

Human Rights Approaches to Eliminating Poverty

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In September 2015 the world will recommitment to a series of *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*. The first proposed goal is to end poverty in all its forms¹. This expands on the first *Millennium Development Goal (MDGs)* to halve the number of people living in extreme poverty².

In the period between 2000 and 2015, 'the global poverty rate at \$1.25 a day fell... to less than half the 1990 rate', but there are still '1.2 billion people living in extreme poverty.'³ This a profound challenge because not only does reducing extreme poverty requires a sustained political commitment but also because the causes and consequences of poverty are complex and cross-cutting and defy easy solutions. This is a crucial time to pause and reflect on how best to tailor development policies and human rights approaches to eliminating poverty.

There is a growing awareness of the relationship between poverty and inequality. However, there is a shift in the nature of this inequality. Traditionally poverty has been understood as an issue predominantly of lower income countries⁴.

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New research reveals that due to an emerging middle class in China and India 'global income inequality is charting a modest decline' but income and wealth inequalities within the state are increasing.⁵ This means it is important to pay attention to wealth inequalities within the state. While there have been proposals to re-examine tax structures, redistribution policies and national governance, it also important to assess the relationship between status inequalities and poverty. For example, Canada ranks 11th in the UN's *Human Development Index*⁶ but at the same time in two Canadian provinces, Manitoba and Saskatchewan,

62 and 64 per cent of First Nations children live in poverty compared with just 15 and 16 per cent among non-indigenous children.⁷ It is necessary to appreciate how poverty and disadvantage tracks onto to identity characteristics and how this results in income and wealth disparities in the state. To that end, this article examines the connection between status inequalities and proposes tentative solutions on how these challenges can be addressed so as to ensure the SDGs achieve their goal of ending poverty.

Part of the challenge in achieving the SDGs is to recognise that poverty is not a neutral phenomenon. The empirical evidence demonstrates that there is a strong relationship between poverty and the traditional status grounds of discrimination. The UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights explains that 'discrimination and exclusion are among the major causes and consequences of poverty.'⁸ Women, children, older persons, persons with disabilities, migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, internally displaced persons, minorities, persons living with HIV/AIDS and indigenous people are more vulnerable to poverty and experience greater challenges in accessing, controlling and enjoying economic resources.⁹ All these forms of intersecting discrimination and poverty are pernicious, however this article uses gender as an example of the challenges of addressing the relationship between inequality and poverty. Gendered social norms and cultural attitudes that are based on the idea of the inferiority women and the superiority of men or on the stereotyped roles of women and men cause and contribute to women's poverty. For example, poor households may be reluctant to invest limited resources in the education or health needs of girls and women. Prejudices



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and stereotypes on the role and value of women underpin the low valuation of work traditionally assigned to women, their role in reproduction, their disproportionate responsibility for care giving and their exclusion from public life, education, credit and property. This perpetuates a vicious cycle of poverty, powerlessness, social exclusion, inequality and discrimination which is different from men who live in poverty.

Development policies and human rights solutions need to account for these different gendered experiences. States and donors need to ensure that social and economic benefits not only address poverty but also further substantive gender equality. There are various measures that can be taken to ensure that poverty and inequality are concurrently addressed. Non-contributory social protection schemes and statistical measurements are often based on head of the household. This can obscure women's poverty within the household and result in women not having access to financial resources. In turn, this contributes to women's dependency on men and furthers the gendered power imbalances in the home. Social protection needs to be targeted to enhancing norms that empower women and enhance their autonomy. Thus, social benefits should be provided to women absence any relationship with men. Moreover, social assistance rates need to cognizant of the fact that women disproportionately have the financial and time burden of caring for children and the elderly. In times of the cutbacks for public services women are increasing having to perform this care-work. Therefore, social assistance rates need must take into account the time and resources women expend in care work. At the same time, social assistance should not essentialise women as primary care givers and needs to work towards achieving equality between men and women in care-giving. Furthermore, there is a growing trend in many countries to provide social assistance grants on the basis of fulfilling certain conditions.¹⁰ There is one argument that these programs provide women with independence and shift the power balance in the home because women are given greater control over the household's resources.¹¹ However, these programs 'may create an unnecessary burden on women while perpetuating traditional notions of gender roles within the family.'¹² These types of conditions can increase women's time poverty which limits the amount of time they have to invest in training and employment opportunities.¹³ Therefore, these conditions need to be carefully reviewed to

ensure they do not re-entrench gender inequality.

In eliminating poverty in all its forms it is necessary to understand how disadvantage tracks onto to status based characteristics, not just in relation to gender but other markers of identity. If states, development policies, human rights, civil society organisations and other relevant stakeholders appreciate and take steps to address the nexus between inequality and poverty the SDGs hold real promise in eliminating poverty in all its forms.

¹ *Report of the Open Working Group of the General Assembly on Sustainable Development Goals* (Aug 2014) A/68/970.

² *Millennium Development Goals: Goal 1 Eradicate Extreme Poverty* <<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/poverty.shtml>>.

³ *ibid*.

⁴ A. Sumner, 'Global Poverty and the 'New Bottom Billion': What If Three-Quarters of the World's Poor Live in Middle-Income Countries?' *Institute of Development Studies Working Paper* (September 2010).

⁵ Branko Milanovic, 'National vices, global virtue: Is the world becoming more equal?' *globalinequality blog* (22 December 2014) <<http://glineq.blogspot.co.uk/2014/12/national-vices-global-virtue-is-world.html?spref=tw>>.

⁶ UNDP, 'Human Development Report 2013: Canada' <<http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/Country-Profiles/CAN.pdf>>.

⁷ Amber Hildebrandt, 'Half of First Nations Children Live in Poverty' *CBC* (19 June 2019) <<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/half-of-first-nations-children-live-in-poverty-1.1324232>>.

⁸ *UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, 'Final draft of the guiding principles on extreme poverty and human rights'* (2012) A/HRC/21/39 [8].

⁹ *ibid*. See also, See World Bank, 'Voice and Agency: Empowering Women and Girls for Shared Prosperity' (World Bank, 2014) and World Bank, 'The World Development Report: Gender Equality and Development' (World Bank, 2012).

¹⁰ *UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, 'Cash transfer programmes'* (2008) A/HRC/11/9 [70].

¹¹ *ibid* [68].

¹² *ibid* [71].

¹³ *UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, 'Women's rights and the right to food'* (2013) A/HRC/22/50 [2], [41]-[42].

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