In 2018, popular attention exploded on the issue of gender disparity. Organizations of all types are racing to put in place new workplace policies and practices, with a flurry of new pledges and ambitious targets for gender balance. But we are still far from a fundamental societal rethink on gender and so many angles are yet to be addressed.

**Session name:** Gender Equality: Is Time Up?

**Date:** 12 November 2018

The Paris Peace Forum convened a panel of prominent advocates of gender-awareness. Coming to the discussion as voices of stature in their own fields, ranging from climate to economic development to governance, they provided insights that transcended the traditional “it matters” message. From candid assessments of how slow it has been to optimism about the opportunities that today’s urgent global crises could offer for a gender rethink, the discussion dove into what is needed for this societal transformation and how to get there.

**What’s the Problem**

It may seem that we are on the cusp of a new mindset and dramatic change. The public has woken up to the need to significantly change their professional conduct and hiring practices and new conversations are opening up worldwide. Across sectors and specialties, we see a growing number of programs concentrated on women and girls. Gender equality is one of the targeted U.N. Sustainable Development Goal 5. But as the panelists at the Paris Peace Forum cautioned, these actions are long overdue and there is still a tremendous amount to be done if we want to shift societal predispositions and systemic imbalances.

It is not only an issue of fairness or human rights. Women and girls represent half the world’s population and therefore half of its potential. Persistent gender inequality stagnates social progress. Countless statistics demonstrate the deficits and disadvantages in pay gaps, life expectancy, access to education and health care, economic opportunity, ownership rights, civil rights, political rights, justice from violence, and many other areas.
It is also an issue of missed opportunity. Advocates have made the case for years that the empowerment of women can unlock progress in numerous areas, whether that be poverty eradication, inclusive economic growth, peace and stability, or wide-ranging social issues.

UN Sustainable Development Goals

No. 5: Achieve Gender Equality & Empower Women & Girls

Women and girls represent half of the world’s population and therefore half of its potential. But, gender inequality persists and stagnates social progress. The statistics are impressive: pay gaps, life expectancy, access to education and health care, economic opportunity, ownership rights, civil rights, political rights, justice from violence, and many other areas show large patterns of disadvantage to women and girls.

They are disproportionately impacted by climate change and the burdens of unsafe water, poor energy, food insecurity, and natural resource deprivation. Women and girls are overrepresented amongst the extreme poor, but a necessary foundation for any sustainable development. Providing women and girls with equal access social and economic opportunity is necessary for a peaceful and prosperous world.

For more facts and figures go to www.unwomen.org

The Forum’s discussion benefited from voices representing widely divergent economies with distinct challenges. As they began talking about advances over the last few years in workplace practices and parental leave, Gilbert Houngbo emphasized that gender challenges in advanced economies vary greatly from those in poorer, especially rural, communities. Debates about parental leave in advanced economies have little relevance when talking about poor communities. “In these rural areas, you don’t even have ‘leave’. You work every day.” We have to rethink how to build gender reforms into cultures where basic social protections barely exist.

Gabriela Ramos, the Chief of Staff at the OECD and one of the participants in the Forum’s panel, emphasized that progress has been far, far too slow. Although the conversation on policies, regulations, and professional practices is advancing, systemic economic and social structures still need an overhaul in most countries. “How many countries have gender-neutral textbooks in schools? How many countries have justice systems to combat prevalent violence against women?” She argued that we have not even begun to deal with the underlying societal views on family, changing behaviors in social networks, and role models (and image-standards) in pop culture. “When will we start changing the media, the storytelling, the mindsets that put women in certain roles?”

The discussion at the Forum honed in on two particular problems: How do we energize more systemic change? And, how can we create opportunities in the work we do on global challenges to maximize the agency of women and children?
Endgame: Engagement

The panel was composed of a mix of renowned experts in climate, development work, and international governance. Each of them spoke of the concrete impact that engagement of women would bring to their portfolio areas.

Mary Robinson, chair of The Elders and former Prime Minister of Ireland, made the case on climate change. As she argued, we are in a race against time to keep the rise in global temperature to only 1.5°C above preindustrial levels before consequences become dangerously unpredictable. Reducing emissions to the necessary extent is going to require major changes in how we live our daily lives, transport, household practices. Women have the leading role in many of these lifestyle choices and tend to view the long-term differently. Given their perspective and influence on the behavior changes needed to arrest climate change, they are core actors both for implementation and policy development. Practicality is essential; there is no time to lose on abstract policies.

Gilbert Houngbo of the International Fund for Agricultural Development, pointed out how a conscious effort to engage women in their program work to eradicate poverty and hunger has benefited their outcomes.

