

VISION OF SOCIALIST INTERNATIONAL WOMEN

60th Session of the Commission on the Status of Women – MARCH 2016

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Party of European Socialists

98, Rue du Trône

B - 1050 Brussels

Tel + 32 2 548 90 84

Fax + 32 2 230 17 66

www.pes.eu

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Introduction

At this critical juncture in the global women's movement, Socialist International Women (SIW) welcomes discussion of the priority theme of women's empowerment and its link to sustainable development at the 60th United Nations Commission on the Status of Women, March 2016.

SIW firmly asserts that the benefits of sustainable development cannot be realised while a significant proportion of the global population, the vast majority being women, remain financially and educationally disadvantaged, subjected to multiple forms of violence, and largely excluded from participation in the discussion, decision-making and implementation of developments in their regions. Of primary importance in enabling women to achieve their full potential and capacity to help shape and influence their environments and communities is the complete cessation of gender based violence. Women living in a permanent state of anxiety and fear of impending violence, or suffering the physical and psychological consequences of violent acts and behaviours, are being denied the most basic principles of human enjoyment and freedom. Assuring the primary human rights of women and re-establishing their expectation and experience of safety, dignity, respect and basic wellbeing is the cornerstone to building the confidence and strength of women, and increasing the overall influence of women and girls worldwide. Their invaluable knowledge and perspectives of women, and their unique understanding of specific issues relating to women and girl children, female sexual and reproductive health, childcare needs and social and community replenishment can – and is doing so where

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enabled– contribute vital and relevant insights to development discussions and implementation measures. The active participation and contribution of women is crucial to ensuring gender equality, inclusiveness and relevance to sustainable development initiatives. Further, the active engagement of both men and women in decision making processes is conducive to the creation of peaceful and harmonious communities, for the benefit of all.

SIW acknowledges and applauds the progress which has been made so far to address gender equality issues. During the 20 years since the adoption of the seminal Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) increasing numbers of women have gained clarity on the issues hindering their empowerment and participation in the evolution of their economies and societies, as well as an increased confidence in articulating how these issues may be sustainably resolved. Over the last two decades the tenacious and courageous actions of millions of women have raised international awareness of gender based discrimination and violations of women's human rights. They have also been powerful catalysts for the development and implementation of far-reaching gender equality solutions, and increased the self-esteem, expectations and aspirations of women and girls worldwide.

Despite these significant successes, SIW notes with deep concern that the global spread of change has been both slow and geographically uneven. On a global scale, violence against women remains one of the biggest issues of acute concern, damaging women, their families and communities at deep, incalculable levels. There is also persistent gender disparity in terms of education and

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literacy, despite many successful interventions with the education of girl children. The latest available UNESCO statistics show that in 2013, 63% of the estimated 757 million adults who cannot read or write are women, with most of these being older women^[1]. This persistent disparity remains a barrier to women's access to quality paid employment. Recent estimates predict that it will take over 75 years to achieve global equal pay for women performing work of equal value to men at our current rate of progress. While the political participation of women has increased, it has also been estimated that it will take around 50 years for women to achieve global gender parity in parliamentary participation at our present rate of change^[2].

A significant challenge to progress has been a strong reluctance within some regions and communities to prioritise key critical issues related to gender equality. The resulting political and societal inertia, coupled with a severe lack of financial investment, has been a hugely significant factor in the slow speed of change. The challenges of change are exacerbated further because the majority of gender equality issues are co-dependent and are only fully effective when addressed together. For example, providing education for women and girls, while insufficiently addressing endemic gender discrimination in the workplace, only partially addresses the core issues involved and does not effectively facilitate the achievement of gender equality within employment.

SIW asserts that increasing the speed of change is of utmost importance. Significant acceleration of co-ordinated action to develop and implement gender equality solutions across all platforms is urgently required to rapidly increase the rate of change

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on a global scale. SIW strongly believes it is both urgent and essential to encourage the addressing of interrelated gender equality issues concurrently and coherently wherever possible. Speeding up the process of implementing effective, co-ordinated action is vital to expedite the living reality of gender equality that all women and girls deserve. Together, women have already achieved so much, and together women can and must rise to the challenge of fast forwarding the vision of global gender equality into reality.

SIW looks eagerly to the future following the 2015 launch of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The 17 Goals announced, to be achieved by 2030, take over from the pre-2015 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and offer an opportunity to re-focus efforts and recommit to the realisation of global peace, gender equality and a healthy, habitable planet.

