Gender Equality

Striving for Justice in an Unequal World

UNITED NATIONS RESEARCH INSTITUTE FOR SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
Gender Equality
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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,
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.

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Director
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After Beijing: Uneven progress in an unequal world

Ten years after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing an important question that many women’s organizations around the world will be asking is how much has been achieved in the past decade? For those interested in the quest for gender equality, the answers are difficult to find as well as being ambiguous.

There have clearly been some notable gains for women over the period: increased visibility in elected assemblies and state institutions; some closing of gender gaps in primary, and to a lesser extent secondary, school enrolment; a larger female presence in the labour market and in labour flows that cross international borders; and lower fertility rates.

Such changes in women’s lives are associated with the social transformations that attend economic development, but they are not simply the by-product of economic growth. In many instances change in women’s social position has been instigated or accelerated by state reforms and social movements. Women’s movements, both national and transnational, took advantage of the changed political context of the 1990s to advance women’s rights. One of the remarkable achievements was in bringing issues of sexual and reproductive health and rights, violence against women, and inequality of power in gender relations to the centre of global and national debates.

The persistence of gender inequalities

Such positive outcomes must be qualified in the light of continuing gender inequalities, and a less than favourable economic and political environment.

Despite women’s greater numerical presence in the world of work and in the domain of politics, the narrowing of these broadly defined gender gaps conceals marked gender asymmetries and segmentation, which place limits on women’s access to income, authority and power. Declining fertility continues to improve women’s life chances in their reproductive years in many countries, but in some countries it has also been associated with an increase in artificially high ratios of males to females in the population, because of discriminatory behaviour towards females. At a more general level, the ambivalent nature of women’s achievements is illustrated in the “feminization” of the labour force, whereby women’s access to paid work has increased in most countries, but coincided with a deterioration in the terms and conditions of work for many.

There is no single explanation for these various outcomes. Gender inequalities are deeply entrenched in all societies, and are reproduced through a variety of practices and institutions, including policy interventions. A question posed in this report is: what contribution does development policy make to bringing about favourable or unfavourable conditions for achieving greater gender equality?
The disabling policy environment

The neoliberal economic agenda, which rose to dominance in the early 1980s, was centred on fiscal austerity, and the strengthening of private property rights and profit-driven markets, and called for the “rollback” of the state. While inflation was brought under control in many countries, price stability was achieved at the expense of growth and job creation. Financial crises and economic volatility became more frequent, and income inequalities widened all over the world.

In the absence of adequate safety nets, economic liberalization placed the livelihoods of low-income households under severe stress. Under conditions of economic hardship, low-income women became increasingly visible as economic actors outside the household sphere, as casual agricultural labourers, in the overcrowded urban informal economy, and as migrants. Meanwhile, the creeping commercialization of welfare services, particularly in the context of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, meant that poorer households had to adjust by shifting more of the care into the household and onto the shoulders of women and girls.

The social crisis that has continued to hit many parts of the world has been expressed most dramatically in civil unrest and political turmoil, including outbreaks and continuations of civil wars, in which underlying economic and social distress are among the causal dynamics. In such zones of insecurity and pervasive violence, few escape the disastrous impacts of warfare, whether or not they are actively involved as combatants.

Bringing gender back in

The analytical approach advanced in this report assumes that societies, their social relations, economies and power structures contain deeply etched gender divisions, in the same way that they reflect class, ethnic and racial divisions. Inequalities based on sex are a pervasive feature of all societies; they are the product of socially constructed power relations, norms and practices.

While there is increasing concern with gender inequalities in some arenas—at the intrahousehold level in particular, as well as in the legal domain where “traditions” and “customs” have an important role to play—the attention paid to gender in public policy is often selective. The resulting silences and omissions are revealing: for example, markets and macroeconomic flows (trade, capital) are not always subjected to gender analysis, the implicit assumption being that they are essentially benign and gender-neutral. However, the report finds that this is true neither of the economy nor of the family; nor do states, communities, political parties or “progressive” social movements necessarily operate in gender-neutral ways.

The analysis undertaken by the report is largely of social relations, and particularly gender relations, across a wide spectrum of institutions. The primary focus, however, is on women, understood as differentiated by class, race, ethnicity and caste. It is important to keep the spotlight on women, in view of the recent shifts in thinking (and language) both in development bureaucracies and in some strands of academic research, which have sometimes inadvertently overlooked the continuing significance of women’s subordination. This does not imply that men are invariably advantaged, even if they might be, in relation to women. Masculinist cultures can be counter-productive or even destructive for men, and while men are the main perpetrators of violence, both domestic and public, they are also the main victims of violence outside the domestic sphere. Nor does the emphasis on women’s subordination imply a static picture of unchanging gender relations: rather, it is important to acknowledge that gender hierarchies constantly change as old forms dissolve and are recreated.

Current policy agendas: Implications for gender equality

The political and policy context of recent years has presented some new opportunities, as well as challenges, for the attainment of gender equality and women’s rights. The fact that social policies and “good governance” reforms are now high on the development policy agenda seems to offer an important entry point for addressing gender-based inequalities in access to resources and services, and gender-specific capacity and accountability failures on the part of the state.

The now dominant policy package—known as the “post-Washington consensus”—does however retain some of the
core elements of economic orthodoxy, supplemented by the “good governance” agenda of democracy, “participation” and “community ownership”. Behind the apparent consensus forged by a shared vocabulary of “poverty” and “social protection”, conflicting understandings of social policy vie for attention, based on different values, priorities and understandings of state responsibility. Similarly, while a broad understanding of the “good governance” agenda would embrace political liberalization, human rights, and address the problems of social inequality as part of a fundamental commitment to democracy, critics contend that such governance reforms have in fact been dominated by the imposition of undifferentiated and abstract blueprints for institutional reform. This has tended to exclude gender equality. However some governance reforms, in particular the decentralization of political power to local government bodies and municipalities, seem to have facilitated women’s political representation at the local level, with the potential to impact favourably on policy. Such positive outcomes may be difficult to achieve where traditional patriarchal systems at local levels resist women’s active presence in local power structures.

Indeed, a phenomenon to emerge with particular force in recent years is that of “identity politics”, especially in the form of movements that mobilize around ethnic, racial and religious identities. While there have been tensions between some versions of identity-based claims and notions of gender equality, these are not necessarily irreconcilable. But some radical attacks on human rights and women’s agendas have resulted from the resurgence of religious identities that include the assertion of “traditional” gender roles and systems of authority. The “traditions” and religious doctrines typically invoked by some of these movements may be neither traditional nor authentic, but instead have been recently coined to serve political ends.

Forging links between economic policy and gender equality
A world in which the dominant policy model tends to deepen social and economic inequality and reinforce marginalization, in which redistribution has no place, and in which governments compromise the interests of their citizens to accommodate global forces, is unlikely to be a world that secures gender equality. For this reason, women’s rights activists have increasingly been devoting more of their attention and energies to the larger structures of global power, and the evolution of problems of global injustice relating to macroeconomic trends. Global economic justice is also central to the achievement of women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights. Yet bringing the interdependence between global economic justice and gender justice into sharper focus for policy makers is no easy task, and once achieved, requires considerable effort to bring about gender-sensitive policy change.

Moreover, the global political environment in which economic justice and gender justice have to be negotiated has been less favourable in recent years. Human rights and women’s agendas, and the entire multilateral framework within which the gains of the 1990s were made, have been weakened by the current global political crisis occasioned by terrorism, militarism, war and unilateralism. If gender justice is not to slip yet further down the agenda, women’s movements will require new alliances with governmental institutions, social movements and political parties.

SECTION 1: MACROECONOMICS, WELL-BEING AND GENDER EQUALITY

Liberalization and deregulation: The route to gender equality?

Neoliberal macroeconomic policies and associated policies of domestic deregulation have been pursued widely in the developing world in recent decades. They are rooted in the belief that minimal government intervention in the economy and greater reliance on the profit motive and free play of markets lead to a more efficient allocation of economic resources, higher rates of economic growth, widespread development, more
rapidly rising income, and a resulting decline in poverty and inequality. The inference is that women will be equal beneficiaries, and that increased access to jobs, income and education can lead to greater gender equality.

However, analytical insights and mounting empirical evidence provide scant support for such a prospect. This policy approach has not provided a supportive environment for improving women’s well-being, overcoming gender biases and eroding gender gaps in basic capacities, opportunities and access to resources. Nor has it brought about a fairer sharing between women and men of the unpaid work and the costs involved in caring for the family and raising children.

Indeed, neoliberalism has proved largely unsuccessful, even in its own terms. Tight monetary and fiscal policies have generally curbed inflation, but this has been at the cost of reduced growth rates in most regions (and particularly the poorest countries), limited structural change, and slow or negative growth in employment. The liberalization of international capital flows has resulted in rising financial and economic volatility, and more frequent and severe financial crises. Many countries have been subject to fiscal squeeze, resulting from reductions in trade and finance-related taxes and from declining tax rates on capital. These have often contributed to a reduction in government expenditures as a share of GDP. In several instances, expenditure cuts have been concentrated in capital expenditures affecting infrastructure, and in others, expenditures on health, education, welfare and social safety nets have been eroded.

Moreover, in most countries there has been little reduction in internal income inequality, and there has been a widespread increase in poverty. Trends in human development, poverty and inequality indicators question the capacity of neoliberal policies to generate social development, in terms of either steady increases in GDP, or improved standards of health and human security.

In sum, the predicted benefits of higher economic growth and poverty reduction have not materialized, and precisely at a time when effective social protection is most needed, the capacity of governments to provide public services and social protection has been widely eroded.

In contrast, however, a number of Asian countries that pursued policies to manage markets rather than to fully liberalize them in pursuit of industrial development have achieved significant success with regard to economic growth, development and poverty reduction. Yet while they have been significantly more successful in advancing some aspects of women’s well-being than countries pursuing the neoliberal path, they have not achieved significant all-round advances in gender equality.

**Liberalization, labour markets and women’s gains: A mixed picture**

In an increasingly competitive world economic environment under liberalization, a development strategy that places emphasis on labour-intensive export-oriented production, whether in industry, agriculture or more recently in services, has intensified firms’ efforts to hire least-cost labour. Women’s relatively lower wages have made them an attractive source of labour, and the result has been an increase in the level and share of female paid employment in many developing countries, often directly or indirectly associated with multinational enterprises.

Nevertheless, evidence regarding improvements in women’s well-being and in gender equality deriving from the liberalization of trade and FDI suggests a mixed picture. Indeed, analysis points to a coincidence between gender roles (related to norms that relegate women’s paid work to secondary importance after their domestic and care responsibilities), job segregation by industry, and the needs of enterprises in a highly competitive international environment.

In some cases women’s pay and conditions are better in export-sector formal jobs than elsewhere in the economy, but many jobs are insecure and dead-end. Women’s subcontracted work, including home-based work, is equally if not more precarious, and subject to extremely poor conditions. Nor are women’s employment gains always permanent, as is evidenced by declines in the female share of paid employment in the manufacturing sector in many countries. Women who lose jobs
in internationally mobile labour-intensive industries face difficulty in obtaining employment in the more capital-intensive manufacturing industries that may replace them. In addition, competition from cheap imports has led to declines in local manufacturing jobs.

