

At the United Nations, a push for true gender equality

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UN Women executive director Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka discusses why stereotypes and prejudices can't go ignored in the fight for greater women's rights.

In September, the 193 member countries of the United Nations ratified 17 Sustainable Development Goals. All have some focus on progress for women, and 1 specifically calls for gender equality and full empowerment for all women and girls. A major force behind these objectives is UN Women's executive director, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, who has long made women and girls a priority in her public-service career, which includes being deputy president of South Africa and coordinator of the World YWCA. In this interview with McKinsey's Mekala Krishnan, Mlambo-Ngcuka describes why progress for women has been slow and how government and the private sector can act aggressively to achieve equality by 2030. An extended and edited transcript of Mlambo-Ngcuka's remarks follows.

Why gender equality matters

Gender equality is very important both as a human-rights imperative and also as a means for economic development. Women's rights are human rights. All of the violations of women's rights that we are familiar with are actually violations of human rights.

If you talk about gender-based violence, if you talk about inequality in pay, if you talk about women's underrepresentation in decision making, all of those are fundamental rights that are just as important to women as they are to men.

When women's economic rights and economic participation are hindered, women become poor citizens. Their overall development is compromised. And, in fact, development and well-being of nations are significantly compromised. The world's GDP would be much greater if women were involved in the economy to the same extent as men are involved.

Yet, progress in gender equality has been very uneven. In the past 20 years since we began monitoring what has happened since Beijing¹ in 1995, countries created institutions and machinery to address gender equality. But these institutions are hopelessly funded. Some of them are supposed to fight against child marriages. Some are supposed to promote and ensure girls are attending school. But without proper funding, you do not get the kind of impact

¹ In 2015, the United Nations marked the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, which was signed at the fourth UN World Conference for Women.

that you need. There has been progress, yes, but a fundamental shift in gender equality? No. We don't have that yet.

One of the barriers that I think is a big elephant in the room is prejudice against women and stereotypes that are there in every society, whether in the most developed country or in a less developed country.

How to effect change

To address gender equality, you need a variety of stakeholders. Government clearly is a critical stakeholder. You obviously need civil society, which has always been a critical player in addressing all kinds of issues that have to do with rights, including the rights of women.

You need young people. You need the media. Business is an important stakeholder because business runs the economies of the world. So you need business to embrace the issue of women's economic participation, removing of the glass ceiling, increasing representation of women in decision making. In some cases, when government passes legislation that has to do with the economic well-being of women, that legislation is supposed to be implemented in the private sector. If you do not have higher consciousness in the private sector and corporate citizenship, the private sector can just tick the box and not implement the legislation in spirit and letter. And then, government does not monitor and enforce. So in the end, the legislation does not make a difference. In many countries you've got legislation to protect women from sexual harassment at work, "sextortions," as we call it in some other countries. You need the CEOs and the captains of industry to be concerned about the well-being of women—not even to wait for legislation—and to make sure that in their companies women are not exposed in any sexual harassment.

And of course, equal pay, to me, is really the most important action for the private sector to lead with. If the private sector could ensure pay equality, that would be awesome.

The role men in leadership can play

In our HeForShe campaign, which targets men as role models, men in leadership are being asked to use their power to spur significant changes in their environment. If as a HeForShe participant—a man who stands for gender equality—you are able to challenge your company to provide businesses to women-owned enterprises, you begin to engender your value chain and bring in more women into active supply of goods and services to the company.

It's very important for us that when a man becomes a HeForShe and is in a position of authority, they change things in such a way that even if they leave that institution, the impact remains with the institution.

As part of HeForShe, one company has decided that it will focus on addressing unequal pay. Another company wants to address representation of women at the senior level. Another company will address the issue of positive masculinity across its workforce. And we require HeForShe participants to share the information about their progress, so that other companies,

other individuals under institutions, can learn from those experiences. We intend to document this and share it widely.

Meeting the UN's development goals

The Sustainable Development Goals represent one of the most comprehensive agreements that nations have ever signed since 1945, when they adopted the charter. In each of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, there's an indicator that focuses on aspects that impact women. We also have a goal that is dedicated to women. This gives us a programmatic possibility to engage with countries. Because once countries sign on the dotted line and adopt the Sustainable Development Goals, it means that they are making a commitment. But we know that making that commitment doesn't mean that it's going to happen. These goals still need to be domesticated, and this gives us an opportunity to then go country by country to follow up.

It's not enough to just talk about women's economic empowerment. What are you going to do? Land access for women? Access to credit? That kind of concrete message and programmatic interventions become very important. We're also giving time frames in terms of gender equality. We are calling for countries to aim to achieve substantive gender equality by 2030, which means that by 2030, we shouldn't be talking about unequal pay. We should have addressed violence against women significantly. We should, by 2030, have paternity leave as a given for men. Once we do that, we're then addressing unpaid care work and we are redistributing unpaid care work in the house.

Right now, for example, in politics, only 22 percent of women are parliamentarians. That's a global average. It was 11 percent in 1995. That's so slow. That is so slow. We need to get to 50 percent, because even though we've been talking about 30 percent, that number does not reflect gender parity. Women are more than 50 percent. Because if we talk about 30 percent for women, it means that we are providing 70 percent affirmative action for men. And we are entrenching it. □

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