

Breaking down the barriers

Macroeconomic policies that promote women's economic equality

The achievement of women's economic equality and empowerment (WEE) is pivotal to the advancement of gender equality and women's rights, yet it has received inadequate attention to date. The ground-breaking Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) called for the promotion of "women's economic rights and independence, including access to employment, appropriate working conditions and control over economic resources."¹ In the subsequent two decades, however, most gender equality work shied away from the economic sphere. When WEE has been discussed, too often it is in relation to generating economic growth rather than gender equality and the fulfilment of women's rights.

1. Introduction

The existence of the UN High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment provides an opportunity to re-open this debate. We share the concern of others within civil society over the legitimacy of the Panel, and particularly the role of corporations in decision-making within a UN platform. Nevertheless, the Panel's existence provides an opportunity to outline the fundamental reforms necessary to achieve women's economic equality.

In the next section we suggest that for the concept of WEE to be meaningful, it will have to be defined broadly and acknowledge the differential gendered impact of economic policies at both global and national levels. Crucially, we argue that WEE and rights must be seen as goals in themselves, not just means by which to further economic growth. We also set the context for the debate: Agenda 2030 and the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) recognize structural barriers to progress, yet in the realm of economic policymaking it has been largely business as usual, something that the Panel will have to address. Meanwhile corporate abuses continue, undermining women's rights and other social and environmental goals.

There will be numerous submissions, we are sure, that deal with specific micro-interventions to support WEE, many of which will be useful. A Panel such as this must go beyond such atomistic solutions, searching further, broader and deeper to address

the structural barriers that prevent the lasting, transformative change needed for economic justice. Section three of this paper therefore focuses on the macroeconomic barriers – and solutions – that the Panel should address in order to create an enabling macroeconomic environment for gender equality.

2. The context

2.1 Understanding WEE

WEE is central to the realisation of gender equality and women's rights. Its achievement will not only increase the power of women to shape economic policies and make and act on economic decisions but also provide voice, choice and control in other areas of life. The definition of WEE must be understood as far more than women's ability to compete equally in existing markets, or than the beneficial outputs of their contribution to growth; it should include women's access to and control over economic resources, access to decent work, control over their own time and meaningful participation in economic decision-making at all levels from the household to international institutions. In turn, WEE will only be achieved in cooperation with progress in other areas of gender equality like women's access to sexual and reproductive health and rights, meaningful participation in political decision-making and freedom from violence.

Empowerment, as Kabeer explains, is “the process by which those who have been denied the ability to make strategic life choices acquire such an ability.”² Thus, to understand WEE, it is necessary to acknowledge the barriers women face and support solutions to those same barriers. This means building women's capacity and autonomy to exercise real power and control over their own lives, and strengthening the terms on which they engage with social and economic structures. It means women organizing themselves for change – and governments respecting, protecting and fulfilling their right to do so. Ultimately, achieving WEE will require the removal of structural barriers, which will mean fundamental changes to the way that work is recognized and organized. Policies with the potential to address such barriers are the subject of the third section of this paper.

Crucially, it should be the pursuit of equality and rights and not economic growth that drives measures to promote women's economic equality. It may well be true, as is so often suggested, that the increased participation of women in the labour force will contribute to higher economic growth, but this must not be the underlying rationale. A core objective for the Panel should be to promote an understanding among its stakeholders that gender equality and women's rights are legitimate and vital goals in their own right. As Simona Scarpaleggia, co-chair of the Panel, has pointed out, “You don't need a business case to promote human rights.”³ Nor, it should be noted, is it the case that economic growth will necessarily contribute to gender equality and the promotion of women's rights.⁴ Strengthening and promoting WEE must be the ultimate goal of the Panel, rather than a means to other ends.

In every country, women's economic choices, income and control of assets continue to lag behind those of men.⁵ This inequality between women and men also intersects with the substantial gap between rich and poor, as well as other discriminations women face on the grounds of race, age, disability, sexuality and so on. Recognising the intersectionality of barriers facing different women is essential for effective policymaking and achieving equality, as is an acknowledgement of the footprints of colonial history in shaping economic policies that exacerbate gender inequality. To understand these specific experiences will require full consultation with women's rights organisations including those working with, and comprised of, the most marginalised women and oppressed peoples, whether in the Global North or South.