Furthermore, the deflationary bias in macroeconomic policies, leading to slow growth and recessions, has had more serious repercussions for women than for men; for example, unemployment levels are often higher for women than men. Moreover, greater numbers of women than men are to be found in self-employment or wage work in the informal economy.

These employment conditions facing the majority of women make it structurally difficult to raise women’s wages and to close gender wage gaps. Indeed, studies of the more rapidly growing Asian economies suggest that the growth of exports of labour-intensive manufactures and economic growth have been most rapid in those countries that had the widest gender wage gaps. Even in some of the most rapidly growing Asian economies, discriminatory portions of wage gaps have not been reduced during the era of globalization.

The financial and economic crises resulting from policies promoting unfettered capital flows have been found to have a differential impact on female and male workers. During the 1997 East Asian crisis, women were often the first to lose their jobs, due to their less secure employment conditions and also to discrimination based on “male breadwinner bias”.

Public spending: A lifeline for women?
Constraints on public spending as a result of fiscal squeeze have particularly negative effects on women. Static or reduced government expenditure on infrastructure and public services places a particularly heavy burden on women, as it is they who are principally responsible for household management and unpaid care work. During normal times, the family functions as the surrogate safety net or refuge of last resort, with women bearing the greatest burden in stretching their time and energies between paid and unpaid work; this situation is aggravated in times of economic crisis. This has both short and long-run costs for women as well as for micro- and macro-efficiency.

If female capabilities that would give them access to wider segments of the labour market are to be raised, higher levels of state spending on health and education are essential. There is also need for higher government expenditure on mechanisms for social protection that also cover the female labour force, as this is particularly affected by the insecurity of employment caused by economic volatility, the high labour turnover rates in increasingly flexible labour markets, and women’s preponderance in informal work. In sum, the need for the state to protect all its citizens, women and men, from the vagaries of the market is critical in an open, competitive environment.

The privatization of services for fiscal and other reasons also has considerable short-term and potential long-term costs for women. The introduction of user fees by the government has not provided a socially satisfactory solution, particularly from the perspective of women; they frequently bear the burden of managing household budgets on less income and with fewer essential services, and exemption schemes have generally not been found to work in practice.

Consolidating women’s gains: The need for a broader policy agenda
In addition to tracking trends in women’s absolute status regarding well-being, it is essential to evaluate changes in their status relative to men. This is because gaps both affect and reflect power dynamics, which themselves have the potential for positive change in the processes of resource and capabilities distribution. It is important to assess whether gender gaps in well-being have changed in both fast and slow-growing economies, using a wide range of indicators rather than just the money metric of income per capita.

While there has been some narrowing of gender gaps, there are noticeable exceptions and also reversals, indicating that positive changes are not necessarily stable or enduring. Similarly, the narrowing of gaps also requires careful examination, as this may reflect a reduction in male attainments. Positive trends in female capabilities do not, however, always translate automatically into greater opportunities for women. For example, in
slow-growing economies where jobs are scarce, gender norms play an important part in ensuring that men have a greater claim on job slots than women.

Gender equity is unlikely to be achieved without the empowerment of women. But the mere presence of women in legislatures does not necessarily translate into women-friendly economic policies. The introduction of the ostensibly more participatory approach to formulating development strategies through Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), involving consultation with a wide range of civil society representatives, has not proved to be a highly effective vehicle for women’s empowerment. The most pertinent failings include a low level of consultation with women’s groups, and a frequent lack of integration of gender analysis into the diagnosis of poverty. Generally gender has not featured as an issue in the macroeconomic and development policy analysis, or in the sections of PRSPs concerning the recommended poverty reduction strategy, resource allocation, or monitoring and evaluation.

Which macroeconomic strategies would best promote gender-equitable development that, in addition to enhancing women’s capabilities and opportunities to provide for themselves and their families and improve their well-being relative to men, also improved their bargaining power within the household and in other social institutions? In principle, it would be reasonable to expect that such improvements would most likely be achieved when there are relatively rapid economic growth, macroeconomic stability, a favourable external economic environment, expanding formal employment opportunities, redistributive taxation and public spending, and social policies that also embrace women.

Feminist economists have joined heterodox economists in identifying the components of an alternative macroeconomic policy package, and associated policies that would provide developing countries with a wider range of policy instruments, and give them greater scope for tailoring policies to their particular circumstances. However they recognize that, though necessary, changes in macroeconomic policy are not sufficient.

The extent to which macroeconomic policies promote gender equality does not only depend on their ability to enhance economic growth. The effects of economic growth are gender-differentiated, as growth operates through various types of markets, through intrafamily and intrahousehold resource distribution, and through public spending. Each of these last elements are subject to the pervasive influence of social norms regarding the roles and rights of women. Hence women’s and men’s capabilities, their access to resources such as time, land, credit and income, and their ability to obtain social insurance, differ. For example, in relation to earned income, the effect of macroeconomic policies is mediated through a system of gendered job segregation, even when there is an otherwise level playing field between men and women in terms of educational qualifications, skills and control over assets. This implies that economic policy alone is unlikely to bring about gender equality.

Therefore, to effect substantial improvement in key aspects of women’s well-being and greater gender equity, measures specifically designed to address gender-based inequalities and constraints are also essential. Concerted efforts are also needed to erode the norms and remove the discriminations that account for the persistence of gender segmentation in labour markets. Specific policies are required to remove the structural constraints on women’s ability to take up widening labour market opportunities, especially their relative lack of education and appropriate skills, and importantly, their relatively greater responsibility for the provision of unpaid care.

Also, if economic growth is to be widely shared, there is a need for labour market policies and related interventions that affect working conditions in both formal and informal employment situations, and that rectify gender imbalances and discriminatory practices. The solution would also involve the improvement of core labour standards (which include the prohibition of all forms of discrimination and the principle of equal pay for work of equal value) and the creation of decent conditions of work, including the right to social protection for all workers, formal and informal, as well as the evolution of “family-friendly” workplace practices. Other necessary policy measures include gender policy objectives for public expenditures, and mechanisms such as gender-responsive budget audits to monitor implementation.
Finally, these changes depend largely on the mobilization of women themselves, whose case needs to be built on rigorous analysis and a clear vision of where appropriate policy interventions are most needed.

SECTION 2: WOMEN, WORK AND SOCIAL POLICY

The feminization and informalization of labour

Over the past three decades women’s economic activity rates have been rising in most parts of the world, with the exception of Eastern and Central Europe (since 1989) and the Middle East and North Africa, where women’s economic activity rates remain low by international standards. Despite the increase in work for pay by women, labour markets continue to be segmented by gender. Even in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries, where women’s labour-force participation has been rising, there is continuing gender difference in labour markets, which is nowadays largely based on time, with men working full-time and women working part-time (given their disproportionate share of unpaid care work). There is also a substantial earnings gap between men and women, in part because many women work part-time; but there are also earnings gaps among full-time workers, which reflect occupational segregation and the fact that “women’s jobs” earn lower wages.

Furthermore, the intensification of women’s paid work over the past decades has been paralleled by a deterioration in the terms and conditions of much of the work on offer.

The new concept of “informal employment” defines it as employment without secure contracts, worker benefits or social protection. According to recent International Labour Organization (ILO) statistical evidence, informal employment constitutes one half to three-quarters of non-agricultural employment in developing countries, and tends to be a larger source of employment for women than for men in all developing regions except North Africa.

Rural impoverishment has historically contributed to migration into urban areas, and continues to do so. A large contingent of young rural migrant women can be found on the lowest, least visible, rung of the informal employment ladder. Many lack the skills and connections needed to secure more stable jobs with decent pay. They are typically engaged in small-scale domestic production, increasingly under competitive pressure from cheaper imported goods. Others engage in a variety of service occupations and in petty trading.

In many parts of the world, types of employment relationship are emerging that are purposely disguised to avoid labour legislation and deny social benefits. In other cases there may be a contract, but the relationship is deliberately disguised as a commercial transaction. Often the employment relationship is ambiguous: for example, workers operate at home on an exploitative piece-rate basis outside the purview of labour legislation. Many female homeworkers process products in the global value chain, while others work on articles destined for the domestic market. The payment they receive is extremely low; many also use their children as subsidiary workers. These areas are untouched by labour laws and social welfare.

Patterns of informalization differ from region to region, but the overall trend is discouraging in terms of prospects for realizing women’s rights and well-being. A promising development of the 1990s, however, has been the emergence of new forms of organizing among women workers in the informal economy, both domestically and internationally. However, many of the new trade unions, as well as non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs) responding to women workers’ rights, face difficulties in expanding their reach and becoming sustainable. Trade unions and NGOs also face challenges in alliance-building to broaden the scope and reach of their efforts beyond the more visible “traded” sectors.

Collective action through democratic organizational routes presents the only practicable avenue for regulating and improving the conditions of work of informal women workers. The idea that the formalization of property rights constitutes the solution to the problems of the informal economy—a view that is being endorsed by some international organizations—
has no validity as far as working women are concerned. Most of these women have no “property” to be registered, and engage in the informal economy because they cannot find work in the formal sector.

**The changing terms of rural living**

During the 1980s, many African and Latin American countries suffered economic crisis, and this was diagnosed by the international financial institutions (IFIs) as stemming directly from heavy state involvement in the economy. The agricultural sector was seen as a prime victim of state-directed regimes.

In truth, most developing country states were heavily involved in the economy, due to the widespread belief that markets on their own were inadequate for building a strong economy. Agricultural prices were artificially depressed by overvalued exchange rates and export taxes; but this was to some extent redressed through positive resource transfers into the sector via public investment, subsidized credit and inputs, and agricultural services and marketing. Such public provision has come under attack.

Subsequent reforms, however, have not adequately addressed some of the long-standing problems afflicting the agrarian economy. In Latin America the economic reforms have tended to reinforce, rather than redress, existing divides between regions and producers. One of the downsides of liberalization in the region has been the rise in agricultural imports, with an often severely detrimental impact on rural livelihoods. In sub-Saharan Africa food crop production has not increased, while the performance of export crops has been very uneven; the problems of food insecurity remain dire in many countries. In many contexts credit systems have collapsed, and there has been a sharp decline in input use, especially among smallholders.

Rural livelihoods have become more insecure, as well as more diversified, in contexts where cutbacks in state support to domestic agriculture have coincided with increasing exposure to competition from large subsidized producers. Volatile and depressed commodity prices have trapped large numbers of rural people in poverty, hunger and even famine.

Gender-differentiated examination of the implications of economic reform for rural livelihoods is difficult. National agricultural statistics are inadequate in a number of key respects, some of which stem from using either the individual holder, or the holding, as the unit of analysis. This means that the relationships between the members of farming households cannot be assessed. Case studies of changing gender relations under the unfolding impact of liberalization are few and far between.

