

POVERTY AND THE PLIGHT OF THE GIRL CHILD IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

Abdullahi Rabi'u Kontagora

Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Abuja

Phone: +234 7067543074

Abstract

The study examined the concept of poverty and the plight of the girl child in developing countries. It also analyses how governments of the southern hemisphere intervene in dealing with the menace. The research was anchored on the theories of substantive equality, corrective justice, and intersectionality, which collectively provided a theoretical foundation for understanding how structural, legal, and cultural factors perpetuated women's economic marginalization. The study relied on secondary data obtained from scholarly journals, institutional reports, and policy documents, employing qualitative analytical methods to interpret existing evidence. Findings revealed that women's poverty was largely rooted in systemic discrimination, unequal access to education and employment, legal exclusion from property ownership, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work. The study also established that these structural constraints reinforced intergenerational poverty cycles and limited national development potential. However, affirmative action when effectively designed and implemented was found to be a viable mechanism for promoting substantive equality, enhancing women's participation in economic and political spheres, and bridging the gender poverty gap. The study concluded that addressing the feminization of poverty required comprehensive gender-responsive policies, institutional reforms, and societal reorientation to eliminate structural barriers. It recommended the institutionalization of affirmative action in governance, education, and employment, alongside targeted interventions for financial inclusion, skill development, and social protection. By emphasizing inclusive policy frameworks, the study contributed to the growing discourse on gender equality and sustainable development in the Global South.

Keywords: Poverty, plight of the girl-child, developing countries, social exclusion, discrimination

Introduction

Across much of the Global South, poverty bears a distinctly gendered face. Women continue to constitute a disproportionate share of those living in poverty a phenomenon widely described as the *feminization of poverty* (Chant, 2016; Moghadam, 2020). This term transcends mere statistical overrepresentation; it captures the complex and multidimensional nature of deprivation experienced by women, encompassing limited access to education, health care, productive

resources, political participation, and economic opportunities (UN Women, 2022). The persistence of this gendered poverty reflects the intersection of socio-economic inequalities, discriminatory legal systems, patriarchal cultural norms, and institutionalized gender biases that have historically relegated women to the margins of economic and political power (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015; Razavi, 2019).

In many developing countries, particularly in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, women's poverty is exacerbated by unequal property rights, wage disparities, unpaid care burdens, and limited access to financial services. Structural adjustment programs, neoliberal economic reforms, and labor market segmentation have also intensified gender inequality by eroding social safety nets and constraining women's access to formal employment (Elson, 2017). Consequently, women's economic vulnerability is not merely an outcome of personal circumstances but a systemic manifestation of gendered power relations embedded within national and global economic structures (Chant & Sweetman, 2012).

In response to these enduring disparities, *affirmative action* has emerged as a crucial policy tool to promote gender equality and women's empowerment. Affirmative action refers to deliberate, targeted interventions designed to rectify historical injustices and structural disadvantages faced by marginalized groups, particularly women (ILO, 2018). Far from being a mere compensatory or symbolic gesture, affirmative action functions as a transformative mechanism aimed at achieving substantive equality by ensuring women's access to education, political representation, employment, and decision-making platforms (Kabeer, 2015; United Nations, 2019). When effectively implemented, such measures can catalyze broader societal change by challenging patriarchal hierarchies and fostering inclusive growth. Therefore, examining the feminization of poverty within the context of the Global South necessitates a critical analysis of how affirmative action policies can serve as both corrective and empowering instruments. By addressing the structural and cultural roots of gender inequality, affirmative action has the potential to not only reduce poverty among women but also to strengthen national development and social cohesion. This study thus seeks to explore the nexus between the feminization of poverty and affirmative action, assessing how proactive gender-sensitive policies can reshape socio-economic realities for women across the Global South.

Material and Method

This study adopts a qualitative, secondary-data-based doctrinal methodology, relying on the analysis of existing legal instruments, scholarly literature, and policy documents. It draws on constitutions, gender equality statutes, affirmative action laws, and judicial decisions as primary materials, complemented by secondary sources such as academic journals, UN and NGO reports, and statistical datasets. The use of secondary data including gender-disaggregated poverty and employment statistics enables an evidence-based understanding of the feminization of poverty and the effectiveness of affirmative action. This approach facilitates critical examination of legal doctrines, revealing gaps, tensions, and opportunities for enhancing gender-equitable policy reforms across the Global South.

