Transcript: Q&A

Gender Equality: 50-50 by 2030

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka

United Nations Under-Secretary-General and Executive Director, UN Women; Deputy President, South Africa (2005-08)

Chair: Dr Robin Niblett CMG

Director, Chatham House

11 June 2015

The views expressed in this document are the sole responsibility of the speaker(s) and participants do not necessarily reflect the view of Chatham House, its staff, associates or Council. Chatham House is independent and owes no allegiance to any government or to any political body. It does not take institutional positions on policy issues. This document is issued on the understanding that if any extract is used, the author(s)/ speaker(s) and Chatham House should be credited, preferably with the date of the publication or details of the event. Where this document refers to or reports statements made by speakers at an event every effort has been made to provide a fair representation of their views and opinions. The published text of speeches and presentations may differ from delivery.
Gender Equality: 50-50 by 2030 Q&A

Robin Niblett

Phumzile, if I may call you by your first name, thank you very much for an impassioned and detailed presentation as well both of the achievements and the challenges and you had a big list. I know our guests here and members will want to come back on some of it. But just as a quick recap, I mean, the areas of… it was like progress, but… So progress on women in work; you gave some figures but lower wages, informal sector. More laws against inequality, but lack of implementation. More women’s rights ministries, but not enough money and then you just leave less people, sometimes...

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka

And less money for UN women too.

Robin Niblett

Oh! Well, then I’m sure we can...

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka

I'm just saying.

Robin Niblett

I don’t know who can help here. I’m sure there’s somebody from the Foreign Office I’ve seen, at least, in the audience, who will have noticed that particular comment.

But school enrolment, less pay and then these structural obstacles; you spent a lot of time on the issue of unpaid care work. How does one quantify this? But the obstacles of infrastructure, childcare and then this interesting point about the role of men in helping deliver greater opportunity. When Melinda Gates was here last November, winning the Chatham House prize, she did a big talk, actually, at a different level about the role of men as fathers, in many cases, in helping empower daughters and how important that was as some of the work that they’d done, which I think was another dimension of yours.

At Chatham House, I should have mentioned earlier, my colleague, Paola Subacchi has been, as you know, pushing this idea of a W20 within the G20 process, which has now been kind of formally recognized along with all of the other L20 and T20 and various C20 sort of categories. So we’re starting to get a sense that, maybe, at the government level but still at that family level, it seems like there’s a lot of work to be done.

Can I just ask you one question before you go on because you said something right at the beginning that caught my attention. I don’t know if other people would pick up on it or not. You said, ‘But why no 2015 meeting?’ And you said, ‘The degree of pushback means we would have lost some.’ And I’m just wondering, I was trying to connect that comment with what I heard later on. Obviously, there are problems at an implementation level but this sounded like countries would be embarrassed, they’d be worried that they would be exposed after 20 years of not having lived up to targets? Why, if I may ask you, why do
you think you would have lost countries in terms of that united view that was demonstrated in 1995?

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka

Anything that has got rights has become very difficult to discuss with member states. Thankfully, this country is not one of those; in fact, it is one of the countries that help a lot. It is also one of the countries that support UN Women generously so we’re very thankful for that. I need to say that so that the taxpayer knows that, you know...

You know, one area for instance that stands out, which continues to be a serious problem amongst member states is the reproductive health and reproductive rights of women as well as sexual rights. There is no meeting that we have which has to do with women where this issue arises where the member states do not break down in the middle. And if you have to find... I mean, just something like the provision of comprehensive sexuality education in schools in the face of the increase of teen pregnancy, diseases and a lot of misinformation that young people get for themselves when they’re not getting information from an authorized person.

The number of countries that have been able to adopt a systematic way of teaching and addressing the issues of sexuality and providing family planning service has actually reduced maternal deaths and infant mortality. There is a correlation between the countries that are pushing back and the kinds of deaths that affect women and children. So it’s a very, very difficult and a disappointing space to be in.

Robin Niblett

Are you worried, therefore, that when it’s pushed from the outside, it ends up creating resistance once you bring this as a rights issue, it looks like a rights issue imposed from some UN system, from Western countries?

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka

It becomes a north-south, east-west, religion, extreme-moderate, it becomes very complicated and then, sometimes, when we do the numbers, if we were to put this to a vote, then we realize we could just lose this vote. Can you imagine if we were to vote and we lose what we gained in Beijing, the demoralizing impact that it would have on women?

Robin Niblett

And are all, this is a big question, are all women on side of the change or do you find women are representing...?

