

People's Power vs. Rising Inequality: Being Bold for Change

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Activists march through the streets demanding equality and an end to homophobia and prejudice during the annual Soweto Pride, South Africa.

PHOTO: KATHERINE V ROBINSON/ACTIONAID

Context

As global inequalities rise, women continue to lose out - we know that eight men own as much as the poorest half of the world.¹ ActionAid research introduces us to some of the women who make up this half - the 3.6 billion people living in poverty. Poor women's inequality is often rooted in economics, and yet inequality is experienced in every part of life: social, cultural and political.

Women in communities across the world are organising to address the power imbalances they face. And they are not working alone. The past months have seen the rise of a global movement against inequalities and the rise of people's movements which are pushing back against a status quo and power dynamic that favours only the very rich and very powerful. For example, horror at the reactionary and discriminatory plans of

U.S. President and billionaire businessman Trump underpin an outpouring of solidarity: over 5 million men, women and children marched in over 80 countries globally the day after he took office.²

Change is in the air as the status quo is untenable; yet change can be elusive. The failure to implement effective regulations and redistributive measures since the global financial crisis in 2008, and the willingness of leaders to bail out rich bankers while allowing workers to suffer has meant a lot more resources for the very richest and hardly anything for everyone else. Since the global financial crisis of 2008, the OECD has found that levels of income inequality within and between countries are the worst they've been in half a century.³ And economic discrimination against women is so bad that at the current rate of progress it will take 170 more years for women to receive pay equal to that of men.⁴

1. <http://www.oxfam.org.uk/media-centre/press-releases/2017/01/eight-people-own-same-wealth-as-half-the-world>
 2. See: <https://www.womensmarch.com/sisters>. For US marches see: https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/21/us/womens-march.html?_r=0
 3. See: <http://www.oecd.org/social/inequality.htm>
 4. For headlines, see: <http://www.ndtv.com/world-news/women-and-men-wont-reach-economic-equality-until-2186-world-economic-forum-1479118>. For the report, see: <http://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2016/>

The problem of inequality is structural. Systems of governance, of finance, and of social order are devised and maintained by those who already have wealth and power, who make the rules in order to consolidate their privilege.

However, we are seeing some opportunity. We're seeing people stand together more than before. Women in mining affected communities in South Africa have been organizing to use tools including the equality courts - set up by the constitution to achieve more balanced power and economic outcomes post-apartheid, but still under-used - to organize against the violence and discrimination that affects them on a daily basis. Originating in black US communities, the now-international activist movement #BlackLivesMatter campaigns against violence and racism experienced by black people and is continuing to effectively raise awareness and stage direct actions.

Governments and civil society groups can recognise and support these movements and their demands around access to quality public education and public services that meet the needs of women. And we know how to raise the resources: tax.

More tax-funded spending on healthcare and education is closely related to lower tolerance and incidence of violence against women; a reduction in women's unpaid care work; a reduction in the preference of parents to send boys to school; and a greater representation of women in politics. It is estimated that developing countries lose an estimated \$200 billion a year to tax avoidance by big companies every year.⁵ And ActionAid estimates that an additional \$138 billion is given away in tax breaks to companies.⁶ When public services are starved of funding, it's women and girls who pay the highest price.

ActionAid's research introduces us to the women patriarchy would leave behind: women who face intersecting inequalities and who will stand with others for the International Women's Day call to action and 'Be Bold For Change'.⁷

ActionAid's approach

Over the past year, ActionAid has published three studies on inequality. The first, *The Price of Privilege*, staked out definitions and explored the magnitude of the global inequality problem, identifying women's disproportionate burden of unpaid care work as a key factor underpinning inequality; the second, *Not Ready, Still Waiting*, examined both what countries have promised to do about the problem and what they have done in practice; and the recently-published *Shifting Power* features experiences of inequality and how to fight it from women in seven developing and emerging economy countries where ActionAid works.⁸

The Price of Privilege

In ActionAid's first inequality report, *The Price of Privilege*, we found that the economic policies that have led to a sharp rise in global inequality since 1980 have been thoroughly discredited. There is now ample evidence that policies such as trade and fiscal liberalization, privatization, budget austerity, deregulation and undermining trade unions lead not just to greater inequality but also to lower rates of growth. And we know that economic inequality entrenches other forms of inequality rooted in gender, religion, ethnicity, race, caste, disability, citizenship status or sexual identity, and that when we're looking at policy responses, they must address both inequalities of wealth and these other interconnected factors.