Conceptual Clarification

The concept of the *feminization of poverty* remains a central but contested theme in gender and development discourse. While popular narratives often cite that "70% of the world's poor are women," scholars have problematized this claim, noting the lack of consistent empirical evidence

and methodological rigor behind such a global figure (Chant, 2016; Moghadam, 2020). Rather than relying on static or numerical representations, contemporary scholarship emphasizes that poverty is deeply gendered in its causes, manifestations, and consequences. It is not merely about income deprivation but about structural inequality, unequal access to capabilities, and limited participation in decision-making processes (Kabeer, 2015; UN Women, 2022).

Gendered poverty is multidimensional spanning economic, social, cultural, and political domains. Women's experiences of poverty often reflect intersecting disadvantages related to class, ethnicity, geography, and household structure. For instance, female-headed households tend to face higher risks of economic insecurity due to limited access to credit, land, and productive assets (Chant & Sweetman, 2012). Moreover, when poverty is measured at the household level, intra-household inequalities are often obscured: even within non-poor households, women and girls may lack control over income, property, or decision-making, resulting in "hidden poverty" (Elson, 2017). To capture these nuances, development agencies and scholars employ composite indices such as the Gender Development Index (GDI), Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM), and Human Poverty Index (HPI). These tools extend beyond income metrics to assess disparities in education, health, political participation, and access to resources, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of gendered deprivation (UNDP, 2021).

The conceptual shift from measuring poverty solely in monetary terms to recognizing its multidimensional and relational character underscores the importance of addressing structural and institutional barriers that sustain gender inequality. Thus, the feminization of poverty should not be interpreted solely as an increase in women's numerical representation among the poor, but as a reflection of the deep-rooted socio-economic and political processes that perpetuate women's subordination. Understanding these dimensions provides a stronger foundation for evaluating affirmative action policies as strategic interventions to dismantle systemic gender inequities and promote inclusive human development.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on three interrelated theoretical perspectives Substantive Equality Theory, Corrective Justice Theory, and Intersectionality Theory which collectively provide a robust framework for analyzing the feminization of poverty and the role of affirmative action in addressing gender-based socio-economic inequalities. Substantive Equality Theory, advanced by scholars such as Sandra Fredman (2011) and Catharine MacKinnon (1987), moves beyond the narrow idea of *formal equality*, which merely guarantees equal treatment under the law, to emphasize *real and meaningful equality of outcomes*. Its basic assumption is that equal treatment in unequal contexts perpetuates inequality rather than eliminating it. Substantive equality thus advocates for differential but equitable treatment to address structural disadvantages faced by women and other marginalized groups. Within this study, the theory is relevant because it justifies affirmative action as a legitimate and necessary mechanism to dismantle systemic barriers such as discriminatory labor markets, patriarchal norms, and legal exclusions that perpetuate women's poverty in the Global South. By ensuring access to education, employment, and political representation, affirmative action operationalizes the principles of substantive equality.

Corrective Justice Theory, associated with legal philosophers such as Aristotle and later refined by scholars like Ernest Weinrib (1992) and Jules Coleman (1990), posits that justice requires the rectification of past wrongs and the restoration of fairness where systemic harm has occurred. The theory assumes that inequalities are not natural outcomes but the result of historical injustices

colonialism, gender discrimination, and unequal property regimes that have disadvantaged women economically and socially. Its relevance to this study lies in its moral and legal justification for affirmative action: such policies serve as corrective instruments to redress long-standing structural inequalities and redistribute opportunities more equitably.

Intersectionality Theory, pioneered by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989), provides a critical feminist lens that underscores how multiple, overlapping identities such as gender, class, ethnicity, and geography interact to shape women's experiences of poverty and marginalization. The theory assumes that gender inequality cannot be understood in isolation from other forms of oppression. Its applicability to this study lies in explaining why affirmative action must be context-specific and inclusive of diverse groups of women, such as rural women, women with disabilities, or minority ethnic women, whose experiences of poverty differ significantly. Together, these theories provide a comprehensive analytical foundation for understanding the complexity of gendered poverty and the transformative potential of affirmative action. They collectively argue that achieving gender justice in the Global South requires not only compensatory policies but also structural reforms that promote empowerment, inclusivity, and sustainable development.

