

Policy Document Women's Rights and Gender Equality: Power of Women

1. Why focus on women's rights and gender equality?

Gender equality: the situation today

Nowhere in the world has equality between women and men been achieved. The gender gap has shrunk considerably¹ in the fields of education and healthcare in the past few decades, but progress has been slow and uneven. In some fields, the trend has even reversed – closing the economic participation gap, for example. Women still lag far behind men, and many women are still dependent on their husband, father or brothers.²

Women's labour market participation rate has been stagnant for many years at an average of 55% worldwide, compared to 80% for men. Everywhere in the world women do the majority of unpaid work and have the lowest paid jobs with the least legal certainty. One in three women worldwide experience violence during their life, usually from their intimate partner, but often on the work floor or in public places. In some countries, mainly countries in conflict, this figure is as high as two in every three women and girls. Women lag furthest behind in political participation: in 2018, an average of only 24% of members of parliament worldwide were women.³ Women's participation in conflict resolution and reconstruction is only just beginning to get off the ground – until 2011, women's share of participants in peace talks was less than 10%,⁴ and in 2016 there was even a slight drop in their participation in delegations led or jointly led by the UN.⁵

A worrying trend is growing opposition from conservative forces, in particular to the right, of women and girls to decide about their own sexuality and if, with whom and when they will have children. We must continue to defend equality between women and men and among all people regardless of their gender or sexual orientation, as enshrined in international agreements.

2. What does the Netherlands seek to achieve?

Agenda 2030, SDG 5 and an inclusive and effective foreign policy

From a deep awareness that sustainable development, peace, stability and human rights benefit by equal opportunities and rights for women and men, the Netherlands seeks to contribute to achievement of the SDG agenda, and specifically the internationally agreed SDG 5 targets, through its international policy on women's rights and gender equality. *Power of Women* therefore focuses on the three objectives listed below. Enhancing universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) is also one of the nine SDG 5 targets (SRHR), and falls under the SRHR Partnership Fund. Strengthening women's role in conflict prevention, peace processes and protection in conflict situations falls within the Women, Peace and Security programme.

Objectives of Power of Women:

² WEF, [Global Gender Gap Report 2017](#).

³ [Inter-parliamentary Union Data 2018](#)

⁴ [UNwomen.org – Peace and Security – Facts and Figures](#)

⁵ [SG Report on Women, Peace and Security 2017](#)

1. Prevention and elimination of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against women and girls;
2. Strengthening women's leadership and women's participation in (political) decision-making;
3. Strengthening women's economic empowerment and improving the economic climate for women.

Women's rights organisations and movements play a crucial role in achieving these objectives. Strengthening the capacity of these organisations, movements and their networks is a precondition to – through processes of lobby and advocacy – achieve structural change and the three objectives of *Power of Women*.

1. *Prevention and elimination of sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) against women and girls*

International women's rights organisations have played a major role in getting the integrated approach to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) on the agenda. They also advocate better legislation and criminalisation of all forms of abuse, including domestic violence, abuse within marriage and violence by intimate partners. The results of their efforts have varied from one country to the next: they have been highly successful in some countries and led to comprehensive prevention, care and reception mechanisms, an appropriate legal framework and guidelines for the police and social workers to ensure better organisation of prevention and care and prosecution of perpetrators of SGBV.

In many countries, these mechanisms are nonexistent or implementation falls far short. Women in many countries are also confronted by political change and conservative legislation depriving them of rights that had been won or impeding their enforcement. Political and economic tensions, conflict and growing social inequality and unemployment lead in some cases to increased violence against women.

There is a clear interface between SGBV and the other two thematic priorities of *Power of Women*. Social and contextual factors like gender norms, economic situation and legislation, in interaction with personal factors like problems with power relationships, behavioural norms, financial problems and addiction, lead to sexual and gender-based violence. In conflict and post-conflict situations, these factors may be aggravated by increased polarisation of gender roles and ethnic disputes, for instance.

2. *Strengthening women's leadership and women's participation in (political) decision-making*

In many countries, women's rights organisations are only marginally involved in politics and governance. Some countries even have restrictive legislation and a growing democratic deficit, often caused by a government clampdown meant to undermine the watchdog role of women's rights organisations. In addition, poor women and women from marginalised groups seldom have their voices heard in political decision-making or are represented in senior management (in both the public and private sector), despite a slow worldwide increase in women's membership in national parliaments. The number of women in leading positions in politics and the public and private sector also lags far behind the number of men.

