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**SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES ARISING IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF  
THE INTERNATIONAL COVENANT ON ECONOMIC, SOCIAL  
AND CULTURAL RIGHTS**

**General comment No. 16 (2005)**

**The equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all economic, social  
and cultural rights (art. 3 of the International Covenant on Economic,  
Social and Cultural Rights)**

**Introduction**

1. The equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all human rights is one of the fundamental principles recognized under international law and enshrined in the main international human rights instruments. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) protects human rights that are fundamental to the dignity of every person. In particular, article 3 of this Covenant provides for the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of the rights it articulates. This provision is founded on Article 1, paragraph 3, of the United Nations Charter and article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Except for the reference to ICESCR, it is identical to article 3 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), which was drafted at the same time.

2. The *travaux préparatoires* state that article 3 was included in the Covenant, as well as in ICCPR, to indicate that beyond a prohibition of discrimination, “the same rights should be expressly recognized for men and women on an equal footing and suitable measures should be taken to ensure that women had the opportunity to exercise their rights .... Moreover, even if article 3 overlapped with article 2, paragraph 2, it was still necessary to reaffirm the equality

rights between men and women. That fundamental principle, which was enshrined in the Charter of the United Nations, must be constantly emphasized, especially as there were still many prejudices preventing its full application".<sup>1</sup> Unlike article 26 of ICCPR, articles 3 and 2, paragraph 2, of ICESCR are not stand-alone provisions, but should be read in conjunction with each specific right guaranteed under part III of the Covenant.

3. Article 2, paragraph 2, of ICESCR provides for a guarantee of non-discrimination on the basis of sex among other grounds. This provision, and the guarantee of equal enjoyment of rights by men and women in article 3, are integrally related and mutually reinforcing. Moreover, the elimination of discrimination is fundamental to the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights on a basis of equality.

4. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) has taken particular note of factors negatively affecting the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights in many of its general comments, including those on the right to adequate housing,<sup>2</sup> the right to adequate food,<sup>3</sup> the right to education,<sup>4</sup> the right to the highest attainable standard of health,<sup>5</sup> and the right to water.<sup>6</sup> The Committee also routinely requests information on the equal enjoyment by men and women of the rights guaranteed under the Covenant in its list of issues in relation to States parties' reports and during its dialogue with States parties.

5. Women are often denied equal enjoyment of their human rights, in particular by virtue of the lesser status ascribed to them by tradition and custom, or as a result of overt or covert discrimination. Many women experience distinct forms of discrimination due to the intersection of sex with such factors as race, colour, language, religion, political and other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status, such as age, ethnicity, disability, marital, refugee or migrant status, resulting in compounded disadvantage.<sup>7</sup>

## **I. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

### **A. Equality**

6. The essence of article 3 of ICESCR is that the rights set forth in the Covenant are to be enjoyed by men and women on a basis of equality, a concept that carries substantive meaning. While expressions of formal equality may be found in constitutional provisions, legislation and policies of Governments, article 3 also mandates the equal enjoyment of the rights in the Covenant for men and women in practice.

7. The enjoyment of human rights on the basis of equality between men and women must be understood comprehensively. Guarantees of non-discrimination and equality in international human rights treaties mandate both de facto and de jure equality. De jure (or formal) equality and de facto (or substantive) equality are different but interconnected concepts. Formal equality assumes that equality is achieved if a law or policy treats men and women in a neutral manner. Substantive equality is concerned, in addition, with the effects of laws, policies and practices and with ensuring that they do not maintain, but rather alleviate, the inherent disadvantage that particular groups experience.

8. Substantive equality for men and women will not be achieved simply through the enactment of laws or the adoption of policies that are, *prima facie*, gender-neutral. In implementing article 3, States parties should take into account that such laws, policies and practice can fail to address or even perpetuate inequality between men and women because they do not take account of existing economic, social and cultural inequalities, particularly those experienced by women.

9. According to article 3, States parties must respect the principle of equality in and before the law. The principle of equality in the law must be respected by the legislature when adopting laws, by ensuring that those laws further equal enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights by men and women. The principle of equality before the law must be respected by administrative agencies, and courts and tribunals, and implies that those authorities must apply the law equally to men and women.