2.2 The Phenomenon of Feminization of Poverty

The concept of the *feminization of poverty* emerged in the late 1970s and gained scholarly prominence through the work of Diane Pearce (1978), who observed that poverty increasingly bore a “female face.” The term denotes not only the numerical overrepresentation of women among the poor but also the qualitative dimensions of their deprivation such as restricted access to education, healthcare, credit, and decision-making power (Chant, 2016). It encapsulates both the *incidence* and *intensity* of poverty experienced by women, particularly in the Global South, where socio-cultural and institutional structures entrench gendered disadvantage. According to UN Women (2023), an estimated 383 million women and girls globally live on less than USD 1.90 per day, compared to 368 million men and boys, highlighting the persistent gender gap in extreme poverty. The disparity is especially stark in sub-Saharan Africa, where for every 100 men aged 25–34 living in extreme poverty, there are approximately 127 women (UN Women & UNDP, 2022). This imbalance reflects a combination of factors, including gender-based discrimination, labor market segmentation, unequal property rights, and the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work that constrains women's economic participation (Kabeer, 2015).

Structural inequalities in access to productive assets and social services also perpetuate women's economic marginalization. For instance, women own less than 20% of global landholdings (FAO, 2020) and are overrepresented in informal, low-paying, and precarious forms of employment (World Bank, 2022). Moreover, social norms often assign women the role of caregivers, reducing their time for income-generating activities and reinforcing economic dependency (Razavi, 2011). Consequently, the feminization of poverty cannot be understood solely as a function of income disparities; it also reflects broader institutional failures in ensuring gender-responsive social protection, equitable labor rights, and inclusive development.

Furthermore, globalization and neoliberal economic reforms have exacerbated gendered poverty by reducing public spending on social welfare and increasing women's vulnerability to economic shocks (Chant & Sweetman, 2012). Female-headed households often formed through widowhood, divorce, or migration tend to face heightened financial insecurity due to limited access to credit, inheritance rights, and social safety nets (Moghadam, 2005). In essence, the feminization of poverty illustrates that poverty is not gender-neutral but shaped by intersecting social, legal, and

economic inequalities. Addressing it thus requires transformative policies such as affirmative action, gender budgeting, and inclusive labor reforms that tackle both structural and systemic barriers to women's empowerment.

2.3 How Feminization of Poverty Reinforces Socio-Economic Inequality in the Global South

The feminization of poverty functions as both a *symptom* and a *driver* of persistent socio-economic inequality across the Global South. It reflects structural asymmetries in access to education, employment, property, healthcare, and political participation, which systematically disadvantage women and perpetuate cycles of deprivation across generations (Chant, 2016; Kabeer, 2015). These mechanisms create a gendered poverty trap that undermines inclusive development and weakens the social fabric of many developing societies.

Restricted Access to Education and Formal Employment: Gender disparities in education remain a key determinant of income inequality. In many parts of sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, girls are more likely to drop out of school due to early marriage, household responsibilities, or discriminatory cultural expectations (UNESCO, 2023). Lower educational attainment directly limits women's access to formal employment and skilled labor markets, pushing many into informal, low-paying, and insecure jobs (World Bank, 2022). This exclusion from productive employment opportunities reinforces dependency and constrains upward mobility, thereby sustaining gendered income inequality.

Discriminatory Laws and Social Norms: Legal and customary systems in the Global South often perpetuate gender-based discrimination. In many African and South Asian countries, statutory and customary laws restrict women's rights to own or inherit land, access credit, or register businesses independently (FAO, 2020; UN Women, 2023). Such restrictions hinder women's ability to accumulate assets, secure loans, or invest in income-generating ventures. Customary practices that prioritize male inheritance or property control further entrench economic disempowerment, reinforcing structural inequality between men and women (Deere & Doss, 2006).

Unequal Burden of Unpaid Care Work: Women disproportionately bear the responsibility for unpaid domestic and care work, which consumes time and energy that could otherwise be directed toward paid labor or education (Razavi, 2011). Globally, women perform about **three times more unpaid care work than men**, with the imbalance even more pronounced in low-income countries (ILO, 2018). This "care economy gap" reduces women's labor force participation and earnings potential, reinforcing both income inequality and social subordination.

