

**THEMATIC REPORT CONCEPT NOTE:
“HUMAN SECURITY OF WOMEN AND GIRLS IN THE CONTEXT OF POVERTY
AND INEQUALITY”**

The 2023 thematic report of the UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls will focus on “Human security and the rights of women and girls in the context of poverty and inequality”.

The thematic focus is part of the WGDAGW’s mandate to maintain a constructive approach with all concerned stakeholders to address the elimination of discrimination against women and girls, with the overall objective of reasserting women’s equality and countering rollbacks. The report will be presented to the Human Rights Council in June 2023.

The specific objectives of the thematic report are to:

- Identify causes of structural discrimination in the realization of human rights, especially lack of access to economic and social rights, due to cross-cutting risk factors stemming from both gender inequality and socioeconomic inequality;
- Deepen the understanding of the implications for women’s and girls’ multiple human insecurities and vulnerability to experiencing human rights abuses primarily in the socioeconomic dimension of their lives, leading to a series of other violations, including lack of access to justice and undue/disproportionate/excessive criminalization;
- Reveal the opportunities for strengthening women’s and girls’ human security and socioeconomic equality (e.g. obligations of *prevention* of human rights’ violations by identifying risk factors and addressing known risks; norms and policies for countering women’s and girls’ poverty; norms and policies for reducing economic inequality, such as taxation, debt and redistribution measures, gendered perspective in free trade agreements, and gendered budgeting in economic and social policy);
- Identify promising approaches and make recommendations for promoting and protecting women’s and girls’ human security, through addressing their condition of poverty and socioeconomic inequality due to systemic gender-based discrimination.

Report overview

An illustrative example

A migrant woman, single mother of six children, lived in an apartment in an urban area. After having paid rent regularly for a year, she stopped paying due to legal problems with the supposed landlord. The financial entity that actually owned the apartment reported her and, due to that, she was denied the social housing she had applied for. Finally, the family was evicted without adequate alternative accommodation. They were able to access a temporary shelter where they were all separated by sex, and two of the children, eight years old, were placed in a different room than their mother and could not sleep because of separation anxiety.

Building on this specific example to illustrate the focus of the report, our analysis would address the *individualized* harm to women and girls (for instance, to the woman’s and her children’s rights to housing, to water, to food, the children’s rights to education, among others), but also, this report will bring to light a *generalized and structural* perspective. Under such perspective, we will highlight how certain legal and policy frameworks (in the concrete example, the rules of access to social housing), as well as social and cultural practices, cause

the ‘stigmatization and systemic discrimination of those who live in poverty’¹, particularly women and girls. A gendered human-security lens based on the human rights framework, as proposed in this report, would also allow for deeper analysis. It would reveal how for women and girls already living in poverty, the compounded forms of structural discrimination and inequality - such as those governing the housing market and the distribution of care functions - place them at an *aggravated risk* and result in further human rights violations.

The human security focus

Human security proposes that the broad spectrum of perils that people confront in this global era cannot be understood nor fully tackled by traditional public policies and concepts of national, military and State security.² This conceptual framing thus centres the concern on the security of the individual rather than of the State, and based on the pillars of the 1945 Charter of the United Nations (UN), it incorporates *freedom from fear*, *freedom from want* and *freedom to live in dignity*. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) articulated a specific concept of human security in 1994,³ ‘New Dimensions of Human Security’, which recaptured the initial UN values and considered that threats to human life should also include those related to hunger, disease and repression and not only those directly related to international warfare or the use of armed force. Based on the severe and critical threats encountered by persons and communities, the UNDP report set forth that human security encompasses economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security.⁴

This ‘broad conception’ of the human security notion was further advanced by the UN-endorsed independent expert body of the Commission on Human Security (CHS), co-chaired by Sadako Ogata, former UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and Amartya Sen, 1997 Nobel Prize in Economics, and developed regionally, nationally and locally. According to the CHS, the human security approach means creating systems that give people the building blocks of *survival, livelihood and Error! Reference source not found.Error! Reference source not found.dignity*.⁵ Human security is comprehensive, multidimensional, context-specific, and prevention-oriented.⁶ The common understanding of the concept reached by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in 2012 affirms that human security includes the *right* of people to live in freedom and dignity, free from poverty and despair, stressing that all individuals, in particular those living in *situations of vulnerability*, are entitled to an equal opportunity to enjoy all their rights, and it specifically asserts that human security ‘equally considers’ *all* human rights: civil, political, economic, social and cultural.⁷

¹ UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, *Maribel Viviana López Albán v. Spain*, E/C.12/66/D/37/2018, 29 November 2019, para. 10,1.