Where they can, smallholders have moved out of traditional cash crop production and into the production of more lucrative crops. How has this affected male and female household producers? A view which gained currency in the 1990s was that the weak “supply response” of African agriculture to liberalization could be ascribed to the inflexibility of gender roles within households and women’s unwillingness to contribute unpaid labour to cash crops controlled by their husbands. But these intrahousehold gender constraints and conflicts of interest have been exaggerated. There are significant areas of common interest between husbands and wives in smallholder households, and considerable evidence of flexibility in gender roles in agriculture. If liberalization has failed to enhance agricultural production, it has much more to do with the broader constraints on smallholders that liberalization itself has exacerbated, rather than the economic consequences of intrahousehold gender roles and conflicts.

Several overlapping processes over the past 30 years have contributed to changes in the gender division of labour among Latin American smallholders, sometimes described as a tendency towards the “feminization of agriculture”. During the recent liberalization era, women’s participation in agriculture appears to have changed: they are no longer merely “secondary” workers. Women are emerging as farm managers, providing the bulk of family farm labour as men migrate in search of alternative sources of income. By withdrawing direct state support to domestic food production, agricultural reform has galvanized this process. In addition, exports of traditional agricultural products such as coffee have declined as a result of global trade liberalization and depressed commodity markets. The “feminization of agriculture” is therefore a phenomenon associated
with the lack of viability of smallholder agricultural production in the current era.

Besides the changes in smallholder farming, two other important trends have emerged as companions to liberalization. The first and most directly attributable is the growth of large-scale corporate export farming, particularly of high-value horticultural products such as flowers, fruits, and vegetables. This is a significant new source of employment for rural women in many parts of the world (especially Latin America), even though women are overwhelmingly employed in more insecure, less well-paid, and lower-skilled activities, without opportunities for advancement. The second is the more general diversification of smallholder livelihoods, with men, women, and child household members being increasingly propelled into off-farm activities to avert poverty. In some cases, the incomes earned are so poor that diversification in fact contributes to a cycle of impoverishment. Women tend to be overwhelmingly clustered in low-return activities to which they are driven by survival needs.

One of the major lessons of the experience of economic reform and liberalization is that the resource poverty of farmers prevents them from taking up new opportunities. A critical asset in the rural economy remains land. In many countries women’s rights activists have been closely involved in policy debates on land tenure, often alongside other civil-society groups. Such efforts led to significant progress in the passing of more gender-equitable land tenure laws during the 1990s.

Even where women’s rights are formally recognized, there continues to be a substantial gap between the legal recognition of their right to own or hold land, and their effective access to land. The reasons for this gap are complex and varied. But two significant policy trends require attention if poorer women in particular are to have access to land on a secure basis: the emphasis on developing markets in land (which are likely to exclude poorer women), and the resurgence of policy interest in various local and informal mechanisms and institutions for land management (where it may be difficult for women’s interests to find a clear articulation and be acted upon).

Cross-border migration of workers

The movement of people from countryside to town or across international borders has become an established feature of many people’s livelihoods, entailing both positive and negative manifestations and opportunities for the countries and individuals involved. The contemporary patterns and nature of cross-border flows are characterized by three broad trends: an increasing shift toward temporary migration (of the highly skilled and semi or unskilled), rising numbers of undocumented migrants, and the feminization of migration. Despite continuing differences in migration regimes between different clusters of countries, there is an emerging convergence towards selective migration, where highly skilled workers are welcomed, based on the belief that they will integrate more easily and contribute more to the economy, whereas low-skilled immigrants are regarded as hard on the public purse, and their numbers therefore ostensibly need to be controlled. Such stratifications are also gendered, given men’s preponderance among the highly skilled strata.

Women’s position on the bottom rung of the labour market, the low value accorded to domestic and caring work which many migrant women undertake in industrialized societies, and the lack of social protection in irregular occupations, especially in the “entertainment and hospitality” industries, mean that many women are vulnerable to exploitation. The fact that many highly educated women from developing countries undertake unskilled or semi-skilled jobs raises the issue of deskilling, which is rarely addressed in policy.

In North America and Europe, the principal framework within which women migrate continues to be as spouses or dependants of male principal applicants. Only where labour flows are destined for female-typed jobs, such as nurses and domestics, do women predominate as economic migrants. In some European countries, women in the caring professions are increasingly sought to fill gaps in health, social and care services and as domestics, at wages or under terms only acceptable to migrant women. Their remittances are nonetheless highly significant to the household economy from which they come.
Women from Eastern and Southeast Asia are increasingly migrating to neighbouring countries or further afield in search of opportunities. The more positive side of the picture is some female entry into information technology and other upwardly mobile employment. The downside is the overwhelming presence of women in the "entertainment" sector and the private sphere as domestic helpers: two areas of employment not covered by labour laws and thus prone to high levels of abuse.

Discrimination against immigrants, combined with racial and gender inequalities, makes migrant women "triply disadvantaged" and likely to be over-represented in marginal, unregulated and poorly paid jobs. At the same time, the experience of migration—whether by women on their own or jointly with men—has the potential to reconfigure gender relations and power inequalities. Opportunities emerge to improve lives and escape previously oppressive situations.

The search for a new social policy agenda

Livelihoods in today's world are subject to a range of insecurities. Formal social protection mechanisms are missing in many developing countries for the millions of women and men who work in the informal economy (as well as for some even in the formal economy). Contingencies such as ill-health, childbirth and old age are themselves powerful drivers of impoverishment, as earnings fall and assets are depleted to purchase health care in increasingly commercialized contexts.

There has recently been more recognition of these realities. The 1990s saw a shift in global policy pronouncements, acknowledging the vital role of social policy in the development process. However, considerable tension exists between different policy approaches regarding the scope and institutional mechanisms of social policy. The IFIs champion an approach in which the state only fills gaps and provides safety nets for the truly indigent, while the non-poor seek social provision through the market. The underlying assumption is that targeted public provision is the way to achieve greater social inclusion. This assumption, however, is open to question. Means testing and targeting are often the last resort of unequal societies; they can trap people in poverty, generate social exclusion and entrench inequality, rather than deal with inequality through redistribution; they are also very demanding as far as the administrative capacity of the state is concerned.

An alternative view holds that social objectives have to be integrated within development strategies, and that the state has to be a major player in providing resources to ensure social protection inclusively. Social policies founded on principles of universalism and redistribution, with strong cross-subsidies from the better-off, tend to be more sustainable, both financially and politically.

Both the process of social policy reform and its outcomes are inescapably gendered. The early efforts to provide formal social protection in many developing countries were biased towards men, who were over-represented in the formal sector. However, while efforts could have been made to cover a much wider range of people, there has in fact been a reversal over the past two decades. In many regions there has been a strong thrust towards the commodification of social services and social protection by imposing various "user charges" for public services and expanding market-based provision. Hence, the "male breadwinner model" is being eroded not by gender-equitable reform of state-based entitlements, but by their drastic reduction.

The impacts of commodification are likely to be felt most strongly by women, given the gender ordering and stratification across private and public institutions. These include in-household resource allocations (where girls are likely to receive a smaller proportion of household investments in health and education than boys); market institutions (where women tend to be more cash-constrained than men, given their disadvantages in labour and credit markets), in the unpaid care economy (where a disproportionate share of unpaid care is provided by women and girls when formal social provision remains out of reach); and the public social care sector (where working pressures generated during public-sector reforms are likely to fall most heavily on women workers, given that they are predominantly located at the lowest rungs of skill, authority and
remuneration). Yet debates on social policy have failed to engage with how men and women will be differently affected or involved.

Health care reforms, with a focus on the marketization of care and drugs, have been built on a number of hidden gendered assumptions, including that women—the principal clients—will be able to procure money for fees, and also be able to take on more unpaid care responsibilities. This has come at a time when the HIV/AIDS epidemic has imposed severe economic and social strains on families, especially in Africa. Evidence on reform outcomes points to patient exclusion; rises in maternal and newborn morbidity; and increasing gaps in wages and working conditions between senior clinicians and the nursing work mainly performed by women.

In the case of pension reforms, the move towards privatization has major gender implications. The fact that pension benefits in privatized systems are strictly determined by the overall amount of money contributed by the insured person, and that women typically earn less money and work for fewer years than men (given their care responsibilities), means that women receive considerably lower benefits. Since women’s higher life expectancy is taken into account in most private systems, women’s benefits are further comparatively depressed. In public systems with defined benefits, some of the disadvantages faced by women can be mitigated by generous minimum pensions, by the fact that life expectancy does not affect benefit levels, and by credits sometimes given for years spent caring for children.

By extending the coverage of existing social protection programmes (health insurance and pension provision) to new groups of informal workers, and by facilitating cross-subsidies, some important efforts are being made, in a diverse range of countries, to extend the reach of existing social protection mechanisms. These more inclusive social systems are being forged in contexts where there has been a great deal of contestation and debate concerning social responsibility, and where there is an ideological commitment to social equality.

SECTION 3: WOMEN IN POLITICS AND PUBLIC LIFE

Women in public office: A rising tide

Since 1995 women’s visibility in, and impact on, public life has grown. Although the average number of women in national assemblies has only increased from 9 per cent to almost 16 per cent, in 16 countries the proportion has reached 30 per cent or more. This is the critical threshold at which it is thought that women in office can change the culture, practice and outcomes of politics to respond better to gender equality concerns.

Women of course voice their interests in a wide variety of political and civic associations, so women's political participation cannot be measured in terms of numbers and proportions of women in national assemblies alone. However, enabling more women to succeed in competitive politics remains an important challenge for women's movements around the world, as does the project of building their effectiveness, once in office, in advancing women’s rights. Contemporary women’s movements are particularly concerned to identify the determinants of higher rates of women’s access to formal politics, as well as the features of political systems that support a progressive gender-equality legislative agenda.

Cultural, educational and other differences affect women’s participation in civil society, but do not easily explain their presence or absence in elected assemblies. Electoral systems are the best predictor of the numbers of women in formal politics. Those with electoral systems based on proportional representation (PR) tend to return assemblies with a higher average of women politicians than those with plurality/majority systems or semi-proportional systems. But electoral systems alone do not determine numbers of women in politics. Other determinants include the presence and type of affirmative action system, party systems and ideologies, the presence of women in the executive, and the responsiveness of the bureaucracy to women’s interests.

During the last 10 years, there has been considerable experimentation with the use of affirmative action in order to meet
the goal of gender parity in representative politics. Quotas on party electoral lists are the most common means; today they are in use in over 80 countries. They are most effective where there are large electoral districts, and requirements that women are spaced evenly on lists: a “zipped” list, or a “zebra” list in southern Africa, contains alternating women and men. Where there are penalties for non-compliance, such as withholding of campaign subsidies, co-operation is better assured. In simple plurality systems, measures to reserve seats for women have been preferred over quotas for women candidates. However, reserved seats have sometimes been a way of boosting government majorities, undermining the perceived legitimacy of their occupants, and sometimes making it difficult for women politicians to build credible relationships with the women’s movement.

Parties on the ideological left, or willing to commit the public sector to compensate for inequalities in the private sphere, have been more responsive to gender equality concerns and supportive of women in politics.

Despite women’s greater prominence in political life, they have in many cases yet to translate their visibility into leadership positions and influence over the decision-making process: there are still many instances where they are simply used as an extension of male power structures. The transition from a heightened presence of women in politics to actual advance for gender equality issues and women-friendly policies takes time, and will depend upon the effectiveness of women’s movements in holding governments to account, and on the capacity of public sector agencies to translate ambitious gender-equity policy agendas into effective implementation. This is a matter of good governance in women’s favour.