SIW stresses the importance and urgency of addressing all critical issues adversely affecting the participation of women in the process of sustainable development at local, national and international levels.

The Sustainable Development Goals

At the heart of SIW's vision is a world where gender equality is fully realised, a world where women and men cooperate in a spirit of mutual respect, and in recognition of the intrinsic value of each other as human beings. This vision is not presented as a purely utopian ideology; it is presented as an achievable benchmark of basic human rights, applicable to all citizens of the world.

The articulation of SIW's core vision expressed as a Sustainable Development Goal is:

SDG5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

With the use of the directive "*achieve*", it is very encouraging to note that this goal sends a far more emphatic message than the previous MDG 3 "*Promote* gender equality and empower women". The tone of SDG5 underlines the extreme urgency of addressing the entirely unacceptable reality of gross gender inequality, violent oppression, indignity and suffering being experienced every single day by millions of women and girls.

Specifically SDG5 is intended to provide women with the tools, frameworks and mechanisms needed to enable their fullest participation in development and implementation across all of the SDGs. Within the overall target are specific goals, designed to ensure that governments, NGOs and women's organisations are aware of and addressing all the key issues involved. The full list of objectives is:

- End all forms of discrimination
- Eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls, which includes trafficking
- Eliminate all harmful practices such as child marriage and female genital mutilation
- Promote shared responsibility within the household and recognize unpaid care work
- Ensure women's participation for leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic, and public life

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- Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health care
- Undertake reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources, including land ownership, financial services, and inheritance
- Enhance the use of enabling technology, particularly information and communications technology
- Adopt and strengthen sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls

Achievement of these objectives is an urgent imperative. It is no exaggeration to say that empowering women and girls is a critical factor in elevating the social evolution of humanity as a whole.

Gathering and analysis of gender specific data

The vital changes required to fully realise SDG5 and the emancipation of women cut across several platforms and their corresponding SDGs. It is essential to gain a better understanding of the scale and nature of gender equality issues within the context of sustainable development. To this end, SIW believes it is both achievable and essential to ensure efficient gender specific data gathering, evaluation and reporting across all SDG platforms.

Gender specific data and analysis can be extremely powerful tools which can provide invaluable supporting evidence to help push forward the development and implementation of gender equality solutions. More specifically, the more gender relevant information that is available, the easier it becomes to:

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- Evaluate the magnitude of issues and their impact, and specifically identify the geographical locations of critical gender related issues
- Plan for the resolution of identified issues, with the possibility of implementing anticipatory measures in some cases
- Streamline the allocation of resources, such as funding, specialist personnel, medical supplies and accommodation, to ensure they are available *where* they are most needed, and *when* they are most needed
- Prepare more specific cost information, based on concrete data, to support proposals for national and international funding of projects, as well as supporting the allocation of on-going financial investment in gender equality issues
- Monitor, review and report on interventions, to assist on-going development and improvement

The Beijing Platform for Action (1995), *Strategic Objective H.3.*, specifically requests Governments, the United Nations (UN) and other relevant parties to: *“Generate and disseminate gender-disaggregated data and information for planning and evaluation”*. However, it is widely recognised that our current body of gender specific quantitative and qualitative data, predominantly collected and collated by the United Nations, remains incomplete and uneven. Deficiencies in available data are due to several factors, which vary from region to region, including:

- Complete absence of data collection processes
- Absence of gender-disaggregated data

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- Incomplete data –such as where women feel too afraid or ashamed to report incidents, such as marital rape, or are otherwise unable to participate in data gathering activities

SIW strongly suggests a firm focus on gender specific data gathering and analysis initiatives. As well as providing more accurate, useable information, maintaining persistently high visibility of the progress of gender equality is also invaluable.

Ending the pandemic of violence against women

It is over 20 years since the UN General Assembly agreed the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (1993). Today, it is of continued acute concern that the pandemic of violence against women remains one of the most critical and urgent issues for women and girls worldwide. By definition, the sheer magnitude of the issue of violence against women, potentially affecting 50% of the world's population, has extremely significant implications for the successful achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

It is deeply disturbing that currently there are millions of women living under a permanent shadow of violence. The daily experience of far too many women is to have no sanctuary of safety within their own homes, to suffer violence from intimate partners, spouses, family members and strangers, to be vulnerable on the streets of their own neighbourhoods and exposed to violations in their places of work.

