

Sixty-eighth session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW68)

‘Accelerating the achievement of gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls by addressing poverty and strengthening institutions and financing with a gender perspective’

Expert Group Meeting

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Making Political Institutions Address Gendered Poverty: Contexts, Capabilities and Change

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

1. Introduction

When *do* national political institutions address gendered poverty? What factors influence their decisions to respond to the poverty needs of women and girls? What kinds of institutional capacities are needed for sustaining the promotion of gender equality goals in addressing gendered poverty? Answers to these questions are critical for setting future action plans and knowledge agendas on gendered poverty.

SDG 16 that emphasizes peace, justice and strong institutions highlights the role played by institutions in building inclusive societies (and economies). In the post pandemic context, paying attention to attaining this goal has gained urgency. My contribution to the session on strengthening political institutions to address gendered poverty focus on the challenges posed by economic and political changes and gender backlash; what may be the possible political/ contextual openings for advancing gender equality goals; what capacities are needed at various levels of government to address gendered poverty; and the strategies for mobilising for change. I draw on both academic and secondary literature and on-going research projects led by the Institute of Development Studies on countering backlash against women's rights and gender equality.

2. The current context

2.1 Gendered impact of the pandemic and gaps in post pandemic recovery plans

The post pandemic context poses several economic and political challenges to political institutions addressing gendered poverty. The impact of the pandemic has been uneven and deeply gendered, with women and girls bearing the brunt of the cost. Globally, one in ten women live in extreme poverty (UNWomen and UNDESA, 2023). Female-dominated sectors of the economy, particularly informal sectors, were adversely affected during the pandemic (Moussie and Staab, 2020) and led to the withdrawal of women from the labour force. The pandemic also deepened the burden of unpaid care which was disproportionately borne by women and girls. Studies on women's time use show that depletion of women's human capabilities (Rai, 2024; Chopra and Zambelli, 2017; Chopra et al., 2020). The post pandemic economic recovery plans are gendered. Stimulus packages have not effectively targeted or worked for women farmers, workers, business owners. Austerity measures and cuts in social services deepened women's time poverty and precarity.

2.2 Gender impact of Poly crisis

The economic crisis triggered by the pandemic, the recent cost of living crisis and the Ukraine war has led to a 'poly crisis' (Ecker et al, 2023). The rise in fuel and food prices has deepened precarity experienced by low-income households in low- and middle-income countries which has intergenerational and gendered impacts. For example, recent panel survey data in Bangladesh show a depletion of savings, resources and assets owned by low- income households (BIGD- PPRC, 2020). Depletion of resources has led to adverse gender-specific impact on food consumption, nutrition and healthcare seeking behaviour among the urban poor households and vulnerable populations (Roleen et al 2023; Ebata et al, 2020). Globally, food insecurity data shows an adverse impact for adult women (FAO 2023). Global response to the polycrisis by policymakers remains uneven.

2.3 Political Polarisation

Public health and economic shocks have deepened existing discourses that blame and promote exclusion of the most vulnerable and marginalised populations and strengthened the existing trends around political polarization. Research tracking hate speech on social media against migrant and racial minority communities in the US, Europe, India shows a rise in intolerance and violence (Laub, 2019). Data on political polarization shows that as income inequality rises so do political polarisation (Gu and Wang, 2021; DORN). Analysis of V-dem dataset by McCoy and Somer (2019) shows that political polarization has eroded established democratic norms and institutional practices and incentivized the politicians to pursue their aims along narrow party lines in the US and other established democracies in

Europe. Countries have been witnessing a wave of autocratization since 2005, with long established democracies such as India, Hungary, Turkey, Brazil, backsliding.

In contexts experiencing democratic backslide and increased autocratization, populist leaders and political parties have used gender equality and pro-poor agendas negatively to build political support. The spaces for alternative visions, particularly those that are considered as counter-cultural or promote 'liberal/ universal' values, have shrunk and has adversely affected progress towards SDGs (Hossain et al, 2018). Pro-poor programmes perceived to help marginalized groups or oppositional supporters have been targeted by populist leaders. For example, the government of Jair Bolsonaro had abolished a major part of the Bolsa Familia (cash transfer programme) that targeted poor women (Kubrik- Mano, 2023).