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka

No, we have women on all sides because, I mean, women are also monolithic. At the same time, you need to consolidate on the things that women and people, men and women can agree with which advance society. One of the things about, for instance, W20, NP20, that,
I think, for us is important. It is yet another initiative around which we could rally, whether you are a member or not because progress of women in any part of the world is progress for women everywhere in the world. It’s important that women do not lose this opportunity and that it facilitates collaboration with the private sector. It brings women into a new realm where you’re going to gain new partners, very critical for changing society.

I say to my colleagues, not necessarily UN Women, just generally, there is, sometimes, a view in the women’s movement, ‘Can we really work with private sector?’ I think it’s a luxury that question; you want the equality in the economy. You have to talk to the people who are the owners of the means of production. And if you want to make sure that there is a capacity for those who are at the bottom of their economies to be lifted up, the people who make business happen need to understand where you are coming from and we then need to work together to crack this. And, sometimes, we disagree and that’s why we need trade unions to hot up the things a little bit here and there but by and large, I believe that there isn’t, in the private sector, people who sit there and they want people in their countries to be poorer and hungrier.

Robin Niblett

I think we’ve had at least one or two films in the UK where the role of trade unions wasn’t always in favour of women’s rights so it’s mixed. Let me get some comments and questions in. Please make sure you introduce yourselves and we’ll get some questions.

Question 1

Jessica Woodruff from the Gender and Development Network; I’d like to congratulate UN Women for getting unpaid care onto the agenda of the Sustainable Development Goals. That was really quite something. But quite often, we get a kickback on that issue saying that it’s cultural imperialism or it’s a domestic issue and it would just be great to hear from you how to answer that.

Question 2

John Wilson, a member of the Chatham House and also a feminist who has spent 40 years trying to further women’s interests, both in my own businesses and through politics. In the 1970s, I was employing women in my construction industry, not only in the office but also out on the site and I’m still bearing some of the scars. We lost our chief computer operator, who was a very fine woman, to childbirth and this decimated our finances for a time. So there is another side to it and I just would like to say that men often can be on your side but, I’m afraid, we’re in a hard economic world where businesses are out to make a profit and, therefore, have to consider those features in employing women.

It was Herodotus, I think, who in 385 BC, quoted the Romans who said that women, if they become our equals, they become our masters. I’ll now ask my question if I may, will women ever achieve equality until science makes it possible to grow babies outside the womb?
Question 3

Hello, my name is Kate Davies from Allen and Overy, the law firm. I have a question about microfinance. I’m aware of a number of female-only microfinance initiatives in Africa and I know that they’ve been very successful on the back of a number of studies which show that women, as opposed to men, tend to plough more than 90 per cent of the money that they receive if they go out to work back into the family, into education, into health, into obtaining clean water and those sorts of things. I just wonder if you have any statistics on how widespread the use of women-only microfinance is and whether or not it’s growing?

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka

I have someone here from UN Women; I may just pounce on her at some point, our new Head of Policy from the UK.

Robin Niblett

Dr [indiscernible].

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka

Dr [indiscernible] so I might just defer to you at some point. So how did we get unpaid care work? I actually think that data is very important because this issue of unpaid care work is very emotive. I think many of us were socialized into providing unpaid care just as a way of life and once you try to monetize it, in the first place and I remember when I was in government and I was one of the people wanting us to understand care work, the discussions with the treasury was always, ‘Where do you think this money is going to come from to pay people to look after their own children?’ And I would say, ‘Minister, someone is looking after your child and your wife’s child because you are at work and they are being paid.’

There are a lot of women who cannot have what we have and as a state we do want these women to contribute and to be the people that will make this country better. We need to subsidize that facility so that you could relieve them on this unpaid... otherwise, we make childcare something that only an exclusive number of people and it is so much part of society, why is it that as a society, we still have not figured out what to do with babies?

So it is more about thinking about how so much... it is not about women having to adapt to society; society has to adapt that it is made up of men and women with different needs that serve all of us and, therefore, together we shape... and that is why we’re saying if there were more women in government and policy-makers, this issue would not have been left to escalate for all these centuries until it’s become this kind of a problem. We would have figured out how to do this thing in a manner that does not disrupt society but that serves all of us.

I think the assumption you are making is that the people who don’t give birth will do the work better. They can all do the work but it’s just that the opportunity has been available to the other. I know, you know, that you women work very hard. They can bring value
back to the shareholders. The evaluation by Ernst & Young, by the World Bank and different, have shown that gender diverse companies actually do very well and when you accommodate the needs of women, including childbirth, you still don’t lose out on the money. You are able to make... because women do become committed to the work that they do. So don’t you worry, and I suspect that the women that you employed actually did make quite a significant contribution.