² See Sabine Alkire, ‘Concepts of Human Security’, in Lincoln Chen, Sakiko Fukuda-Parr and Ellen Seidensticker (eds), *Human Insecurity in a Global World* (Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2003), 15–39.

³ The origin of the concept is often attributed to the Pakistani economist Mahbub ul Haq, as emerged from the broader debate on human development. Ul Haq, along with other economists such as Nobel Prize laureate in Economics, Amartya Sen, were key contributors to the 1994 UNDP Human Development Report.

⁴ UNDP, 1994 Human Development Report, ‘New Dimensions of Human Security’ (UNDP, 1994), 23-25.

⁵ Commission on Human Security, *Human Security Now* (New York, Commission on Human Security, 2003) 4.

⁶ Human Security Unit, *Human Security at the United Nations*, United Nations Trust Fund for Human Security (New York, UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 2012).

⁷ UN General Assembly, A/Res/66/290 ‘Follow-Up to Paragraph 143 on Human Security of the 2005 World Summit Outcome’, 10 September 2012, para 3 a), b) and c). Emphasis added.

As such, one of the added values of the human security concept is that of emphasizing the indivisible character of physical and material security, and its power for unmasking different types of structural violence, conflict and threat, such as discrimination and violence against women and girls, and extreme poverty and socio-economic inequality, today considered against the backdrop of existential threats such as widespread conflict, climate change and COVID-19. This is especially crucial at a time when the threats posed, among others, by extreme poverty and severe inequality, ‘are in constant danger of belying the actual universality of rights’.⁸ It is yet to be seen whether and how measures to reduce economic inequality, such as taxation, redistribution and debt reduction policies, as well as norms and practice in the provision of public services such as healthcare, housing and water, adopt a gendered perspective and reduce exposure to human rights violations.

By making the security and basic well-being of persons its main concern, it is not surprising that the appearance of the concept of human security has been celebrated as offering new lenses through which to understand the obstacles women and girls encounter in living a life free from fear and deprivation.⁹ As such, the links between what we could term a ‘gendered socioeconomic human security’ and human rights are made visible through the elements of *risk and vulnerability* to human rights violations that women and girls living in poverty and inequality encounter in their everyday lives, which will be at the centre of this report.

The empirical reality

Data indicates that for almost 25 years, extreme poverty –understood by the World Bank as people living under 1.90 USD a day- was steadily declining. Now, for the first time in a generation, the quest to end poverty has suffered its worst setback. Global extreme poverty increased in 2020 for the first time in over 20 years as the disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic compounds the forces of conflict and climate change, which were already slowing poverty reduction progress.¹⁰ Under more holistic frameworks of poverty that cover not only lack of income, but also encapsulate gendered privation, encompassing capabilities, livelihoods, subjectivities and social exclusion, the prospect is also preoccupying. According to the 2021 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index, which considers dimensions of health, education and standard of living, there are 1.3 billion multidimensionally poor people, of which 644 million are children under 18 years of age.¹¹ Poverty has especially deepened for women and girls, according to projections of 2022. Two years on from the start of the pandemic, the unpredictable course of Covid-19 continues to upend prospects for growth and poverty reduction. Projections of global poverty by UN Women, UNDP and the Pardee Center for International Futures estimate that, globally, 388 million women and girls will be living in extreme poverty in 2022 (compared to 372 million men and boys). But the outlook could be

⁸ Frédéric Mégret and Philip Alston (eds), *The United Nations and Human Rights: A Critical Appraisal* (OUP, second edition, 2020), 36.

⁹ See Basch, Linda, 2004. Human security, globalization, and feminist visions. *Peace Review*, 16 (1). March, 5-12.