### **B. Non-discrimination**

10. The principle of non-discrimination is the corollary of the principle of equality. Subject to what is stated in paragraph 15 below on temporary special measures, it prohibits differential treatment of a person or group of persons based on his/her or their particular status or situation, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political and other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth, or other status, such as age, ethnicity, disability, marital, refugee or migrant status.

11. Discrimination against women is “any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field”.<sup>8</sup> Discrimination on the basis of sex may be based on the differential treatment of women because of their biology, such as refusal to hire women because they could become pregnant; or stereotypical assumptions, such as tracking women into low-level jobs on the assumption that they are unwilling to commit as much time to their work as men.

12. Direct discrimination occurs when a difference in treatment relies directly and explicitly on distinctions based exclusively on sex and characteristics of men or of women, which cannot be justified objectively.

13. Indirect discrimination occurs when a law, policy or programme does not appear to be discriminatory, but has a discriminatory effect when implemented. This can occur, for example, when women are disadvantaged compared to men with respect to the enjoyment of a particular opportunity or benefit due to pre-existing inequalities. Applying a gender-neutral law may leave the existing inequality in place, or exacerbate it.

14. Gender affects the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of their rights. Gender refers to cultural expectations and assumptions about the behaviour, attitudes, personality traits, and physical and intellectual capacities of men and women, based solely on their identity as men or women. Gender-based assumptions and expectations generally place women at a disadvantage with respect to substantive enjoyment of rights, such as freedom to act and to be recognized as autonomous, fully capable adults, to participate fully in economic, social and

political development, and to make decisions concerning their circumstances and conditions. Gender-based assumptions about economic, social and cultural roles preclude the sharing of responsibility between men and women in all spheres that is necessary to equality.

### **C. Temporary special measures**

15. The principles of equality and non-discrimination, by themselves, are not always sufficient to guarantee true equality. Temporary special measures may sometimes be needed in order to bring disadvantaged or marginalized persons or groups of persons to the same substantive level as others. Temporary special measures aim at realizing not only de jure or formal equality, but also de facto or substantive equality for men and women. However, the application of the principle of equality will sometimes require that States parties take measures in favour of women in order to attenuate or suppress conditions that perpetuate discrimination. As long as these measures are necessary to redress de facto discrimination and are terminated when de facto equality is achieved, such differentiation is legitimate.<sup>9</sup>

## **II. STATES PARTIES' OBLIGATIONS**

### **A. General legal obligations**

16. The equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights is a mandatory and immediate obligation of States parties.<sup>10</sup>

17. The equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights, like all human rights, imposes three levels of obligations on States parties - the obligation to respect, to protect and to fulfil. The obligation to fulfil further contains duties to provide, promote and facilitate.<sup>11</sup> Article 3 sets a non-derogable standard for compliance with the obligations of States parties as set out in articles 6 through 15 of ICESCR.

### **B. Specific legal obligations**

#### **1. Obligation to respect**

18. The obligation to respect requires States parties to refrain from discriminatory actions that directly or indirectly result in the denial of the equal right of men and women to their enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights. Respecting the right obliges States parties not to adopt, and to repeal laws and rescind, policies, administrative measures and programmes that do not conform with the right protected by article 3. In particular, it is incumbent upon States parties to take into account the effect of apparently gender-neutral laws, policies and programmes and to consider whether they could result in a negative impact on the ability of men and women to enjoy their human rights on a basis of equality.

#### **2. Obligation to protect**

19. The obligation to protect requires States parties to take steps aimed directly at the elimination of prejudices, customary and all other practices that perpetuate the notion of inferiority or superiority of either of the sexes, and stereotyped roles for men and women. States parties' obligation to protect under article 3 of ICESCR includes, inter alia, the respect and adoption of constitutional and legislative provisions on the equal right of men and women to

enjoy all human rights and the prohibition of discrimination of any kind; the adoption of legislation to eliminate discrimination and to prevent third parties from interfering directly or indirectly with the enjoyment of this right; the adoption of administrative measures and programmes, as well as the establishment of public institutions, agencies and programmes to protect women against discrimination.

20. States parties have an obligation to monitor and regulate the conduct of non-State actors to ensure that they do not violate the equal right of men and women to enjoy economic, social and cultural rights. This obligation applies, for example, in cases where public services have been partially or fully privatized.

