



# Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR) and Women: A Fact Sheet

Economic, social and cultural rights have a particular significance due to the disproportionate effect of poverty and social and cultural marginalization on women. Today, women represent approximately 70% of the 1.2 billion people living in poverty throughout the world. Inequality with respect to the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights is a central fact of women's lives in every country in the world, and is a central manifestation of women's lesser social, economic and political power. Ongoing inequality in the sphere of economic, social and cultural rights contributes to the continuing subordination of women and makes them especially vulnerable to violence, exploitation and other forms of abuse.

## International Human Rights Standards

- **The Universal Declaration of Human Rights** recognizes the right to work, the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to housing, the right to food, the right to medical care, the right to social security, the right to rest and leisure, the right to necessary social services, the right to security in the event of unemployment, and the right to education. All of these rights are to be realized on the basis of non-discrimination.
- **The Vienna Declaration and Platform of Action** recognizes that "the human rights of women and of the girl-child are an inalienable, integral and indivisible part of universal human rights. The full and equal participation of women in political, civil, economic, social and cultural life, at the national, regional and international levels, and the eradication of all forms of discrimination on grounds of sex are priority objectives of the international community."
- **The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women** recalls that "discrimination against women violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity, is an obstacle to the participation of women, on equal terms with men, in the political, social, economic and cultural life of their countries, hampers the growth of the prosperity of society and the family and makes more difficult the full development of the potentialities of women in the service of their countries and of humanity ... ." This Convention also provides specific standards related to gender equality in the spheres of education, employment, health care, and other areas of economic and social life.
- **The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights** recognizes "the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all economic, social and cultural rights," and prohibits discrimination based on, among other things, one's sex.

## Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights are Women's Rights

### *Right to Economic Equality*

Globally, experts estimate that women are 70% of the world's poor and that they own only 1% of the world's wealth. Poverty, particularly for women, is more than income deficiency. The World Health Organization has noted that women continue to lag behind men in control over essential resources including cash, credit, property, land, wealth and access to material goods. They are also disadvantaged by other forms of impoverishment in areas such as literacy, education, skills, employment opportunities, mobility, political representation, and pressures on their available time and energy linked to gender role responsibilities. For these reasons, women are often poorer relative to men of the same household and social group. Women's disproportionate poverty and economic inequality also effectively compromises their full enjoyment of other human rights, including their rights to food, water, housing and to the highest attainable standard of health, among others.

### *Right to the Highest Attainable Standard of Health*

Gender discrimination and unequal power relationships between women and men in the home, workplace, and community may negatively affect a woman's health in a number of ways. A woman may be exposed to specific forms of gender-based violence, including domestic violence and rape, which can negatively affect her physical, sexual and psychological health. Throughout the world, violence against women is the leading cause of injury for women of reproductive age. Girl children and adolescent girls are also often vulnerable to sexual abuse by older men and family members, placing them at risk of physical and psychological harm and unwanted and early pregnancy. Some traditional practices such as female genital mutilation also carry a high risk of death and disability. Additionally, gender discrimination is integrally linked to women's experiences with HIV/AIDS. This discrimination renders them more vulnerable to HIV, as they are unable to protect themselves from infection.

### *Right to Education*

In every region of the world, women are much less likely than men to be literate, and women make up two-thirds of all illiterate people. Two thirds of the 130 million school aged children without access to primary education are girls. In more than 45 countries, fewer than 1 in 4 girls are enrolled in secondary school. This situation is in part caused by the necessity of child labor to contribute to

the household income. Lack of education reduces women's access to political and economic opportunities, and promotes practices such as child marriage.

#### *Right to Food*

According to the World Food Program, more than 840 million people throughout the world, most of them in developing countries, are chronically hungry. In many countries, the distribution of food within the family is skewed in favor of men and boys, with women and girls getting the lesser share, both in terms of quality and quantity. In developing countries, approximately 450 million adult women of reproductive age are disabled as a result of childhood diet deficiencies. Globally, iron deficiency anemia affects double the number of women as compared to men and protein-energy malnutrition is significantly higher in women in South Asia, where almost half the world's undernourished people reside. This occurs even though women produce 80 percent of the food in Africa, and more than 50 percent of the farm output in South Asia.

#### *Right to Housing*

UN-HABITAT estimates that over 1 billion people live in inadequate housing, and women in particular are especially vulnerable to housing poverty. For many women throughout the world, housing represents not only a place to live, but is a central place of employment and social interaction, and a place to care for children and produce food for the family. However, women face discrimination in many aspects of housing, including housing policy development, control over household resources, and rights of inheritance and property ownership. Security of tenure is also often denied to women through the application of gender-biased law, customary laws, tradition and dominant social attitudes, domestic violence and financial barriers. Each of these obstacles can prevent women from owning, inheriting, leasing, or renting housing, and makes women vulnerable to forced eviction. A woman's precarious relationship to her housing may make her more likely to experience harassment and sexual violence from landlords or from others on whom she depends for her housing security. Women also often face gender based violence during forced evictions and may be exposed to continuing violence after an eviction occurs.

#### *Right to Water*

According to the World Health Organization, approximately 1.1 billion persons in the world lack access to a basic water supply. Throughout the world, women are the primary collectors, transporters, users, and managers of domestic water. In many developing countries, households may spend hundreds of hours a year on water collection alone. Women often having to walk great distances to a water source, and the collection of water can expose women to gender-based violence, especially if the source of water is in a vulnerable area or collection takes place after dark. However, women and their interests are not adequately represented nor addressed in decision-making bodies.

#### *Right to Work*

Some of the most critical problems in the area of women and work concern:

- The unequal work burden women shoulder because of expectations related to their familial and domestic responsibilities and their employment outside the home.
- Women's unpaid domestic labor and ghettoization in low-paid sectors, and women's disproportionate representation in the informal employment sector -- often a site of exploitive, unprotected, and unhealthy working conditions.
- Gender based discrimination and sexual harassment, which severely limits women's job opportunities and the ability to make choices regarding work.
- Unequal pay for equal work or for work of equal value.

In all parts of the world, women generally have fewer job opportunities than men. The employment participation rates of women are on average only 50% those of men (in South Asia 29% and in Arab States only 16%). Women are often paid 30-40% less than men for comparable work. Even in industrialized nations such as Japan, women may receive as little as 51% of male wages. Women also tend to work much longer hours than men, performing about two thirds of the world's working hours.

#### *Cultural Rights and Women's Rights*

Inequality in the enjoyment of human rights by women throughout the world is often deeply embedded in tradition, history and culture, including religious attitudes. While respect for diversity and for diverse forms of social and cultural expression and identity must guide all human rights principles, equally important is the recognition of the dignity and worth of women as full human beings. International human rights law has repeatedly stressed that women's human rights cannot be violated on the grounds of cultural or religious norms. The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women requests states to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women.

For more information on women's human rights issues, visit <http://www.amnestyusa.org/women> or contact us at AIUSA 5 Penn Plaza - 16th floor, New York, NY 10001 or at (212) 633-4292.