Health Inequalities and Social Exclusion: Limited access to healthcare, reproductive services, and social protection further compounds women's vulnerability. Poor women are often excluded from social insurance schemes due to informal employment or lack of documentation (Molyneux, 2007). Health shocks such as maternal mortality, malnutrition, or HIV/AIDS disproportionately affect women, reducing their productivity and economic security. Consequently, gendered health disparities contribute to the intergenerational transmission of poverty and inequality (Sen & Östlin, 2008).

Collectively, these interlocking structural disadvantages do not merely reflect economic inequality they *reproduce* it. The feminization of poverty entrenches gender hierarchies in social, legal, and economic systems, impeding progress toward equitable and sustainable development. As such, policies aimed at reducing poverty in the Global South must explicitly incorporate gender-sensitive

frameworks, including affirmative action, to dismantle these entrenched inequalities and promote inclusive growth.

2.5 Justification for Affirmative Action in Bridging the Poverty Gap

Affirmative action is defensible as a policy response to the feminization of poverty on moral, economic, and pragmatic/institutional grounds. Together these rationales show that affirmative measures are not merely preferential treatments but corrective instruments designed to produce substantive equality and inclusive development.

Moral and ethical grounds.: First, affirmative action recognizes that women's disproportionate poverty is structurally produced rather than individually earned. Centuries of legal exclusion, colonial legacies, and patriarchal institutions have constrained women's access to land, education, finance and political voice; affirmative action functions as a remedial tool to redress those historical injustices (Kabeer, 2015; Fredman, 2016). Second, from a human-rights perspective, states have obligations under international law (e.g., CEDAW) to pursue substantive equality, not merely formal nondiscrimination (UN Women, 2019). Finally, affirmative action is a social-justice measure: it redistributes opportunities so that members of historically disadvantaged groups can realise equal dignity and agency (Young, 1990).

Economic grounds.: Economically, narrowing gender gaps is pro-growth as well as pro-poor. Increasing women's access to education, wage employment, and productive assets expands the labour force, raises aggregate productivity, and diversifies skills in the economy (World Bank, 2012). Empirical studies show that investments in women's incomes have high "multiplier" effects improvements in child nutrition, school attendance, and household welfare so that targeting women yields strong poverty-reduction dividends (Duflo, 2012; World Bank, 2018). Greater female labour force participation also expands the tax base and strengthens fiscal capacity for public services that further reduce vulnerability (UNDP, 2020). Thus affirmative action that facilitates women's entry into formal jobs, entrepreneurship, or education is sound economic policy as well as equity policy.

Pragmatic and institutional grounds.: On a pragmatic level, affirmative action can dismantle systemic barriers biases in hiring, admission procedures, procurement, and promotions that reproduce exclusion (ILO, 2018). Reserved seats, targeted scholarships, gender-responsive procurement rules, and preferential access to credit are practical mechanisms to open doors that remain closed despite formal equality laws. Increased representation of women in decision-making bodies shifts policy priorities toward care, health, and social protection areas critical to breaking poverty cycles (Krook & O'Brien, 2012). Finally, affirmative action can catalyse institutional change by normalising inclusive practices, creating accountability mechanisms (gender audits, disaggregated indicators), and building capacities (mentoring, training) so gains are sustainable rather than tokenistic (OECD, 2017).

More so, affirmative action combines ethical correction of historic wrongs, empirically supported economic returns, and practical institutional levers. It should, however, be designed with safeguards targeting, capacity building, monitoring, sunset/review clauses to mitigate objections (reverse discrimination, mismatch) and to ensure affirmative measures translate into durable empowerment rather than short-term gains.

2.6 Causes of Feminization of Poverty

The feminization of poverty stems from intersecting structural, cultural, and economic inequalities that limit women's access to education, assets, and social protection in the Global South.

(i) Unequal human capital accumulation: Girls' early marriage, cultural biases, and restricted access to education and vocational training constrain women's labor market participation and earnings (UNESCO, 2020; Kabeer, 2015). This educational deficit perpetuates intergenerational poverty (World Bank, 2012).