Although there are clear regional variations, available data shows that violence against women is endemic across all cultural, religious,

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economic and geographical boundaries. Indicators of the magnitude of the violence currently experienced by women worldwide are numerous, shocking and entirely unacceptable.

An estimated 35% of women worldwide have experienced physical and/or sexual violence perpetrated by an intimate partner and approximately 120 million women worldwide have experienced being forced into non-consensual sexual activity by current or former intimate partners and spouses^{[3], [4]}.

Psychological violence, defined as the deliberate intent to cause mental or emotional pain, is more difficult to quantify, but available data for the 28 European Union Member States shows 43% of women have experienced psychological violence in their lifetime, and 1 in 10 women have experienced cyber harassment, including receiving explicit sexual content via emails, SMS messages and social networking sites since the age of 15^[5]. It is likely that for many, their unrestricted access to internet sources and ownership of mobile phones commences at this age. It is also deeply concerning that a 2015 UNESCO survey of school children found one in four school girls feel uncomfortable using their school toilets, with evidence suggesting that school girls are at a greater risk than boys of sexual violence and harassment at school.

In regions affected by war and civil unrest, incidences of rape, humiliation and other forms of extreme violence against women frequently increase. Women in conflict zones, some of whom will be pregnant or mothers, face being subjected to extreme brutality, in

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addition to suffering fear, hunger and the painful upheaval of geographical displacement.

The adverse influence of cultural traditions and attitudes towards women remains, contributing to the 700 million girls worldwide who were married before the age of 18, with approximately 250 million of these girls being married before the age of 15^[5]. In some regions cultural norms openly condone and expressly encourage violence against women. In a small number of regions over 70% of women continue to condone husbands beating their wives for refusing to have sex with them, or leaving the house without telling them. Tackling deeply entrenched traditions which denigrate women is challenging, but the same research indicates that women who have had at least primary level education are more likely to question such practices and refuse to accept them of their own volition.

Cultural factors also influence the continuing practice of female genital mutilation (FGM), a heinous violation of female human rights experienced by an estimated 133 million girls^[6]. FGM is in decline, though slowly, with fewer younger women being subjected to this extremely painful, often dangerous and entirely unnecessary procedure. Research indicates that increasing levels of women's education has an influence on the decision of mother's not to have their girl children genitally mutilated.

The UN estimates that 2.4 million people worldwide are victims of human trafficking at any one time. The latest available figures show that 70% of detected victims of human trafficking are women and girls. Victims of trafficking face forced labour (a form of slavery),

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sexual exploitation and extreme levels of mistreatment that have been described as amounting to torture.

Many incidents of violations of women are not recorded. This can occur for reasons of the fear or shame of victims, or that the victim themselves want to forget the incident happened. Non-recording of incidents can also occur because there are no viable mechanisms in place to do so, such as violations occurring during human trafficking, migration journeys and acts of war. As a result, we do not have definitive data on the true magnitude of violence against women, but what is certain is that the entirely unacceptable reality of violence against women and girls continues to be prevalent worldwide.

The human, societal and economic cost of violence against women

The impact of violence on individual women can be extreme and heartbreaking. The World Health Organisation states that “*violence can negatively affect women’s physical, mental, sexual and reproductive health, and may increase vulnerability to HIV*”. There are also wider implications, including the incalculable damage to the social fabric of families and communities, and the loss of essential maternal support for the children of victims.

The families, particularly the children of victims of violence, can experience personal distress and relationship complications following incidents of violence. They may also experience the immense feeling of powerlessness, loss and sorrow associated with witnessing the unprovoked physical and emotional damage of loved ones.

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Communities and economies are at risk of losing the invaluable contribution of women victims, due to reduced personal capacity, which constitutes a significant loss for all.

Some forms of violence can lead to chronic medical disorders, requiring on-going care, such as depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and eating disorders. However, research indicates that in many instances, particularly during war, geographical displacement, climate emergencies and economic crisis, the needs of women have been largely ignored. This failure to prioritise the needs of women amounts to gross negligence and inattention to their most basic needs and human rights, and increases the likelihood of permanent physical and emotional injury. Increased investment in resources to support victims of violence is a critical and urgent priority. The United Nations Joint Global Programme on Essential Services for Women and Girls Subject to Violence, a partnership of UN Women, UNFPA, WHO, UNDP and UNODC, aimed at providing greater access to essential and quality services for all women and girls, is a strongly welcomed initiative in this area.

