It's time to look beyond the numbers in women's empowerment

Sarah Anyoti (Canada) is the Regional Portfolio Manager at the East and Southern Africa Regional Office of the United Nations Volunteers (UNV) programme. On the occasion of International Women's Day, we interviewed Sarah, who shares her insights on women's empowerment and what UNV is doing in the region to promote gender equality.

Q. What is your take on gender equality in the region?

A. Gender equality is not only a basic human right, but a necessary foundation for a prosperous and sustainable world. It is unacceptable to discriminate against someone because of their gender. In fact, we all lose when we discriminate against women. Research shows that women reinvest up to 90 per cent of their income in education, health and nutrition of their
families and communities – compared to up to 40 per cent for men. This is just one of the many reasons why increasing opportunities for women is important for the development of our societies.

According to a 2016 UNDP report, gender inequality is costing Sub-Saharan Africa US $95 billion a year, on average – or 6 per cent of the region’s GDP. In the East and Southern Africa region, many forms of discrimination against women and girls persist.

Q. Do you think we are on track in tackling gender inequality?

A. We still have a lot to do; it’s time to look beyond the numbers in women’s empowerment and ask more qualitative questions. Take for example the global gender pay gap. Across the world, women still get paid 23 per cent less than men. This gap largely stems from social and cultural norms that position men for more technical and decision-making roles that traditionally have higher wages. In contrast, women mainly take over less technical positions and less leadership roles, which generate lower wages. We need to question these gender differences in our education spaces, our households and our job markets.

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According to recent UN data from 90 countries, women devote about three times more hours a day to unpaid care and domestic work than men. This limits their access to paid work and education and further reinforces gender-based socio-economic disadvantages. Globally, women represented 39 per cent of world employment in 2018, with only 27 per cent being in managerial positions, up only marginally from 26 per cent in 2015. However, in Sub-Saharan Africa, these figures were much lower.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by world leaders in 2015, embody a roadmap for progress that aims to ensure no one is left behind. The SDGs provide us the best anchor to help scale our efforts towards a more equal world. SDG5 aims to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, by ending all forms of discrimination and violence against women and
girls everywhere by the year 2030. However, we need to get better at scaling up and tracking our actions towards the goals. As the UN Secretary General recently said, we should make this the century of women’s equality.

Q. How does UNV empower women in the region?

A. In 2012, the United Nations agreed on the UN System-wide Action Plan (UN-SWAP) on Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (GEEW). Spearheaded by UN Women, the UN-SWAP aims to put gender equality at the centre of initiatives and programmes of all UN entities.

At UNV, we have developed our own gender action plan guided by the UN-SWAP framework and in line with the sustainable development goals. We have integrated gender action planning into all our management operations, ensuring that results on gender equality and the empowerment of women are consistently included in our activities and our reporting. For example, we have a policy that states that all our strategic planning documents must include at least one high-level result on gender equality and the empowerment of women in line with the SDGs.

Across the organization, we also have specific senior-level mechanisms in place to ensure accountability for, and the promotion of, gender equality and the empowerment of women. This approach is supported by all our senior managers, who champion gender equality and the empowerment of women internally and externally.

Our communication guidelines integrate gender-appropriate language across all our platforms. To illustrate this, our mantra in social media communications is: ‘No woman, no tweet’. This is one of our benchmarks to ensure that our communications remain gender representative.

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Lastly, we make deliberate steps to continuously promote and advocate a zero-tolerance policy towards discrimination and any forms of harassment,
including especially sexual harassment, sexual exploitation and abuse of authority, to our UN Volunteers and staff members. In this context, we provide information that guides volunteers on channels to address and report such incidents, in case they occur.

Q. UNV recently attained gender parity in volunteer mobilization globally. How did you achieve this and what lessons would you share with other organizations attempting to achieve similar results?

A. We have come a long way. I must say, we are proud of the progress we have made so far. Over the last 10 years, UNV has made tremendous strides to improve gender parity in volunteer mobilization, both globally and in our region. In 2019, we achieved 50:50 gender parity among serving UN volunteers for the first time in our history. This was achieved through UNV’s concerted efforts to close the gender gap in volunteer mobilization. In this region, we have moved from 32 percent female volunteers in 2010 to 48 percent in 2019.

We work closely with partners to source and integrate more qualified women in volunteer mobilization processes.

Our organizational target is to achieve 50-50 gender parity in the shortlisting and submission of UN Volunteer candidates to host entities. We follow up to monitor and apply lessons learnt regarding gender-inclusive deployments in all duty stations. Additionally, we undertake proactive outreach to attract female candidates through the targeted use of available communication tools and channels.

For example, this year, UNV is working closely with the World Health Organization (WHO) to enhance the engagement of women in provision of quality medical services in the region. We are keen on increasing not just the numbers, but also the quality of female personnel who serve with WHO and assist in the realization of the WHO health targets in our region.

Q. What advice would you give young women facing gender-based discrimination in various areas of their lives?
A. Closing the gender gap requires persistence, hard work and support. Young women should know that there is no ceiling they cannot break through and that their potential in life shouldn’t be restricted by their gender. They should also be more proactive and feel confident enough to follow any career path. Importantly, they should remember that there is a robust support system available whenever they feel their rights are violated. With hard work, appropriate mentorship and a firm belief in their potential, young women today can create the gender-neutral society we urgently need tomorrow. 

This blog was also published by UN Women, Take Five: It is time to look beyond the numbers in women empowerment.


📍 Sub-Saharan Africa

• International women's day • gender equality • women’s empowerment

Sustainable Development Goal: SDG 5: Gender equality, SDG 10: Reduced inequalities