(ii) Legal and customary discrimination: Patriarchal inheritance systems and discriminatory property laws exclude women from owning land and accessing credit, restricting economic autonomy (FAO, 2021; Deere & Doss, 2006).

(iii) Care economy burden: Women perform three times more unpaid care work than men, resulting in "time poverty" that limits education and paid employment (ILO, 2018; UN Women, 2020).

(iv) Restricted mobility and employment: Gender norms and wage disparities confine women to low-wage, informal sectors earning roughly 24% less than men globally (ILO, 2020).

(v) Health, violence, and vulnerability: Gender-based violence, maternal mortality, and inadequate healthcare undermine women's productivity and economic security (UNFPA, 2019; UNDP, 2020). Women's poverty reflects systemic inequalities embedded in institutions and social norms. Combating it demands legal reforms, gender-responsive budgeting, and affirmative action to promote equitable access to resources and opportunities.

2.7 Consequences of Feminization of Poverty

The feminization of poverty produces deep social and economic consequences, undermining equity and sustainable development in the Global South.

Perpetuation of poverty cycles: Women's limited access to education, income, and assets perpetuates intergenerational poverty. Children of poor mothers experience lower health and education outcomes, reinforcing structural inequality (Kabeer, 2015; World Bank, 2012).

Economic drag: Gender inequality in employment and wages reduces global GDP by trillions annually. Closing the gender gap in sub-Saharan Africa could raise per capita income by up to 20% (World Bank, 2018; IMF, 2019). Women's underutilized potential constrains innovation and economic growth.

Social exclusion: Economic dependence and time poverty restrict women's participation in decision-making and governance, weakening democratic inclusion (Cornwall & Rivas, 2015).

Health inequality: Poor women face higher risks of malnutrition, maternal mortality, and gender-based violence due to inadequate healthcare and social protection (UNFPA, 2019; WHO, 2021). The feminization of poverty perpetuates economic inefficiency, marginalization, and health disparities. Tackling these effects requires gender-responsive policies promoting empowerment, healthcare access, and social inclusion.

Empirical Review

An empirical review systematically analyzes studies that use observed data quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods to answer substantive questions. Unlike theoretical reviews, it

evaluates methodologies (surveys, experiments, case studies), summarizes findings, and identifies evidence gaps. For this study, an empirical review grounds claims about affirmative action and the feminization of poverty in measurable outcomes such as poverty rates, asset ownership, and labor participation. By comparing findings across contexts, it identifies which affirmative-action models yield sustainable progress and where reforms remain necessary. Chant (2016) Using cross-regional household surveys, shows women's poverty is multidimensional and context-dependent, revealing "hidden" poverty even in non-poor households. *Relevance:* Affirms the need for multidimensional affirmative action targeting education, assets, and social protection. On the other hand, Kabeer (2015) Combinis program evaluations, Kabeer finds gender-focused initiatives are most effective when paired with rights reforms and childcare. *Relevance:* Demonstrates that affirmative action succeeds when linked to supportive institutions and social services. Duflo (2012) in her Experimental studies show investments in women's education and cash transfers improve child welfare and reduce poverty. *Relevance:* Supports resource-targeted affirmative measures for sustainable poverty reduction. Deere & Doss (2006) Empirical surveys reveal women's limited land and asset ownership hinder productivity and credit access. *Relevance:* Justifies land-rights reforms and gender-responsive credit as key affirmative-action tools. World Bank (2012) The *World Development Report* confirms that gender equality in education and labor participation drives economic growth. *Relevance:* Highlights that legal reform and economic opportunity together yield the strongest poverty-reduction effects. Collectively, these studies show that women's poverty is structural and intersectional. Affirmative action is most effective when combined with education, asset access, and care supports. Rigorous monitoring is essential to ensure programs produce lasting equality rather than symbolic compliance.

Gap in the Literature

While existing scholarship richly documents the feminization of poverty and gender inequality, significant gaps remain in linking affirmative action policies directly to poverty reduction outcomes in the Global South. Chant (2016) and Kabeer (2015) emphasize structural and cultural dimensions of women's poverty but pay limited attention to how affirmative action can serve as a transformative mechanism for bridging the gendered poverty gap. Moreover, much of the empirical literature focuses on economic empowerment initiatives without systematically integrating legal, institutional, and policy frameworks that underpin gender-responsive reforms. This study fills this gap by examining the role of affirmative action as both a legal and developmental tool for mitigating the feminization of poverty, evaluating its effectiveness in addressing structural inequalities, and proposing integrated policy pathways to advance substantive gender equality and inclusive development in the Global South.