2.4 Gender backlash

The rise of populist leaders and conservative agendas and economic shocks triggered by the polycrisis have revalorized traditional ideals of masculinity and femininity and reinforced gender-biased religious doctrines in many countries (Mohmand et al, 2023). These economic and political shifts have also polarized public discourse on gender equality, co-opted women's empowerment for conservative or exploitative agendas, permitted threats to and vilification of women's rights and LGBTQ activists, and instigated gender-based violence. Conservative political forces in Latin America and Eastern Europe have instrumentally used discourses on gender and sexuality to mobilize a diverse set of actors to gain political power (Corredor, 2019). The instrumental use of the feminist agenda has acted a 'symbolic glue' (Kovats and Poim 2015) to bring about a larger political shift.

Anti-women's rights and gender equality backlash is unfolding at a time when international accords and agreements are losing their normative power. Goetz's (2020) analysis of the global meetings show how specific groups of countries band together to challenge agreed upon terms and texts, and gender progressive agendas around bodily autonomy. With respect to addressing gendered poverty, the re-traditionalization of women's roles/ sex roles, the dismantling of gender equality machineries and co-optation of women's empowerment language, create major challenges. For example, the Ministry for Women, Family and Human Rights was dismantled in Brazil (Kubrik-Mano, 2023). In India, the Modi government has successfully co-opted the language of women's empowerment to legitimize repression of religious minority groups (Chopra, 2021).

2.5 Competition for Funding

Recent study by AWID (2023) shows that the overall ODA commitment to gender equality has remained stagnant in the last 10 years. Studies conducted by AWID (2011) and Miller and Jones (2019) reveal that there are limited resources for work on women's rights organizing, and funding for small and medium sized organizations primarily come from private organizations for projects than long term funding. The impact of NGOization on feminist movements is well documented (Jad, 2004; Alveraz, 2009). Availability of limited funding leads to intense competition among women's rights and gender justice organizations which fragments the collective strength of these groups to hold the state to account for addressing gender equality concerns. Projectization (Araujo, 2021) has also adversely affected the sustainability of women's rights and gender equality movements and their effective presence in political spaces (Nazneen and Okech, 2021).

3. What Factors May facilitate change in the present context?

However, the current context contains opportunities to push for gender transformative changes. The urgent need to address gendered poverty and the risk of further depletion of women and girl's capabilities is very clear (Rai, 2024). What are the factors that may facilitate change and what kinds of state capacities are required for this to happen?

3.1 History and Policy legacies matter

How states respond to the challenge of addressing gendered poverty varies. The history of [gendered] compacts among different social/ political groups is important in terms of the claims women can make on the state to address poverty (Tripp, 2013). These formal or informal compacts among social or political groups influence the way state's design and deliver policies to address poverty and welfare-related concerns. For example, Rwanda's developmental approach and integration of gender equality within it goes back to the compact reached during the post conflict transitions (Burnet, 2019). Whether policymakers decide to adopt gender responsive policy measures with respect to social protection, economic stimulus packages, welfare also depends on the 'policy legacies' (Hall, 1993), i.e. how well previous policies have worked and what was done before. These legacies are important reference points for policy activists when demands are made on the state to deliver on gender equality.

3.2 Contextual Openings

Contextual conditions also create different 'political opportunity structures' for change as the balance of power and elite configurations change (Tilly and Tarrow, 2015). Htun and Weldon's (2018) analysis of when states adopt anti-domestic violence laws, family leave and childcare policies highlights the role of contextual conditions that include regime type, policy legacies, and the capacity of state actors and institutions. Entry points for pushing political elites to address gendered poverty varies in democracies and authoritarian/ semi-authoritarian regimes. For democracies, where electoral competition is strong, elections are a key turning point for demanding action on gendered- poverty related concerns, particularly if these agendas align with dominant debates on redistribution and growth. In 2024, more than 50 countries, will hold national elections. These elections may create opportunities for pushing political elites to address gender equality agenda, including gendered poverty. For semi-authoritarian regimes, where electoral competition may be limited, such as Rwanda, Uganda, Bangladesh and other countries, powerholders may be motivated to address gendered poverty to gain international legitimacy. In authoritarian contexts such Egypt, being seen to deliver on gendered poverty agenda contributes to the narrative about the regime's benevolence and ability to address the needs of citizens. Authoritarian regimes may emphasize development to counter arguments that push for democratic practices. This focus on 'performance legitimacy' may provide specific openings for groups advocating for addressing gender-specific vulnerabilities and redistribution.