¹⁰ See <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty>

¹¹ See ‘2021 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) Unmasking disparities by ethnicity, caste and gender’, at The global Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), produced by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and the Oxford Poverty and Human Development Initiative, at <https://hdr.undp.org/content/2021-global-multidimensional-poverty-index-mpi#/indicies/MPI>

far worse. In a “high-damage” scenario, this number could balloon to 446 million (427 million for men and boys).¹²

In terms of inequality, already in 2015, scandalous figures indicated that 50 per cent of the world’s wealth was concentrated in one per cent of the world’s population, and 50 per cent of the world’s poorest held one per cent of global wealth.¹³ There is data that concludes that as a result of the pandemic, inequality will increase and deepen, making people already living in poverty and vulnerable conditions unable to recover from the crisis, and lowering resilience to future shocks.¹⁴ Focusing on gender, the 2021 Global Multidimensional Poverty Index report shows that, worldwide, about two-thirds of multidimensionally poor people, or 836 million, live in households where no woman or girl has completed at least six years of schooling. Besides that, one-sixth of all people in this situation, about 215 million, live in households in which at least one boy or man has completed six or more years of schooling, but no girl or woman has. The report also finds that these women and girls are at higher risk of suffering intimate partner violence.¹⁵ In addition to revealing intra-state inequalities and intra-societal dynamics, the pandemic has also exposed cracks in the system at the inter-state level. To cite one example, we know that by early 2021, rich countries had secured more than 87% of the more than 700 million doses of vaccines dispensed worldwide, while poor countries had received only 0.2%, according to the World Health Organisation.¹⁶ Also, the pandemic has caused the first rise in between-country income inequality in a generation.¹⁷ While the effects of these inequalities on women and girls are yet to be fully revealed and understood, we do know that women are bearing the brunt of the socio-economic effects of COVID-19.

Thus, in many parts of the world, the pandemic has magnified the discriminatory division of labour and social organization of care, with a decade-long setback in some parts of the world, in terms of women’s inclusion in the labour market, and with an unequal impact on women in informal jobs and young women, in a region already facing enormous challenges in the equal distribution of income.¹⁸ The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) indicates that 11 million girls may not return to school due to the unprecedented disruption to education caused by COVID-19. This alarming figure not only threatens decades of progress towards gender equality, but also puts girls around the world at risk of teenage pregnancy, early and forced marriage, and violence. As UNESCO points out, ‘for many girls, school is more than a key to a better future. It is a lifeline’.¹⁹

¹² See UN Women, ‘Poverty deepens for women and girls, according to latest projections’, 1 February 2022, at <https://data.unwomen.org/features/poverty-deepens-women-and-girls-according-latest-projections>

¹³ *Credit Suisse Wealth Report 2015*, Credit Suisse Research Institute, available at www.credit-suisse.com/es/en/about-us/research/research-institute/news-and-videos/articles/news-and-expertise/2015/10/en/global-wealth-in-2015-underlying-trends-remain-positive.html.

¹⁴ The World Bank, ‘Poverty and Shared Prosperity 2020: Reversals of Fortune’ (The World Bank Group, Washington, D.C., 2020), 2,4, 5 and 8.

¹⁵ See Global MPI at <https://hdr.undp.org/content/2021-global-multidimensional-poverty-index-mpi#/indicies/MPI>

¹⁶ WHO, ‘WHO criticises rich countries’ and pharmaceutical companies’ selfishness over COVID-19 vaccines’, UN News, January 2021, available at <https://news.un.org/es/story/2021/01/1486742>

¹⁷ UN Department on Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development, SDG 10, at <https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal10>

¹⁸ See, e.g. Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL), ‘Social Panorama of Latin America 2020’, Presentation, available at <https://www.cepal.org/files/presentation/files>; and CEPAL, Social Panorama of Latin America 2016, United Nations, (LC/PUB.2017/12-P), Santiago, 2017, 47.