### **3. Obligation to fulfil**

21. The obligation to fulfil requires States parties to take steps to ensure that in practice, men and women enjoy their economic, social and cultural rights on a basis of equality. Such steps should include:

- To make available and accessible appropriate remedies, such as compensation, reparation, restitution, rehabilitation, guarantees of non-repetition, declarations, public apologies, educational programmes and prevention programmes;
- To establish appropriate venues for redress such as courts and tribunals or administrative mechanisms that are accessible to all on the basis of equality, including the poorest and most disadvantaged and marginalized men and women;
- To develop monitoring mechanisms to ensure that the implementation of laws and policies aimed at promoting the equal enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights by men and women do not have unintended adverse effects on disadvantaged or marginalized individuals or groups, particularly women and girls;
- To design and implement policies and programmes to give long-term effect to the economic, social and cultural rights of both men and women on the basis of equality. These may include the adoption of temporary special measures to accelerate women's equal enjoyment of their rights, gender audits, and gender-specific allocation of resources;
- To conduct human rights education and training programmes for judges and public officials;
- To conduct awareness-raising and training programmes on equality for workers involved in the realization of economic, social and cultural rights at the grass-roots level;
- To integrate, in formal and non-formal education, the principle of the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights, and to promote equal participation of men and women, boys and girls, in schools and other education programmes;

- To promote equal representation of men and women in public office and decision-making bodies;
- To promote equal participation of men and women in development planning, decision-making and in the benefits of development and all programmes related to the realization of economic, social and cultural rights.

### **C. Specific examples of States parties' obligations**

22. Article 3 is a cross-cutting obligation and applies to all the rights contained in articles 6 to 15 of the Covenant. It requires addressing gender-based social and cultural prejudices, providing for equality in the allocation of resources, and promoting the sharing of responsibilities in the family, community and public life. The examples provided in the following paragraphs may be taken as guidance on the ways in which article 3 applies to other rights in the Covenant, but are not intended to be exhaustive.

23. Article 6, paragraph 1, of the Covenant requires States parties to safeguard the right of everyone to the opportunity to gain a living by work which is freely chosen or accepted and to take the necessary steps to achieve the full realization of this right. Implementing article 3, in relation to article 6, requires inter alia, that in law and in practice, men and women have equal access to jobs at all levels and all occupations and that vocational training and guidance programmes, in both the public and private sectors, provide men and women with the skills, information and knowledge necessary for them to benefit equally from the right to work.

24. Article 7 (a) of the Covenant requires States parties to recognize the right of everyone to enjoy just and favourable conditions of work and to ensure, among other things, fair wages and equal pay for work of equal value. Article 3, in relation to article 7 requires, inter alia, that the State party identify and eliminate the underlying causes of pay differentials, such as gender-biased job evaluation or the perception that productivity differences between men and women exist. Furthermore, the State party should monitor compliance by the private sector with national legislation on working conditions through an effectively functioning labour inspectorate. The State party should adopt legislation that prescribes equal consideration in promotion, non-wage compensation and equal opportunity and support for vocational or professional development in the workplace. Finally, the State party should reduce the constraints faced by men and women in reconciling professional and family responsibilities by promoting adequate policies for childcare and care of dependent family members.

25. Article 8, paragraph 1 (a), of the Covenant requires States parties to ensure the right of everyone to form and join trade unions of his or her choice. Article 3, in relation to article 8, requires allowing men and women to organize and join workers' associations that address their specific concerns. In this regard, particular attention should be given to domestic workers, rural women, women working in female-dominated industries and women working at home, who are often deprived of this right.

26. Article 9 of the Covenant requires that States parties recognize the right of everyone to social security, including social insurance, and to equal access to social services. Implementing article 3, in relation to article 9, requires, inter alia, equalizing the compulsory retirement age for

both men and women; ensuring that women receive the equal benefit of public and private pension schemes; and guaranteeing adequate maternity leave for women, paternity leave for men, and parental leave for both men and women.

