



Position paper roundtable Women's Rights and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights

Gender inequality is a global, systemic issue that is deeply rooted in our behaviours, norms, and institutions. Most of the world's poor people are women. This is no accident, but a reflection of how ingrained gender equality is in global structures, institutions, and cultures.

Research in 68 countries¹ shows that **44% of women do not have full control over their own health care, use of contraception and/or having sex.** This means that nearly half of women cannot make free decisions about their own bodies without being pressured by parents or husbands or even fearing violence. **Nearly 89,000 women and girls were killed intentionally in 2022²** across the globe, 55 per cent (48,800) of all female homicides are committed by family members or intimate partners, underscoring the disturbing reality that home is far from a safe haven for women and girls. Women **earn approximately 20 percent less than men³** on average. They spend more time on unpaid care work, leaving fewer hours available for paid work, have less access to education and are simply being paid less for the same type of work.

Gender inequality does not just hurt women and non-binary people – it harms men, families, economies, and society overall. In addition, research shows us: gender equality leads to happier, healthier, and more productive societies.

Gender equality in a shrinking civic space

Unfortunately, the work towards gender equality is facing challenges. The space for civil society groups is shrinking, which affects all organizations, but especially those supporting women. In patriarchal societies, women often lack opportunities to participate in decision-making. And while this is the case for offline spaces, unfortunately the same is true for online spaces. Algorithms, policies, and digital infrastructures tend to reinforce existing inequalities, perpetuate biases, and exclude marginalized voices.

So, women but also LGBTQI+ people rely on civil society to advocate for their rights. However, if civil society struggles to organize or secure funding, and activists face loss of their safe meeting spaces, it jeopardizes progress on women's rights, LGBTQI+ rights and achieving gender equality.

What do we do as Oxfam Novib

Oxfam Novib works on gender equality by standing behind the people who stand up for equality. Together with our partners, we influence decision-makers and campaign in society to address legislation and transform social norms. Next to stand alone projects on gender equality and sexual and reproductive health, we also mainstream gender⁴ in our other work. We would like to illustrate our work on gender equality in all its shapes and forms with a few examples from our projects, many of which are funded by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Gender equality in households and in the economy:

In its final project year, Empower@Scale took stock of the results. In Nigeria, Kenya and Uganda, the project supported almost 9,900 households to transform gender relations. As a result, in 60% of those households, men and women now have an equal voice in decision making and managed to increase their household incomes by working together. Likewise, through our FACE project, we supported young women in Niger to become financially independent and make their own decisions about their bodies

and sexuality. In its second year, 45 women with disabilities and 27 young-women-led groups set up income-generating activities, selling clothes, breeding animals or producing soap.

Next to our work at household and community-level, Oxfam further contributes to economic empowerment and gender equality by supporting women-led SME's such as Olufonto's waste management and recycle company Chanja Datti in Abuja, Nigeria. With support of our SME fund, Olufunto has managed to expand her company, which has now three locations providing full and part-time work to 200 people, many of whom are women.

In 2022-23, our Work in Progress! project, currently in its final year, specifically focused on increasing opportunities for young women entrepreneurs in the more conservative contexts of Egypt and Somaliland. We offered women-only startup incubation programs such as the Ladies Startup League and Women's Business Accelerator. This also led to a significant increase in female participants in online courses and in Somaliland the increase was even threefold. "After the course, my life changed a lot," says Shukri who is now a successful videographer. "It was easy to find work and I quickly had a lot of clients. Women in particular feel more comfortable having a female videographer at their events."

Gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights

Our five-year project in the MENA region mobilises young people, in particular young unmarried women, to work towards gender equality and claim their sexual and reproductive health and rights. Together with consortium members and partners, we supported more than 47 civil society organisations and an increasing number of youth leaders to create both offline and online spaces, provide sexual and reproductive health rights information and services to young people. We have reached more than 45 million people with our information.

It is imperative to continue to support organisations who are at the forefront of this work. Hayat Mirshad, the director of FEMALE, one of our consortium partners in Lebanon, explains how with this support they can navigate shrinking civic space and continue their work towards gender equality: "Because of the backlash, we try to decentralize the movement. So, we expand the work in remote areas where we reach adolescent girls. They are the changemakers and hope for the future. It's about awareness raising and knowledge production." For Mirshad, engagement starts through communities. When friends or family members say, "come join us".

The above results and testimonies inspire to continue the work towards gender equality. So let's stay committed to SDG5! In times when gender rights- human rights - are under pressure, it is of utmost importance that work on gender equality remains at the heart of Dutch Foreign Policy. We therefore have the following recommendations:

- Continue international leadership and political support to gender equality and extend this support by investing in gender expertise at all levels in government.
- Continue the unique collaboration with civil society in the Netherlands because of our crucial and sometimes lifesaving support to partners.
- Continue funding gender equality and ensure more accessible funding to organisations in country.
- Do not stop all funding when a country formulates policies and regulations that affect women and/ or LGBTQI rights negatively but stop funding only towards the governments imposing these policies and regulations and continue supporting activists and CSO's who are defending these rights.