

The Post-2015 Development Agenda: Realizing the rights of women living in poverty through commitments on gender equality and unpaid care work

Submission by the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights

Summary

The UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights calls on States to include the issue of unpaid care work in commitments to tackle poverty and gender inequality in the evolving post-2015 global development framework. This would represent a crucial step forward in the struggle for women's equal enjoyment of human rights. In particular, she calls for a stand-alone goal on gender equality with commitments on reducing women's time burdens; improving access to childcare and other quality public services, as well as time-saving domestic technologies; investing in infrastructure in disadvantaged areas; and conducting regular time-use surveys. In addition, goals and targets in all relevant areas of the post-2015 agenda - in particular employment and social protection - should be sensitive to inter-relationships with unpaid care work.

Introduction: human rights, the MDGs and the post-2015 agenda

Many actors have recognized that one of the weaknesses of the MDG framework was its failure to fully reflect the promise in the Millennium Declaration where countries pledged to strive for the protection and promotion of all human rights. Despite the importance of human rights for improving the lives of people living in poverty, they are not adequately reflected in the MDGs.

Therefore, it is first and foremost crucial that the post-2015 development agenda is underpinned by and premised on human rights. Human rights standards and principles provide concrete guidance as to how goals and targets should be framed. Governments have already committed to uphold human rights in numerous international treaties; however these existing legal obligations and norms have been largely overlooked in current development policy. Moreover, grounding development priorities in human rights is not only a legal and moral imperative, but can also enhance effectiveness and accountability.

The Special Rapporteur adds her voice to the strong calls for the post-2015 agenda to include a strong commitment to gender equality and women's rights, as both a stand-alone goal and an overarching concern across all areas. When women are left behind, human rights are violated, development is stalled and whole societies are held back.

Any stand-alone goal on gender equality must go much further than the current MDG 3, which focuses solely on equality in education. While this is an important issue, the structural causes of women's inequality and discrimination against women run much deeper.

Inequalities, women and unpaid care work

In this regard, the Special Rapporteur would like to stress the critical importance that the post-2015 development agenda directly addresses the issue of the unpaid care economy. Many stakeholders have highlighted the importance of commitments to tackle inequalities, including gender inequality, in the post-2015 framework. Unpaid care work is closely linked with multiple structures of inequality and therefore it must be a central consideration to any goal-setting in this regard. Care underpins economic growth and productivity, social development, wellbeing and social cohesion, but the costs of providing care are unequally borne across gender, income levels, social class, race, ethnicity and other lines of inequality. Unpaid care work is also an obstacle to moving out of poverty for many women and families.

Given the acknowledged importance of gender equality and empowering women and girls for tackling poverty, States and other development actors cannot afford to turn a blind eye to unpaid care work.

To contribute to the discussion, the [Special Rapporteur's 2013 report](#)¹ to the General Assembly (A/68/293) focuses on unpaid care work, poverty and women's human rights. The report identifies the unequal distribution of unpaid care work, and its intensity in particular for disadvantaged women, as a major cause of human rights violations and poverty, and makes a number of recommendations for how States can tackle this problem.

The urgency of addressing unpaid care work

We cannot hope to achieve gender equality if unpaid care is not adequately supported or fairly distributed in our societies. The unequal, gendered division of unpaid care work is not natural, neutral or inevitable. How care is addressed plays a large part in determining the capabilities and choices that women and men have and is also critical to challenging gender stereotypes related to family and work, such as “male breadwinners” and “female nurturers”. These stereotyped gender roles result in women assuming an unfairly large burden of unpaid work, which then prevents them from enjoying several human rights such as the right to education, right to work, right to health and right to participation on an equal basis with men. Indeed, the amount, intensity and drudgery of unpaid care work realizing their potential in school, participating in political and community life, from accessing decent work or income-earning opportunities and may also impact their health.

The unequal distribution of unpaid care work negatively impacts women and girls throughout their lives, from girls who are removed from school to undertake care work in the home to older women who have to live on lower pensions. The situation is worse for

¹ Also available in other UN languages at <http://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Poverty/Pages/AnnualReports.aspx>

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women living in poverty and in particular for those who experience discrimination and social exclusion on other grounds such as ethnicity, race, colour, health or marital status. Research shows that women living in poverty have particularly time-consuming and intense unpaid care work demands, due to their lack of income, social exclusion and lack of access to quality infrastructure and public services. In some developing countries, for example, women living in poverty spend many hours each day collecting water, food and fuel for their family. Additionally, across a diverse range of countries, women from disadvantaged racial and ethnic groups provide care services to meet the needs of more powerful social groups, while their own care needs and responsibilities have been downplayed and neglected.

