

# Debunking Gender Equality Myths: A Cheat Sheet

The fulfillment of gender equality must be embraced by all of society, with a strong participation by male allies. However, misconceptions regarding the cause can lead individuals to feel excluded or disenfranchised. Addressing misunderstandings with your peers can clarify gender equality's goals and illustrate its importance. To assist in that task, below are potential responses to five prevalent myths.

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## **MYTH #1: Women have already achieved equality in the Caribbean**

While many national and international instruments outline legal equality for all people and prohibit discrimination on the basis of sex or gender, this has not translated into full equality in practice. Biases and stereotypes persist that subordinate women, contributing to a variety of issues: unequal access to the labour market and lower pay than men for the same work, unfair division of household responsibilities and care work, and alarming rates of gender-based violence, among others.

Gaps in legislation also remain. A social impact and gender-responsive analysis of data from across the Caribbean reveals the following inequalities in the legal frameworks of at least one country:

- Bank policies exist that prevent women from opening an account or receiving a loan without a man co-signing
  - Women's nationality is affected by marriage or divorce in ways that differ from men, and they do not have the same right as men to confer nationality to a foreign spouse
  - The definition of rape is too narrow: it exempts marital rape from prosecution, or is specific to a penis entering a vagina, which ignores that men can be raped
  - Women over 18 are unable to work at night in certain sectors
  - Protection from sexual harassment in the workplace does not exist
  - Paternity leave is not guaranteed
  - Marriage is not permitted for same-sex couples
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## **MYTH #2: If they are interested and intensify their efforts, women could resolve inequality**

Over time, much of society has been shaped by patriarchy, in which men and their contributions are valued over others. Women and men are not, as groups, naturally more inclined or interested in assuming particular tasks, such as performing manual labour or caring for others. Rather, problematic structures persist that result in individuals being assigned certain roles, characteristics, and responsibilities based on their gender.

Leadership is perceived as a masculine trait and political spaces (among others) have historically been built by a class of privileged men. This has created material and psychosocial obstacles that hinder women and other marginalized groups' access to and representation in the public sphere.

As a result, while one woman or group of women may be able to advance their own standing, their actions alone are insufficient to address all inequality, particularly because women have varied privilege and life experiences. When solutions in the workplace, for instance, are presented as the responsibility of individual women, this places the burden of change on them. It also often requires women to fit into a male-defined mould, which can perpetuate structures that disadvantage many.

Social systems and norms themselves must change to be inclusive of diverse individuals in order to achieve equal rights, opportunities, and results. Temporary special measures and affirmative action become important for this reason, as they help counteract some of the structural barriers faced.

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### **MYTH #3: Gender is a shorthand for women, and is just a “politically sensitive” way of referring to their biological sex**

Gender refers to how one identifies and expresses themselves in relation to conventional associations with “man” and “woman.” While someone may be declared male or female at birth (sex), their gender is related to the attributes they assume and how these would fall on a spectrum of masculinity and femininity in a given context.

Since gender is socially constructed and fluid over time, one’s gender is not at all linked to their sex or sexuality. Gender is also not binary; not everyone identifies or expresses themselves as a man or a woman, or by the gender that is traditionally associated with the sex they were assigned at birth.

To use “gender” as shorthand form for “women” is an oversimplification and masks that the life experiences of men and others who do not identify as women are also impacted by gender and stereotypes.

### **MYTH #4: Feminism wants to make women better off than men and will result in a zero-sum outcome**

Feminism seeks to create equality in all realms for all people. While this does mean that men must yield some of the privileges they have historically held over other groups, it is meant to level the playing field for everyone, not to elevate women above men.

Feminism is also open to men’s participation and has broad benefits in society (for examples, see the [“Making the Case for Gender Equality”](#) tool available on the web portal referenced in this document’s footer). Everyone is harmed by inequality and rigid gender norms, and everyone can and should play a part in creating positive change.

Despite the wider goals and benefits, using the term “feminism” (as opposed to “humanism”) is still important because it helps to correct for the fact that women as a group have largely been invisible in the public sphere. The term calls attention to the structural inequalities that have disadvantaged more than half of the population (with negative repercussions across society) and honours the strong women-led movements behind advancements over the past centuries for women and marginalised groups. The feminist movement continues to be a strong force in calling attention to a variety of intersecting inequalities.

### **MYTH #5: All development initiatives – whether they are gender-sensitive or not – will automatically help women**

The [UN Women World Survey on the Role of Women in Development 2014](#) found that “dominant development patterns have both entrenched gender inequalities and proved unsustainable as regards many issues... including economic growth and work; population and reproduction; food and agriculture; and water, sanitation and energy.” Growth and development do not automatically benefit all individuals equally. Women are often among those left behind if a gender lens is not applied in planning.

For example, the same publication illustrates how efforts to expand the green economy and create decent jobs in this field can exclude women if they are not explicitly considered. The sectors typically selected for increased green employment (energy, construction, and basic industry) tend to be male-dominated. For women to benefit economically as well, the initiatives would have to include specific components to promote women’s entry into the field, such as targeted skill development and education.