3.3 State capacity

what are the institutional capacities needed for addressing gendered poverty?

State capacity to deliver policies that address gendered poverty is varied. State capacity refers to: a) technical abilities to conduct gender analysis of poverty and identify needs of women and girls; b) co-ordination and organisational capacity to deliver intended policies to address these needs; c) fiscal capacity to fund pro-poor and economic stimulus programmes; d) and the political will to take such measures (reframed based on Piscopo, 2020).

Why ruling elites may want to address gendered poverty depends on the incentives elites have to address these issues. Incentives can be instrumental (winning elections, gaining legitimacy, distributing patronage) or ideological (valuing gender equality). Gender and poverty concerns have been mainly addressed through social policies, labour policies, financial inclusion schemes (Sweetman, 2002). State gender machineries have played a significant role in many countries in promoting such policies (Mcbride and Mazur, 2013). In Chile, Argentina, South Africa, Rwanda, state gender machineries have promoted gender equality in labour rights (including maternity benefits, care policies); integration of gender in financial planning and in social protection measures (Waylen, 2014; Burnet, 2019). However, many of the gender machineries lack funding, human resources, and sanctioning power (Nazneen and Mahmud, 2012) and are perceived as weaker ministries.

Globally, state capacity also varies when it comes to co-ordination between inter-ministerial agencies and various departments for effective implementation of policies. In federal systems, subnational capacities also vary. Evidence from the US, Latin America, India shows that during the pandemic some subnational governments were able to respond quickly and implement measures that addressed

vulnerabilities of the population (Piscopo, 2020). The variation in capacity at the subnational level not only highlights the importance of paying attention to building capacity at various levels of government, but also that opportunities may exist at this level for pushing gender equality agenda even if national level policy spaces are closed.

What factors influence states to address gendered poverty?

Gender champions or gender policy advocates within the state machinery play critical roles for promoting specific policy solutions (Staudt, 1990). Apart from feminist bureaucrats (femocrats), women representatives in formal political institutions, both the legislature and the executive play key roles in advocating for gender equality agenda. Evidence from India and South Africa shows cross party collaboration among women representatives when it comes to welfare and gender-based violence issues (Rai, n.d; Waylen 2014). While evidence remains inconclusive about the impact of gender quotas, research shows the presence of ‘critical actors’ is crucial for policy change (Childs and Krook, 2009) and gender responsive delivery. Evidence from local government studies conducted in India (Chattapadhaya and Duflo, 2004), comparative studies on Latin American legislatures and cabinets (Escobar- Lemmon et al, 2014) shows that women’s presence in policy spaces matter.

However, women remain under-represented in various levels of government. Globally women’s representation in parliament is at 23 percent (IPU, 2021), and women’s presence in the bureaucracy is mostly limited to soft sectors such as health and education (UNDP 2017). Women are also under-represented in Cabinets. During the height of the pandemic, only 24 percent of the national task forces included women, and these were mostly in North America and Europe (UNWomen, n.d). Under-representation or exclusion of women from critical spaces of power, for example task forces created to address the current crisis, may mean plans developed for recovery may overlook women’s needs and gender equality concerns.

Apart from representation of women’s interests by elected officials and bureaucrats, a critical factor to ensure that the state has the capacity to address gendered poverty is the effectiveness of mechanisms set up to monitor ‘gender-related performance of the state.’ This capacity includes mechanisms for collection of sex- disaggregated data, clear indicators in gender to measure service and welfare delivery, clarity among staff on which agency tracks and monitors these, and established processes for relaying the information that has been collected to the top decisionmakers.

