

Empower women. End poverty.

Women around the world are more likely to live in poverty, simply because they are women. Women's unequal position in society means they have less power, money, protection from violence and access to education and healthcare. Despite these injustices, women everywhere are standing up to claim their rights and to fight poverty.

ActionAid funds projects around the world that support women to claim their rights, and we also campaign for change. In the UK, we have made progress in putting poverty on the political agenda, now it is time to focus on women's rights. ActionAid is calling on the UK government to put women's rights at the forefront of the fight against poverty.



Antonio Olmos/ActionAid

Power, poverty and women's rights

Poverty is about more than having a low income. It is about a lack of choice and a lack of power. Unequal power relations are imposed in both rich and poor countries on the basis of gender, age, caste, class, ethnicity, HIV status and disability. And discrimination on the basis of gender cuts across other forms of discrimination, creating double oppression for many already poor women and girls. As a result, they often end up the poorest of the poor.

ActionAid strives to support people living in poverty to claim their rights, as the best way to empower themselves and fight poverty. Women's rights

inform all our work. For example, because women do not have equal rights to own land in many countries, they are more likely to be denied their right to food. This is why women's rights will be a key focus of our new international campaign on the right to food.

Recognising that women are more likely to be denied their rights certainly doesn't mean that those boys and men who are in the same situation don't matter. But it does mean that for too long development policy and interventions have ignored the rights of women and girls, and that we are committed to rebalancing priorities.

Gertruida Baartman

Sonia Hamilton/Women on Farms



Women work two-thirds of the world's working hours, yet earn only a tenth of its income (UN Millennium Campaign).

Are you alright with that?

She's not

Gertruida Baartman risked her job campaigning for a better deal for South African fruit pickers whose labour helps bring cheap food into UK supermarkets. She came to Britain to confront Tesco executives and tell shareholders the truth of her pay and conditions – earning just £3.49 for nine hours fruit picking, without protection from pesticides.

ActionAid's not either

The misuse of global buying power by some UK supermarkets is forcing down wages and conditions in developing countries. We helped Gertruida come to the UK as part of our campaign to get supermarkets to change their practices and the government to change the rules.

“I forgot that I was a low-paid farm worker and I felt powerful. If I could just make them understand our plight, it could make the world of difference.”

Gertruida, South Africa.

“ We believe that women are vulnerable and more impoverished compared to men because they have been systematically made vulnerable by years of violence, patriarchal power and control, as well as decades of inequitable laws and policies deliberately designed to put them in this position. ”

Everjoyce Win, ActionAid International, South Africa

How and why are women denied their rights?

All over the world, women are likely to be poorer, more vulnerable and more excluded than men, a situation excused by an artificially created difference in 'gender roles'. These roles have long been justified through a divide between productive and reproductive work. Women are almost always expected to carry out domestic and caring work in the private domain – essentially reproductive labour – that is usually unpaid and undervalued. Men are more often paid for work – or productive labour – in the public domain, which is seen as the foundation of economic life and gives men access to powerful decision-making roles, in politics for example. There is no 'natural' reason why men cannot or should not do caring work, or why women should not be politicians, but societies hold deeply embedded and often unquestioned assumptions about the different gender-based roles that are appropriate for men and women. Even where women do enter paid work they are disproportionately concentrated in the lower paid 'caring' jobs, while continuing to hold most of the responsibility for society's unpaid caring work.

Injustice, including gender injustice, is human-made and results from the choices made by some individuals, communities, institutions and nations to discriminate against, exclude, or exploit others. Those with power do not give it up easily, instead often using it to accumulate more power, privilege and status, abdicating their obligation to society by denying rights, resources and opportunities to the less fortunate. Unequal power relations between women and men are also perpetuated by gender-based violence, which includes domestic violence, rape, sexual assault and harassment, and crimes

HIV and AIDS – how the gender dynamic makes it worse for women

HIV and AIDS now has a female face. Sixty per cent of those infected in Africa are women and in some countries, including South Africa, Zimbabwe and Zambia, young women aged 15-24 are six times more likely to be infected with HIV than men in the same age group (UNAIDS).

Women are particularly vulnerable to contracting HIV partly due to the epidemic of violence against women in many countries. Worldwide, one in three women will be raped, beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused in her lifetime – her abuser is usually known to her (UN stats). Violence against women means that women often do not have control over who they have sex with. Programmes promoting abstinence or the use of condoms ignore the reality these women face.