There is already a wealth of research and analysis available on which the High-Level Panel should build, including (among many others) UN Women's recent *Progress of the world's women 2015-2016: transforming economies, realizing rights* and the ILO's report *Women at work: trends 2016*.⁶

2.2 WEE in the post-2015 context

The Panel's report takes place in the context of Agenda 2030 and its commitments to equality, sustainability and inclusiveness. In fact, the Agenda 2030 declaration makes clear that gender equality is both a crosscutting issue and a goal in its own right that stands alongside other social and economic aspirations. As such, the declaration resolves to:

*end poverty and hunger everywhere; to combat inequalities within and among countries; to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies; to protect human rights and promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; and to ensure the lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources. We resolve also to create conditions for sustainable, inclusive and sustained economic growth, shared prosperity and decent work for all, taking into account different levels of national development and capacities.*⁷

There was acceptance during post-2015 negotiations that progress would require addressing structural barriers to change, and indeed in announcing the Panel, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon made stated that:

*The empowerment of the world's women is a global imperative. Yet despite important progress in promoting gender equality, there remains an urgent need to address structural barriers to women's economic empowerment and full inclusion in economic activity.*⁸

Meeting such aspirations will require a shift towards a more just, equitable and sustainable development model; the achievement of WEE, and gender equality and women's human rights more broadly, will entail a redistribution of wealth, power,

resources and choices. Yet the kind of paradigm shift necessary to catalyse such structural changes was missing from Agenda 2030. Many contradictions remain, like that between the pursuit of growth and climate change, and between the increasing role of corporations and democratisation. Despite the wealth of available analyses illustrating the negative impact that current policies have on women and on other marginalized groups, the recent Addis Ababa Action Agenda also reinforced the status quo, failing to recognise the changes necessary in both global governance and macroeconomic and monetary policies.⁹ While the aspirations outlined in Agenda 2030 sometimes exceeded those found in the Millennium Declaration that came before it, the methods endorsed to achieve them remain the same, and continue to be inadequate to the task.

The Panel also takes place in the context of increasing concern around climate change. It should reference and support the commitments on this issue that formed part of the SDGs, and were the subject of the Paris Agreement.¹⁰

2.3 International agreements and the duty of states

Too often, economic policymakers have failed to recognise that human rights agreements are applicable to their sphere of activity.¹¹ The Panel's report should be firmly based in existing international agreements on human rights, including those on women's rights, ensuring that they build on the decisions already taken in international fora, using internationally agreed commitments, laws and norms.

The BPfA provides comprehensive coverage of the measures needed for gender equality, going beyond and with much more specificity than the SDGs.¹² In addition, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, accepted by all UN member states, covers a range of economic and social rights that are applicable to the pursuit of WEE.¹³ A broad range of other international treaties is also relevant.ⁱ Moreover, under international law, trade and investment treaties are subordinate to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights; the enforcement of this primacy of human rights over other agreements should be part of the promotion of WEE and gender equality. Article 103 of the UN Charter, by which all UN member states are bound, states:

In the event of a conflict between the obligations of the Members of the United Nations under the present Charter and their obligations under any other

ⁱ Subsequent treaties that further establish the nature of these rights include the 1995 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the 1966 International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the 1994 International Convention on Population and Development. Specifically on WEE, CEDAW contains a number of articles relating to women's economic empowerment, including equal rights in employment such as equal pay (Article 11), equal rights to family benefits and financial credit (Article 13), rights of rural women including participation in development planning (Article 14), and equal rights of both spouses in the ownership and management of property (Article 16). There are also a number of ILO conventions that promote women's rights in employment including the 1951 Equal Remuneration Convention 1951 (No. 100), the 1958 Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention (No. 111), the 1981 Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention (No. 156), the 2000 Maternity Protection Convention (No. 183) and the 2011 Decent Work for Domestic Workers (No 189).

international agreement, the obligations under the present Charter shall prevail.¹⁴

These agreements set out the legal framework within which Agenda 2030 will be implemented. They also establish the principal role and duty of governments, or states, to respect, protect and fulfil human rights, including regulating business operations under their jurisdiction. In fulfilling their obligations, states are obliged to seek progressive realization of human rights, deploy the maximum available resources towards rights and equality, avoid retrogression, and satisfy minimum essential levels of economic and social rights, equality and non-discrimination, participation, transparency and accountability.¹⁵

2.4 The role of corporations

States bear primary responsibility for the implementation of Agenda 2030, and they are accountable to civil society for their actions, yet today we are witnessing an increasing role for the private sector not just in delivery but in the crafting and decision-making around the SDGs and other international agreements. As Global Policy Forum notes:

...globalization has compounded the power of large transnational corporations (TNCs) in recent decades, big business has consolidated its influence on global governance and the United Nations in particular. In that multilateral setting, corporate actors have been granted privileged access to decision-makers, and their interests have become more prominent as calls for legally binding instruments for TNCs become more sidelined.¹⁶

Such calls for corporations to be held to account come in the midst of a plethora of well-documented cases of corporate abuse and violation of human rights, taking the form of land grabs, exploitation of local resources by extractive industries or dangerous working conditions in global supply chains.¹⁷ Oxfam has documented the global preponderance of land acquisitions that happen in the service of monoculture crop cultivation by large corporations. Brazil, the world's largest sugar producer, has seen an escalation of violence as local and indigenous communities try to protect their lands and livelihoods.¹⁸ The UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Issues has noted the damaging impact of natural resource extraction on women's access to natural resources, as well as its exacerbation of violence against women and girls (VAWG).¹⁹ The collapse of the Rana Plaza factory building in Bangladesh in 2013 was one of the worst examples of unsafe working conditions – over a thousand people were killed with thousands more injured.²⁰ High profile cases like Rana Plaza hit the headlines, but poor conditions are widespread. Recent research found that garment workers in Myanmar, 90 per cent of whom are women, face long hours, low pay, unsafe conditions and intimidation from supervisors.²¹