But in the case of unpaid care work, how were we able, really, to get the issue on the agenda? It was just providing systematic data that shows what the countries lose, what the contribution is, what is the age group, when we begin and I think, probably, just the example of the girls dropping out of school because they have to fetch water. I think all of us would never want a child to have to make up for the failures of a country, national plans where infrastructure has not been adequately provided. It can’t be the responsibility of an 11 year old. So it was really just making the argument and providing the data systematically and doing case studies of countries.

On the issue of microfinance, the studies show all the time that women honour their debts and that they reinvest the money in their businesses. Many of the successful microcredit initiatives happen in local communities, where women tend to know each other and they actually borrow together and they work in groups. It’s just that it is tedious. It takes so much time, it becomes so expensive, that is why we have not been able to get the kind of critical mass from microcredit that we should be getting.

And at the same time, the established banks just have not been able to find a sustainable way of supporting and meeting women’s needs. There has got to be a way in which... a hybrid way of providing finance. In some countries, credit co-ops have worked very well. But right now, the issue of scaling is still an issue. Probably, Bangladesh stands out as a country where the initiative was both credible, sustainable and was able to reach scale and made a tangible impact on reducing poverty in that country.

**Question 4**

My name is [indiscernible]; I work with the Commonwealth Secretariat and I bring warm greetings from our Secretary-General, Kamalesh Sharma and our Deputy Secretary-General, Josephine Ojiambo and we also want to say thank you for supporting the Secretariat with our work.

My question is linked to climate change. We’ve been doing some research on climate change with respect to the United Nations Framework on Climate Change and in our research we found out that the first time gender was mentioned was 2010. The next time gender was mentioned was 2013 when you took office. So we are grateful for that observer status that has been given to women. The UK even got it before us, they got it in 2009.

But now, the question is the role and the percentage of women in policy-making, in decision-making, would they be able to achieve it much, much, way higher before 2030? We are hoping that women can have a direct voice in a decision-making role because it is a huge issue for our members, 32 members of the Commonwealth Secretariat, actually, small states. Thank you.
Question 5

Hi, Leslie Vinjamuri from SOAS. Thank you; it’s an honour to hear you speak. I wanted to come back to Robin’s question because it was also mine and I was very... I was fascinated by the statement about not having a meeting in 2015 but you made it seem very unproblematic in terms of the decision, the process through which you came to that decision. It resonates that there is a degree of pragmatism in that, that isn’t usually attributed to the broader international human rights network and so it sort of stands out.

And so I’m wondering, in terms of the partners that you work with in the INGO world, in Europe and in the US, how controversial was that decision? How much time did you spend debating that and how did you arrive at that? And what sort of pushback did you get from within your own network?

And then the second part, you said that it made more sense for you to work individually with countries and I’m wondering, when you do that, do you use the language of rights or do you actively avoid using that language?

Question 6

Kate Jenkins, London School of Economics; you raise by implication, in the course of what you said, which was fascinating and thank you very much indeed, it was an extremely interesting presentation but a lot of issues which I think are common to us all. But what I was particularly interested in, not least because it’s a domestic problem is how one handles a situation where you get a government which is warmly enthusiastic about the importance of doing things for improving the condition of women but doesn’t actually do so domestically? And I think this is something which is going to be an increasing challenge as we persuade international organisations and national governments to sign, for whatever reason, the international agreements on the position of women but manage, somehow, to forget to give that priority when they’re at home.

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka

Starting with the last question, I think this is one of the biggest contradictions in working in the international forum that some of the most progressive governments on a variety of policy positions at a multilateral forum don’t necessarily follow up or domesticate these international agreements.

I mean, let’s just take one example, the protocol on the protection of domestic workers; less than 30 countries have ratified that protocol. This is one area where 65 per cent of people work there are women. If you ratify the protocol, you would be assisting this heap of women at the bottom of the pile who are unpaid, who lose their jobs when they go on maternity leave, who work long hours, who do not have a minimum wage. In countries that have been able to ratify the protocol and implement it, it changed the lives of millions of women just like that because many people can’t do without domestic workers. If you just think about what we hear about women migrants in many rich countries, you could just imagine the number of women, some women even die in the hands of their employers.
So the number of countries that have got a very progressive outlook on a number of issues that have to do with rights in the United Nations, I can probably count up to 80 countries and the fact that you can only just get 30 just to ratify this one agreement, which, on the face of it, should not be something that you should get a lot of pushback, this gives you a sense of the contradictions that we are dealing with.