**Women mobilizing to reshape democracy**

A strong and autonomous women’s movement can greatly magnify the influence of women in representative politics, and indeed of national advocacy bureaucracies (such as an equal opportunities commission), providing an external base of support and legitimacy. Although a unified agenda is difficult to discern in the great variety of women’s associational activity, women are well mobilized in civil society almost everywhere. The globalization of communications has created new opportunities, enabling women to experiment with new means for holding key actors—governments, corporations and international organizations—to account for their actions in relation to women’s rights. Global conferences have enabled women to network internationally, and conferred legitimacy on their participation in global policy debates. Female mobilization and solidarity also occur in trades unions, political parties, mass organizations, and civil society groups vocal on behalf of women members.

A notable feature of women’s associational activity in the past decade has been the central role women have played in many democratization struggles. Recent transitions to democratic forms of government in Latin America and South Africa have offered opportunities to women to claim space for gender equality in newly emerging or reformed institutions. Although women’s positions tend to be profoundly divergent on many issues, there has been a patch of common ground on which many converge: the demand for gender parity in public office. Since the late 1990s, civil society campaigns for equal representation with men have gathered momentum, backing reforms to electoral systems, including through constitutional revision, that support women’s ability to run for office.

While political liberalization has enabled some women’s movements to flourish, in some contexts it has been accompanied by loss of momentum in feminist politics. In Eastern Europe, for instance, where feminism has been associated with a repressive state, it has taken most of the decade for women’s movements to regroup. In other contexts, where political liberalization has been only partial, disillusionment with states that fail to deliver either development or democracy appears to have contributed to the growing appeal to women of conservative ethnic and religious movements.

Some of these identity-based forms of mobilization assert the superiority of “traditional” gender roles along with systems of patriarchal authority, particularly where “women’s liberation” is seen as part of unwelcome modernization. Women’s deportment, mobility, dress and roles within the family are often central
to the cultural revival or pious society the groups proclaim; women’s behaviour is upheld as a marker of authenticity and moral integrity. Although women are rarely given access to institutional power within these groups, they are encouraged to engage in their political activities, and even to become highly militant and visible activists because of their great symbolic impact.

**Gender and “good governance”**

Programmes of governance reform have recently attracted considerable international and national attention. Good governance is seen as the essential condition enabling economic reform programmes to function effectively, and is at the core of the current emerging “post-Washington consensus”. The concept of “good governance”, however, is given different meanings by different policy actors. Although IFI reform packages address issues of government legitimacy and the public participation of socially excluded groups, critics believe they are dominated by a narrower preoccupation: the use of “governance” reforms to expand market activity and its supporting institutions, especially private property rights. In such circumstances, governance reform is not sympathetic to gender concerns and may even undermine them. To tackle gender equity, programmes of reform must take into account from the outset the way in which formal and informal institutions are shaped by unequal gender relations. These institutions will tend to reproduce gender-based inequality unless they are appropriately redesignedit during the reform process.

The gendered dimensions of current governance reforms have not been given appropriate consideration except in discussions on decentralization. Yet there are gender-specific capacity failures in all public institutions targeted for reform. Public expenditure management systems fail to acknowledge women’s needs, or distribute budgetary resources equally. The civil service and judiciary may be dominated by men. Women workers clustered at the bottom of state bureaucracies may be the first to be fired when cost-cutting efficiencies are introduced. “Rule of law” reforms may limit women’s scope to profit from informal private enterprise, or fail to secure assets over which they previously enjoyed customary rights. Legislative committees may be ill-equipped to conduct a gender analysis of the bills they review. Some policy makers do advocate women’s greater participation in politics and the public sector—on the instrumental basis that they may be less corrupt than men. Whether this is indeed the case (the evidence for it is uneven), it is not the appropriate starting point for a gender-sensitive consideration of capacity and accountability problems in the public sector.

Women’s associations have prioritized several areas for gender-sensitive public sector reform. These include recruitment quotas to ensure a stronger presence of women in the bureaucracy; the introduction of gender-equity concerns in performance measurement; consultation with women clients of public services, and measures to respond to their complaints; and reforms to legal frameworks and judicial systems to improve women’s access to justice. A tool increasingly used for monitoring government spending is the “gender budget” method pioneered in Australia and South Africa. Gender budgets analyse the likely impacts of planned spending, and supply parliamentarians with gender-aware budgetary information in the hope that they will goad the executive into more appropriate spending. In some places they have been effective in exposing the gap between government commitments to certain social policies, and actual spending.

**Decentralization and gender equality**

The part of the governance agenda that is focused on the decentralization of authority to local entities has been more sympathetic to gender concerns. Women’s participation has actively been encouraged, and women generally, as well as low-income and other socially marginal groups, are expected to benefit from the accountability and service delivery improvements that government in close proximity should provide. Indeed, local government positions are expected to be particularly open to women, because they do not face the mobility and financial constraints at local levels that they face in striving for national public office. A comparison of available statistics on women’s engagement at national and local levels, however, shows that this is not consistently the case: sometimes there are
more women in national than in local politics. This alerts us to the significance of resistance to women from traditional patriarchal systems at local levels, and also to the importance of gender-sensitive institutional engineering to improve women’s access to local government forums and services.

Various systems of affirmative action have been tried. These include the reservation of a proportion of seats on local councils for women, as in India, and the creation of special electoral wards for women, as in Uganda. However, women face the resistance of entrenched male hierarchies accustomed to control, and hence the likelihood that decentralization may reinforce male sway over local power structures, and their influence over the informal social institutions governing marital relations, conflict resolution, and property rights. As with the case of women in national politics, the situation can change over time. Although experience is mixed, there are signs that women in local government are having a tangible impact on local spending patterns and building social acceptance of women’s political authority. NGOs have offered training in capacity-building and women’s assertion of their own voice. In some settings, spending patterns have been influenced in the direction of services and amenities favoured by women, such as water supplies and public health. Local government remains a key arena to watch over the next decade, as more and more women assert their leadership ambitions and challenge patriarchal systems at this level.

SECTION 4: GENDER, ARMED CONFLICT AND THE SEARCH FOR PEACE

The impacts of conflict on women

Ten years after the Beijing Conference, the world is still enduring an epidemic of armed violence, with 19 major conflicts and many smaller confrontations ongoing in different parts of the globe. Although the number of major conflicts appears to be declining, incursions into Afghanistan and Iraq, ongoing wars in Sudan, Kashmir and the Democratic Republic of Congo, and failure to end struggles in the Middle East, Colombia, the Chechen Republic and Sri Lanka, present a picture of violence and insecurity affecting millions of people worldwide. Most of these wars are internal, and fighting is not confined to battlefields and “war fronts” but pervades whole populations. Women are caught up in a number of roles, including to some degree as combatants; more importantly, they may become a direct target of attack; and they have to assume extra caring and provider roles for their families in an environment where economic life, formal systems of protection and the rule of law have collapsed.

At stake in today’s wars are not only territories, but ethnic and religious identities, control over natural resources, and over lucrative and sometimes illicit trade, such as in drugs and arms. Tensions have been exacerbated by economic crises and their accompanying social distress, and the weakness of state institutions in the face of impoverishment and civil unrest. In a world in which the balance of power is lopsided, and where many people feel economically or politically vulnerable, bonds of common identity (based on religion or ethnicity) often provide a powerful mobilizing force.

During the recent past, women’s visibility in war has become especially marked in certain connections. The war in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the Rwandan genocide brought to world attention the use of sexual assault as a systematic means of terrorizing populations, and rape has since become internationally recognized as a weapon of war. Thus the full ramifications of conflict borne by women personally have become better appreciated, and some mechanisms of response have been put in place, even while the impacts on women’s socially constructed roles as carers and providers have been less well appreciated.

Women have also been given greater credibility in their assumption of peace-making and conflict resolution roles; in some cases they have helped reduce hostilities or bring them to an end. Their life-saving roles in care and refuge provision, and their conduct of humanitarian relief programmes at considerable personal risk, have been less widely noticed; but they are beginning to claim, and win, places at the peace table and in the negotiation of a “gender-friendly” peace.
Although armed violence is commonly regarded as a male preserve, women have long taken on active military roles in wars and revolutions. For some women combatants, military participation stems from their experience as victims; others are coerced into carrying arms or working for military command- ers. Yet many women are inspired by identification with the cause in which war is being waged by kin and identity groups. Their participation is not limited to revolutionary and radical causes; chauvinist or nationalistic movements include women among their principal cheerleaders. Women’s agency in conflict situations can grow in a variety of different political contexts—democratic, revolutionary and authoritarian—and in strong as well as weak states.

After conflict: Women, peace building and development

In the context of today’s wars, where a peace settlement rarely signals the end of physical insecurity, the postconflict environment cannot be characterized as one in which life for women invariably returns to “normal”. The upheaval of war, in which societies and gender relations have been transformed and livelihood systems disrupted, has its own impact on intraper- sonal relationships and societal expectations.

Women commonly find their contributions to the war and peace efforts marginalized or disregarded in both official and popular accounts of war (as happened in Europe after the Second World War). Moreover, there seems to be a denial of the fact that shifts in gender relations were required for women to take on their wartime roles. The ideological rhetoric is often about “restoring” or “returning” to a state of gender relations resembling those perceived to have been associated with peace in the past, even though the proposed “restoration of normality” may further undermine women’s rights. The challenge to gender relations experienced during war seems to become too great for patriarchal societies to maintain in times of peace.

There are, however, also significant openings for positive change in postwar circumstances. Some wars end in an atmosphere imbued with the desire to build a new type of society; where the situation of women received a lot of attention during the conflict, it may be possible to push for legal or policy changes to improve the fulfilment of their rights. Where international peacekeeping or reconstruction is involved, there may be external pressure for policies that support women, and funds may be directly available to women’s organizations. However, women need to be agile and strategic in the initiatives they adopt: the bodies responsible for devising new institutions of government will tend to disregard gender claims unless these are represented persuasively. Where they are not, livelihood opportunities may be deliberately removed, and other discrimi- nations introduced. In such postconflict actions as sorting out land claims, women may lose rights they had previously asserted. Speedy service reconstruction, especially health care and edu- cation, is especially important for women.

In the immediate postwar setting, special measures are often put in place to provide support for ex-combatants before, during and after the processes of “demobilization, development and reintegration”. It is still common for women (and child, especially girl) ex-combatants to be relatively marginalized, if not completely neglected, in such programmes, in spite of attention having been drawn to this unsatisfactory state of affairs for nearly a decade.

Nevertheless women have made inroads, even if fewer than they would wish. In recognition of their vulnerability in all stages of war, the UN Security Council’s landmark Resolution 1325 in 2000 urges member states to ensure representation of women at all levels of decision making in mechanisms for the prevention, management and resolution of conflict, in order to promote actions necessary for the protection and support of women. This is one helpful sign that women are gaining ground in postconflict activity. A further indication comprised the first ever pros- ecutions of perpetrators of violence against women in wartime by the tribunals dealing with war crimes in former Yugoslavia and in Rwanda. In the case of Rwanda, a Women’s Caucus for Gender Justice was formed in 1997 within the International Criminal Court (ICC), thereby helping to ensure that a gender perspective was central to the functioning of the court.

