking place in global arenas. As we all know, women play a major role in local processes, as a group subjected to various circumstances of vulnerability, but also as active agents advocating for change in the social, legal and policy environments where they are situated.

- **Examination of interconnections across various human rights areas to systematically integrate a gender perspective in the Special Procedures system.** The reports presented to this Council over the past year reveal a number of gaps and inadequacies. While some reports mention "women" several times, other reports make a one-time token reference to the categories of "women" and/or "gender" even when the subject addressed clearly demands an in-depth gender analysis. Most troubling are those reports that totally dismiss gender inequalities and how these contribute to or exacerbate other human rights violations. Furthermore, the reports adopt a rather simplistic and binary concept of gender that does not take into account, for instance, that transgender and intersex persons – or in specific cultural contexts, hijras, kothis, metis and other forms of gender expression – are also victims of human rights violations. The lack of interconnections across human rights areas can be seen in the Human Rights Council mandates that review the situation of human rights in relation to economic and financial trends but never adopt a gender perspective. None of the reports recently presented to the

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Council on the effects of economic reform policies and foreign debt or transnational corporations appreciate the value of the categories of "gender" or "women" in examining the social dynamics of these issues. This is in stark contrast to the review process of the UN Financing for Development Conference, where the NGO Women's Working Group, in which DAWN participates, has systematically underlined the impact of unequal gender power relations in areas such as domestic resource mobilisation, foreign direct investments and private capital flows, trade, international financial and technical cooperation, and debt.

- **Application of Gendered Analyses in all aspects of its work including the Council's special mandates on critical ecological concerns such as toxic and dangerous products and wastes; the right to food; access to safe drinking water and sanitation.** The Council can effectively contribute toward illuminating the linkages between the devastating health and livelihood effects of environmental degradation, the increasing impoverishment of women, and human rights violations worldwide. ■

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and future in the markets are facilitated by financial products, including currency, lending instruments, among others. There is another aspect that is not fully acknowledged in policy circles and that is the labor expended for the caring of oneself and of others, who are usually members of the same household but not necessarily so.

After understanding the structure of an economy, the next question to be asked is who the key actors in these spheres are. Many are familiar with companies and workers, or with landlords and farmers, or with self-employed informal sector workers, or landless laborers. Less recognized is women's labor, often unpaid, in the performance of caring functions. Women's social assignment is to care for others, especially in the absence of institutions that provide care. It is possible to purchase caring services from the market but for households in poverty, this is not accessible. Governments can provide services but in the face of severe budgetary restrictions or situations of conflict, such services many not be available. For many households, the default solution is to rely on women's work.

In designing gender-equitable public policy, it is important to understand the division of responsibility over the varying aspects and processes of provisioning for the improvement of well-being. This understanding is necessary for making decisions over the distribution of material and labour resources that members of society need for survival, maintenance and prolongation. What we consistently find is that the assignment of responsibilities for care is skewed towards women, to the extent

that it limits her ability to participate fully in all of society's activities. Gender-equitable public policy should be able to address the imbalance in the responsibilities for provisioning.

Stephanie Seguino and Caren Grown's chapter in the book, *The Feminist Economics of International Trade*, published by Routledge in 2007, highlights three elements that guide the design of gender-equitable public policy. These are: equitable access to jobs through the elimination of discriminatory barriers against women;

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equity between the genders in earning living wages; and, equitable distribution of state resources.

The elements proposed by Seguino and Grown are often reflected as the desired results from policies that balance out different and, sometimes, contradicting social objectives. Among the objectives that need to be balanced out are the following: balance between growth targets and social objectives; balance between market expansion and subsidised public service and regulation; and the balance between promoting property rights and human

rights. Many alternative policy proposals seek to achieve coherence among these objectives.

However, for policies to be truly gender-equitable, they should aim to change and correct the imbalance in the responsibilities for provisioning, particularly in easing the burdens of women. For example, in implementing cash transfer programs, women have been chosen as the primary beneficiaries because their expenditure patterns are closer to socially desired goals, such as health care and education. Benefits have been shown to accrue to the children of women receiving the cash transfers and, yet, the responsibility for ensuring that the sick are cared for and that school assignments are done remains with the women. In this case, the cash transfer program falls short of changing the burdens of responsibility.

This approach to defining gender equitable public policy raises questions on the extent to which gender mainstreaming continues to be a useful strategy. There is no debate as to whether or not there is any need to address discrimination. This is certainly needed and programs that target women specifically are helpful in this sense. However, we need to be able to go beyond these approaches in order to deal with the "systemic issues" on the appropriate role of various social institutions in provisioning for the improvement of well-being. Public policy must change the incentive structures in society so that the responsibilities for provisioning and care are more evenly carried among states, markets, and households or communities. In doing so, gender-equitable public policy contributes to social transformation. ■