

Central or Sidelined?

Examining How Girls Fared in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

As 2015 comes to a close, so do the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In their wake is a new plan for the next 15 years: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, or the 2030 Agenda.

Although the MDGs drove significant progress in several areas, such as improved primary school enrollment and reduced incidence of malaria and other major diseases, they fell short in numerous others. Chief among the unfinished work is the goal of achieving full gender equality. In particular, the MDGs gave inadequate attention to the breadth of gender inequality and also to the unique needs, assets and rights of the 250 million adolescent girls living in poverty around the world. Thanks to the active engagement of experts, civil society and particularly women's and youth organizations from around the world, the 2030 Agenda prominently features gender equality and women's and girls' rights throughout the document. This policy brief focuses on how, and to what extent girls fared throughout the various pillars of the Agenda.

The Preamble

The 2030 Agenda opens with a bold and worthwhile pledge to leave no one behind, including girls. As part of this ambitious effort, the new goals, as noted in the preamble, seek to "realize the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls."

The Declaration

Gender equality and the importance of empowering both women and girls are mentioned repeatedly throughout the Declaration. Notably, women and girls are cited as specific populations that must enjoy equal access to quality education, economic resources and political participation. The Declaration also states strongly that all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls must be eliminated. Emphasizing the Agenda's commitment to gender equality, the Declaration includes important language about including men and boys in efforts to end discrimination and violence against women, and



notes that the systematic mainstreaming of a gender perspective throughout the implementation of the Agenda is critical in order to achieve lasting results.

The Sustainable Development Goals and Targets

As it was in the MDGs, gender equality is a standalone goal in the 2030 Agenda. However, while its predecessor called for the promotion of gender equality and marked progress in this area solely through advancements in education, Goal 5 of the 2030 Agenda aims to achieve gender equality and to "empower all women and girls." These shifts reflect a noteworthy increase in ambition around gender equality and an acknowledgement that girls' rights and empowerment are important in their own right.

The gender equality goal (Goal 5) includes targets that will require countries to track progress toward:

- the elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls, with specific commitments to end child marriage and female genital mutilation
- the recognition and value of unpaid care and domestic work
- ensuring women's full and effective economic, social and political participation and opportunities for leadership
- ensuring access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights
- reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources
- the utilization of technology for women's empowerment
- stronger policies and enforceable legislation that promote gender equality and empower women and girls

Girls, in particular, are referenced eleven times across the Agenda's 17 goals, including in targets to end poverty (Goal 1), and address nutrition (Goal 2), health (Goal 3), education (Goal 4), gender equality (Goal 5), water and sanitation (Goal 6), economic growth (Goal 8), inequality (Goal 10), safe cities (Goal 11), climate change (Goal 13), and peaceful and inclusive societies (Goal 16). The Agenda specifically calls on the global community to address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls (Goal 2), to ensure inclusive and equitable education for girls and boys (Goal 4), and to achieve access to adequate and equitable sanitation and hygiene for all, calling for particular attention to the needs of women and girls and those in vulnerable situations (Goal 6).

Also notable is the Agenda's amplification of youth as a population in need of particular attention, especially in terms of achieving inclusive and equitable education and employment. It calls on the development community to ensure that young people have universal access to sexual and reproductive health care services, including for family planning, information and education, and that reproductive health is incorporated into national strategies and programs. Furthermore, the Agenda aims to certify that universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights is "in accordance with" the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Platform of Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences. These agreements include important youth-focused language, so their inclusion in the 2030 Agenda is critical for holding governments accountable for the health and wellbeing of adolescent girls, as well as boys and young people more broadly.

Means of Implementation, the Global Partnership and Follow-up and Review

While the UN member states' commitment to achieving the 2030 Agenda is reaffirmed through the pillar on the Means of Implementation, there is no mention of women, girls or youth here. There is, however, a commitment to "an intensive global engagement in support of implementation of all the goals and targets," which includes civil society organizations (CSOs). Such engagement will be an important way in which CSOs can advocate for greater inclusion and engagement of girls and youth as the 2030 Agenda is implemented.

The Follow-up and Review pillar includes a positive commitment to ensuring that the follow-up and review processes be "people-

centered, gender-sensitive, respect human rights and have a particular focus on the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind." This is welcome language. These processes are also to be "rigorous and based on evidence, informed by country-led evaluations and data that is high-quality, accessible, timely, reliable and disaggregated by income, sex, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts." Such data are critical to ensuring accountability moving forward.

However, the pillar is weakened by not providing concrete processes to engage civil society in data gathering, follow-up, and implementation – all standard elements of strong accountability mechanisms. Further, to achieve the Agenda's ambitious goals, governments must ensure adequate financial commitments, including, for example, to ensure gender equality through domestic resources and/or official development assistance. The Agenda unfortunately falls short in regard to securing such commitments.

Looking Forward

Overall, the 2030 Agenda highlights the importance of gender equality as a fundamental component of achieving sustainable development and calls for attention to adolescent girls far more powerfully than global development agendas of the past. The recognition of women and girls throughout the document, and the fact that girls are referenced repeatedly as a specific population in need of greater attention, should be welcomed and promoted. Going forward, member states and world leaders must commit to paying special attention to the most marginalized and vulnerable populations, including an explicit focus on the 250 million adolescent girls living in poverty and exclusion. Specifically, as the UN Statistical Commission and Inter-Agency Expert Group continue to develop indicators by which to measure progress on the 2030 Agenda, girls must not fall through the cracks.

Once the indicators are finalized and the drafting process is complete, the world will inherit a robust framework that prioritizes girls and women across all goals and targets and provides for a gender-transformative and comprehensive system for measuring global progress. Then, it will be the work of governments, civil society and the UN system to carry out this ambitious agenda successfully over the next 15 years. Without full funding and meaningful implementation, even the best framework will be unable to achieve its pledge to leave no one behind.



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