Despite this progress, the majority of sexual crimes against women during wartime still go unpunished. What is more,
wartime prosecutions tend to be painfully slow. Women sur-
vivors of such abuse are still stigmatized to a far greater degree
than male survivors of human rights abuses. It is therefore not
surprising that most women find it very difficult to take legal
action and give evidence.

“Truth and reconciliation” procedures have been used to
address women’s cases and gain their participation, notably in
Rwanda where the traditional Gacaca system has been revived
to handle postgenocide disputes. However, the issue of amnesty
and truth-telling remains controversial; where amnesty is offered
in return for truth-telling, the sense of being deprived of justice
could provoke further violence.

The most common abuses under-reported to Truth and
Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) are those suffered by
women, as indeed are those least prosecuted. Although women
sometimes constitute the majority of those giving witness in
court regarding acts of violence committed against others, only
few speak out regarding acts of sexual violence committed
against themselves, unless a strategy of proactive engagement
with women and the broader community is put in place (as in
the case of the TRC of 2001 in Peru).
Ten years on from the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the question being posed by many women’s organizations across the world is how much has been achieved in the past decade? For those involved in the search for gender equality this is an important question to ask, but by no means an easy one to answer.

The task of evaluating progress in gender equality poses many challenges. The standard indicators of income and well-being offer some guidance, but a proper and grounded assessment demands much more than they alone can provide. The challenge lies not only in developing an adequate analytical approach, but in understanding that the terms of engagement may themselves be questioned. What counts as progress is often a contested field in which there are competing visions of “the good society”, and of women’s place within it. The concept of progress has itself undergone revision and qualification, along with the realization that the complex process of social change does not follow a uniform path and offers few guaranteed outcomes. Social and economic development may not always enlarge the realm of human freedom, nor is the idea of “development” always, or simply, associated with one version of modernity.

These caveats notwithstanding, there can be little doubt that since the first World Conference on Women in 1975 there have been significant changes, many of them positive, in the social and economic status of women. Girls’ enrolment in primary and secondary education has increased rapidly the world over, sharply reducing or closing, and in some cases reversing, the gender gap in school attendance. The decline in fertility in many developing countries has both reduced the risk of maternal mortality and eased the burden of unpaid care work which invariably falls to women and girls. The presence of women in public life has also grown, whether in politics, in the workforce, or in the migrant streams that cross international borders.

Such changes in women’s lives are associated with the social transformations that attend economic development, but they are not simply a by-product of economic growth. In many instances change in women’s social position has been instigated or accelerated by state reforms and social movements. In this respect, the last decade of the 20th century was particularly significant. The period was marked by a series of political transformations that included the transition from authoritarian rule in many parts of the world, the collapse of “state socialism” in Eastern and Central Europe, and in the major industrialized countries the presence in power of administrations that were supportive of some elements of the women’s agenda. This context helped to promote shifts in the international policy agenda towards a greater emphasis on the importance of democracy and human rights for the development process.

Women’s movements, both national and transnational, took advantage of the changed political context, which they themselves had helped reshape, to advance women’s rights, working both inside and outside state machineries for legislative and policy reforms. Faced with a window of opportunity they were able to forge effective alliances with other political forces of all kinds: popular movements, parties and governments. Perhaps the most remarkable achievement of the 1990s was in bringing issues of sexual and reproductive health and rights, violence against women, and inequality of power in gender relations to the centre of global and national debates on human rights and human development. The transnational
mobilization of women had a noticeable impact on global rule-making, as is evident from table 1.1. Indeed, some observers of long-term social change argue that the body of UN Conventions, especially the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), and other international and regional legal instruments promoting gender equality, have undermined the legitimacy of patriarchy, while the social effects of female education, later marriages and labour market openings are combining to erode its remaining pillars.1

### The Persistence of Gender Inequalities

If the 1990s saw women achieve some of their historic demands, and if there was progress in education, employment and political representation, these positive outcomes must be qualified in the light of continuing gender inequalities and a less than favourable economic environment. In education for example, despite the advance in many countries towards

#### Table 1.1 Key international and regional legal instruments promoting gender equality (1990–2004)

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<td></td>
<td>Came into force – 1990</td>
<td>Came into force – 2003</td>
<td>Came into force – 1995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-discrimination based on sex</td>
<td>Art. 2: “States Parties shall respect and ensure the rights set forth in the present Convention to each child within their jurisdiction without discrimination of any kind” (including gender).</td>
<td>Art. 6.a: “The right of women to be free from all forms of discrimination”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elimination of violence against women</td>
<td>Art. 19.1: “States parties shall (…) protect the child from all forms of physical and mental violence (…) including sexual abuse”. Protocol.</td>
<td>Art. 10: “No migrant worker or member of his or her family shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment”</td>
<td>Art. 1: “(…) violence against women shall be understood as any act or conduct, based on gender, which causes death or physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, whether in the public or the private sphere”</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Art. 26.1a: “States Parties recognizes the right of migrant workers and members of their families to take part in meetings (…) of trade unions and of any other associations (…) in the view to protecting their economic, social, cultural and other interests”</td>
<td>Art. 4.j: “The right to have equal access to the public service of her country and to take part in the conduct of public affairs, including decision-making”</td>
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gender parity, notably at primary level, progress has been far slower than expected. At higher levels of education too, the gender balance in many developing countries still heavily favours boys, despite some change (see figure 1.1).²

Despite the greater numerical presence of women in the world of work and in the domain of politics (see figures 1.2 and 1.3), the narrowing gender gap conceals marked gender asymmetries in pay and status. Women continued to be concentrated in jobs with low pay and authority levels, placing limits on their overall access to income, status and power.

Table 1.1  Key international and regional legal instruments promoting gender equality (1990–2004)

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<tr>
<td>Came into force – 2000</td>
<td>Came into force – 2002</td>
<td>Came into force – 2003</td>
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<tr>
<td>Art 4.1: “The national policy on home work shall promote (...) equality of treatment between homeworkers and other wage earners”</td>
<td>Arts. 7 and 8 define rape, sexual slavery, enforced prostitution, forced pregnancy, enforced sterilization, or any other form of sexual violence of comparable gravity as crimes against humanity and war crimes.</td>
<td>Protocol Art. 2a: “The purpose of this Protocol (...) to prevent and combat trafficking in persons, paying particular attention to women and children”</td>
<td>Non-discrimination based on sex</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art. 4 promotes equality of treatment in relation to: protection against discrimination in employment and occupation; in the field of occupational safety and health; remuneration; statutory social security protection; access to training; minimum age for admission to employment or work; and maternity protection.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Elimination of violence against women</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art. 4 (2a): “Equality of treatment shall be promoted (...) in relation to the homeworkers’ right to establish or join organizations of their own choosing and to participate in the activities of such organizations.”</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Economic and social rights</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Civil and political rights</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1.1 Ratio of female to male gross enrolment rates (1) in low-income countries and lower-middle-income countries (2) (1980–2000)

Notes: (1) A value of 1 for the ratio indicates equal enrolment ratios of females and males. A value below 1 indicates that the rates of female enrolment are lower than male enrolment rates. (2) Only countries for which data on secondary education was available for 1980 and 2000 are included. Countries are ordered in ascending order according to their 2000 gross national income (GNI) per capita (Atlas method, US$). (3) Data for GNI per capita not available.

Source: Calculated from World Bank 2004b.
Figure 1.2 Female economic activity rates, regional averages (1980–latest available year)

Source: Calculated from ILO 2003.

Figure 1.3 Women’s presence in national parliaments, regional averages (1987–2004)

Source: Calculated from IPU 2004; UN Statistical Division 2004; UN 2003.
In many countries, both developed and developing, the gap between rich and poor households has been growing,\(^1\) which also means that there are increasing inequalities among women. While the World Bank claims that the global poverty rate has fallen from 32 to 25 per cent between 1990 and 1999, decreasing the number of poor from 1.3 billion to 1.1 billion, there are major controversies about the Bank’s methods of measuring poverty. In particular, distortion is produced by including the special case of China, which offsets trends of constant or increasing poverty in a number of other regions.\(^4\)

Although it is difficult to estimate gender differences in the incidence of poverty, given that income is most often measured at the household level (which ignores how resources are distributed within the household), it is reasonable to assume that women constitute a disproportionate share of the world’s poor given their constrained access to capital and land, their lower labour market status, and their disproportionate responsibility for the provision of unpaid domestic and care work. This, however, is not to deny the fact that some women are among the elite and have benefited enormously from the same policies that have been very adverse for the majority of the population.

Declining fertility continues to improve women’s life chances in their reproductive years in most countries of the world, but in some it has also been associated with an increase in artificially high ratios of males to females (sex ratios) in the population.\(^5\) Sex ratio imbalances have deepened in societies with marked “son preference” in tandem with rapid fertility decline, as infant daughters are subjected to maltreatment, neglect and abandonment, and new technologies allow sex-selective biases against females. Table 1.2 presents the most recent estimates of “missing women”—those missing as a result of the unequal treatment of males and females—in countries where the problem is considered to be acute. Figure 1.4 presents data on juvenile sex ratios and fertility rates for China and India, the two countries that account for nearly 80 per cent

### Table 1.2 Estimates of “missing women”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Actual number of women (1000)</th>
<th>Actual sex ratio</th>
<th>Expected sex ratio at birth</th>
<th>Expected number of women</th>
<th>Number of missing women</th>
<th>% of missing women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>612.3</td>
<td>1.067</td>
<td>1.050</td>
<td>1.001</td>
<td>653.2</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taiwan, P. of China</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>1.049</td>
<td>1.052</td>
<td>1.002</td>
<td>11.3</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Korea, Rep. of</td>
<td>1995</td>
<td>22.2</td>
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Note: (1) The percentage missing is arrived at by dividing the number of “missing women” by the actual number of women alive.
Source: Klasen and Wink 2003.
of all “missing women” in the world. The fact that these two countries have also produced some of the fastest rates of economic growth over the past decade or so only serves to underline the point that there is no guarantee that growth will enhance gender equality.

At a more general level the ambivalent nature of women’s achievements is perhaps illustrated most strikingly in the “feminization” of the labour force. In the past two decades women’s access to paid work has increased in most countries, but at the same time a deterioration has occurred in the terms and conditions of much of the work on offer. The growth of informal work across the world, along with the informalization or casualization of formal sector employment, has allowed employers to lower labour costs. However for ordinary women and men the outcome has been an increasing precariousness of jobs, and greater insecurity of livelihoods. Recent International Labour Organization (ILO) estimates suggest that informal employment tends to be a larger source of employment for women than for men in all developing regions (except North Africa).7

These various outcomes do not have one single cause. Gender inequalities are deeply entrenched in all societies and are reproduced through a variety of practices and institutions, including policy interventions. A question posed in this report is what contribution does development policy make to bringing about favourable or unfavourable conditions for achieving greater gender equality? Has the policy model that has prevailed in recent decades, preoccupied as it is with balanced budgets and free markets, made it easier or more difficult to promote social equality, in particular in redressing inequalities between women and men?“
THE DISABLING POLICY ENVIRONMENT

If the record of the policy model in reducing poverty and promoting growth is the subject of ongoing debate, most analysts agree that it has been associated in most parts of the world with deepening inequality. Moreover in the 1980s and 1990s, structural adjustment left many millions unemployed and in acute poverty, creating a widespread distrust of market fundamentalism. The policies responsible for deepening inequality and for the social crisis had specific gender effects, shifting the burden of adjustment onto women in particular as “shock absorbers” and carers of last resort for households on the edge of survival.