27. Article 10, paragraph 1, of the Covenant requires that States parties recognize that the widest possible protection and assistance should be accorded to the family, and that marriage must be entered into with the free consent of the intending spouses. Implementing article 3, in relation to article 10, requires States parties, inter alia, to provide victims of domestic violence, who are primarily female, with access to safe housing, remedies and redress for physical, mental and emotional damage; to ensure that men and women have an equal right to choose if, whom and when to marry - in particular, the legal age of marriage for men and women should be the same, and boys and girls should be protected equally from practices that promote child marriage, marriage by proxy, or coercion; and to ensure that women have equal rights to marital property and inheritance upon their husband's death. Gender-based violence is a form of discrimination that inhibits the ability to enjoy rights and freedoms, including economic, social and cultural rights, on a basis of equality. States parties must take appropriate measures to eliminate violence against men and women and act with due diligence to prevent, investigate, mediate, punish and redress acts of violence against them by private actors.

28. Article 11 of the Covenant requires States parties to recognize the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living for him/herself and his/her family, including adequate housing (para. 1) and adequate food (para. 2). Implementing article 3, in relation to article 11, paragraph 1, requires that women have a right to own, use or otherwise control housing, land and property on an equal basis with men, and to access necessary resources to do so. Implementing article 3, in relation to article 11, paragraph 2, also requires States parties, inter alia, to ensure that women have access to or control over means of food production, and actively to address customary practices under which women are not allowed to eat until the men are fully fed, or are only allowed less nutritious food.<sup>12</sup>

29. Article 12 of the Covenant requires States parties to undertake steps towards the full realization of the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. The implementation of article 3, in relation to article 12, requires at a minimum the removal of legal and other obstacles that prevent men and women from accessing and benefiting from health care on a basis of equality. This includes, inter alia, addressing the ways in which gender roles affect access to determinants of health, such as water and food; the removal of legal restrictions on reproductive health provisions; the prohibition of female genital mutilation; and the provision of adequate training for health-care workers to deal with women's health issues.<sup>13</sup>

30. Article 13, paragraph 1, of the Covenant requires States parties to recognize the right of everyone to education and in paragraph 2 (a) stipulates that primary education shall be compulsory and available free to all. Implementing article 3, in relation to article 13, requires, inter alia, the adoption of legislation and policies to ensure the same admission criteria for boys and girls at all levels of education. States parties should ensure, in particular through information and awareness-raising campaigns, that families desist from giving preferential treatment to boys when sending their children to school, and that curricula promote equality and non-discrimination. States parties must create favourable conditions to ensure the safety of children, in particular girls, on their way to and from school.

31. Article 15, paragraph 1 (a) and (b), of the Covenant require States parties to recognize the right of everyone to take part in cultural life and to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress. Implementing article 3, in relation to article 15, paragraph 1 (a) and (b), requires, inter alia, overcoming institutional barriers and other obstacles, such as those based on cultural and religious traditions, which prevent women from fully participating in cultural life, science education and scientific research, and directing resources to scientific research relating to the health and economic needs of women on an equal basis with those of men.

### **III. IMPLEMENTATION AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL**

#### **A. Policies and strategies**

32. The most appropriate ways and means of implementing the right under article 3 of the Covenant will vary from one State party to another. Every State party has a margin of discretion in adopting appropriate measures in complying with its primary and immediate obligation to ensure the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of all their economic, social and cultural rights. Among other things, States parties must, integrate into national plans of action for human rights appropriate strategies to ensure the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights.

33. These strategies should be based on the systematic identification of policies, programmes and activities relevant to the situation and context within the State, as derived from the normative content of article 3 of the Covenant and spelled out in relation to the levels and nature of States parties' obligations referred to in paragraphs 16 to 21 above. The strategies should give particular attention to the elimination of discrimination in the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights.

34. States parties should periodically review existing legislation, policies, strategies and programmes in relation to economic, social and cultural rights, and adopt any necessary changes to ensure that they are consonant with their obligations under article 3 of the Covenant.

35. The adoption of temporary special measures may be necessary to accelerate the equal enjoyment by women of all economic, social and cultural rights and to improve the de facto position of women.<sup>14</sup> Temporary special measures should be distinguished from permanent policies and strategies undertaken to achieve equality of men and women.

36. States parties are encouraged to adopt temporary special measures to accelerate the achievement of equality between men and women in the enjoyment of the rights under the Covenant. Such measures are not to be considered discriminatory in themselves as they are grounded in the State's obligation to eliminate disadvantage caused by past and current discriminatory laws, traditions and practices. The nature, duration and application of such measures should be designed with reference to the specific issue and context, and should be adjusted as circumstances require. The results of such measures should be monitored with a view to being discontinued when the objectives for which they are undertaken have been achieved.



