



Social Reconditioning for Women's Empowerment

By Roberto Valent



Throughout my work with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) I have seen self-empowered women proactively seizing opportunities and actively engaging economically and politically in their countries.

On March 8 of each year, the world celebrates International Women's Day, taking stock of progress made and challenges ahead, and acknowledging the fortitude of women who benefit their communities in transformational ways.

Since International Women's Day was first observed in 1977, we have been collectively advocating for and committing to women's rights through existing international instruments such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). Despite all the progress that has been made, every girl and woman in the world still falls short of living fully their due rights.

The 2016 theme for International Women's Day is **Planet 50-50 by 2030: Step It Up for Gender Equality**. The idea of this theme is to consider how to accelerate the 2030 Agenda, building momentum for the effective implementation of the new Sustainable Development Goals, especially goal number five – achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls; and goal number four – ensure inclusive and quality education for all and promote lifelong learning.

Gender equality is not only a social and political driver but also an economic one. According to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon: "If the world is to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, we need a quantum leap in women's economic empowerment."

Today some of our best-perceived leaders are women who lead countries and businesses. Nevertheless, women globally still earn 24 percent less than men for doing the same work, while 75 percent of women's work in developing countries is informal and unprotected.¹ Women and girls continue to represent the majority of the world's poor and illiterate; they are less politically empowered than men and

more likely to be victims of domestic violence.

In the State of Palestine, women represent half the population. Palestinian women have high enrolment rates in education (94.4 percent), actually exceeding male enrolment rates in higher education institutions. Yet, in the labor market there is still a wide gap between female and male participation. Women's participation rate in the labor force was 19.1 percent compared to 72.5 percent among males in 2015.²

On the other hand, while progress has been registered in women's participation in Palestinian public life through their presence in legislative bodies, ministries, enterprises, female participation in political life remains low. The quota of women in Palestinian legislative elections is only 20 percent of the total number of candidates.

Palestinian women continue to struggle to gain their rights in the political, economic, social, judicial, health, and educational spheres.

Gender equality is a cornerstone of the human rights agenda. Working to support gender equality is all the more relevant and critical in a context of occupation, and promoting women's rights is intrinsically linked to Palestinians' right to freedom and dignity.

The promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women are at the heart of the development agenda. Gender equality requires integrated development responses that cater to the multiple dimensions of what today still underpins gender imbalances. In this perspective, UNDP targets gender equality as part of the programming in its three main work streams: sustainable development; inclusive and effective democratic governance; and risk prevention and resilience.

UNDP's Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian People has an extensive portfolio of projects and programs that contributes to the mainstreaming of gender and empowerment of women in the Palestinian society.

UNDP's social and public infrastructure interventions, including in the education and health sectors, ensure improved access to basic services for women and girls. On a different front, UNDP is supporting women in decision-making processes and ensuring women's access to justice and legal representation in courts.

Thousands of women are benefiting from enhanced access to more equal, efficient, and effective business development services, business finance, entrepreneurial programs, business incubators and accelerators, and trade and export services throughout the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip.

Building on the analysis of the bottlenecks that hamper girls and women from attaining their rights, it is our collective responsibility to continue advocating for women's social, economic, and political rights to be brought to the forefront. The empowerment of women must come from multiple fronts, and a degree of social and cultural reconditioning is needed on the importance of the role played by women in society. Indeed, despite progress made, it is critical that the dialogue and action be strengthened to secure women's equal share in sustainable development.

Roberto Valent is the Special Representative of the Administrator for UNDP's Programme of Assistance to the Palestinian People (UNDP/PAPP). Prior to his current position, Mr. Valent was the UN Resident Coordinator and UNDP Resident Representative in El Salvador and Belize. Mr. Valent also held senior positions in the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Albania. An Italian national, he holds a BA and an MA in political science from Bologna University, Italy, followed by another MA in international relations from Sussex University, UK.

¹ "The Power of Parity: How Advancing Women's Equality Can Add \$12 Trillion to Global Growth," McKinsey Global Institute, September 2015.

² Labor Survey – Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, February 2016.