Capacity for oversight is also critical. State agencies that ensure horizontal accountability, such as the office of the comptroller auditor general or the gender equality committees in parliament play key oversight roles (Goetz and Jenkins, 2005). Whether states collect data on using an intersectional approach (that explores various axis of exclusion), tracks allocation of resources (for example uses socially inclusive budgeting measures) and has effective mechanisms for redressals set up, are important factors for holding the state to account. Social accountability mechanisms, such as participatory budgeting processes, citizen’s report cards/ score card, open forums at the local level can lead to states responding effectively to needs of [female] citizens (Nazneen and Oliveres, 2021; Agarwal, 2010). How women and marginalized groups are included in these processes through mandates, quotas, and delegation of sets of responsibilities, play an important role in influencing whether women and marginalized groups have an effective voice in these forums.

4.Mobilising for Change

The role of women’s and feminist movement(s) is critical to create pressure on the state to deliver on addressing gendered poverty. Htun and Weldon’s (2018) study covering 70 countries shows that autonomous women’s movement plays a key role in adoption of gender equality policies. However, mobilisation for change requires paying attention to how power is configured nationally (which actors have what kinds of interests) and building cross-sectional alliances and alternative narratives to justify demands.

Narratives constructed around policy change is critical, particularly providing ‘a diagnostic’ of what is the issue at stake and policy solutions to the issue (Fernandez, 2012). The dominant narratives around women’s empowerment and reduction of gendered poverty have mainly stressed family welfare concerns and have instrumentalized women’s economic empowerment (Kabeer, 1994). The current discourses on building resilience contains the risk of stretching women’s capacity, time, and energy and responsabilizing women for addressing gendered poverty (Nazneen and Araujo, 2021). An area of action for feminist coalitions would be to create new/ alternative narratives that pushes the current discourse, particularly connecting to the agenda of economic justice for women/ gender equality. This requires evidence generation, cross disciplinary collaborations, and analysis, and going beyond the policy silos in addressing poverty.

Pro gender equality coalitions mobilizing around demands for addressing gendered poverty, also need to think through which sectors and areas need to be prioritized. These will vary in different contexts given regime type, strength of the actors that may oppose the proposed changes, political openings and the power of ideas promoted by the gender equality coalition. The political opportunity structures, particularly the political openings for advocating expansion of social protection schemes, education and skills training (capacity building), food security, and targeted stimulus packages for women farmers/ workers, entrepreneurs, may dictate where coalition’s energies are focused first. It is also important to consider that different parts of the state may be more amenable to specific types of agendas (Staudt, 1990). Hence selective targeting of different parts of the state, identifying gender champions within it, and understanding the nature of and who the relevant actors are with respect to sectoral politics, is important.

Building inclusive coalitions and cross-sectional alliances is critical for making effective claims on the state (Nazneen and Mahmud, 2012). This requires creation of internal cohesion around claims and identity among coalition members and allies to build support and to signal movement strength to both internal and external actors. Paying attention to intersectional needs when building alliances is critical for inclusive alliances.

5.Role of the international Norms and Actors

International norms and discourses are important reference points for women’s rights and gender equality movements for making demands on and holding the state to account for delivering on its commitments. With the shift towards authoritarian tendencies in many contexts and a shrinking space for counter-cultural agendas (such as gender equality), it is critical that international actors create coalitions that focus on keeping international policy spaces open to counter-cultural agendas.

Recommendations:

- **For member states:**
 - Better co-ordination on gender equality among government departments and agencies beyond inter-ministerial level, and co-ordination between different departments at the local level for gender responsive delivery
 - Establishing and strengthening horizontal accountability mechanisms for tracking public expenditure using a gendered lens/ approach; introduction of gender responsive budgeting processes
 - creation of gender inclusive social accountability mechanisms such as citizens participatory budget processes, citizen procurement processes and other measures at the local level
- **For women’s movement/ development actors**
 - Creating networks and connections between activists for effective engagement at the local level and subnational levels
 - Building cross sectional alliances with other social movements (tax, environmental movements) to create pressure on states around economic justice for women

- **For development agencies**
 - Funding inclusive alliances for gender responsive delivery of services, assistance, economic planning
 - upholding counter cultural agendas in international policy spaces and coming together with like-minded actors to create progressive alliances that promote gender equality in these spaces
- **For academics and think tanks**
 - Engaging with evidence and cross-disciplinary collaborations among researchers on gender poverty
 - Development of tools for mobilising citizens to understand complex finance issues

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