There are significant identifiable costs associated with supporting the victims of violence, to tend to their emotional and bodily wounds, and provide guidance and support as they and their families process their trauma and move towards recovery. It is essential that funding is consistently available to implement and maintain services and institutions which provide support for this worldwide epidemic of violence.

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As long as violence against women continues, there is a serious barrier to the achievement of the full emancipation of women, raising the status of women in communities, regions and countries, and achieving true gender parity in the participation of women in the creation of sustainable development.

Measures to combat violence against women

Violence against women is a learned behaviour, exacerbated and perpetuated by the influences of cultural traditions, localised and national social norms, and reinforcement by the mass distribution of adverse media stereotypes and what amounts to propaganda.

As an urgent priority, interventions at local, national and international levels are needed to combat and challenge the beliefs at the root of violence against women.

Education, particularly of women and girls, but also of men and boys, can be a powerful way to change behaviours towards women for the better. In addition, improving the effectiveness of legislation and policies protecting the safety and rights of women, on a zero tolerance basis, are essential.

Of equal importance is the urgent stepping up women's access to protection, justice and the essential services required to support women following acts of violence. Available data shows that less than 40% of women seek any help at all following incidents of violence^[5]. This means a shocking 60% of women cope with the effects of physical, emotional and sexual violence alone and unsupported. The majority of those who do seek help, gain support from within their immediate circle of family and friends. They do not

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approach healthcare services, and less than 10% approach police services.

There has been significant progress on passing legislation outlawing violence against women, with 119 countries passing laws relating to domestic violence, 125 countries passing laws relating to sexual harassment and 52 countries passing laws outlawing marital rape^[5]. However, these laws are not uniformly compliant with international standards and recommendations across regions. In addition, their sometimes extremely weak application in practice can render legislation effectively toothless in its purpose of protecting the human rights and freedoms of women. Even in regions regarded as progressive in relation to women's rights there are marked weaknesses.

One key influencing factor shown in data collected from 99 countries is that on average women make up only 10% of police forces. Data collected from 40 countries which have female personnel shows that the presence of women officers increases the likelihood of women reporting sexual assaults^[7]. This is yet another indicator that achieving gender equality within all levels of the justice process is vital to encourage and support women to speak up regarding violence and other criminal behaviours.

There is an urgent global requirement to gain the confidence and trust of women, to encourage them to reach out for the support and protection they need. This can only be achieved by bringing into practice laws and policies which do much more than pay lip service to the goal of combating violence against women. Policies and legislation must be genuinely accessible, sensitive to local cultural

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norms, and demonstrate strong and effective action to ensure the protection of women's human rights and freedoms.

It is inarguably clear that gender equality and the empowerment of women cannot be fully realised until the global scourge of violence against women is totally eradicated. SIW reaffirms its commitment to the goal of the eradication of all forms of violence against women and recommends support for all initiatives which serve to accelerate the achievement of this goal.

Governments and related parties need to act with urgency to reverse the fear, mistrust and disappointment that many women have experienced following ineffectual responses to their suffering. This reversal will take immense commitment and trust on all sides, but with the cooperation and determination of all can be achieved.

Women, peace and intercultural dialogue

The continuing fragility of peace in many parts of the world makes it impossible to speak of measures to combat violence against women without consideration of the devastating consequences of war and conflict on women and children. Civilian women and children today continue to suffer disproportionately both during conflict and in post-conflict transitional periods. Women often have fewer resources to protect themselves and their children, and often make up the majority of displaced migrant groups.

The articulation of the intention to create sustainably peaceful and inclusive societies worldwide, and end the suffering of women, men and children, expressed as a Sustainable Development Goal is:

SDG16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and effective, accountable and inclusive institutions for all

Research analysis shows that including women as mediators, negotiators and signatories to peacemaking processes can increase the probability of peace agreements lasting at least two years by 20% and increase the probability of peace agreements lasting 15 years by 35%^[8].

It is now 15 years since the adoption of UN Security Resolution 1325 (S/RES/1325) on women, peace and security, reaffirming the vital role of women in the successful prevention and resolution of conflicts. Important progress has been made, but there is still a very long way to go, with 97% per cent of military peacekeepers and 90% of police personnel being men in 2015^[9]. Without women's participation in peacemaking and judicial processes their powerful contribution is lost and all too often the interests and human rights of women are entirely forgotten.