Power of Women seeks to strengthen the capacity of women's rights organisations in the area of lobby and advocacy, with a view to increasing women's participation in and influence on political decision-making.

However, this objective does not focus exclusively on promoting participation of women and women's rights organisations in formal political positions and processes. Change often takes place within local communities, where women and women's rights organisation work (for example) to improve economic self-reliance and prevent gender-related violence. Through this work some individual women and women's rights organisations come to be seen as experts in their field, thereby increasingly assuming informal leadership roles and gaining influence in their community. In addition, because of this growing local leadership role and influence, the transition towards formal political processes, leadership and influence becomes easier.

Given the significance of these bottom-up processes, *Power of Women* also focuses on strengthening the capacity of women's rights organisations to take up leadership roles and increase their influence

in local communities.

3. Strengthening women's economic empowerment and improving the economic climate for women

A regular income and job security for women contributes demonstrably to a better balance of power between partners, a greater investment (up to 80% of income) in healthcare, children's education and reduction of domestic violence. Economic independence is also a major condition for equal participation in decision-making and thus for political participation.

However, all over the world more women than men feel the impact of increasing economic exclusion. Men are nearly twice as likely to have a permanent, full-time job. Women often work fewer hours than men in paid employment and have jobs with less security and fewer development opportunities. They are overrepresented in informal jobs in unsafe, unhealthy conditions that do not meet international standards.

Due to their decreased access to tools, credit, ownership and control of land and innovative technologies, women farmers have lower yields, and women in general have less access to economic resources. Women entrepreneurs are generally active in small one-woman businesses in less profitable sectors. Everywhere in the world, women and girls perform the great majority of care and household tasks. Far more women than men experience discrimination, harassment and unsafe situations at work.

Coherence between three objectives

In reality, these three objectives are often interlinked. For example, for women who are not free to do as they wish, it becomes more difficult to stand up for their own rights and interests. There can be also no equal opportunities on the labour market if women face sexual harassment and have nowhere to turn to claim their rights. Because of these interlinkages between the three objectives of *Power of Women*, it is required that consortia focus on at least two of these themes in their proposal.

3. Assumptions

Power of Women bases itself on the executive summary of the general Theory of Change Strengthening Civil Society (see annex 5), and follows the same processes of change, strategies and underlying assumptions. The assumptions described below thematically supplement this general Theory of Change with regards to the theme of women's rights and gender equality. Proposals of consortia will have to take into account both the general Theory of Change Strengthening Civil Society and the assumptions described below:

- Women's rights organisations play a crucial role in empowering women and girls and in setting in motion structural processes of change geared to gender equality.⁶ To bring about structural transformation, links to local, national, regional and global women's and other movements are central.
- Commitment not only to strengthening women's rights organisations, empowering individual women and girls and ensuring their access in practice to and control over natural and economic resources, but also to security and the rule of law, SRHR and emergency aid leads to women's political and economic leadership and a civil society that effectively advocates women's rights and contributes to an enabling environment for gender equality.
- To create an enabling environment⁷ for gender equality and to bring about the

⁶ ['Donor support to southern women's rights organisations: OECD Findings'](#), 2016, p. 5.

⁷ For a definition of the enabling or institutional environment, see Jim Woodhill, 'Shaping behaviour: How institutions evolve', 7 October 2008, *The Broker Online*, who defines institutions as 'the more stable and permanent aspects of human systems' that embody the power and interests of stakeholders. 'Some institutions, once developed, lock societies into

structural transformation of institutions that perpetuate gender inequality, it is essential to gain the support of and work with government authorities, the private sector, civil society and knowledge institutions.

- Gender equality implies equal power relationships between women and men.⁸ Engaging with men and boys in interventions geared to achieve gender equality leads to better prospects of structural, widely supported change, while at the same time allowing both women and men to benefit from the advantages that gender equality generates.

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a particular path of development,' he writes. Unequal gender relations are an expression of such institutions. Changes in the institutional environment are therefore a precondition for gender equality and the exercise of women's rights.

⁸ See [IOB evaluation 405, *Gender Sense & Sensitivity*](#), 2015, p. 21.