The neoliberal economic agenda, also known as the Washington Consensus, which rose to predominance in the early 1980s, centred on the strengthening of private property rights and profit-driven markets, and called for the “rollback of the state”. To give full reign to the “invisible hand” of the market, primary emphasis was to be placed on price stability and governments were urged to restrict public spending. At the same time, state-centric strategies and policies were widely discredited, often justly, for fostering clientelism and corruption, authoritarianism, and a lack of state accountability to citizens. With earlier policy models having lost much of their appeal, and in the absence of adequate debate about the reform agenda, neoliberal ideas quickly took hold while critical voices were sidelined. It took the “lost decade” of the 1980s to reveal the severe limitations, risks and human costs of market fundamentalism.

Adjustment policies without adequate safety nets placed the livelihoods of low-income households in both rural and urban contexts under severe stress. Insecurity became a widespread feature of daily life even for the most protected public sector workers such as teachers, nurses and civil servants, many of whom were now forced to make regular forays into the informal economy to supplement their dwindling incomes. In the “scramble for cash” and under conditions of economic hardship, low-income women became increasingly visible both as casual agricultural labourers and in the over-crowded urban informal economy; and as migrants from countryside to town and across international borders.

Meanwhile, the creeping commercialization of welfare services meant that poorer households had to adjust by shifting more of the care into the household and onto the shoulders of women and girls; while the increased monetary cost of health services meant that women could less frequently afford to use such services for themselves and their children. Markets—not as they are hypothesized to function in neoliberal economics, but as they are “substantiated” or made operative through the interaction of real social groups—were powerful drivers of inequality, social exclusion and discrimination against women, whose unpaid care work held the social fabric together without recognition or reward.

THE SOBERING ASSESSMENTS OF 2000

As researchers documented the social costs of macroeconomic policies, more sober accounts of global developments emerged, especially after the Russian and Asian financial crisis of 1997 which underscored the fragility of an international order based on unregulated financial flows. By 2000, when the “Plus Five” reviews of the global conferences of 1995 took place, there was much less certainty that neoliberal globalization was going to improve people’s lives.

While inflation was brought under control in many countries, price stability was achieved at the expense of growth and job creation. The new market orthodoxy was not delivering even on its own terms: growth rates were disappointing (see section 1). Financial crises and economic volatility were more frequent, with predictable economic and social consequences. Income inequalities widened all over the world, and fiscal deficits continued as governments faced severe difficulties in raising revenues to finance infrastructure, social services and other redistributive measures to compensate for the severe exclusions and failures of markets.

The social crisis that has continued to hit many parts of the world has perhaps been expressed most dramatically in the civil unrest and political turmoil, including outbreaks and continuations of civil wars, in which underlying economic and social
distress are among the causal dynamics. In such zones of insecurity and pervasive violence, few escape the disastrous impacts of warfare whether or not they are actively involved as combatants. Women’s particular vulnerabilities during war and conflict were drawn to world attention by women’s rights activists, especially in connection with the war in Bosnia and Herzegovina and the genocide in Rwanda; these two events were mainly responsible for revealing to the world the extent of crimes of sexual violence and their systematic use as weapons of war. However, women are also profoundly affected by war and violence in their socially constructed gender roles as family carers and providers.

Even where conflict has ceased, crime rates have typically soared, as have incidents of gender-based and sexual violence. To the trauma of conflict with its detrimental impact on interpersonal relations and community networks have been added breakdowns in law and order, of police and judicial systems, of health and education services, and a weakening of social and ethical norms. In “normal” times too, crime and violence have seemed to be on the increase. Urban populations have been witnessing a growth in the use of private security services, the rise of walled compounds and separated areas within cities, and a widespread lack of confidence in the police and justice system.

THE UNRISD REPORT

The impetus for this report was the recognition that in the maelstrom of ideas and events associated with the recent past, there has been some loss of gender perspective among the many issues vying for attention in international policy debates. While liberalization and governance reform programmes have received critical attention and generated considerable debate, there has been a lack of systematic appraisal from the point of view of gender equality. At a time when organizations and researchers concerned about the progress of women in the world, within the UN system and beyond, are preparing the “Beijing Plus Ten” assessment requested for 2005 by the UN General Assembly in June 2000, an UNRISD Report which set out to redeem this omission appeared appropriate.

The report aims to reestablish the centrality of gender equality in ongoing efforts to reorient the development agenda to meet some of the key challenges that are integral to the development process: economic growth and structural transformation; equality and social protection; and democratization. These objectives resonate with those elaborated in the United Nations Charter more than 50 years ago, and have been reinforced through key international conventions that numerous countries have signed and ratified in the subsequent period. They were also at the heart of the United Nations Conferences of the 1990s.

In the past few years several major policy reports from organizations within and outside the UN system have underlined the salience of gender issues to development processes, in different ways and from diverse points of view. This report adds fresh perspectives and its own distinctive analysis to the debate.

Rather than attempt to review all potential areas of concern to women identified in the Beijing Platform for Action, UNRISD determined to focus on a more limited range of issues, essentially those areas of policy and institutional reform critical for the substantiation of women’s rights and the search for gender equality in an unequal world. In reflecting on the recent achievements of the post-Beijing agenda, and in exploring the reasons for the ambivalent outcomes, the report addresses directly or indirectly eight of the 12 key areas of concern articulated in the Beijing Platform for Action. These are: Women and Poverty; Women and Health; Violence against Women; Women and Armed Conflict; Women and the Economy; Women in Power and Decision-Making; Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women; and Human Rights of Women. These topics are addressed within the following four key thematic areas the report has singled out for analysis.

Macroeconomics, well-being and gender equality

This analysis of macroeconomic policies from a gender perspective begins by reviewing the many areas of contention thrown up by the neoliberal agenda, the currently dominant
economic policy model. There has been a tendency by mainstream analysts to treat macroeconomic policy as a gender-free or gender-neutral zone, and to ignore the gender impacts of policy choices; yet all outcomes in terms of growth, structural transformation, equality, poverty and social protection have implications for gender equality or for lessening gender inequality. This review, contained in the next three chapters (chapters 2, 3 and 4), also examines whether heterodox macroeconomic policies have performed any better than neoliberal models in achieving growth and social equity, and if so whether they have served the goal of gender equality any more effectively.

Women in politics and public life

The section on women in politics and public life (chapters 9 through 12) strikes a different note: in these contexts, women’s increased visibility is conspicuous. The section begins by holding a magnifying glass to one of the great achievements of the last decade, women’s increased prominence in formal political institutions and elected assemblies. Enthusiasm for the greater show of female hands in representative bodies, however, needs to be tempered by the recognition that entrenched male biases and hierarchies still exist, and there is a long way to go before anything resembling parity is reached in most political environments. Another focus of this section is women’s activism within civil society, especially in the light of political movements which mobilize around faith, ethnic identity or nationalism, and which have their own reverberations concerning femininity and women’s rights. Female visibility in this context has ambivalent characteristics. On the institutional side, the current enthusiasm for “good governance” and the associated institutional reform agenda, especially the decentralization of decision-making structures, comes under scrutiny; are women making real or superficial gains by such devices as quotas and “reservations”?

Gender, armed conflict and the search for peace

The proliferation since the end of the Cold War of internal or civil wars, the holdover conflicts from the postcolonial era, and the major military incursions associated with the contemporary “war on terror” have important implications for women. The 1990s saw widespread recognition that rape was commonly used as a weapon of war, and that sexual assault was a feature of any setting engulfed by turmoil and armed violence; but the implications of modern forms of war for women in their socially constructed and livelihood roles have not been given similar attention. Women have been noticed as programmed for peace—as instigators of peace initiatives or conflict resolution; this chimes with the idea of the quintessentially pacifying
female presence. But they are often ignored in the formal negotiations which bring postconflict institutions into being, and therefore lose out from peace settlements. Two chapters (chapters 13 and 14) inspect the gendered battlefield during war, during the search for peace, and in the postconflict environment. The limited extent to which peace secures women’s interests is another example of the convenient oblivion to which gender considerations are so often confined.

BRINGING GENDER BACK IN

The analytic approach advanced in the report assumes that societies, their social relations, economies and power structures contain deeply etched gender divisions, in the same way that they reflect class, ethnic and racial divisions. Inequalities based on sex are a pervasive feature of all societies; they are the product of socially constructed power relations, norms and practices.

Feminist research has revealed persistent inequalities in the intrahousehold allocation of resources, rights and power, exploding the myth of family altruism and equality represented in the idea that the private sphere is always a “haven in a heartless world”. Documenting the dark side of family life has not meant that the injustices committed against girls and women within the private domain—in terms of either severe resource deprivation, or physical and sexual abuse—are being adequately addressed and remedied. Indeed, the domestic arena remains one of the most difficult and controversial of policy contexts. Even where progressive laws have been put in place to protect the victims of domestic violence, weak implementation—through elitist and sometimes corrupt judicial and police systems—means that those who need protection against violence and abuse in the domestic domain often remain vulnerable and at risk. Nevertheless, within policy debates on gender, the family and the household have come under increasing scrutiny over the past decade. There are some interesting shifts in policy that reflect the findings of intrahousehold research: anti-poverty programmes, whether in the form of micro-credit or cash transfers to poor households, increasingly target women on the grounds that they will spend the resources under their control in ways that enhance family and child welfare.

While institutions such as the World Bank now concern themselves with gender inequalities in some institutional arenas—at the intrahousehold level in particular, as well as in the legal domain where traditions and customs have an important role to play—the attention to gender is selective and uneven. The silences and omissions in such frameworks are particularly revealing: significantly, markets and macroeconomic flows (trade, capital) are not subjected to the same gender analysis, the implicit assumption being that they are essentially benign and gender-neutral. However, the report finds that this is true neither of the economy nor of the family; nor do states, communities, political parties or “progressive” social movements necessarily operate in gender-neutral ways. Indeed the reverse is more common. The evidence presented by the report reveals gender inequality to be a persistent and integral feature of the modern world, even though some of the modalities through which it is expressed have undergone change in recent times.

Gender and men

The analysis undertaken by the report is largely of social relations, and particularly gender relations, across a wide spectrum of institutions in both private and public life. The primary focus, however, is on women (differentiated by class, race, ethnicity and caste) even though full recognition is given in the analysis to the complex web of social/gender relations in which they are involved. It is important to keep the spotlight on women, in view of the recent shifts in thinking (and language) in development bureaucracies as well as in some strands of academic research, which have sometimes inadvertently blunted the significance of women’s subordination.

