

# Inequality SDGs: Countries Still Not Ready

## Overview

September 2016

**The countries of the United Nations approved a remarkable commitment to 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September 2015 to be achieved by 2030. On the one-year anniversary, it's too early to start measuring their progress, but not too early to assess whether they are ready to make progress.**



**Bhagwati Tharu** spent 25 years working for free as a bonded 'Kamaiya' labourer in her landlord's house in Nepal. After liberation, she and her husband moved onto land given to them by the government, but her name was not on the deeds. 12,000 Kamaiya women have received joint land ownership certificates since they were freed from bonded labour in 2000. Bhagwati is still waiting. She is an active member of the Kamaiya women's group, and is pushing her case forward with ActionAid's support.

PHOTO: CREDIT: RUTH KELLY/ACTIONAID

We have found that governments urgently need to improve their policy readiness if they want to have any chance of achieving the SDGs on inequalities. Governments in most developing countries do not yet have the laws and policies in place to allow them to achieve SDG 5 on gender equality and SDG 10 on reducing inequality both within and among countries. In ActionAid's study, **only three of ten developing countries – Brazil, South Africa, and Ghana -- have over 65% of key inequality-reducing policies in place now.** Three countries (Senegal, Uganda and Zambia) had less than 50% in place. To make things worse, the rich developed countries are not adequately supporting developing countries to achieve the SDGs, contrary to SDG 17's commitment to "revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development." Indeed, some of those countries' policies actually deepen inequalities globally.

"Policy readiness" measures whether governments have the basic agreements and tools to undertake this work. Implementation of those policies, and change in women's lives, of course, will be the crucial determinant of whether countries achieve the SDGs. For now, we want to know whether governments have the basic building blocks in place.

## Looking for Promising Signs

In preparing a report on women's views on how inequality is manifested in communities around the world (provisionally titled *Shifting Power* and slated for publication in November 2016), ActionAid has assessed countries' policy readiness to achieve the two SDGs explicitly targeting inequality (numbers 5 and 10). We chose three targets from SDG 10 and four targets from SDG 5, selecting one or two policy readiness indicators per target. We researched information from global sources and then each of the ten countries studied had ActionAid staff and external experts validate the indicator table using 'yes/no' responses.

We have focused on ten of the developing countries where we work: Brazil, Ghana, Haiti, Liberia, Nepal, Nigeria, Senegal, South Africa, Uganda and Zambia. In four developed countries with ActionAid offices -- Australia, Denmark, the UK, and the US -- we look at the governments' readiness to meet SDG 17, which outlines the imperative to "revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development" to facilitate universal achievement of the SDGs by 2030.

## Income Inequality and Gender Inequality

Broadly speaking, the focus of the inequality debate which has sparked huge interest in recent years has been on reducing income inequality. This is of course a key problem, and women fare poorly on such measures. The new [Africa Human Development Report from the UN Development Programme \(UNDP\)](#) on gender inequality estimates that the pay gap between African women and men is 30% - meaning women earn about 70% of what men do. It also calculates that the loss to Africa resulting from gender disparities in labour income amount to between \$95 and \$105 billion each year.

But ActionAid's experience shows that reducing income inequality will not be enough to change women's lives; laws and policies must also respond to the multiple and overlapping inequalities that affect them. Significant among these are violence against women and girls (VAWG), the inequalities facing women in education, health, mobility in the community, obtaining decent paid work, unequal access to and control over land and resources, and women's unpaid care burden (i.e. cooking, cleaning, collecting water and firewood in rural areas, taking care of the ill and elderly, and participating in community work, etc.).

**The cost of government inaction** in tackling inequality is huge for women. ActionAid looked at the total amount of both paid and unpaid work undertaken by women and men and found that globally, a young woman beginning to seek income today can expect to work for the equivalent of an average of four years more than her male peers over her lifetime, as she is balancing both paid and unpaid care work. This amounts to the equivalent of an extra one month's work for every woman, every year of a woman's life.