Since the adoption of S/RES/1325 in 2000, the nature of conflict and its primary causes has changed significantly. One factor is that many conflicts are more prolonged in duration, which contributes to the normalisation of violence in general and violence towards women in particular. Another significant change is the primary causes of conflict. What is increasingly evident is the involvement of non-State aggressors who hold violently extremist ideologies, particularly regarding cultural or religious interpretations.

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Is of vital and critical urgency to strongly promote intercultural dialogue to highlight areas of convergence and harmony, and cultivate tolerance and understanding for all members of our diverse global population. There is an immediate requirement for all nations, communities and individuals who wish to live peaceably to take swift action to accelerate **SDG16** into reality.

The participation of women has proven essential in creating and maintaining harmony within communities and supporting the sustainable development of peaceful societies. Women's belief in the fairness, impartiality and effectiveness of their justice systems and institutions is of critical importance to encourage and enable their rightful and invaluable contribution.

Addressing the gender imbalance of poverty

The articulation of the desire to raise all of humanity above poverty expressed as a Sustainable Development Goal is:

SDG1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere

There are estimated to be over 1 billion human beings currently living at extreme levels of poverty. Most, but certainly not all, are located in developing countries and the vast majority are women. The urgent issue of the total eradication of poverty remains of primary importance to all, but the far higher prevalence of poverty among the female population urgently requires immediate, targeted attention.

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Women have many diverse and irreplaceable roles which shape and contribute to the social enrichment, wellbeing, nutrition and economic development of their children, families and communities. The persistent lack of status and recognition of the contribution of women continues to be a significant factor in plunging many into extreme states of poverty. As women remain the primary caregivers of children, extreme poverty is also causing irreversible damage to the physical and psychological health and wellbeing of children and young adults, adversely affecting the lives of entire generations. The current levels of female poverty are therefore potentially contributing to the creation of human suffering and incapacity in the future.

Women who are widowed, single, elderly, refugees or migrants are generally at a higher risk of experiencing the horrors and suffering of extreme poverty. These groups are among those who are more likely to lack a minimum level of education, access to independent means of mobility, financial resources and property ownership rights. In some regions, gender oppressive cultural behaviours and practices, often embedded in policies and legislation, further isolate and exclude widowed, unmarried and otherwise single women within their communities, through the imposition of lowly status and lack of entitlement.

A combination of these and other gender specific societal and economic factors push many women into desperate situations to support themselves, such as sexual exploitation, and appalling conditions of low-paid domestic labour. Even for those who do find decent employment, the wage disparity between women and men,

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and the responsibilities of home and childcare that many single women juggle in between, mean that both their income and time are painfully stretched.

The gender imbalance of poverty was specifically highlighted in the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), calling for governments and other parties to prioritise efforts to eradicate the disparately high impact of poverty on women worldwide. Emphasis was particularly placed on isolated rural areas, where extreme poverty in general more frequently exists almost un-noticed by wider local communities and nations.

There have been a number of highly progressive initiatives in some countries which proactively serve to redress the gender imbalance of poverty and increase women's empowerment to support themselves and their communities. These initiatives demonstrate that gender inclusive change within governments and communities is achievable, right now, and provide inspiring examples of success for other nations to emulate.

While the genuine desire and will to effect lasting change is essential, this must be followed through with action, and particularly the provision of adequate funding and investment in gender-specific issues. It is now critically urgent for the global community, governments and related parties to demonstrate their commitment to gender equality and reinstate women to the full enjoyment of their human rights and freedoms.

Providing quality, lifelong education for all women

The articulation of the urgent need to provide quality level education for all expressed as a Sustainable Development Goal is:

SDG4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Promoting education for all women is essential to achievement of gender equality on many interlinking levels. At the primary level of self-esteem and self-confidence, increasing the skills and knowledge of women and girls to achieve parity with men and boys is a vital foundation for the achievement of gender parity. With equal levels of educational exposure, women are far better equipped to think for themselves, form their own opinions, and express their needs and concerns confidently. The power of this factor alone, raising women's self perceptions of their capabilities and potential, has already changed the way millions of women experience the world and interact within their relationships, communities and nations.

In the workplace, education is only part of the story, but is nonetheless vital. Education equips women to compete for positions and careers that were previously closed to them. Gender specific factors inhibiting women from taking on jobs, such as laws allowing husbands to prevent their wives from working outside the home, are of continuing urgent concern. There is also still a very long way to go to achieve gender parity in pay for jobs of the same value as men, even in highly developed economies, which is clearly unacceptable and an issue requiring urgent action worldwide.