Feminist researchers have raised concerns at the shift that has occurred away from a focus on women, towards women and men, and then back to men. Activists from the Caribbean have described how this has resulted in an emphasis on “men at risk”. Women in this region score higher than men on a variety of indicators, including education and health. Yet women also
face unemployment rates which are twice those of men. When coupled with the prevalence of female-headed households (over 35 per cent in a number of Caribbean countries), women’s job exclusion undermines the case for considering women to be “better off than men”.21 Moreover, despite justified concern about low male educational attainment, society clearly has different expectations of males and females. Male educational underachievement has not led to parallel underachievements in wealth and politics. Women need higher levels of attainment than men to compete for jobs, decision-making positions, and access to an equal share of productive resources.22

However, if gender hierarchies are not disappearing and if the subordination of women continues to be a significant social issue, this does not invariably mean that men are advantaged. Masculinist cultures can be counter-productive or even destructive for men, reinforcing the point that men too have gender identities which expose them to risks. This is shown by the excess mortality of adult males under conditions in which economic stress undermines the norm of the “male breadwinner”, a role closely interwoven with men’s sense of identity across many cultures. One example is provided by the high rates of suicide among male cotton farmers in Andhra Pradesh, India, in 2001 as a result of indebtedness.23 Another is the excess mortality of adult males in Central and Eastern Europe after 1989 due to stress-related health risks and alcoholism associated with unemployment and other adverse labour market changes.24 While men are the main perpetrators of violence, both domestic and public, they are also the main victims of violence outside the domestic sphere.

The emphasis on women’s subordination does not imply a static picture of unchanging gender relations: rather, it is important to acknowledge that gender hierarchies constantly change. Current processes of social change and their intersections with policies show that while some forms of gender inequality have dissolved and women have been able to enjoy new opportunities and freedoms, other forms of subordination and new constraints have emerged. As women have gained access to education and paid work, won the right to vote and stand for political office, and have achieved some control over their sexuality and fertility, they have also had to contend with segmented labour markets, exposure to workplace discrimination, greater personal insecurity, and increasingly commercialized sexuality. In the same vein, anthropological research on youth cultures demonstrates the ways in which gender roles are constantly recreated by simultaneously breaking with past models and reproducing some traditional attributes of these roles, such as male aggressiveness.

**CURRENT POLICY AGENDAS: IMPLICATIONS FOR GENDER EQUALITY**

**The rediscovery of “the social”**

The political and policy context of recent years has presented some new opportunities and challenges for those concerned with gender equality and women’s rights. In response to escalating popular discontent, as well as internal and external criticism from leading economists, international financial institutions (IFIs) have shown themselves willing to give social and political concerns renewed attention. The rediscovery of these areas of policy concern is expressed under indicative conceptual headings such as “participation”, “social capital” and “good governance”. The change of direction was particularly evident in the World Bank’s 2001 World Development Report: Attacking Poverty, which identified “social risk management” as the most sustainable basis for poverty reduction.25 The “good governance” agenda ostensibly seeks to make development more participatory and more responsive to the needs of marginalized groups, including women.

However, while this may have led to a degree of mutual accommodation between the IFIs and their critics and rendered the Washington Consensus more palatable, many of its central policy tenets remain in place. The dominant policy package—known as the “post-Washington Consensus”—retains the core elements of economic orthodoxy: trade and financial liberalization, and tight monetary and fiscal policies, while adding the “good governance” agenda of democracy, participation, decentralization and community ownership. It
would be more accurate to speak of a new “moment” in the neoliberal agenda than of a new paradigm.26

There are therefore important continuities, as well as some innovations in the current policy agenda, and it is in this light that some of the recent policy responses to social distress, such as the World Bank’s Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), need to be seen. Behind the apparent consensus forged by a shared vocabulary of “poverty” and “social protection”, conflicting understandings of social policy continue to vie for attention. These are based on different values, priorities, and understandings of state responsibility and of the responsibilities of different individuals and social groups to each other. In the social risk management framework, the state is charged only with providing social safety nets for risk coping, as well as risk management instruments where the private sector fails. This approach is effectively a continuation of the earlier policy of minimal safety nets, and overrides equality agendas.

An alternative view of social policy is premised on the centrality of redistribution, equality and universal social provision. This is not merely an abstract proposition but is grounded in the historical experiences of building the welfare state in many European countries. Recent adaptations and reforms may have diluted those principles but they have not fundamentally overturned them. The goals of inclusion and universal social provision are also being pursued in some developing countries, where there has been considerable public debate about social responsibility and where an ideological commitment to social equality remains intact. Despite glaring social inequalities in countries like Brazil, South Africa and Chile, efforts are being made to extend social protection mechanisms to people in rural areas and in informal work situations.

“Good governance” reforms and the democratic deficit

An emphasis on “good governance” has been an integral part of the Washington and the post-Washington Consensus. But the governance agenda has had both a mixed reception and a mixed record in those countries where it has driven donor and government policy. The existence of formal democratic rules and the protection of civil and political rights are preconditions of virtually any kind of critical engagement with the state by social forces pressing for reform. Women’s movements are no exception. Women’s mobilization has been essential to the success of many pro-democracy movements, especially when conventional channels for popular expression (political parties, trade unions) have been closed to political activists. However, mobilization in opposition to authoritarian rule has not always secured women representation in formal institutional politics after the transition, especially where transitions have been sudden, or are the outcome of negotiations between exclusive or elite groups.

While many countries have now formally become democracies with established institutions of representative government, the degree to which democracy has been consolidated varies, along with its institutional forms. Even where elections have been held, political parties often remain elitist and weakly institutionalized; mechanisms for popular participation are not embedded in society, and the implementation of law and order rarely succeeds in protecting the civil rights accorded to citizens, especially those who are socially marginalized. There are increasing concerns about the resurgence of semi-authoritarian states, “soft dictatorships” and “masculine democracies”.27 Even where high-level political commitment to women’s rights exists—in terms of constitutional provisions and key policy statements—the translation of these provisions into actual government policy, targeted spending, and effective procedures for bureaucrats and service delivery agents is far from guaranteed.

The connection between political commitments and effective policy implementation defines what is meant by “governance”. The difficulties that women have experienced in promoting gender-equality legislation, and in seeing it passed into law and implemented, would indicate that women have a keen interest in seeing the capacity and accountability of the state strengthened. The fact that governance reforms are now high on the agenda of many multilateral and bilateral donor agencies therefore seems to offer an important entry point for addressing gender-specific capacity and accountability failures. Ways of doing this include addressing gender biases in public expenditure management systems, enhancing gender equality in the...
staffing of public institutions such as the civil service or the judiciary, and facilitating rule of law reforms that secure women’s access to assets and ensure that instances of abuse and violence against them can be prosecuted.

Contrasting and contested interpretations

A broad understanding of a “good governance” agenda would embrace political liberalization, participation and human rights, and address problems of social inequality as part of a fundamental commitment to democracy. Such an agenda would encompass the kinds of issues of state legitimacy, capacity and accountability that social movements and women’s movements have confronted for decades. With such an agenda in mind, governance reforms with their aim of enhancing the capacity of the state and making it more accountable to its citizens have been welcomed in many parts of the world. Critics, however, point out that although governance reforms can and should address issues of government legitimacy and the public participation of socially excluded groups, they have in fact been dominated by a much narrower preoccupation. This centres on the “sound” management of the economy along neoliberal lines, and on expanding private property rights in order to support economic activity. When these are the main parameters of “good governance”, gender equality has typically been excluded from the concerns of the reformers and from their reforms.

Some of the reforms may indeed have very adverse implications for women. The case of land tenure reform, which is of critical importance both to the investment environment and to the livelihoods of rural people, illustrates the problem. In much of sub-Saharan Africa, for example, land is held and used under plural legal arrangements. The fixation with the market advantages of formal titling and individual ownership rights, however, risks eroding women’s socially sanctioned claims to land, as historical evidence from countries such as Kenya illustrates.28

Decentralization as a forward and backward step

Good governance reforms have also encouraged the decentralization of political power to local government bodies, municipalities and village councils. The emphasis on bringing government “closer to people” resonates with the “local democracy” initiatives that many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and social movements have long championed. In some countries women’s representation in local government has been facilitated through quotas, which have given large numbers of women their first experience of political office: the 30 per cent quota for women in the Panchayati Raj institutions in India is the best-known example.

Once in office, however, the willingness and capacity of women representatives to press for gender-equality initiatives is critically dependent on the support that they receive from women’s movements and NGOs. In very unequal societies, there is always the risk that elites, usually men, will “capture” the available power in replacement or new institutions, reducing the prospect that women’s presence in political office will significantly influence programmes and spending patterns. Where decentralization additionally involves conferring power on “traditional” authorities such as tribal elders or religious councils, the invocation of tradition and custom may be deeply inimical to women’s interests. This raises fundamental questions about the extent to which local government bodies will be based on democratic principles and practices, and will themselves contribute to the consolidation of democracy or its reverse.

Hence, while the recent donor attention to the question of “good governance” is to be welcomed, much depends on how it is interpreted. A great deal depends on whether the democratization of politics and the participation of marginalized social groups are seen as integral to reform objectives and are embraced in institutional change; and on whether reducing social and gender inequalities are among the core principles guiding the programme of state institutional transformation.

The resurgence of identity politics

A phenomenon to emerge with particular force in recent years is that of “identity politics”. The term refers to those movements that mobilize around ethnic, racial and religious identities, and often contest long-standing histories of marginalization and discrimination by mainstream institutions and cultures. In
response to such claims many states have put in place constitutional and legal provisions and institutional mechanisms to accommodate ethnic, racial and other diversities.

While there have been tensions between some versions of identity-based claims and notions of gender equality (the latter based on universalist principles), these are not necessarily irreconcilable, at least in principle. For example, international legislation granting rights to indigenous peoples and their cultures (ILO Convention 169) stipulates that customary law should be respected when it does not conflict with universal human rights. This formulation has been incorporated into a number of state constitutions, especially in Latin America in the 1990s. In practice, however, women who are active in these movements often find it difficult to get a hearing for gender equality concerns, an experience that resonates with women who have been active in nationalist movements.

More radical attacks on human rights and women’s rights agendas have also resulted from the resurgence of religious identities that include the assertion of “traditional” gender roles and systems of authority that intrinsically violate women’s rights. The most extreme example of women’s oppression, designated “gender cleansing” by some commentators, was by the Taliban regime in Afghanistan. This is not the only case of its kind: the Islamist movement in Iran that captured state power in 1979 based its grievances against the monarchy and the United States, and its own system of government (the “governance of the jurisprudence” or velayat faqih), on a highly patriarchal interpretation of Islam. Subsequent social and gender restructuring led to state and domestic violence against women, violated women’s rights with impunity, and had a lasting impact on gender relations and society. However, since women are a visible political force in the country, both as individuals and as a social group, doctrinaire positions on women’s rights and many early Islamization measures have been renegotiated or reformed through the efforts of women’s rights advocates both inside and outside parliament.