Findings of the Study

The study revealed several interrelated findings on the nexus between socio-economic inequality, the feminization of poverty, and the justification for affirmative action in the Global South:

1. **Persistent Gendered Poverty Gap:** The study found that women continue to constitute a disproportionate percentage of the poor due to systemic barriers such as unequal access to education, property ownership, and formal employment opportunities (UNDP, 2020).
2. **Structural and Legal Discrimination:** Discriminatory laws, patriarchal norms, and limited political participation remain significant contributors to women's economic marginalization (Kabeer, 2015).

3. **Impact of Unpaid Care Work:** Women's disproportionate involvement in unpaid care and domestic labor limits their time for income-generating activities and reinforces economic dependence (Chant, 2016).
4. **Affirmative Action as a Corrective Mechanism:** Affirmative action policies—such as gender quotas, targeted credit schemes, and education subsidies—were found to enhance women's participation in governance, labor markets, and entrepreneurship (UN Women, 2022).
5. **Positive Economic and Social Outcomes:** The study established that gender-inclusive policies yield multiplier effects, including improved family welfare, higher educational attainment for children, and community-level economic resilience (World Bank, 2021).
6. **Implementation Challenges:** Despite progress, weak institutional enforcement, political resistance, and inadequate monitoring frameworks limit the transformative potential of affirmative action in many Global South states (IMF, 2019).

Overall, the study concludes that while affirmative action is a justified and effective mechanism to address the feminization of poverty, its success depends on sustained political will, robust legal frameworks, and the integration of gender equality into national development planning.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the feminization of poverty remains a critical global and developmental challenge, particularly in the Global South, where structural inequalities, patriarchal norms, and weak institutional frameworks continue to reinforce women's socio-economic marginalization. The research demonstrated that gendered poverty is not merely an economic issue but a manifestation of systemic injustice rooted in unequal access to education, property, healthcare, and political representation. It further established that affirmative action through gender-responsive budgeting, employment quotas, access to credit, and legal reforms serves as an effective corrective tool for addressing entrenched inequalities. Evidence from various development programs indicates that empowering women economically and politically contributes significantly to national productivity, poverty reduction, and social inclusion.

However, the study emphasizes that for affirmative action to achieve its full transformative potential, there must be consistent political will, strong institutional support, and effective monitoring mechanisms. It concludes that sustainable development and poverty eradication are unattainable without dismantling the gendered structures that perpetuate women's poverty and exclusion. Hence, the study advocates for a comprehensive, multi-sectoral, and gender-sensitive approach to policymaking that recognizes women not as passive beneficiaries but as active agents of economic and social transformation.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen Gender-Responsive Laws: Governments should reform and enforce legislation promoting women's rights in education, employment, land ownership, and inheritance, eliminating discriminatory customs and legal barriers.

- 2. Expand Education and Skills Development:** Provide scholarships, vocational training, and adult education for women, especially in rural areas, to enhance employability and economic independence.
- 3. Enhance Financial Inclusion:** Develop gender-sensitive credit and microfinance programs enabling women to access capital and entrepreneurship opportunities without collateral constraints.
- 4. Reduce Unpaid Care Burden:** Invest in childcare, healthcare, and social infrastructure to ease women's time poverty and boost formal workforce participation.
- 5. Institutionalize Affirmative Action:** Adopt quotas in employment and governance to ensure women's representation in leadership and policy-making.
- 6. Improve Gender Data Systems:** Collect sex-disaggregated data on income, employment, and assets to inform equitable policy and program evaluation.
- 7. Strengthen Partnerships:** Collaborate with UN agencies, NGOs, and women's organizations to enhance advocacy and program implementation.
- 8. Promote Cultural Reorientation:** Implement campaigns challenging gender stereotypes and valuing women's economic and social contributions.
- 9. Mainstream Gender in Development Planning:** Integrate gender priorities into national budgets and poverty strategies to achieve inclusive growth and sustainable development.

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