## What's Holding Countries Back?

In our April 2016 report, *The Price of Privilege*, we show how powerful forces at the global level prevent countries from addressing inequalities. In the full version of *Not Ready; Still Waiting* we examine blockages at the national level which prevent the establishment of laws and policies to reduce inequalities from being put in place. For example, social protection is widely recognised as a key redistributive policy with positive effects in reducing inequality, yet only two of the ten developing countries ActionAid studied, Brazil and South Africa, currently have comprehensive coverage.

Two examples of our findings on policy readiness – on social protection and equal pay legislation (both critical for addressing the unpaid care burden) are shown in the following box. When quality legislation is in place, citizens have a tool with which they can more effectively demand government action. The complete data and reasoning for our overall conclusions can be found in [the full report](#).

Country Profiles on Indicators for general inequality (SDG 10) and gender inequality (SDG 5)										
	Brazil	Ghana	Haiti	Liberia	Nepal	Nigeria	Senegal	South Africa	Uganda	Zambia
<b>10.4 indicator</b> effective social protection legislation	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
<b>5.1 indicator</b> equal pay legislation	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No

## The Role of Rich Countries

The SDGs are universal, meaning that all countries should achieve all the goals. Beyond the developing countries studied, this report also looks at government readiness for SDG 17 in Australia, Denmark, the UK and the US, in terms of their global commitments. The analysis was done using a composite indicator that ActionAid developed, incorporating trade, aid, tax, funding for women's rights organisations, and business ethics. We also looked at countries' commitments to climate change, and found that – in each area – developed countries were falling behind in their commitments. For example, the US must increase its recent adaptation finance provision more than 60 times by 2020 and by 154 times by 2025, in order to meet the required funding level of \$150bn by 2025.

On a more basic level, the fight against inequality requires that those who are "more equal" take steps to reduce the gap, but the richest countries continue to put developing countries at a disadvantage in order to protect their privileged positions. Even as

they talk about their commitment to development and reducing inequality, rich governments use tools ranging from tax treaties to self-serving "policy advice" to retain their advantages and prevent developing countries from reaching new opportunities.

## Shifting Power

Our next report, *Shifting Power*, will analyse women's perspectives of inequality in seven of the ten developing countries studied here. Using a participatory field work process, we brought our analysis of global and national barriers to achieving women's equality to communities in Africa, Latin America, and Asia to explore how women view and respond to these, with a view to effectively supporting women to shift power. Policy or laws alone may not always lead to change, but their existence strengthens civil society campaigns for change on the ground. We believe that empowered communities pushing for change can make the change sustainable (see Box 1 and 2).

**BOX 1: Women’s collective action challenges inequalities in Nepal**

Women’s collective political action in Nepal has led to the adoption of a strikingly progressive constitution that commits the government to measuring women’s unpaid care work, one of the very few countries to adopt such a commitment. Women have been using time-use diaries to record their unpaid care work and paid work activities. Starting at the local level, women have been using the time diaries to hold people with power accountable for ensuring the policies are realised in practice. This tool provides the basis for discussions between women and their husbands and children. For example, in one village in Nepal, women using time-use diaries organised a campaign called “Burn your curry,” based on the tool. Women participating in this campaign explained that, “it is very difficult to make our husbands understand how much we contribute; it’s taken for granted, we’re not appreciated. So when cooking, we pretended we had to go and do something else, and asked for help from our husband/brother/father. If they cook[ed] nicely, [it was because] they [had taken] part [in unpaid care work]; if they burned it, we would say that they ruined it because they didn’t take much interest.” It took great courage for the women of this campaign to challenge the division of labour in the home in this way.