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There is still much to be done to close the gender gap in education, particularly in the education of older generations of women. For example, over the last 20 years, there has been stagnation in the improvement of literacy rates for women. Of the estimated 774 million adults who cannot read or write, two thirds are women. This proportion has remained the same for 20 years across most regions. The majority of illiterate women are older adults, rather than girls and adolescent women. This stagnation may be due in part to gender based factors inhibiting women from participating in education, such as being restricted from leaving their homes for educational purposes, the lack of the allocation of funding for the education of women, and less access to computer, mobile phone and internet resources than men.

It is encouraging to note that the gender gap in the enrolment of girls into primary level education has narrowed significantly, although gender disparity still remains. Less encouraging is the fact that out of an estimated 72 million children of primary school age who are not attending school, girls make up over 54% of the total.

While women remain underrepresented in tertiary education for scientific and engineering subjects, they continue to be dominant in education, health and welfare, social sciences, humanities and the arts.

It is vital that the progress made so far in educating women and girls continues to be firmly supported, funded and accelerated. Focussing on identified areas of critical concern and ensuring recommendations and initiatives are implemented and monitored are of vital

importance to close gender gaps in education across all generations of women.

Gender equality and work

The articulation of the vital need to create sustainable growth worldwide and decent work for all expressed as a Sustainable Development Goal is:

SDG8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

The challenge within this SDG is to reverse the frustrating and disappointing experience of millions of women around the world that achieving the same educational levels as men, performing the same jobs as male counterparts, and even creating and running their own successful businesses has not been enough to attain global gender equality and empowerment of women.

The contribution of women is of vital importance to sustainable development. However, women remain largely under-utilised in the development and success of sustainable economic growth. To reverse this stagnant and unhelpful situation, it is essential to implement policies and initiatives which raise the perception and status of women and recognise them as valuable assets in the workplace. The benefit to communities of fully utilising the skills, knowledge and expertise of women in respectful and appreciative ways, including via appropriate levels of remuneration, has the

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potential of transforming the lives of women and enriching their communities and economies.

Too many of today's women have largely un-productive and unfulfilling employment roles, doing their very best to work around family and childcare commitments. UN data confirms that, in addition to the often entirely inexplicable differences in women's pay for the same value of work as men, women and men have markedly different employment conditions and opportunities for career progression.

Women remain over represented in agriculture and low paid occupations, such as domestic work and cleaning. Overall, women are less likely to have full time permanent contracts of employment with associated corporate benefits and more likely to be working in part time, less secure roles, working fewer hours than they would like and under-utilising their skills and knowledge. Women are also more likely to be working in more informal low status roles, with no formal contract, very low levels of job security, often very poor working conditions and increased levels of risk of harassment and violence.

Women's earnings tend to be less than men (United Nations, 2010), partly because women's rate of pay is frequently automatically less than men due to gender inequality, and partly due to the prevalence of women in part time roles.

It is vital that governments and the private employment sector take responsibility for their part in allowing the perpetuity of gender

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discrimination in the workplace. Gender sensitive policies, legislation and working practices are urgently needed to ensure women are secure and protected in their workplaces, and paid equitably for the work they perform.

Women are also more likely to be unpaid workers contributing to family owned enterprises. Unpaid roles occupying women also include working in the home, child rearing activities, cooking family meals and home cleaning. In some regions, the responsibility for collecting water from distant sources, gathering food and fuel also lies with female members of families and communities. These commitments can amount to full time occupations, which do not allow women to seek paid work outside the home.

The unpaid contribution of women to the social and economic development of their regions and nations remains largely unappreciated and seriously undervalued. For example, in many Asian and African regions, women are essential to their economies, communities and families as the principle farmers of animals and growers of edible crops. These women have invaluable knowledge, skills and expertise, but are often excluded from discussion and decision making on issues such as climate change, or maintaining sustainable food supplies. The irrational approach of ignoring local, relevant and knowledgeable resources based purely on gender is sadly repeated the world over.

It is time for women to take their rightful place in the process of creating sustainable, inclusive economies, and creating employment

which values and rewards work done, with equal terms for men and women.

