

# Has progress towards more gender equality got stuck halfway?

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No. 5, 15 May 2020

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Between 1960 and the first few years of the new millennium, the trend towards global gender equality seemed to be on a continuous upward trajectory, particularly in the areas of education, the labour market, legal equality and political representation.

However, looking at the last 15 years, it appears that this progress – despite persisting inequality – has seen a significant drop in momentum and has even gone backwards. There are also complaints that the improvements made remain more formal in nature with little having changed when it comes to the actual discrimination of women.

## Indication of stagnation or setbacks in many areas

These signs apply to both industrialised and developing countries, though the situation is particularly critical in the latter case (also due to their need to catch up):

- While gender-specific differences in mortality rates (that cannot be traced back to natural causes and are instead attributed to inequality – the concept of “missing women”) are shrinking on the whole, an increase in gender-selective abortion rates can also be detected in some countries (e.g. China, India).
- Gender-specific (particularly domestic) violence has stagnated at a high level – even in countries that have enforced legislation in this area.
- On the labour market, adjustment towards equality in employment rates for women and men has come to a stop and is even regressing in some regions (particularly formerly socialist countries).
- Even gender-specific structural em-

ployment attributes with regard to sectors (including unpaid domestic work), level of qualification and management level have seen very little progress.

- When wage differences are adjusted for structural factors, women are still at the negative end of a large gender gap that is barely shrinking at all.
- Many developing countries are experiencing a rise in groups who are slowing down or calling into question the trend towards gender equality (e.g. Taliban, Islamic State, Boko Haram).

## The main causes: the persistence of social norms and power structures

There is a far-reaching academic debate regarding what is causing the trend towards declining efforts to eliminate gender inequality. To some extent, this slowdown is to be expected because the issue is no longer as pressing, which makes political mobilisation more difficult. There is also some criticism of the goal of gender equality, with the proponents of this argument citing differing preferences (e.g. risk appetite, altruism). These differences could even provide a good explanation for gender-specific employment patterns, though they tend not to be very pronounced on the whole; furthermore, it is difficult to distinguish the extent to which these patterns of behaviour are “natural” or have been “acquired” through socialisation.

However, the majority of experts agree that the current level of inequality cannot be tolerated. They regard the persistence of social norms and power structures as the main cause of the slowdown:

- Social norms and values (including traditional allocation of roles) are often

in conflict with the elimination of gender injustices. Experience shows that such norms are certainly able to change if there is a social consensus (changing needs or requirements). However, if this change happens too quickly, it can also be perceived as a cultural threat and can lead to conflicts and (conservative-fundamentalist) counter-movements.

- Eliminating discrimination against women inherently involves a loss of privilege and power by men – a process that is exacerbated by globalisation and the accompanying loss in wages and jobs.

## Approaches for increasing equality in developing countries

The following measures would be particularly conducive to reviving progress in gender equality in developing countries:

- Support for a “gradual” change in norms anchored at a social level
- Removal of obstacles (e.g. cushioning measures for certain groups who are negatively affected by this progress such as men with a low level of qualification)
- Continued political pressure (e.g. by the women’s movement) for increased equality and the goal-oriented promotion of women (e.g. equal pay, affirmative action, childcare, promotion policy, presence in management)

Growth and fiscal policy (e.g. specific employment promotion for women and the development of wages in female-dominated sectors).■