And I think this is where we need to work in a very collaborative way between the multilateral institutions and people like ourselves and activists in different countries so that we are able to exchange information because, in some cases, on one hand, governments will ratify an international agreement because of pressure at home and governments will implement a progressive position at home because we are able to highlight the fact that there is an international agreement, which, in your country, you are not able to take full advantage of.

So it boils down to advocacy, activism; I don’t think that we’ll ever be without that. Some things, I think, just defy the fact that they will be linear. It’s always going to be about this fighting backwards and forwards and depending on the power of civil society, by and large and human rights activists and human rights defenders in some countries where it gets even much more dangerous.

The issue of not having an international agreement; it was hugely problematic. It was very intense. It was problematic within the UN, let alone with all the partners. It probably was even stronger in developing countries than it was with Europe and the US because, for instance, the US also had some difficult positions on some of the issues. So it’s not... probably the EU has been much better and more consistent but it doesn’t follow that the countries in the north will always be... they can be good allies but they’re not always the most progressive on all of the issues.

As far as UN Women is concerned, we have had fewer issues to fight about. For instance, the representation of civil society within the CSW in the restructuring we’re proposing. The pushback was not just from developing countries. Countries north-south just united to say, 'This is an intergovernmental body; don’t open it up too much.' So you have to pick the issues, sometimes, about where the countries are going to be.

So yes, the issue was hugely problematic. Whether we were able to deal with the rights language? When we tried, then, to have a declaration, we were trying to piece the pieces together and highlight the fact that in most of the countries that did not do well in implementing the Beijing, it was those countries where the rights issues were neglected. And what we thought was just going to be a declaration that would pull the countries together to bring back the things that were missing, such as the rights issues, we lost that. So we did not leave it off the table; we brought it back onto the table.

There was an agreement and it just didn’t go through. One of the issues that, for me, is still really a concern is the fact that we have not been able to position much better human rights defenders considering that women are actually dying in Libya, women are dying in Afghanistan, women are dying in Iraq. The violence against women is just at an all-time level and not to have been able to get a consensus on that was quite distressing, I have to say. And we continue to depend on civil society to work with, to see how we could put this issue on the table. So it’s a tug-of-war, I must say.
Gender Equality: 50-50 by 2030 Q&A

Robin Niblett

Just the climate change topic?

Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka

Yes, climate change... the numbers are still very small. We are hopefully going to benefit from the excellent work that has been done by the small island states because the most prominent and, I think, the most dynamic contribution that we have been able to receive on climate change and women has come from the Commonwealth members and we continue to rely on them to increase the numbers. We have not reached a point where we will not be able to increase the participation of women. We are hoping that by the time we get to the conference in September, we will have been able to enhance the role and participation of women.

Ourselves, as UN Women, we are putting together a big event on women, climate and leadership to highlight the leadership and the role of women and what would benefit society and women are more resilient.

Question 7

Hi, it’s an honour to have you speak to us today. My name is Mariella Frostrup and I’m the founder and trustee of the Great Initiative, which is a very small advocacy unit here in the UK, and probably our greatest achievement to date has been inspiring a Private Members’ Bill, which then went through and became an Act of Parliament, which was to include gender equality as a criterion in the allocation of international development money.

It’s something that we’ve been surprised that our own government has failed to publicize or take credit for, which is very unusual for politicians, as you can imagine and we found ourselves in Brussels last week, informing the British chairwoman of the European Council’s international development about this amendment. She was very taken with it and now wants to see if she can have it implemented as a tool with the European Council.

And I wondered... I’ve got two questions. First of all, whether you see something like that as an important stick, as it were, in achieving the goal that we’re all looking for, which is gender equality and secondly, we’ve just had the start in this country of a political party around the last election called the Women’s Equality Party and I wondered if things like this party, things like the W20, which was mentioned here tonight, you know, as a sort of small subsidiary of the G20, which is, obviously, far more important and things like international women’s day, indeed, in the end serve to continue to make gender equality seem a minority interest topic and not a majority interest topic.

Question 8

Patricia Lewis of Chatham House. I want to talk to you about women’s role and the importance of it science, technology, engineering and mathematics, the STEM subjects and how to ensure educational access, particularly in emerging and developing
economies, particularly when you look at the difficulties that we’re still having in the wealthier countries, in terms of confidence and uptake in those subjects?

**Question 9**

Hi, my name is Zoé Tabary and I work at Amnesty International. Thank you very much for coming here today and giving this speech.

A lot of the changes that you’re calling for happen at a policy level, which I think is necessary; you need the buy in of governments and businesses. But I wondered what changes you’d call for, for women and men to take on an every day basis? I feel that, like you’ve said a lot of men have been excluded from the agenda but also women who don’t get involved for fear of being branded a feminist.