We know what it takes to reduce inequality, because history shows that a combination of strong social protections (especially those that focus on women's empowerment), industrial policy, strong trade unions, and progressive taxation lead to economically more equal societies. Implementation of these policies often leads to ordinary citizens having a greater voice in local and national government. Countries should focus on the creation of more and better jobs for women and men, and on ensuring that the rich pay their fair share of tax.

5. ActionAid, 2017, unpublished.

6. ActionAid, 2017, unpublished.

7. See: <https://www.internationalwomensday.com/>

8. Links to the full cycle of ActionAid inequality reports are at the end of this paper.

But these policies may not be enough for the current moment. That is why *The Price of Privilege* recommends that countries and the global community in general consider how best to implement more far-reaching, radical policies such as instituting national, or even global, wealth taxes; reducing and redistributing women's unpaid care burden; increasing corporate democracy by implementing structural shifts towards employee control of companies; instituting a maximum wage that is proportional to the wage paid to the most junior workers in a company; and limiting private finance for political parties and political campaigns.

Not Ready, Still Waiting

Governments in 2015 pledged to make many positive policies through the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). ActionAid's second inequality report, *Not Ready, Still Waiting*, released on the one-year anniversary of the SDGs in September 2016, assessed whether governments are ready to address gender and economic inequalities.

In all our study countries – and equally in rich countries – women find one of the biggest obstacles to be their “unpaid care work” obligations -- supporting children and elders and sustaining households. Globally, women spend 2.5 times more time performing unpaid care and domestic work than men⁹ – work valued at an estimated US \$10 trillion a year, or some 13% of global GDP.¹⁰ The cost of government inaction in tackling inequality

is huge for women. ActionAid looked at the total amount of both paid and unpaid work undertaken by women and men and found that globally, a young woman beginning to seek income today can expect to work for the equivalent of an average of four years more than her male peers over her lifetime, as she is balancing both paid and unpaid care work. This amounts to the equivalent of an extra one month's work for every woman, every year of a woman's life. In countries such as Senegal, where there is no law to say that women and men should have equal pay, the gap is unlikely to close.

Not Ready, Still Waiting examines the blockages at the national level which prevent the establishment of laws and policies that would reduce inequalities from being put in place. For example, social protection is widely recognised as a key redistributive policy with positive effects in reducing inequality and critical for addressing the unpaid care burden, yet only two of the ten developing/emerging countries ActionAid studied -- Brazil and South Africa -- currently have comprehensive coverage. And three of the countries, Senegal, Uganda and Zambia, had less than 50% of any of the policies identified as inequality-reducing in place.

Women around the world are not simply waiting for governments sit up and listen. At every level, women are organising and meeting in groups to discuss issues facing them. Many use income generation as their entry point, and as they become economically autonomous, some begin to challenge power imbalance within their homes and communities.

Country Profiles on Indicators for general inequality (SDG 10) and gender inequality (SDG 5)

	Brazil	Ghana	Haiti	Liberia	Nepal	Nigeria	Senegal	South Africa	Uganda	Zambia
10.4 indicator effective social protection legislation	Yes	No	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	No
5.1 indicator equal pay legislation	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes	No

9. UN Women (2015) *Progress of the World's Women 2015-2016: Transforming economies, realizing rights*: http://progress.unwomen.org/en/2015/pdf/UNW_progressreport.pdf p. 24.
 10. McKinsey Global Institute, *The power of parity: How advancing women's equality can add \$12 trillion to global growth*, Sept 2015: <http://www.mckinsey.com/global-themes/employment-and-growth/how-advancing-womens-equality-can-add-12-trillion-to-global-growth> and ActionAid, *Close the gap: the cost of inequality in women's work*, January 2015: https://www.actionaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/publications/womens_rights_on-line_version_2.1.pdf.



