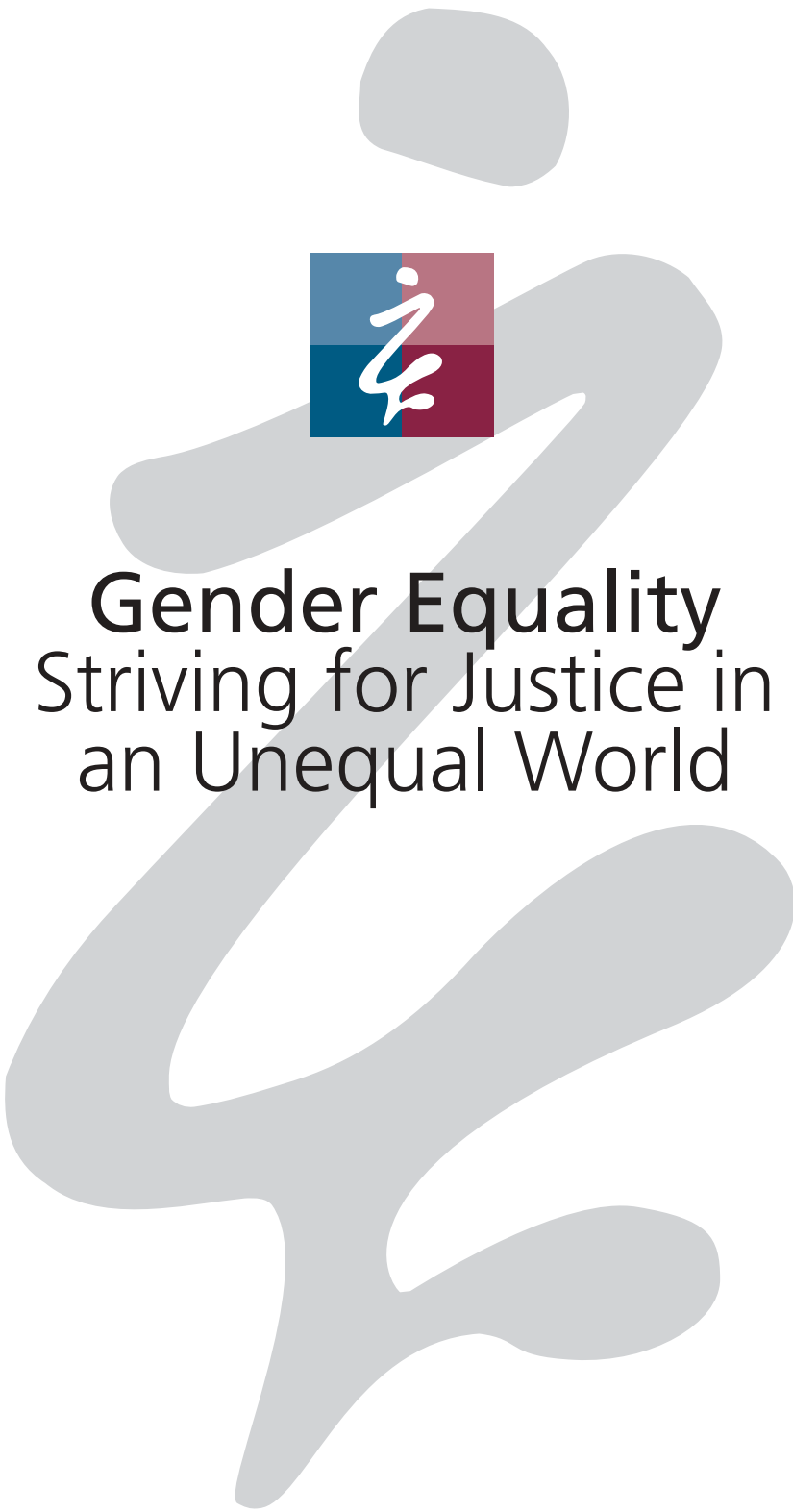


Gender Equality

Striving for Justice in
an Unequal World



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Gender Equality Striving for Justice in an Unequal World

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Preface

The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in September 1995, was a high point in international efforts to advance women's human rights in all dimensions. Ten years on, many actors around the world will be reflecting on the achievements of the past decade.

The impetus for this report was the recognition that the mainstream international policy debates on some of the most pressing and contested issues of our time—economic liberalization, democratization and governance reforms, and identity and conflict—are not being systematically informed by the knowledge that is being generated through gender research and scholarship. At a time when organizations and researchers concerned about global progress in gender equality—both within the UN system and outside it—were preparing the “Beijing Plus Ten” assessment requested for 2005 by the UN General Assembly in June 2000, a research-based report that set out to fill this lacuna appeared appropriate.

As an autonomous research institute within the UN system with an ongoing programme of research on the gender dimensions of development, UNRISD seemed well placed to make a useful research-based contribution to this process of reflection and debate, tackling difficult and controversial issues that currently preoccupy many people around the world. While drawing on the Institute's past and ongoing research programme on gender, a wide range of feminist scholars from diverse countries and regions, particularly in the South, were commissioned to prepare background papers. Their work has immensely enriched the substantive content of this report.