“[Citing a World Bank report]: If women in rural areas were to have access to the same tools and productive resources as men, another 150 million people would be out of poverty.”
- Gilbert Houngbo, International Fund for Agricultural Development

Beyond the statistics, such as the 40% of the workforce in rural areas being women and their essential role in these communities, Houngbo spoke about the Agricultural Fund’s “household methodology approach” to designing their programs. In short, before the concept note for a program is drafted, the Fund sits down with the families in the recipient community in order to discuss their needs and pathways for progress. But by including the whole family, the methodology has integrated women’s voices and influence in change at the outset of program design. This upstream effort not only helps program designers to think through the lens of the recipient, but also maximize opportunities for impact.

Thinking concretely in areas of health, education, small business, social practices, more gender-inclusive thinking can provide endless opportunities for policy advancement. It’s not just about ensuring equitable access to services, economic opportunities, or political participation. It brings value. It also means their voices should be at the table, shaping policy from the beginning.

The argument works also in the peace and security space. As the panel pointed out, there is, of course, the follow-on effect of addressing drivers of instability. But conflict prevention, mediation, resolution, and reconciliation work all can benefit from gender-responsive and inclusive approaches. Women often experience violent conflict differently than men; their choices and escalation points are different and they often experience a very different impact. As a panelist argued: women have a frontline experience that should be considered upstream in peace negotiations, not just when it comes to implementation.

Mary Robinson shared a specific experience from her Foundation’s work in the climate policy circuit. “We did the top-down stuff (supporting women in leadership roles in international climate negotiations). Then
we realized the importance of making space for the true voices of climate change ... the frontline people who cope - the grassroots, the indigenous, those who absolutely know what the problem is - and get them into delegations, get them into the conferences.”

“"In the last three [climate] conferences, you have had at the table the voices of those who know what the real problem is. They have an extraordinary ability to stop a room with their story, give a real sense of urgency and the need to move forward.”

- Mary Robinson, The Elders

Who’s on the Hot Seat

All of us. The panel emphasized the cross-cutting nature of the challenge, one that spans sectors, institutions, and policy areas. In fact, a systemic approach to gender-responsiveness was a recurring theme of the discussion.

It is an issue that touches the whole of society. The panel was joined by Elizabeth Nyamayaro, the head of the UN’s He for She initiative, a project participating in the Forum’s Space for Solutions. She offered a practical argument on why a shift on gender thinking can only occur if the movement includes not only women, but also men. “Everywhere else there has been successful social movements [whether the anti-apartheid movement or the civil rights movement], they have been anchored in one thing: you rally the entire society around the issue.”

“We have got to build solidarity on this topic ... It has mostly been seen as an agenda by women, for women. Men have to be part of this too.”

- Elizabeth Nyamayaro, He for She

He for She has seen support for this idea explode with over two million signatories just in a few years and successful results from its 10 x 10 x 10 initiative. 10 x 10 x 10 is a project specifically focused on systemic reform to advance gender parity by expanding opportunities for girls in STEM programs (Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics) as well as in leadership tracks in academic and the private sector more generally.

The scope needed to make real societal change will require simultaneous bottom-up and top-down efforts. Regarding institutional practices more specifically, Gabriela Ramos of the OECD pointed out that there are many large institutions with initiatives already in place -- some for many years. [Since the 1980s at the OECD, for example.] But having a gender equality initiative does not necessarily equate with practices that put women on a fair footing. Organizational leaders need to get into the bureaucratic inertia and insist on reforming hiring and promotion practices, for example.
Governments fall under these recommendations too, but they also hold a responsibility for building gender-responsiveness into their conduct of governance. The panel emphasized that gender issues cut across silos and feedback on one another; gender-responsiveness has to reach across all portfolios. It comes down to structural reforms to create the greatest impact.

“Having women talking about women’s issues is good, but we need to talk about economic and social structure. And we have to connect this with the global agenda.”

- Gabriela Ramos, OECD

When it comes to the international policy arena, the panel drilled down into specifics. They shared ideas from rethinking diplomatic processes – who is “at the table” – to redesigning development programs with more diverse participation from the outset.

It was also suggested that civil society initiatives can help by linking up networks around the world that are breaking new ground and create multiplier effects – “networks of networks” as Mary Robinson described it. Panelists identified breakthroughs and new momentum in a number of parts of the world, in particular the impressive networks blossoming amongst women leaders in Africa. Drawing public attention to these successes and bolstering their chances to succeed is essential.

**Zoom in: Capacity Building Programs**

International development and capacity building efforts were highlighted as a unique opportunity to impact social and economic structures around the world. Rémy Rioux of the French development agency AFD spoke about gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) programs, such as the one their work in Morocco. The intention of gender-responsive budgeting is to ensure that the allocation of public resources benefits women and men equally, taking into account the distinct needs and contributions.