Jacqueline Morette, a farmer from Haiti and coordinator and founder member of AFUP [Association des Femmes Unies de Pouly - Association of United Women of Pouly] says 'one person can't have impact. AFUP doesn't have enough power so we integrate with other women's platforms in the region and integrate with other networks so we can really have a bigger influence acting with the authorities.'

PHOTO: DANIELLE PECK/ACTIONAID

Our third report, *Shifting Power*, illustrates the findings of *Not Ready, Still Waiting*. We feature the story of Jacqueline Féquière Morette, from central Haiti:

- ▶ **'We know that the ministry of women aims to help women improve their social and economic conditions in order to achieve equality. The ministry says it's working to support women but since its existence we haven't seen any concrete things to improve women's situation.'**

I am the coordinator and founder member of AFUP [Association des Femmes Unies de Pouly - Association of United Women of Pouly]. Initially there were only ten of us. We each made a contribution and every two and half months one of us could withdraw money. We sought legal recognition from the local government and this meant we could open ourselves to more people, and there are now 50 contributors. We wanted the organisation so that we could get stronger and we continue to increase in strength; no matter what the situation, if we collaborate we can achieve great things like everybody else'.

Reversing rampant inequality requires not just smarter policies and more open political systems. Lasting systemic change needs consistent and determined popular mobilization. Those who benefit from the current arrangements won't change the systems simply because it's the right thing to do. *Not Ready, Still Waiting* concludes that we must shift power from the elites to the people who are feeling the sting of inequality, and keep working to make power more accessible and accountable. We need community action, national awareness-raising, and a strong global movement.

Shifting Power

Our latest report, *Shifting Power* is based on focus group discussions and interviews in communities in seven developing and emerging economy countries where ActionAid is active: Brazil, Haiti, Liberia, Nepal, Nigeria, South Africa and Uganda. Groups of women were asked how they experience inequality and, most importantly, how they are addressing inequality. We found that across the countries, when women like Ma Zoe Taweh, from Liberia, take collective action on the many challenges facing them, they feel better equipped to address inequalities within their families and communities.

Ma Zoe Taweh from Yangayah, Liberia, played a key role in her community's Ebola response, and is now the first Town Chief in Gbarpolu county.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID



Solidarity and determination are at the heart of women's mobilizing, and women go to great lengths to change their lives.

In 2015 the women of Yangayah, Liberia, decided it was time to change the system of traditional rule preventing women from becoming chiefs; traditional chiefs are considered the equivalent of judges. They recognised that without a female voice in the town council of elders (which includes the chiefs), women's rights and opinions would never be taken seriously.

The Mothers' Club successfully campaigned for its former chair, Ma Zoe Taweh, to become Town Chief. In fact, they persuaded the men of the council to nominate her themselves. She is the first female town chief in this town and in Gbarpolu County in history. ***"When the women came together, we found a voice,"*** she said. ***"We started raising concerns and challenging decisions that were unfavorable for women and girls in the community."***

But some male elders opposed the idea of a woman in a traditional position of power and exploited traditional beliefs and customs preventing women from physically entering the sacred forest where the elders meet to discuss the issues of the town. Ma Zoe was effectively excluded from decision-making as she could not be at the meetings to present her report or voice women's concerns during discussions. But after months of fighting back, they secured an agreement to change the customs.

The women of Yangayah town stood together and wielded their power as a collective to break the customs excluding women from power. Their leadership had a ripple effect. Since Ma Zoe's campaign in 2015, women from four other towns in Gbarpolu County have stood for elections to become Town Chief. So far only Ma Zoe and the women of Yangayah town have succeeded in getting a woman elected but the women from the neighbouring towns are not giving up. As another woman leader, Ma Gbelley Kouh, said, ***'I used to think women don't have power and rights to do anything and we are subject to men but Ma Zoe has showed us that way and I will be the next General Town Chief.'***

Shifting Power shows that the sustained actions of women's grassroots organisations, movements and civil society can challenge the structural

causes of gender inequality and place women's rights at the centre of progressive policies.