¹⁹ See UNESCO, ‘Girls in the Spotlight’, at <https://es.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/girlseducation>

From a gendered perspective, we must also recall that poverty is often causally linked to economic inequality, which is in itself shaped by gender, for instance, through discriminatory divisions of labour where women have greater responsibilities for collecting water or gathering fuel, where women are prohibited or prevented from owning or inheriting property, occupying certain jobs or accessing education.²⁰ Women and girls living in poverty are often exposed to both *institutional and individual risks of violence* and threats to their physical integrity from State agents and private actors, causing them to live in constant *fear and insecurity*. Continued *exposure and vulnerability to violence* affects their physical and mental health and impair their economic development and capacity to escape poverty.²¹

Many of the most pervasive forms of oppression against women occur in the economic, social and cultural spheres. Economic, social and cultural rights therefore have particular significance for women and girls, because they are disproportionately affected by poverty, and by social and cultural marginalisation.²² In the current context, this pattern has been repeated and, as noted above, there has been an asymmetrical effect of the pandemic on the situation of women and girls.²³ Women in precarious forms of work or employed in the informal sector as, for example, domestic workers, market vendors and waste pickers, are particularly exposed to harassment and violence in the course of their work. And given that some of this work, particularly domestic work, as well as care functions, are disproportionately performed by women around the world, the closure, loss of formal jobs and deepening economic crisis caused by COVID-19 make women vulnerable to, or indeed suffer from, direct and indirect discrimination.

The report's approach

The Working Group has analysed the impact of some of these forms of discrimination on women's and girls' economic and social rights.²⁴ It has also highlighted various forms of structural discrimination with a human security-sensitive view, such as women's economic 'unfreedom' and its links to the deprivation of their liberty, the risks of the changing world of work to women's right to work and their rights at work, as well as the state of perpetual crisis of women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health rights, and the threats to girls' and young women's activism due to age and gender-based discrimination.²⁵ Building on such findings, and considering the current described context, the Working Group deems that an analysis of women's and girls' poverty and inequality from a gendered human security lens grounded in human rights standards could not be more timely.

²⁰ Beth Goldblatt, 'Violence against Women and Social and Economic Rights: Deepening the Connections', in Susan Harris-Rimmer and Kate Ogg (editors), *Research Handbook on Feminist Engagement with International Law* (Edward Elgar Publishing, 2019), 366.

²¹ See, e.g., UN Human Rights Council, *Guiding Principles on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights*, Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona, UN General Assembly Resolution A/HRC/21/39, 18 July 2012, endorsed by UN Human Rights Council in Resolution 21/11 of 27 September 2012, para 63.

²² See in this regard *Montreal Principles on Women's Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, reprinted in *Human Rights Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 3, 2004, pp. 760-780.

²³ WGDRAWG statement, 'Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic must not disregard women and girls', April 2020, available at <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25808&LangID=E>.

²⁴ WGDRAWG, Report of 2014, A/HRC/26/39: Eliminating discrimination against women in economic and social life with a focus on economic crisis.

²⁵ WGDRAWG, Reports of 2019, 2020, 2021 and 2022, respectively (A/HRC/41/33: Women deprived of liberty; A/HRC/44/51: Women's human rights in the changing world of work; A/HRC/47/38: Women's and girls' sexual and reproductive health rights in crisis; and A/HRC/50/25: Girls' and young women's activism).

Indeed, apart from exacerbating inequalities, the COVID-19 pandemic has at the same time triggered a re-evaluation of dominant ideologies, including recognising the central role of care in our societies. It presents a unique momentum to revisit uncontrolled economic growth often based on deeply embedded forms of discrimination, economic inequality, and inexistent or insufficient networks of social protection to guarantee universally recognized human rights such as health, water, housing or education. Without a thorough understanding of how the gendered and poverty realities interact to perpetuate women and girls' insecurity and systemic inequality, even in terms of unjustified criminal persecutions, the enormous challenges faced in a (post)COVID world, will fail to be addressed.

This is also crucial in the context of the UN's 'Recover Better' objective, the recent discussions being held at the HLPF on the SDGs (especially SDGs 1, elimination of poverty; SDG5, gender equality, and SDG 10, reducing inequalities within and among countries) and considering particularly the 2023 UN Summit for the Future. In this scenario, the socio-economic risks faced by women and girls need to be highlighted, and all their human rights reaffirmed. To tackle the structural risks and obstacles impeding the access to and enjoyment of human rights of women and girls living in poverty, we must not only counter structural inequality but also advocate actively for substantive equality.²⁶ Through this report, the WG hopes to contribute constructively to this aim.

²⁶ See also in this line Katharine Young, 'Inequality and Human Rights', in *Inference Review*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (12 December 2019), at <https://inference-review.com/article/inequality-and-human-rights>