Economic and political reforms of the 1990s play a central role in the analysis that is presented here. If most of these

reforms did not directly address gender equality, they nevertheless received considerable scrutiny from a gender perspective. One reason was that whatever their design and intentions, the reforms had enormous implications for gender relations and women's well-being.

While the task of evaluating progress in gender equality poses many challenges, there is no doubt that there have been significant improvements in the social and economic status of women. One of the most outstanding developments of the past decade is the growing presence of women in the public sphere—whether as political actors in national legislatures, civil society organizations and social movements, or as economic agents increasingly visible in the paid workforce and in migrant streams. There has also been much progress in the enrolment of girls in primary and secondary education. Women in the state and legislature in many countries, building on political pressures brought to bear by women's movements, have worked hard to make national laws more responsive to women's rights.

Yet as the report argues, progress has been uneven, and the positive outcomes must be qualified in the light of continuing gender inequalities and a less than favourable economic and political environment.

Recent years have seen some reassessment of the role of the state, a rediscovery of social policies, and a new faith in institutions and “good governance” as necessary to foster growth and a vibrant private sector. However, while this may have rendered the “Washington Consensus” more palatable, the now more eclectic policy reform package retains some of the core elements of economic orthodoxy—trade and financial liberalization,

and tight monetary and fiscal policies—while adding the “good governance” agenda onto it.

Orthodox economic policies have produced disappointing outcomes, even in the estimate of their designers. Rural livelihoods have become more insecure in contexts where cutbacks in state support to domestic agriculture have coincided with increasing exposure to competition from large subsidized producers. Insecurity is also on the increase across the world with the growth of informal economies, in which women are overwhelmingly concentrated. This has meant the increasing precariousness of jobs and a greater insecurity of livelihoods. With weak public health and welfare programmes, and underfunded and fragile infrastructures, the provision of unpaid care by women and girls has intensified, reaching intolerable levels, for example, in sub-Saharan Africa, where the HIV/AIDS epidemic is taking a staggering toll of lives.

For the vast majority of women, gender equality will remain a distant dream as long as the market continues to be the principal arbiter of policy. Attaining gender equality requires the strengthening of publicly accountable and universal systems of social provisioning. This means investing in well-functioning and accessible public health and education services, labour standards and rights that protect women’s employment and conditions of work, and investment in the public provision of a range of complementary services that support the care economy.

The task of democratizing the state, and building its capacity and accountability to its citizens has long been emphasized by scholars and activists from the South. The difficulties that

women have experienced in promoting gender-equity legislation, and in seeing it passed into law and implemented, indicates that women have a keen interest in seeing the capacity and accountability of the state strengthened. Yet the danger in much of the current good governance reforms is that they impose highly abstract and uniform institutional blueprints on developing countries that many fear will not even produce a vibrant private sector, let alone enhance social equality.

In recent decades, virtually all countries have witnessed a deepening of inequality as neoliberal macroeconomic policies have tightened their hold, and previously accepted values such as equality and redistribution have been sidelined. Many of the prevailing policies—trade and financial liberalization, tight monetary and fiscal policies, market-based entitlements to welfare—operate as obstacles to meeting the objectives that were agreed upon in the global conferences of the 1990s, including in Beijing. Indeed, as the title of this report alludes, achieving gender equality and gender justice will be very difficult in a world that is increasingly unequal.

On the tenth anniversary of the Beijing Conference, women’s movements will be considering not only the continued dominance of ideologies and policies oblivious to both developmental concerns and inequality, but the challenges thrown up by the recent shifts in geopolitics and the new forms of religious-identity politics. Many fear that women’s ambitions for social change risk taking a back seat to concerns about security. The multilateral framework within which transnational feminist networks painstakingly nurtured a global women’s rights regime over the years appears fragile today. There is the

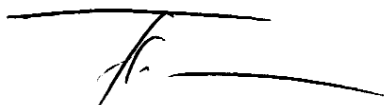
danger that in a polarized ideological climate where security concerns loom large and internal dissent is discouraged, it will be difficult to sustain the autonomous spaces that have been so essential for the vibrancy of women's movements.

Three overarching messages emerge from this report. The first highlights the dangers of an axiomatic mode of thinking in which policy implications are simply derived from first principles. Actual outcomes are, however, deeply conditioned by multiple factors so that a similar set of policies can have dramatically different outcomes in different settings. Thus, for instance, the assumption that liberalization of labour markets would automatically benefit social groups disadvantaged by extant labour market regimes is not borne out by evidence. In virtually every case where there have been improvements, these have been due to a whole range of complementary policies, including affirmative action, and special investments in human development and social infrastructure.

The second key lesson is the importance of attending to issues of redistribution, social protection, production and reproduction simultaneously. Today, social policy remains largely detached from economic policy and continues to be seen as a way of mitigating the social costs of unfettered economic liberalization. What is needed is a major rethinking of economic policies and a much more serious attempt to integrate social and economic policy.

Third, success in the economic and social domains determines the "quality" of democracies. The report clearly suggests that the considerable political gains that women have made in the last decade have been compromised by failures in the social

and economic policy arena that have rendered the lives of most women and their dependents insecure. The challenge thus remains in using women's gains in terms of political presence to render state policies, practices and spending patterns more responsive to the interests of all women.



Thandika Mkandawire

Director

December 2004