Anelisa Matanzima, a campaigner from South Africa, is 'fed up' with the government. Her vision is of a safe city, 'where women can walk to the taxi rank or shop without being abused by men who either say vulgar things or physically assault them.'

PHOTO: MBUSO NGUBANE/ACTIONAID



Young urban women activists campaign for gender responsive public transport in South Africa

1000 young urban women in Western Cape and Gauteng meet together as part of a youth network called Activista. Their collective action has convinced decision makers to change policies and attitudes in their favour.

Many South African cities are dangerous for young women and the government is not taking sufficient action. Anelisa Matanzima is 'fed up' with the government. Her vision is of a safe city, 'where women can walk to the taxi rank or shop without being abused by men who either say vulgar things or physically assault them.'

In May 2016, these young activists contacted the City of Johannesburg and the South African National Taxi Council and lobbied them to take on board their vision of what gender responsive public transport should look like. The activists' demands were underpinned by research they had undertaken with women who use taxis, 69% of whom had witnessed violence and harassment, and 56% of whom had personally experienced violence. Faced with this evidence, decision makers were persuaded to support activists by holding an awareness-raising event which engaged taxi drivers, marshals and commuters about the violence and harassment: a first step to shifting institutional sexism.

The activists' struggle for safe cities is long term; in November 2016 they participated in the 16 Days of Action, joining with other organizations with a positive solution 'Tax Pays for Safe Cities for Women'. They underpinned their demands with evidence gathered from women train-users, 61% of whom had witnessed violence or harassment against women and 49% of whom had experienced violence or harassment. The campaign has already scored a success: representatives from provincial transport agencies are planning to meet in 2017 to take the campaign to a national level.

In order to deliver on their human right obligations to citizens, governments must invest in tax-funded gender responsive public policies and services that address the range of inequalities affecting women. Public services include public early childhood education, elderly care, healthcare, and affordable public housing, transportation and clean water. Such investment will reduce women's burden of unpaid care work, ensure decent work in public service jobs, and free up women's time for education, political participation and self-care.

Most importantly, all parts of society need to create space for women's organising and respect the role it plays in building a more equal society. Existing and new women's groups and movements must be able to work for their economic autonomy; support each other to shift power at home and in their communities; and hold local and national governments accountable for implementing gender responsive policies.

People's Power

As the world's media showcases the worst indecencies of those with power, and although there is temptation to hide under the blankets and despair as the stories unfold, we urge people to recall and stay focused on the presence of social movements and women's groups around the world that are doing the day-to-day work of building power and alternatives to gross inequality. We need to support those who are doing that work, remove barriers to their organising, and contribute to expanding and strengthening a truly global movement to challenge the structures that create and maintain inequality. Only people's power, united across borders, can reverse the hoarding of power and wealth by a tiny elite, re-democratizing our politics, our societies, and our economies.

ActionAid's Inequality Series:

ActionAid (2016) *The Price of Privilege; Extreme wealth, unaccountable power and the fight for equality*
www.actionaid.org/publications/price-privilege

ActionAid (2016) *Not Ready, Still Waiting; Governments have a long way to go in preparing to address gender inequalities and the SDGs* www.actionaid.org/publications/not-ready-still-waiting

ActionAid (2017) *Shifting Power; Learning from women's experiences and approaches to reducing inequality* www.actionaid.org/publications/shifting-power

ActionAid (2017) *People's Power vs Rising Inequality: Being bold for change*
www.actionaid.org/publications/peoples-power-vs-rising-inequality

ActionAid is a global movement of people working together to achieve greater human rights for all and defeat poverty. We believe people in poverty have the power within them to create change for themselves, their families and communities. ActionAid is a catalyst for that change.

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