By adjusting budget policies at the spigot, the idea is to change policy – and subsequent social – behaviors more systemically. GRB is a concrete approach, beginning with assessment studies, in order to understand what needs to be changed and performance assessments afterward. Morocco’s chief budgetary authority has created a center of excellence to spread the policy across state institutions and policies.

Gender-responsive budgeting addresses the challenge as a cross-cutting issue, to better adapt approaches to their beneficiaries. Finance ministries are of course key, but it involves engaging ministries across the board – in the process, building stakeholders across government and society. In development work, it also streamlines gender parity objectives into existing capacity building work and anchors it into national budget reform processes.

The gender-responsive budgeting strategy was applauded by voices at the Forum for its systems-level approach. A number of the panelists emphasized that focusing change on cross-cutting practices at the systemic level is essential, whether that be in the public sector or private industry.
**What’s next**

It’s time to speed up. Efforts are intensifying, but still far too slow. Advancing a societal transformation of this magnitude requires engaging the whole of society and using every tool in the toolbox, or as Gabriela Ramos stated, “all sets of policies, regulations, frameworks, and incentives” we have.

The panel recommended a value-added approach, arguing the missed opportunity of women being sidelined. It’s not a new argument. But, they took it one step further, arguing that with the scale and urgency of challenges the world faces now – think climate change, the SDGs agenda, economic inclusiveness, food stability, and so much more – there is a practical necessity for more creative solutions. New gender attitudes and practices could enable women to make critical contributions.

On almost every global challenge, we are finding ourselves stretched and struggling. The Paris Peace Forum’s panel on gender emphasized that we should be using every resource possible, and if we are not integrating women in every aspect of the work, we are cutting ourselves off from valuable assets, insights and ideas. It’s not about meeting quotas or filling seats, it’s about using every resource we can.

If we can start to think about gender-parity policies in terms of practical gains, policy makers could be creating opportunities to leap forward on a range of global challenges and development goals. If we can convert gender reforms into impact, that is a win for women, for society, and for the battles we are all fighting to create a more stable and secure world.
“At the Table”

So often we hear the recommendation that “we need more women at the table”. The panel of long-time advocates converted this slogan to practical advice.

Bring the policy table to them. Ask them their needs at the outset. Gilbert Houngbo discussed how the International Fund for Agriculture Development has developed a program methodology that involves sitting down with the entire family to develop a practical path out of poverty, before program officers design an action plan.

Change the composition of the table upstream – in specialized policy areas. Mary Robinson recounted a detailed example from her work in climate policy circles in recent years. She emphasized the importance of not only having women at the top levels, i.e. Ministers, but especially the ground-truth of women’s experience.

“We did the top down stuff. Then we realized the importance of making space for the true voices in climate change...the frontline people who have to cope.” Getting them into delegations, into the big climate conferences has made a big difference. “In the last three conferences you have had the voices of those who know what the real problem is. They have an extraordinary ability to stop a room with their story and create a real sense of urgency.”

The “table” exists up and down the decision chain. Institutional reform in any sector must be comprehensive. Yes, it matters to have women breaking the glass ceiling and taking leadership positions at the top. As Gabriela Ramos noted, we need these role models. But she also emphasized that it cannot just be a change at the top. Building the pipeline, the pathway to the top is essential. As well as ensuring that there is gender equity along the middle and upper levels.

Before you get to the table: Influencing base assumptions. Watch out, Gabriela Ramos warned. Whether it be for policy decisions or social interactions, more and more often are ideas are influenced by digital sources. Now, consider that “90% of our software is produced by men”. We are at a pivotal moment in the digital transformation of society and “we are putting all these biases, stereotyping, storytelling into the digital world” without even knowing it.
Panel Participants

The Forum thanks panel participants: Gilbert HOUNGBO, President, International Fund for Agricultural Development, Elizabeth NYAMAYARO, Global Head of the HeForShe Initiative, UN Women, Gabriela RAMOS, Chief of Staff, Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, Rémy RIOUX, Chief Executive Officer, Agence française de développement, Mary ROBINSON, former President of Ireland, Chair, The Elders.

The panel was moderated by: Annette YOUNG, Host of “The 51%”, France 24.

This is a publication of the Paris Peace Forum reflecting the debates at the Forum’s inaugural session in November 2018. It does not necessarily represent the conclusions of each individual participant.

About the Paris Peace Forum The Paris Peace Forum is a unique platform for global governance solutions. It focuses on improving the organization of our world, in order to address its most pressing challenges in the areas of peace & security, development, environment, new technologies, inclusive economy, and culture & education.

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