**Question 10**

Hi, my name’s Hugo Marino; I’m a student of political science. I’m studying at the moment some of the more undesirable effects of global civil society and I was wondering if you’d care to mention, maybe, if you have any tools or any plans to deal with the more regressive elements of civil society in terms of women’s issues? So I’m thinking, maybe, religion on a macro scale or others that may have more archaic views than us in this room. Thank you.

**Question 11**

Hi, I’m Emily; I work for the NHS. You’ve slightly touched on it already but I just wanted to clarify what you thought UN Women’s role was on working with multiple countries at the same time, rather than on a case by case basis, particularly with the global care chain because, of course, when we talk about care work, we don’t just mean childcare, we also mean caring for the elderly and in the NHS, the majority of people who care for our elderly are female migrants from poor countries and so the impact of global inequity between women and what UN Women’s role might be on that?

**Robin Niblett**

You don’t have to answer all of the questions; some of these were good points and I think it was good to hear them, actually, with a kind of topic like this. We’ve got two or three minutes, I don’t want to make people too much later. Pick up what you like.

**Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka**

I don’t even know some of the answers. So I think the... let us start, I think, probably with a critical question: what has changed in the everyday life of women? I think, probably, education is one of the most critical, the number of girls that in the last 20, and I’m not saying that UN Women did that, but I’m just saying in the implementation of – we did not even exist 20 years ago – but the area of education, the turnaround of the HIV/AIDS tide, which was both fought in the MDGs but also the women’s movement took it up in the Whole Health Campaign, the reduction of maternal deaths are some of the concrete things.
Areas where there has been gross underperformance and which could have made the lives of women much better are political representation, which is still at 22 per cent global average of women MPs, because in countries where we’ve got a critical mass of women politicians, you do get very good and helpful legislation and follow through programmes and women’s economic participation. Women’s economic participation is about survival. It is one area where the everyday lives of women were not enhanced.

But, certainly, in education and in health, I think many of the women got a bit of a fighting chance, not sustainable in some cases because we got some gains and then they were eroded by the financial crisis and, sometimes, bad policies.

I agree on the issue of STEM; we should all be doing more to support women’s participation in the science subjects. It continues to be a challenge and the training of teachers to teach those subjects is also very important and role models of successful people who are in those careers so that girls can look up to those people.

The regressive elements of international civil society; it’s exhausting. Oh, you should just come and see us; we’re there until 4:00 AM arguing. It is exhausting. It is difficult. We need to just increase the stronger, progressive NGOs. It’s a site of struggle. It’s a terrain where they also have a democratic right to be there, to push their own agenda so it’s a battle. Let me just be open to you.

The issue of, I think, the important question there on the UK, engendering ODA, very critical, especially for financing for development. As some of you will be aware, in July, the countries will meet in Addis to decide how these big changes that we are talking about are going to be financed sustainably. There are a number of entry points that we are looking at for financing. It is domestic funding, including gender responsive budgeting in each country to try to see of we cannot institutionalize it because we are not talking about new money; we are talking about money that countries can just spend, more efficient utilization of taxes, stopping illicit outflows and we are talking about the use of ODA in a much more systematic and gendered manner and we would love to see something like what the UK has done becoming a norm.

This morning I was in Berlin, having exactly the same discussion with the Germans about the importance of going to all these countries and urging them to make sure that we use ODA to really change the game. But the important thing is that you as taxpayers, you must monitor because there isn’t a culture of using ODA in that way in the countries so it can fall between the cracks, not, sometimes, even because the countries are resisting; they just don’t know how to do it. So we are wanting to support them to build that capacity but we need you to be active in monitoring and to hold your governments accountable so that they can also ask the right questions. I think there is a lot of learning curve for all of us there but it’s something that you can turn around.

So thank you so much for having initiated something like that.

Robin Niblett

I was letting you go on because I see you’ve answered so many of the questions, I think that counts as... there was a double question there but I think these are the key points.
Look, we've stayed on. Everyone's sitting here ignoring the sun outside, listening to you speak. Phumzile, your energy, commitment, inspiring... as a father of two daughters, I might add, I'm doubly inspired... wish they'd been here, actually, to hear you talk.

So thank you very much for coming. Thanks for asking great questions, making good points as well. I think, certainly, I speak, personally, I think, probably, on behalf of our members here, we're behind you, hope it works. Good luck. Don't get exhausted. I think you will out-exhaust your opponents. I have this suspicious, sneaky feeling. But thank you very much.