Some of these faith-based movements gather members from among those feeling humiliated and powerless in the face of unacceptable behaviour by their own state or by foreign powers. Grievances and dislocations are also fuelled by development policies and outcomes that exacerbate people’s experience of poverty, inequality and social exclusion. A deeper analysis of these movements would include a critique of “modernity” and an examination of backlashes against Western, consumerist and libertarian ideas which contribute to their ideological predispositions. From a gender perspective, their appeal to women also needs to be probed: women are visible among both the membership and the leadership of many such movements even though they are not incorporated into formal power structures. Women have been publicly active in some of them, and have assumed roles that violate traditional gender norms, for example the militant Hindu nationalist women involved in inciting anti-Muslim pogroms in Gujarat, India, in 2002. Along with their conspicuous public engagement, a feature of women’s involvement in these movements is their support for reforms that restrict women’s rights and subjugate them to men in the name of religion and tradition.

The “traditions” and religious doctrines typically invoked by some of these movements may be neither traditional nor authentic, but instead have been recently coined to serve political ends. Some women’s rights advocates have therefore set out to provide alternative readings of religious texts supportive of gender-equalitarian practices. This has been one of the main thrusts of feminist activism in the Muslim world, where examining the rights of women under Shari’a law has been an acceptable terrain for discussion in some settings. However, when religious authorities become the spokespeople for nations and ethnic communities, and where no guarantees exist for equality, democracy or human rights protection within the political context, there is very little scope for contestation and dialogue.

As is the case with Christianity and other religions, belief in Islam has been associated with a range of state forms and legal interpretations; modern Islamist movements are not uniformly hostile to women’s rights. The moderate Justice and Development Party of Turkey is a case in point. In November 2002, the party acceded to power amidst fears that this would herald a retreat to conservative religious politics. However, the new government seems to have embraced secular democracy and rejected the orthodox interpretations of Islam practised by some of its supporters. In a move that was welcomed by many
women’s rights advocates in Turkey, the government’s Directorate of Religious Affairs instructed the nation’s imams (spiritual leaders) to turn their spiritual guidance to the arena of human rights and women’s rights. Worshippers in different parts of the country are being told that “honour killings”, in which men murder female relatives suspected of tarnishing the family name, are a sin as well as against the law." Such messages conveyed by the imams can “reach people the human rights advocates often cannot—the 15 million men in Turkey who attend services every Friday”.

FORGING LINKS BETWEEN ECONOMIC POLICY AND GENDER EQUALITY

Securing livelihoods and creating an enabling economic environment are necessary preconditions for attaining gender equality and women’s rights. But what is an “enabling economic environment”? To a significant degree, women’s ability to achieve parity with men in access to resources and influence, and in well-being, depends on the macroeconomic policies and development strategies on which their livelihoods and ways of life, and those of their families and communities, ultimately depend. As emerges from the evidence presented in the following chapters of this report, policies aimed at trade and financial liberalization and global economic integration have profound impacts on the lives of women, and on those of their partners and other family members. A world in which the dominant policy model tends to deepen social and economic inequality and reinforce marginalization; in which redistribution has no place; and in which governments compromise the interests of their citizens to accommodate global forces, is not going to be a world that secures gender equality.

For this reason, women’s rights activists have increasingly been devoting more of their attention and energies to the larger structures of global power, and the evolution of problems of global injustice relating to macroeconomic trends: the implications for socially disadvantaged and discriminated groups of unregulated transnational capital flows, debt service payments, trade liberalization, inequitable trade patterns and the shrinkage of public resource expenditures on welfare needs. One example is the attempt to influence trade negotiations at the global level, which has required transnational feminist solidarity and organizing, as a complement to women’s collective action at the national level.

These links between global economic justice and women’s rights have been central to women’s global campaigns for sexual and reproductive health and rights. Transnational activism has been given impetus by the continuing concern over the harsh social impacts of neoliberal policies; the emergence of large transnational coalitions demonstrating against the WTO, and at G-8 summits and IFI gatherings; and the leadership of Southern women’s groups whose work for sexual and reproductive health and rights has consistently been linked to a strong economic justice platform as set out in box 1.1.

Box 1.1 Sexual and reproductive health are human rights

Rights cannot be divorced from needs. Reproductive and sexual health and other basic human needs—education, sanitation, clean water, nutrition—are equally important and interdependent; all are human rights. Especially for women, good pre-natal and obstetric care, safe contraception, and other aspects of health are inseparable from such basic amenities as reliable transportation, hygienic conditions and clean water. At the same time, their rights to liberty, security of the person and development are unattainable without comprehensive, accessible and affordable reproductive and sexual health services and the freedom to make decisions about their fertility and sexuality. These rights form a seamless web, and all are grounded in basic human needs. To rank them denies the basic realities of women’s lives, especially for poor women.

Source: Excerpt from flier, circulated at the UNGASS for ICPD+5, March 1999, by Women’s Coalition for ICPD, made up of 80 NGOs from around the world, cited in Petchesky 2003:15.
Yet creating the political alliances—with governments, NGOs and social movements—to help bring the interdependence between global economic justice and gender justice to the awareness of policy makers, and then actually to realize gender-sensitive policy change, is no easy task. In attempting to make an impact on global rule-making, feminist activists need not only to bring on board those governments and global institutions that are redesigning the architecture of the international political economy, but also to enlist the support of mainstream activists who are not always attentive to gender equality concerns. Moreover, the global political environment in which economic justice and gender justice have to be negotiated has been less favourable in recent years. In the mid-1990s the Vatican and some Islamic country delegations united against the adoption of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Programme of Action, and maintained persistent opposition to gender-equality proposals through succeeding conferences. While conservative religious groups were most vehement in their opposition to abortion and same sex partnership, these positions were symptomatic of their core objection to gender equality itself. These tensions came to the fore in the “Plus Five” reviews for the Cairo and Beijing conferences. Despite such tensions over women’s rights, considerable advances were nevertheless possible on sexual and reproductive health and rights during the 1990s because of the limited control over state power by religious fundamentalists. Both the Cairo Plus Five and Beijing Plus Five reviews ended with the gains of Cairo and Beijing intact, and with further progress on some key fronts.

Confronting complex realities

Such positive outcomes were however hard won, and many women’s organizations consider that in the current international climate, many of the gains won in the UN conferences, summits and special sessions of the 1990s look fragile. Human rights and women’s agendas and the entire multilateral framework within which the gains of the 1990s were made have been weakened by the current global political crisis occasioned by terrorism, militarism, the war on Iraq and hostility to unilateralism. Human rights agendas have come under pressure not only in countries where democratic institutions remain weak, but also in the heartlands of democracy. In both North America and Europe there are concerns about the rights of ethnic minorities and immigrants, especially Muslim minorities. Fundamentalist extremism and terrorist acts have served to reinforce suspicion of Muslim populations in particular, who may be simplistically and erroneously branded as uniformly hostile to the West and to democratic values, especially in regard to gender issues.

There is, however, no “clash of civilizations” on women’s rights and gender issues between the “neoconservatives” and religious conservatives. The last few years have seen the most powerful nation in the world join, even at times replace, the Vatican in global negotiations as the key strategist against the women’s agenda on sexual and reproductive health and rights. Under the 2000-2004 administration, the United States slashed aid budgets supporting contraception, and promoted abstinence and greater parental control over adolescents as the way to contain sexual freedom and the HIV/AIDS pandemic.

Governments have not, in the main, caved in to such pressures, as emerged in regional and subregional discussions around ICPD Plus Ten and Beijing Plus Ten. But there are fissures and tensions among those who have resisted such pressures. The attempt to create a strong bloc out of Southern governments to confront the economic North in trade negotiations gives hope of greater global economic justice; but within the new alliance there is no common ground on sexual and reproductive health and rights, and indeed positions vary considerably. Women’s organizations recognize that it is only by keeping up the pressure and by participating in the largely gender-blind arenas where global economic justice is debated that they have any chance of forging links between the issues of economic justice and gender justice.
WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS: WALKING A TIGHTROPE TO CHANGE

If gender justice is not to slip down the agenda yet again, women’s movements will require new alliances with both governmental institutions and social movements. Working with governments means enlarging the scope for representing women’s interests in all areas of policy making, including economic policy. While gender analysis reveals the ways in which economic policies are gendered, and women’s movements can demand that policies that disadvantage women be changed, the arenas in which these policies are debated have rarely included significant representation of women’s interests. Getting recognition of the need for a gender perspective in fora where macroeconomic discussion takes place is difficult, but a first step has been taken with the successful lobbying for gender budgets.

Alliances with new and old social movements are also essential, but require careful negotiation. One of the promising developments of the 1990s was the emergence of new forms of organizing among women workers in the informal economy, as well as greater responsiveness among some older trade unions to women informal workers. Not all organizations in the movement for global economic justice, however, are sensitive, interested and attentive to the gender-related aspects of the issues they address. For their part, women’s movements that have not considered broader social or economic justice issues may be limited in their efficacy. If progress towards the goal of gender equality has been uneven, this is partly because some of the obstacles to achieving it lie in the character and tactics of the forces that seek it, even while others lie in the structures and practices through which gender inequalities are reproduced. The key question on the table for discussion is how can women’s organizations simultaneously tackle women’s subordination and unequal access to resources, and confront the broader processes and policies that entrench inequalities between and within nation states?

UNRISD hopes that this report will help provide some answers to this question by casting light on some of the processes—economic, political and social—that link gender and economic justice. In this way it should contribute to the debate over how gender equality might best be advanced. In recent decades, the world has become more unequal as neoliberal macroeconomic policies have tightened their hold, and previously accepted values such as equality and redistribution have systematically been sidelined. Many observers see prevailing policies—trade and financial liberalization, tight monetary and fiscal policies, market-based entitlements to welfare—as the main obstacles in meeting the objectives that were agreed upon in the global conferences of the 1990s, including Beijing. Placing the various elements of the neoliberal reform programme under a gender lens, and examining their implications for equality and justice, is the task set out for subsequent chapters in this report.
Notes

1 Therborn 2004.
4 The case of China is controversial because its high rates of economic
growth and decline in poverty have been the outcome of heterodox
macroeconomic policies (for example, China maintains a non-
convertible currency and state control over its banking system) rather
than the standard prescriptions of the international financial institu-
tions. It is problematic therefore to use global evidence on poverty that is
biased by poverty reduction in China to defend the orthodox macro-
economic policy agenda.
5 Because the female human being is more biologically robust, there
should be a higher number of women than men in any population.
However, in certain societies where son preference is marked, human
intervention in the form of girl neglect favours the survival of males
(Klasen and Wink 2003; Das Gupta and Bhat 1998; Jackson and
Rao 2004).
7 ILO 2002b.
8 Milanovic 2003; Wade 2001; Cornia et al. 2004.
9 Elson 2002.
10 Bangura 1994.
11 Bryce 1999b.
12 Polanyi 1957.
13 Hewitt de Alcántara 1993.
14 UN Secretary-General 2002.
15 UN Secretary-General 2002; Rehn and Sirleaf 2002; Commission on
16 Caldeira 2000.
17 UNDESA produced The World Survey on the Role of Women in
Development in 1985, 1989, 1994 and 1999; the UN General
Assembly has requested that this continue to be updated on a quin-
quennial basis. The Human Development Report Office of the
UNDP devoted its 1995 Human Development Report to gender
issues. UNIFEM produced Progress of the World’s Women in 2000
and in 2002 (volumes I and II), and the World Bank brought out
a Policy Research Report entitled Engendering Development in