

Republic of Fiji

Positions for the General Assembly Plenary

I. Addressing Gender Inequality and its Role in Perpetuating Global Poverty

The United Nations has for a long time made fighting gender inequality a priority. Besides reducing women's quality of life, gender discrimination is a serious roadblock to ending global inequality by leaving the potential of half the population underutilized. Economic development and productivity is reduced when women are marginalized and prevented from contributing to society to their full potential. It also causes more subtle issues, since women of child-bearing age are particularly likely to end up in poverty. The children of these mothers, whether male or female, are less likely to get adequate education and resources, reducing their performance later in life. Gender inequality tends to be worse in developing countries, those who can least afford to neglect the human capital available to them. This helps perpetuate poverty across the generations and in turn reduce the opportunities for future generations.

Fiji is aware that it too has serious issues with gender inequality and associated poverty. It was ranked 103rd out of 153 countries evaluated by the World Economic Forum in its Global Gender Gap report. Many women do domestic and agricultural work, with low wages and low accountability for employers, resulting in a large gender gap in economic wellbeing, particularly for young women and single mothers. However, Fiji has made rapid progress on the issue of gender equality in recent years and has a National Gender Policy to achieve economic development through promoting gender equality and raising awareness of gender-related issues. This includes measures particularly targeted for young working women, such as providing access to childcare. Fiji also provides women with microloans and requires development projects consider the interests of single mothers. Fiji is not unique in having issues with lack of opportunity and marginalization for young women. Globally, according to the World Bank, women between the ages of 25 and 36 are nearly 50% more likely to live in extreme poverty than their male peers. Just as the problem is not unique to us, neither are the necessary solutions. Young women throughout the world struggle to become established in a male-dominated environment, and, often, have the added challenge of raising children without support. Improving the lot of young women will also help children, the other group that is disproportionately impoverished, killing two birds with one stone. As women are increasingly likely to be paid equally or at all, household income increases. This is especially true for households headed by young women, allowing them to improve the standard of living for themselves and their children. In the Beijing Conference, 25 years ago, the UN approved a platform for action calling on states to take measures to fight inequality, both general and specific. It has since continued to act on this goal and established in 2010 the UN Women program specifically focused on the issue of gender inequality. Its goals are to increase women's political representation and economic empowerment, while reducing violence against them. In Fiji, it has helped conduct research on the causes of violence against women and has also provided specialists to help the Fijian government in its efforts. This includes training women as rugby coaches, a male-dominated occupation. Recommendations were solicited from the male coaches and gender related training was provided to reduce opposition. Rugby coaches are just one example of how women are excluded from many career options. Addressing such exclusions is also a vital part of ensuring women have equal opportunity. This is already being worked on, not just by UN Women, but also the UN in general. Most UN programs, regardless of the agency involved, try to consider gender inequality and what they can do to reduce it.

While progress is being made on fighting the gender gap, additional measures are still needed. Fiji suggests that the UN pass a resolution calling for member states fight poverty among young women by addressing the challenges they face in terms of childcare, higher education, and equal job opportunities. This would also call for states to establish plans and guidelines to help women and, more particularly, young women. To support this, a subgroup should be formed within UN Women specifically focused on the issue of poverty among young women. This would provide support to states and organizations in their efforts to fight inequality. These measures will help not just young women in the short-term, but also children, women more broadly, and society as a whole in the long-term. This would help reduce gender inequality and simultaneously aid the global fight against poverty.

II. Improving Access to Electricity in Developing Member States

Access to electricity plays a vital role in economic development. Want to search for a job, run a household appliance, manage a shop? The ability to do all of these is greatly enhanced by electricity access. There are many places not connected to an electric grid at all, and where electricity is available, it is often only for part of the day or prone to blackouts. In an information age, that leads to socioeconomic marginalization both at the individual and the state level. Economic development is increasingly difficult to achieve without an effective electric grid. Furthermore, only 7% of global electricity generation is renewable. Besides the macro concerns of global warming and fossil fuel depletion, this leaves many developing states highly dependent on fuel imports to provide energy. Renewable energy generally has a high startup cost but is often cheaper in the long run. However, developing countries find it difficult to fund the initial expensive, so fossil fuels are used, or worse yet, no electricity is provided at all.

Fiji is aware of the vital role that electrification plays. Almost all Fijians have access to electricity, 98% according to the World Bank. However, while Fijians may have access to electricity, this does not mean they have reliable access. Power failures and insufficient maintenance is an ongoing issue. This is a common difficulty for developing states trying to expand access to electricity and Fiji is an example of the importance of international cooperation in electrification. The Australia and New Zealand Banking Group established a risk sharing fund for renewable projects in Fiji, helping Fiji fund these projects, which often come with high start-up costs. Australia also donated equipment after Cyclone Winston wrecked power infrastructure in 2016. The UN also provided support, including for a study on the potential for using waste products to generate electricity. Fiji has been a leader in developing renewable energy with 67% of electricity generated renewably, mainly hydropower and biomass, according to the International Renewable Energy Agency. This push helps meet the goal of 100% renewable electricity generation and access for all established by the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Besides reducing carbon emissions, renewable electricity has reduced dependence on imported fuel and saved money. For every dollar Fiji has spent on renewable energy, two have been saved in fuel expenditures. Fiji may be an island nation, but its experience is not unique. According to the International Renewable Energy Agency in 2018, the worldwide average cost to generate per kilowatt of electricity from hydropower was about half that of fossil fuels. Solar and wind also tended to be cheaper, though by a smaller margin. The barrier for renewable energy, not just in Fiji, but worldwide, is the high start-up costs, which developing countries often lack sufficient capital for. The UN has established the Green Climate Fund (GCF), which provides loans and grants to green projects, including electricity generation. This includes a project for renewable energy generation in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, it has insufficient funding and too many other focuses to provide the support states need in working on renewable electricity generation. The World Bank has been supporting the UN in working toward achieving the latter's Sustainable Development Goals.

Continued international support and cooperation is still needed for countries to expand access to electricity that is reliable, cheap, and sustainable. Fiji proposes to establish UN Renew, which would specifically provide support to states that are developing their renewable electricity capacity. It would be under the UN Development Programme and have a much narrower focus than the GCF, being limited to the issue of renewable electrification. States could provide grants and technical assistance specifically for it to use in this mission. The narrower focus would enhance the ability to provide support and states would be more likely to cooperate as the benefits would be clearer and more direct. The United Nations should also pass a resolution calling on states and organizations to form regional groups to assist in achieving sustainable development goals. Whether Rwanda, the DRC, and Burundi's joint hydropower project or Australia providing power equipment to Fiji, such cooperation is essential for improving electricity access throughout the developing world. UN Renew would, in addition to aiding states directly, be able to provide expert assistance and/or financial support to these groups as needed.