Women also face gender-specific barriers to accessing treatment. There is increasing pressure on women to disclose their HIV status, but if they do, they are often subject to stigma, discrimination and violence, which means that women are afraid

to access the treatment and care they need. ActionAid is campaigning for universal access to treatment, which includes a focus on the particular barriers for women.

The HIV and AIDS pandemic has also increased the burden on women, since care of sick family members and orphans invariably falls to them. All of these factors increase women's vulnerability to poverty. Without treatment, but with additional burdens of care, it is difficult for women to earn enough money to ensure the survival of themselves and their families. In some cases, this can lead to a situation where women are forced to exchange sex as a means of survival, which in turn makes them more vulnerable to infection. Women need not only to be supported in their caring roles, but also to be supported in challenging them. The World Health Organisation makes the argument that: 'unless and until the scope of human rights is fully extended to economic security, women's right to safe sexuality is not going to be achieved.'

in the name of honour. Violence against women is routinely used to maintain male dominance over women all over the world, which is why the first ActionAid international campaign on women's rights is focusing on this issue.

To implement good policy and programmes, it is essential that governments and donor agencies have a clear understanding of gender. It is often assumed that policy and programmes are gender neutral – that they have the same impact on women as men – or there is a poor understanding of any differential impact they may have. Policy is often formulated on the basis of gender stereotypes – focusing on men or male-headed families as the main unit of analysis. Yet if gender roles are not taken into consideration it is very likely that the policy will be ineffective and fail to benefit women.

Around the world ActionAid works with women to fight for their rights

The struggle for women's rights is global. Women in every society have for centuries been fighting for their rights. As an international organisation ActionAid is privileged to work with and support these women.

- In Ethiopia, ActionAid has been providing support for the Network of Ethiopian Women to conduct training for women parliamentary candidates, to enhance their chances of being elected. This effort played a part in more than doubling women's representation at the last election.
- ActionAid Pakistan has been a key part of the campaign to challenge the Hudood Ordinance which, among other things, criminalises women who have been raped. As well as lobbying for change in the face of fierce conservative opposition, ActionAid has provided free legal support to some of the women in prison as a result of the Ordinance and has supported gender-sensitising training for the police in Lahore. In November 2006, the Women's Protection Act was passed which has bought some very limited improvements, but there is much further to go both legally and in terms of shifting attitudes.
- Many ActionAid programmes support projects around women's economic empowerment. ActionAid India has provided micro-credit to women in fishing communities in tsunami affected areas. ActionAid Nepal supports a community forestry project, initiated by rural women to help preserve the forest and strengthen their livelihoods by growing fruit and vegetables.

ActionAid UK campaigning for change

ActionAid UK supports the work of our country programmes through campaigning and policy analysis primarily focusing on the UK government.

Until recently the UK's Department for International Development (DFID) had a strong record of promoting women's rights through its aid programme and was considered to be one of the leading bilateral donors in this area. Gender analysis featured quite prominently in the DFID white papers of 1997 and 2001. DFID then moved to an approach which aimed to 'mainstream' gender. As in many other organisations, this approach has largely failed and has resulted in gender becoming de-politicised. Two recent evaluations of DFID's work found that gender issues are now seen as 'add ons', rather than central to its work (OECD Peer Review and DFID's Evaluation of Policy and Practice in Support of Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment).

While poverty has been rising up the political agenda, women's rights have fallen off the development agenda. The 2006 DFID white paper, Making Governance Work for the Poor, failed to do

justice to the importance of women's rights. However, in response to recent criticism, DFID now seems to have a renewed impetus on gender issues, which is very much welcomed by ActionAid UK.

Putting women first

ActionAid sets high priority on women's rights because we believe that gender inequality, in and of itself, is an injustice we must fight. ActionAid also recognises that 70% of the world's poor are women (UN Millennium Campaign). We will not succeed in tackling poverty if we do not support women in fighting for their rights. ActionAid believes that we have a part to play in creating a more equal and just world. We strive to do this as part of a broad coalition. Our hope and aim is to witness women worldwide growing in confidence, skills and knowledge so that they may decide their own destiny, live without fear of violence and participate effectively in the decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods.

For more information about ActionAid and how to join our target poverty campaign, go to www.actionaid.org.uk/targetpoverty



Stuart Freedman/ActionAid

ActionAid is a unique partnership of people who are fighting for a better world – a world without poverty.

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