Women and climate change

The articulation of the urgent need for sustained, radical and immediate action to ameliorate the effects of human intervention on the world's climate, expressed as a Sustainable Development Goal is:

SDG13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

The effects of climate change have the potential to be catastrophic for all of humanity. The adoption of the Paris Agreement at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, Paris 2015, marked an historic moment in the global commitment of governments and nations to saving the planet we live on.

Changes of seasonal weather norms, hurricanes, bush fires, and almost visibly rising sea levels have caused chaos and the destruction of property, wildlife and human life with such frequency in recent years that world governments have been forced to focus urgently on climate change issues.

Climate changes are also affecting regions in the form of more gradual degradations of the environment, such as rising sea-levels visibly and speedily eroding coastlines, severe soil erosion due to the desiccation of previously verdant areas, and the leeching of essential nutrients from previously fertile soil.

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The impact of these changes can have immediate effects on the ability of communities to grow food, find fuel and source clean water. In many rural areas of African and Asian regions, women and their families depend almost entirely on the land, with no reserves available to pull them through leaner times or emergencies. Frequently women in rural communities are given the responsibility of gathering food, water and fuel. Women in communities like these are more likely to go without food themselves if they believe it is necessary; giving what is available to their husbands and children. As resources become scarce close to their homes, women are forced to travel further and further away to find them, at increased risk of injury and attack, and with less food to sustain them physically.

Migration is another area where women can become extremely vulnerable to harm. There are very real possibilities that at some time in the future effects of climate change, such as extreme flooding, may force mass migration away from a region. Women and girl children are generally more vulnerable to violence and abuse on migration journeys than their male counterparts. Female migrants are more likely to experience sexual violence and the denial of basic human rights not only on their migration journeys, but also at their destinations. Migrant shelters can also be crowded and intimidating for women and girls, some of whom may be travelling alone. This forces some women to find shelter elsewhere, in the often mistaken belief they will be safer.

The involvement of women in the development of planning for climate change is essential. The implementation of policies and procedures to encourage and engage women in participation of

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discussions and decision making processes is a matter of urgency across all regions.

This is particularly applicable in rural communities, where it is vital to ensure the full participation and consultation of women in relation to rural climate change issues affecting the sustainable supply of food, clean water and fuel. Women in rural areas, as the primary farmers, care givers of families and children and resourcing agents for food, water and fuel are in uniquely knowledgeable positions with regard to localised climate changes. They are also ideally placed to advise and contribute regarding possible sustainable development solutions relating to climate change. The input of women ensures measures implemented are practical for all, gender inclusive and workable within their communities.

In terms of planning for climate change emergencies which may require mass migrations, for example flash flooding, women and girl children have specific hygiene and dignity needs, which are often entirely ignored in times of escalating crisis. It is essential to consult women regarding measures which would better serve their comfort and basic human rights wherever possible.

Climate change is affecting the entire human and animal population in one way or another. Women deserve the right to have a voice in developing and implementing solutions which will affect them in equal measure to men.

Funding and investment for gender equality initiatives

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The articulation of the need to secure tangible action and concrete commitment to the achievement of the SDGs through the allocation of funding and investment, expressed as a Sustainable Development Goal is:

SDG17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development

Women urgently need to continue pushing for dedicated and continuous investment and resources to enable rapid and consistent progress. The call on governments and other agencies for dedicated resources to deliver on gender equality commitments must remain strongly insistent and tenacious. Adequate funding and high levels of partnership at local, national and international levels are critical for the implementation of life-changing gender equality goals. The support of strong institutions, with the resources to measure, review and report on progress, and give advice on issues is also critical to ensure the continued success of interventions and help ensure adherence to international benchmark standards and recommendations.

Chronic underinvestment in women's empowerment over the last 20 years has severely impeded progress on women's rights and gender equality. A UN Women review of progress on the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) found that in some countries underfunding of gender equality initiatives has been as high as 90%. This crippling financial shortfall was recognised by UN

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Member States early in 2015, resulting in a Political Declaration pledging to close this gap.

The intention is to provide increased financing for women's organisations and NGO's, as well as government and other relevant sectors. Women's organisations are particularly targeted for funding due to their in depth knowledge of the struggle for women's empowerment, and powerful networks of knowledge and partnership. Women's organisations have also been achieving incredible successes in gender equality, despite in many cases having little or no financial support.

The ability of nations to adapt to gender equality is not in question; it has been proven in several countries that they are certainly capable of doing so. The issue is to harness and mobilise the social and political will necessary for change, coupled with resolute insistence on concrete action and financial commitment to enable implementation. It is hoped that the high international visibility of the SDGs will assist here, but nonetheless, the achievement of these goals may not come easily in many regions.