37. The right of individuals and groups of individuals to participate in decision-making processes that may affect their development must be an integral component of any policy, programme or activity developed to discharge governmental obligations under article 3 of the Covenant.

### **B. Remedies and accountability**

38. National policies and strategies should provide for the establishment of effective mechanisms and institutions where they do not exist, including administrative authorities, ombudsmen and other national human rights institutions, courts and tribunals. These institutions should investigate and address alleged violations relating to article 3 and provide remedies for such violations. States parties, for their part, should ensure that such remedies are effectively implemented.

### **C. Indicators and benchmarks**

39. National policies and strategies should identify appropriate indicators and benchmarks on the right to equal enjoyment by men and women of economic, social and cultural rights in order to effectively monitor the implementation by the State party of its obligations under the Covenant in this regard. Disaggregated statistics, provided within specific time frames, are necessary to measure the progressive realization of economic, social and cultural rights by men and women, where appropriate.

## **IV. VIOLATIONS**

40. States parties must fulfil their immediate and primary obligation to ensure the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights.

41. The principle of equality between men and women is fundamental to the enjoyment of each of the specific rights enumerated in the Covenant. Failure to ensure formal and substantive equality in the enjoyment of any of these rights constitutes a violation of that right. Elimination of de jure as well as de facto discrimination is required for the equal enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights. Failure to adopt, implement and monitor effects of laws, policies and programmes to eliminate de jure and de facto discrimination with respect to each of the rights enumerated in articles 6 to 15 of the Covenant constitutes a violation of those rights.

42. Violations of the rights contained in the Covenant can occur through the direct action of, failure to act or omission by States parties, or through their institutions or agencies at the national and local levels. The adoption and undertaking of any retrogressive measures that affect the equal right of men and women to the enjoyment of the all the rights set forth in the Covenant constitutes a violation of article 3.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Draft International Covenants on Human Rights Report of the Third Committee. A/53/65 (17 December 1962), para. 85.

<sup>2</sup> Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (hereinafter CESCR), general comment No. 4 (1991): The right to adequate housing (article 11, paragraph 1 of the Covenant) para. 6; general comment No. 7 (1997): The right to adequate housing (article 11, paragraph 1 of the Covenant): Forced evictions, para. 10.

<sup>3</sup> CESCR, general comment No. 12 (1999): The right to adequate food (article 11 of the Covenant), para. 26.

<sup>4</sup> CESCR, general comment No. 11 (1999): Plans for primary education (article 14 of the Covenant), para. 3; general comment No. 13 (1999): The right to education (article 13 of the Covenant), paras. 6 (b), 31 and 32.

<sup>5</sup> CESCR, general comment No. 14 (2000): The right to the highest attainable standard of health (article 12 of the Covenant), paras. 18-22.

<sup>6</sup> CESCR, general comment No. 15 (2000): The right to water (articles 11 and 12 of the Covenant), paras. 13 and 14.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, general comment XXV (2000): Gender-related dimensions of racial discrimination.

<sup>8</sup> As defined in article 1 of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women.

<sup>9</sup> However, there is one exception to this general principle: reasons specific to an individual male candidate may tilt the balance in his favour, which is to be assessed objectively, taking into account all criteria pertaining to the individual candidates. This is a requirement of the principle of proportionality.

<sup>10</sup> CESCR, general comment No. 3 (1990): The nature of States parties obligations (art. 2, para. 2).

<sup>11</sup> According to CESCR general comment Nos. 12 and 13, the obligation to fulfil incorporates an obligation to facilitate and an obligation to provide. In the present general comment, the obligation to fulfil also incorporates an obligation to promote the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women.

<sup>12</sup> Other examples of obligations and possible violations of article 3 in relation to article 11 (1) and (2) are further discussed in CESCR general comment No. 12, para. 26.

<sup>13</sup> CESCR general comment No. 14, paras. 18-21.

<sup>14</sup> Reference is made in this regard to general recommendation No. 25 on article 4, paragraph 1, of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women adopted by the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), CESCR general comment No. 13 and the Limburg Principles on the Implementation of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

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