



PRESS RELEASE

The economic dimension is the next challenge towards global gender equity

NEW YORK (Feb 28) – More than half the women in the world live in countries that have made no progress towards gender equity in recent years. That is one of the findings of the Gender Equity Index (GEI) 2008 that Social Watch launched here as a contribution to the 52nd Session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women that will end next March 8, the International Women's Day.

The GEI, developed and calculated by Social Watch, ranks 157 countries in a scale where 100 would imply complete equality between women and men in education, participation in the economy and in decision-making bodies (empowerment). Yet the highest-ranking country in the world (Sweden) has an index of 89 and the world average of 61. Finland (85) and Norway (84) follow Sweden in the table, and after that come Germany and Rwanda, both with 80. While the first four countries are among the richest of the world, Rwanda is one of the poorest. German Women are obviously better educated and live longer than those in Rwanda. What the index shows is that the gap separating their condition from those of men is similar.

“The GEI for 2008 clearly shows that income alone is no guarantee for gender equity”, emphasizes Social Watch coordinator Roberto Bissio. Countries with very high per capita incomes, such as Luxembourg or Switzerland, have the same equity level as Mozambique, a country with a much lower income level.

For the first time this year, the GEI is able to show recent evolution (last five years) in 133 countries. While there is not enough evidence yet to show the evolution of very populous countries like China and India, the indicators do show that progress towards gender equity is difficult and vulnerable to regressions. Education is the dimension that is closer to complete equity, with a global average of 90. But in education more countries are regressing than those making progress. Empowerment is the dimension where most countries are showing progress, but it is also the one where the global average is the lowest, reaching only 35 points out of 100. In terms of the economy, there are as many countries where women make progress as countries regressing.

The economic dimension of the gender equity index measures gaps in women's participation in the labour market and in the salaries earned by them as compared to men. Among the 15 top places in economic participation, the Nordic countries – Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Denmark and Finland - share the honour with ten of the poorest countries in the world: Mozambique, Burundi, Rwanda, Cambodia, Ghana, Viet Nam, Uganda, Madagascar, Kenya and Guinea.

At the root of most of the national regressions in the total GEI the index points out to setbacks in the participation of women in the economy. This is the case of Eastern Europe, the region presenting the biggest reversions in this area. Latvia, Belarus, Slovakia or Macedonia, all of them countries that used to enjoy high levels of female participation in the economy are now to be found in the group of those regressing.

According to Genoveva Tisheva, managing director of the Bulgarian Gender Research Foundation and a member of the Coordinating Committee of Social Watch, “in Eastern Europe women are more often unemployed after the completion of a higher educational degree”. Tisheva argues that “legal and regulatory measures should ensure access to the labour market of young women and other groups of women with less bargaining power and from vulnerable groups”. Tisheva warns that the global trends of trade liberalization “have made of women one of the most flexible participants in the labour market, subjected to deregulation, informalisation, lowering of the social and labour standards”.

Affirmative measures such as gender quotas for political participation in elected bodies and pro-equity regulations in the labour market are behind most of the success stories of countries making progress in the Gender Equity Index.

More information about the Gender Equity Index and the complete statistical tables can be found at: www.socialwatch.org.