

Women's Rights at the Crossroads

Council of Europe
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Comments by Jacqui Hunt, Director Europe and Eurasia office, Equality Now

Ending violence against women and girls can bring us closer and faster to achieving the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. The Council of Europe Convention on preventing and combating violence against women and domestic violence (the Istanbul Convention) requires the protection and promotion of the right of everyone, particularly women, to live free from violence and for the prohibition of discrimination against women. Similarly, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) call for an end to all forms of discrimination against all women and girls and elimination of all forms of violence against them, including trafficking and sexual and other forms of exploitation. By drawing up the SDGs, governments have recognised that “ending poverty and other deprivations must go hand-in-hand with strategies that improve health and education, reduce inequality and spur economic growth – all while tackling climate change and working to preserve our oceans and forests”¹.

The world cannot sustainably develop if it leaves half of its population behind. To fulfil their full potential, women and girls need equal access to education, employment, opportunities and resources. Violence and discrimination against women and girls are an obstacle to women's and girls' full participation in society. For example, female genital mutilation causes physical and psychological harm and even death. Frequently linked to child, early and forced “marriage”, girls may be drawn early out of school, unable to finish their education and learn the skills needed to successfully navigate a solid economic and perhaps social future. Instances of maternal mortality or obstetric fistula, increased when girls get pregnant while still children themselves, cause enormous harm directly to the girls and women and put early pressure on healthcare systems. Sex selective abortions reduce the number of women in a population and lead to the trafficking of girls and women to satisfy the demand of men for brides, generating increased criminal behaviour and its concomitant costs to society in addition to the women directly affected. Sexual harassment in public spaces and the workplace deny women safe spaces and free movement. Targeted in particular based on their sex, the abuse and threats levelled at women parliamentarians may dissuade them from office. Legislative timetables often make it impossible for women to balance work as a parliamentarian with childcare responsibilities of which they continue to bear the brunt. The impact of domestic and sexual violence on women is huge and continues into their families, including their children. Family trauma, missed school and work, policing, healthcare and the justice system all add to the costs of male violence against women. The list goes on.

In order for real development to be made and to be sustainable, respect for and promotion of human rights, including women's rights, is a prerequisite. In 2015, consulting firm

¹ <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/sdgs>

McKinsey estimated that advancing women's equality can add \$12 trillion (11%) to the global economy in 10 years and up to \$28 trillion (26%) if there were real parity in the workplace².

Equality Now's particular priority and favoured approach to achieve the SDG targets on violence against women and girls within the timeframe indicated by the 2030 Agenda is through the law. We believe the law is a reflection of how governments view their societies and that it informs public response and behaviour. Having laws that provide equality and justice is a good first benchmark to show that women and girls are valued equally with men and boys and against which women and girls can claim their rights. Removing sex discriminatory laws is a pledge governments have made repeatedly, including in the Beijing Platform for Action and by ratifying the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. The target date under the Beijing Platform for Action of 2005 for achieving this is long past, but progress has been made and, with genuine political will, all sex discriminatory laws could be revoked by 2030.

The Istanbul Convention also calls for the abolition of laws and practices which discriminate against women. Discrimination is fueled by stereotypes which permeate many laws based on a rigid definition of perceived roles. The Council of Europe Recommendation on preventing and combating sexism of 27 March 2019 is a useful tool in identifying where and how sexism arises and can be stopped and in pointing out how this is exacerbated by intersecting discriminations, such as on the basis of ethnicity, minority or indigenous status, age, religion, refugee or migrant status, disability, marital status, social origin, gender identity, sexual orientation or sexuality³. It also underscores that equality promotes well-being for all. With the central message of the SDGs being that no-one should be left behind, it is an important reminder that everyone is affected and everyone must be included.

Strong partnerships generally are key in achieving the SDGs. Particularly given the recent backlash against women's rights, it's important that all champions of equality join together in their efforts to improve the lives of all. Civil society space is shrinking; journalists, activists and parliamentarians are being targeted and silenced; the rule of law is being challenged. The environment this creates benefits a small, privileged group only who strip their societies of wealth, harmony and well-being. Together we can pull for change and a world where everyone thrives.

www.equalitynow.org

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<https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/employment-and-growth/how-advancing-womens-equality-can-add-12-trillion-to-global-growth>

³ <https://rm.coe.int/prems-055519-gbr-2573-cmrec-2019-1-web-a5/168093e08c>