**Sandhya Limbu is 31**, and is married with three daughters. She lives in Nepal. She goes to a local REFLECT circle. Sandhya’s husband helps her with cooking, looking after the children, washing clothes, and fetching firewood and water. She believes that the family is key to recognizing, reducing and redistributing unbalanced work at home.  
PHOTO: NAYANTARA GURUNG KAKSHAPATI/ACTIONAID



**Some of the women leaders** from Gbarpolu County who went against tradition in support of MaZoe Taweh’s candidacy for Town Chief in Yangayah town in Liberia.  
PHOTO: BENJAMIN SIDORI OMBIRI/ACTIONAID

**BOX 2: Women Overturning Tradition to Claim Power in Liberia**

In 2015 the women of Yangayah, Liberia decided it was time to change the system of traditional rule preventing women from becoming chiefs; traditional chiefs are considered the equivalent of judges. They recognised that without a female voice in the town council of elders (which includes the chiefs), women’s rights and opinions would never be taken seriously. So the Mothers’ Club successfully campaigned for its former chair, MaZoe Taweh, who played a crucial role in the local effort to prevent the spread of the Ebola virus, to become Town Chief. In fact, they persuaded the men of the council to nominate her themselves. She is the first female town chief in this town and in Gbarpolu County in history. “When the women came together, we found a voice,” she said. “We started raising concerns and challenging decisions that were unfavorable for women and girls in the community.”

But some male elders opposed the idea of a woman in a traditional position of power and exploited traditional beliefs and customs preventing women from physically entering the sacred forest where the elders meet to discuss the issues of the town. MaZoe was effectively excluded from decision-making as she could not be at the meetings to present her report as Town Chief or voice women’s concerns during discussions. But after months of fighting back, they secured an agreement to change the customs that prohibit her from attending the meetings.

The women of Yangayah town stood together and wielded their power as a collective to break the customs excluding women from power. Their leadership had a ripple effect. Since MaZoe’s campaign in 2015, women from four other towns in Gbarpolu County have stood for elections to become Town Chief. So far only MaZoe and the women of Yangayah town have succeeded in getting a woman elected but the women from the neighbouring towns are not giving up. As another woman leader, Ma Gbelley Kouh said, “I use to think women don’t have power and rights to do anything and we are subject to men but Ma Zoe has showed us that way and I will be the next General Town Chief.”

**To improve their policy readiness to achieve the SDGs, civil society and national governments should:**

1. **Shift policy decision making power** away from those who currently hold power and influence, including multilateral institutions, rich-country governments, elite groups, and multinational corporations, and towards developing country governments and their people.
2. Develop and hold governments accountable to **redistributive national plans** with policies that support the accomplishment of the SDGs. Such policies would aim to:
  - recognise, redistribute and reduce women's unpaid care work
  - improve opportunities for decent work and wages for women and young people
3. Put in place appropriate **systems, governance, financial support, and monitoring and evaluation** programmes so policies can be designed with a genuine "feminist lens" insisting that women's development potential be at the centre of analysis and decisions. Those systems should be implemented with sufficient information, infrastructure and budget, and rigorously monitored by women and girls who are given the power to hold decision-makers accountable.
  - increase women's access to education and health
  - stop violence against women and girls
  - improve women's mobility, and their capacity to organise and participate in decision-making at all levels
  - improve women's access to education and health, and their access to and control over natural and economic resources.

**Links:**

**The Price of Privilege: Extreme Wealth, Unaccountable Power, and the Fight for Equality:**

<http://www.actionaid.org/publications/price-privilege>

**Not Ready, Still Waiting: Governments have a long way to go in preparing to address gender inequality and the SDGs:**

<http://www.actionaid.org/publications/not-ready-still-waiting>

**UNDP Africa Human Development Report 2016:** <http://bit.ly/2byzEPe>

**act:onaid**

**ActionAid** is a global movement of people working together to achieve greater human rights for all and defeat poverty. We believe people in poverty have the power within them to create change for themselves, their families and communities. ActionAid is a catalyst for that change.

International Registration number: 27264198

Website: [www.actionaid.org](http://www.actionaid.org)

Telephone: +27 11 731 4500

Fax: +27 11 880 8082

Email: [mailjhb@actionaid.org](mailto:mailjhb@actionaid.org)

ActionAid International Secretariat,  
Postnet Suite 248, Private Bag X31, Saxonwold 2132,  
Johannesburg, South Africa.