Next steps – accelerating the rate of gender equality change

SIW asserts that accelerating implementation of gender equality requires closing the gap between broad global targets and specific national and community based development initiatives.

At grass roots level the development of country-specific targets and plans, consistent with gender equality and the SDGs, could provide a

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basis for prioritising interventions and the allocation of resources at national levels. Promoting the linking of projects pursued by individual development actors and agencies with national targets would also help focus efforts and resources, as part of a coherent strategy. Another essential factor is supporting and funding the development of effective, fair and gender inclusive institutions and socioeconomic infrastructures, such as legislation and budget allocation policies.

SIW strongly believes that promoting global partnerships and intercultural dialogues is critical. These initiatives promote the strengthening of bonds between nations and communities and keep communication pathways open and constructive.

Providing adequate support during what can be fragile transition phases in development is of paramount importance. SIW suggests particular emphasis on the following:

- Encourage development of shared definitions, frameworks for analysis of data, and operational strategies among local, national and international development actors.
- Introduce benchmark tools and operational policies and practices in the development of country and local strategies, including monitoring, evaluation and reporting.
- Develop multi-stakeholder partnerships around critical development initiatives to ensure inclusiveness and a true focus on gender equality and the sustainable development goals.
- Support the development of subject matter expert and institutional networks to share experience, knowledge and synergies.

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The Beijing Platform for Action (1995) states that *“The success of the Platform for Action will require a strong commitment on the part of governments, international organisations and institutions at all levels.”*

Focus must now be intensively aimed at achieving this commitment, and harnessing strong political will, as a matter of urgency, to rapidly accelerate the pace of change. The achievement of gender equality is the key to liberation of women.

Women are ready to embrace their freedoms, human rights and enjoyments. This attitude is helping pave the way forward to securing the requisite financial resources, legislative instruments and policy changes needed to embed gender equality into the core framework of global society. The journey is not over yet though, which means the continuation of the expression of women’s courage and tenacity, which has already achieved so much for the emancipation of women.

Recommendations

Socialist International Women urges all governments, member parties of Socialist International, the UN and NGO’s to recommit to the framework and measures within the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (1995) and the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (1994).

SIW further calls for urgent action on areas which are critical to accelerating the progress of gender equality changes, and action to implement the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development (1994) by supporting their integration into local

and national frameworks, policies and legislation.

SIW urges the creation of partnerships with government, NGO and women's groups, particularly aimed at securing strong financial support and investment for gender equality initiatives, to ensure their effective implementation.

SIW recommends four priorities for the achievement of women's emancipation and empowerment:

1. Eradicate violence against women

Violence against women is the single most prevalent gender equality issue of all. Without freedom from the fear of violence and the consequences of the acts of violence women remain subjugated in ways that impact on their belief of their entitlement to freedom, dignity, respect and basic human rights. From this position, the will and energy of women to challenge injustices is severely weakened.

The establishment of strong sanctions and legislation to curb violence against women is a critical and urgent requirement. In addition, increasing the support available to victims of violence, and access to support from justice, healthcare and social care institutions is essential.

2. Achieve gender parity in the education of women and girls

To achieve true gender equality in their homes, communities and workplaces, women need the skills and knowledge to operate on a level playing field with men. Just as importantly, there is evidence to support the view that education of women and girls increases levels of confidence, and increases their ability to challenge gender oppressive

traditions, practices and cultural norms.

3. Achieve gender parity in women’s political participation and representation

For gender equality to become a reality it is necessary for women to become much more active and visible in the high level decision making processes of regions and nations. Available evidence indicates that higher levels of political participation increase the rate of gender equality change, and accelerate the integration of gender considerations into the budgeting and spending allocation of governments.

Also of vital importance is the participation of women in the discussion of legislation and policies, both in general and in relation to gender specific issues.

4. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

This is the overarching goal of gender equality towards which all gender initiatives lead. It is also the only acceptable state for women in socially democratic, egalitarian and inclusive societies.

SIW takes this opportunity to reaffirm its views and recommendations presented in the following papers published in 2015:

Declaration: International Women’s Day 2015

Declaration: Migration and Climate Change – Women’s Contribution to Living Together

Statement: Women’s Empowerment and its Link to Sustainable Development

Resolution: Global Agenda 2030: Women, Peace and Sustainable Development

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