Thus the unequal distribution of unpaid work – common across all societies – is a major cause and consequence not only of gender inequality and inequality generally, but also of violations of several obligations that States have assumed under human rights law. Domestic, regional and international human rights norms oblige States to protect and ensure that women enjoy their rights to work, education, health, an adequate standard of living, participation in political, social and cultural life, and others on an equal basis with men. Women’s disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care also contributes significantly to the feminised inter-generational transmission of poverty and it should therefore be a major development policy concern.

Today, although knowledge about the impact of care is increasing exponentially, still the issue is not systematically included in policy agendas. This situation must change. Action is especially urgent now, given that various phenomena and trends – including the HIV/AIDS pandemic, global migration flows, ageing populations, and austerity measures taken in response to the global financial and economic crises - are putting caregivers and care arrangements under great pressure, jeopardizing women’s rights further.

Moving forward requires commitments from States as well as active social movements to ensure that resources are put behind the policies and investments that work, including universally accessible, good-quality provisions for public goods that can support and redistribute care (water, sanitation, transport, education, health care, childcare, etc.). Directly or indirectly, States play a major role in determining who has access to quality care and who bears the costs of its provisions; therefore they must promote gender equality through supporting, funding, regulating and providing care, consistent with their human rights obligations (see the full [report](#)).

Where public services are inadequate or inaccessible (which they often are in informal settlements and rural areas), women have to take on more unpaid care work – caring for the sick, elderly, children, persons with disabilities; fetching water; grinding grains by hand, etc. Lack of decent roads and public transport also means long journeys to work, health centres and schools, which exacerbates their time poverty and further prevent them from accessing their rights.

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Quality and accessible public services and infrastructure in disadvantaged areas – in particular health care, child care, elder care, education, public transport, water and energy provision - are therefore crucial interventions in order to redistribute women’s unpaid care work and reduce its drudgery, thereby freeing their time for income-generating work, education and training, or participation in cultural, political and social life. This leads to greater equality, rights enjoyment and empowerment.

Recommendations for the post-2015 agenda

In order to make decisive progress in the struggle for gender equality and women’s rights, it is necessary to recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work. States, international organizations and human rights advocates should address the issue of care as a matter of priority, as a major human rights concern. The post-2015 agenda can make a major contribution to rights-based, equitable development and ensuring women’s rights by positioning care as a social and collective responsibility.

The post-2015 development goals should therefore include commitments on recognizing, reducing and redistributing unpaid care work as a major element of a goal on gender equality, women’s rights and women’s empowerment. The Special Rapporteur supports [UN Women's call](#) for a target on **reducing women’s time burdens**, with indicators including the average weekly number of hours spent on unpaid domestic work by sex, and the proportion of children under primary school age enrolled in organized **childcare**. She also recommends further commitments on improving **gender-sensitive infrastructure and public services in disadvantaged areas**, and investments in affordable **time-saving domestic technologies**.²

Goals in other relevant areas of the framework should also take account of unpaid care work as a major determinant of the opportunities and rights enjoyment of women living in poverty. For instance, any goals on employment should fully integrate targets on gender equality and non-discrimination in employment, promoting and facilitating women’s participation in **decent work** (for instance by providing affordable childcare services) and commit to promoting a more equal distribution of unpaid care work. Goals on **social protection** should also mainstream gender equality and human rights concerns stemming from the distribution of - and stereotypes around - unpaid care work. For example, social protection programmes should not reinforce women’s caring roles by tying payments to mothers’ performance of certain duties.

In order to recognize unpaid care work and provide an evidence base for informed policy-making, improved data collection will be necessary. As well as overall commitments to collect disaggregated data, the post-2015 agenda should encourage States to conduct **regular time-use surveys** – in line with the recommendations of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action over twenty years ago.

² For more detailed recommendations, see the Special Rapporteur’s report: UN Doc. A/68/293.