



Women's rights are human rights

“Human rights are women’s rights and women’s rights are human rights”

So proclaimed Hillary Clinton, US First Lady at the United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing, China, in 1995, in a landmark speech of her career.

Despite Clinton’s words echoing around the world for close on 20 years, one must ask: What has changed?

At a United Nations commemoration of International Women's Day, Clinton said that important progress has been made, such as the increasing number of girls in school and women in elected office, and the repeal of many discriminatory laws.

"Yet for all we have achieved together, this remains the great unfinished business of the 21st century," she said. "When women succeed the world succeeds. When women and girls thrive, entire societies thrive. Just as women's rights are human rights, women's progress is human progress."

South Africa’s Phumzile Mlambo Ngcuka, head of UN Women, echoed Clinton’s words, declaring: "The 21st century offers an opportunity for a big leap forward.

"Equality between men and women remains an elusive dream. The face of poverty is that of a woman. The majority of the world's poor and illiterate are women and girls."

As South Africa’s gender statistics show, entrenched cultural norms mean that the balance remains tilted in favour of men. Women are worse off in key areas like education and literacy, employment and income.

When it comes to technology, women have been left behind. Particularly in developing economies, they are trailing men, creating a digital gender gap. However, wired women, with access to the Internet have a powerful tool for self-education and empowerment.

The United Nations has deemed high-speed Internet access to be a basic human right. South African policymakers would do well to take note. Without widely available, cheap Internet access, SA will drop out of the knowledge economy, and women will remain the worst off.

There are, however, positive signs in South Africa and elsewhere on the continent that the expectations and mores of societies that place a higher value on the education of male children are changing.

Access to education, work opportunities and the gender gap are inherently linked. A lack of formal education limits opportunities for women in the workplace, restricting them to lower paid jobs. Even when women do advance through the career pipeline, they tend to be paid less than men for performing the same work.

In Nordic countries where 100% literacy for both sexes was reached several decades ago, gender parity in education follows. The gender gap has been reversed and women make up the majority of skilled workforce.

There are sound practical reasons for entrenching women’s rights. We need to draw on the skills of both men and women if we are to meet the challenges of today’s complex and uncertain social, political and business environment.