



Government commitments to women's rights in 2015: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September this year was a landmark moment for women and women's rights advocates around the world for several reasons. First, the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals that are at the heart of the Agenda are the product of a process that was far more participatory than other global agreements, including the Millennium Development Goals. The advocacy of the women's movement was central to achieving a stand-alone goal on gender equality and to ensuring that gender equality targets are integrated across a number of the other goals.

Second, the fact that it is a universal Agenda—one that applies to developed and developing countries alike—is a critically important departure from the Millennium Development Goals. It is a recognition that developed countries have equal responsibilities to promote and protect women's human rights; to address social and economic inequality; and to ensure that our environment is safeguarded for future generations.

Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals, which aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, has been rightly welcomed as an important commitment by governments to fulfil the human rights of women and girls. It includes targets on ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls; eliminating all forms of violence and harmful practices against women; recognising and valuing unpaid care and domestic work; ensuring women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership in public life; and ensuring universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights.

Combined with the resolve expressed by governments to protect human rights for all in the opening paragraphs of the 2030 Agenda, these targets signify an important re-commitment by governments to meet their obligations under core human rights instruments, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and the Beijing Platform for Action. In this regard, these are not new commitments, but are promises that women have in some cases been waiting for decades for governments to fulfil, whether they live in situations of peace or conflict.



The 2030 Agenda, particularly Goal 16, also has important implications for women affected by conflict, even though conflict is not explicitly mentioned in the goal. Rather, it is framed as a goal to ‘promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.’ It requires governments to do so by ‘significantly reducing all forms of violence and related death rates everywhere’; ensuring equal access to justice for all; and ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels. These are clearly commitments that address some of the key concerns of women affected by conflict and insecurity, including those highlighted by local women in Asia and the Pacific in previous meetings convened by APWAPS.

If governments were to meet all of these targets, there is the potential for a dramatic transformation in the lives and realities of women around the world. Ensuring that governments do so is therefore one of the central challenges facing the women’s movement now. This is not the first time that promises have been made to ensure safer, more peaceful, and more just lives for women and girls. Indeed, 2015 also marks the 20-year anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action, the most comprehensive roadmap for women and girls’ rights agreed to thus far. This time, we must insist that there is robust accountability for these commitments. We, as civil society and women’s rights advocates, will of course continue to play our part in ensuring accountability. We will continue to defend gains and draw attention to instances where promises go unfulfilled. But in the current social and political environment, and indeed in the experience of many APWAPS affiliates, this is becoming more difficult. The shrinking space for the importance work done by women’s rights organisations is evident in increased criminalisation of social dissent, harassment and disappearances of women’s human rights defenders across the world, and the ongoing lack of stable and predictable resources to finance women’s rights organisations and movements.

Prioritizing resources to support these organizations from a variety of sources, such as domestic resources, overseas development aid and other forms of governmental and intergovernmental financing, is crucial to achieving women’s rights and peace and security in the long run.

However, monitoring and vigilance on our part is no substitute for government’s institutionalising these commitments.



The 2030 Agenda speaks of monitoring, follow up and review processes for the Sustainable Development Goals at the global, regional and national level. We already know that the High-level political forum, convened annually by the UN, will be the premier forum for global review of the implementation of the goals. At the regional level, the Asia Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development, convened under the auspices of UN ESCAP, will play a key role as an annual space to review governments progress, starting from 2016 with the elaboration of a regional roadmap for implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It is at the national and local levels, however, that the real work will take place, as governments devise sustainable development strategies for implementation. We hope and expect that national and level governments will promote accountability for their commitments through the implementation of national action plans; gender and human rights-responsive budgeting and financing; parliamentary reporting on implementation; and independent, regular and comprehensive reporting mechanisms that feed into review processes at the regional and global level.

Effective data collection will also be fundamental to measuring progress in implementation of the SDGs, and this requires support to national statistical offices to collect data that is disaggregated by gender and a range of other markers, including migration status, disability, ethnicity, caste, and geographic location. In conflict-affected states, while more challenging, this is even more important to ensure that the furthest behind are reached first.

The real test of the strength and significance of the 2030 Agenda will therefore unfold in the coming years, as governments' steps to implement the Agenda start to take shape. Women and girls in Asia and the Pacific, particularly in areas affected by conflict, will expect that in the next 15 years, the rhetoric of women's human rights and peace and security becomes reality.