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A human rights approach to poverty reduction and gender equality

- Although average national indicators are known to hide important disparities and realities, they exercise undue influence on policy-making. An average is nothing more than an abstract concept created to help us understand complex realities more easily. It is important to keep in mind that averages do not exist in reality, but only in the human mind. The moment one ceases to realise that the average is an abstract concept, one falls victim to the fallacy of ‘misplaced concreteness’. Unwarranted conclusions are drawn about concrete realities — but they are based on deduction from abstractions, not on real observations.
- An example of ‘misplaced concreteness’ is when average income is considered as a good proxy for well being. First, GDP measures only a limited range of welfare dimensions that involve market transactions; they do not include most of the care economy, which predominantly involves women. Second, average household income is an abstraction for most women who have little control over how household income is used. Third, the rate of economic growth for a country is an average indicator that hides enormous differences among groups of households and individuals - including changes in opposite directions. Its distribution is likely to be strongly influenced by the distribution of human, physical and financial capital. Hence, average growth rates of, say, 5 % does not guarantee that poor women will see their income rise by a similar rate, if at all.
- The risk of ‘misplaced concreteness’ also applies to gender analysis. In Côte d'Ivoire, for instance, a series of household surveys showed that primary school enrolment was determined by two major factors: the socio-economic status of the household and

- The 1997 Human Development Report points out that not all countries show evidence that supports different poverty levels between male- and female-headed households. A recent World Bank report on rural poverty in China states that ‘available evidence does not suggest that women are greatly over-represented among the poor’. Such statements - that are based on aggregate averages - illustrate the risk of ‘misplaced concreteness’. The reality is that gender discrimination does not occur indiscriminately.
- The example mentioned earlier about enrolment trends in Côte d’Ivoire suggests that gender is more a liability to poor girls than to their non-poor counterparts. Similarly, evidence shows that women gradually become more vulnerable to HIV infection when the pandemic spreads; but this trend mostly concerns illiterate young women, not all women. Education emerges as a potent ‘vaccine’ to help avoid HIV infection.
- Generalisations about gender gaps overlook these realities. Documenting such important nuances will not only make the gender case more compelling and convincing, it will also point towards appropriate policy actions and programme interventions required to narrow gender gaps. Policy analysis and gender budgeting, therefore, must go beyond averages to avoid the fallacy of ‘misplaced concreteness’.
- There is no universally defined concept of poverty. The poor are not a homogeneous category; the causes of their poverty are not uniform. Data collection and disaggregation to document poverty among women is essential for formulation of poverty strategies.
- Gender equality is not a desirable by-product of development, but a core development goal in its own right. Gender discrimination is the source of endemic poverty and low

- New macro-economic thinking must incorporate the care economy as an economic output by drawing upon the interaction between the private sector commodity economy, public service economy and the household and community care economy. UNDP estimates that the value of the invisible work done by women is \$11 trillion dollars per annum and that the sum of the global output would be almost 50% greater if this work was included in the measurement of the economy.
- In Mexico, in 1995, women spent an average 28 hours a week on unpaid work in the household and 33 hours per week on employment outside the home. Men on the

civil society has a critical role to play in this area. The initiative has also strengthened advocacy around gender equality.

- One of the main concerns is that it is often difficult to track budgetary allocations for social services. The 20/20 initiative has provided more insight into budgetary allocations for basic social services and constraints associated with restructuring the national budget allocations. Such constraints, for example, lie in the area of defense spending, tax collection and debt burdens.
- Reduction of public money for basic social services and the related introduction of users' fees have especially affected the poor and particularly women. The impact of user fees is essentially gender biased resulting in decreased services used by women in girls (as in the Nigeria example of women resorting to traditional medicine) and further perpetuates gender inequalities.
- Women, as demonstrated in household budget surveys, have different priorities than men and are ready to bear the cost of user fees when necessary by sacrificing personal nutrition and health. However, their financial ability to do so is even more limited than that of men due to income discrimination in the household. User fees have also resulted in decreased enrolment of girls in school since the choice has to be made between the girl and the boy in the family, a traditional gender biased choice of parents. User fees for health have dramatically reduced the demand for antenatal care. Therefore, there is no substitution for the state's responsibility to supply basic social services viewed as the basic human rights and equal to men and women
- Analysis of national budgets and fiscal policies at the international level can help track and monitor whether countries are meeting their international commitments, made at UN international conferences, on social and economic goals.

Gender, Poverty and Trade

- UNDP has distributed at this panel its recent publication on **Trade, Gender and Poverty** (October 2001) written by Dr Nilufer Cagatay.
- The publication argues that the “success” of trade policies need to be evaluated not through market-based criteria per se, but in terms of whether such policies support and promote desired social outcomes such as equity, social inclusion, freedom from

poverty, development of human capabilities, realisation of internationally accepted human rights and democratic forms of governance in an environmentally sustainable manner. In short, this implies a people-centered approach to trade policies and the current world trade regime.

- From a policy perspective, the paper lends support to the idea that there is a two-way relationship between international trade policy and human development in general and gender based-inequalities in particular. On the one hand, trade policies produce different outcomes for men and women because of their different positions in the economy and society, in addition to their differential access to and command over resources. On the other hand, gender-based inequalities also affect trade policy outcomes. The precise implications of this will differ between countries and will depend on the level and pace of development of a country as well as the type of economy and sector. It is this dynamic, two-way relationship which should make gender analysis an essential component of trade policy formulation if we wish to contribute to the enhancement of human development and poverty eradication.
- The paper also argues that trade liberalization and export orientated policies in developing countries increase women's share in paid employment without a corresponding decrease in their household and care responsibilities, contributing to their "triple burden." Moreover, export orientated policies compel women to enter labour markets under much lower wages and working conditions, often making this a country's key 'competitive advantage' in the international arena.
- The paper also argues that the reduced expenditure to social services in governments' budgets as a result of trade liberalization which induced reductions in trade tax revenues, negatively affects women disproportionately to men, as women are forced to make up for the reduction in education, health care, clean water etc., by increasing their unpaid household work and care labour. Through these and other channels, gender insensitive trade liberalization policies are likely to raise women's burdens resulting in increased human poverty for both women and society as a whole (through, for example, decreased nutritional intake for other members of the household, especially children).
- From an economic growth and efficiency perspective, gender-based inequalities in control over resources such as land and credit constrain the output response and export capacity of the overall economy and thus limit the potential advantages that liberalized trade policy can provide to a society. Gender inequalities in education, health and access to farm inputs also often reduces output, productivity and growth

rates, resulting in lower export performance. Furthermore, lower wages for women as