The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights provides a voluntary set of guidelines, based on existing human rights obligations, which detail the obligations of

states to protect human rights and provide a remedy for violations, and the responsibility of corporations to respect human rights.²² The limitations of these principles are widely recognized, and there have been attempts to strengthen them; for example, UN OHCHR has issued legal tests and strategies for improving access to remedy for abuses.²³ That said, problems persist, and organisations such as the Latin American Mining Monitoring Program observe the many barriers that women face in engagement with states or mining corporations – and which the Guiding Principles fail to acknowledge.²⁴

Meanwhile, there remains no legally binding mechanism to regulate the activities of transnational corporations and other forms of business for their impact on human rights. The announcement in 2014 of a UN Human Rights Council working group to consider a legally binding instrument was warmly welcomed by civil society groups.²⁵ Since then women's rights organisations have also called for women's human rights defenders and women workers to be part of shaping the outcome of these considerations.

Business leaders, particularly those on the Panel, should also look to improve their sector's own record through accurate and gender-responsive due diligence in the area of human rights. This includes improving their labour rights and safety records but also considering the overall impact of their corporate practices on human rights, especially the impact of their tax practices and their environmental records in relation to carbon emissions, land acquisitions and environmental damage.

3. Policies to remove the structural barriers to WEE

3.1 Removing the barriers

To date, interventions around WEE have focused primarily on equipping individual women with the skills and resources they need to compete in the market place – providing credit or training, for example – thus focusing on changing the individual woman rather than the context in which she is working. Now, however, there is widespread acceptance that WEE and gender equality will require measures to address the structural barriers that limit progress.²⁶ It is clear that a body with the mandate of the HLP must look at the more fundamental structural barriers to WEE if it is to achieve lasting progress, recognizing that change will require mutually reinforcing legal, social and economic interventions.

This paper focuses on those barriers created by economic policy, given both its importance to achieving lasting change and that it is an area of expertise for many of the Panel members. In particular we argue that macroeconomic policy, traditionally seen as a tool for economic growth, has the power to make a positive impact on WEE and on the achievement of gender equality and women's rights more generally.

The record of prevailing macroeconomic policy on gender equality is not a positive one. Numerous studies demonstrate detrimental outcomes for gender equality that have been the result of reductions in public spending, trade liberalisation and other policies favoured by many governments and the international financial institutions (IFIs).²⁷ Importantly, the impact of such cuts in social investment has been obscured by women's unpaid labour, while the value of this work has been hidden by definitions of economic activity that discount 'women's work'. All the while, global value chains rely on the exploitation of women's labour as a source of competitive advantage, legitimised by gendered social norms. In pursuit of economic growth, prevailing economic models perpetuate, exacerbate and rely on the gender-based discrimination faced by women, alongside that faced on the grounds of income, class, race, ethnicity, sexuality and so on.²⁸

It is clear that the achievement of WEE will not be possible without policy reforms in critical areas to create an appropriate macroeconomic enabling environment. In the remainder of this section, we consider five such areas:

- the care economy and unpaid care
- progressive taxation to realise gender equality
- social infrastructure investment
- decent work
- economic decision-making

3.2 Recognising the care economy and redistributing care work

The impact of unpaid care work on women's empowerment

Unpaid care work takes place both in the household and in the wider community; it includes domestic work such as cooking and food preparation, cleaning, washing clothes, water and fuel collection, and direct care of people including children, older persons, persons with disabilities and able-bodied adults.ⁱⁱ While the focus in many OECD countries has been on childcare, the most time consuming activities for many women and girls are in fact the collection of water and fuel and domestic work that benefits all members of the family, including adult males.²⁹

Women do over 75 per cent of all unpaid care work globally, with that proportion rising to even higher levels in some countries.³⁰ The considerable time and opportunity costs involved in unpaid care work restrict women's ability to earn income from paid work, channels them into low-paid work with poor conditions, undermines girls and women's education and thus their future earning potential, diminishes their health, reduces the time available for social activity, and prevents their full and meaningful participation in politics and economic decision-making. That their work is unpaid and undervalued also

ⁱⁱ *Unpaid care* is sometimes defined as including domestic work; in other cases the term *unpaid care and domestic work* is used. Unpaid care work does not include the unpaid work that many women do for their family businesses.

reduces women's economic decision-making power within the household and in the wider community. The intersection between gender, race, class, ethnicity and migrant status means that the impact of unpaid care work is most apparent for those who cannot afford private services or domestic technologies, often living in areas underserved by public services, and who may also have low-paid jobs in addition to unpaid responsibilities.

In part because caregivers are so often excluded from policymaking, there has been little investment in those areas that could reduce the time needed to provide quality care. Investments in electricity networks in rural South Africa, however, have demonstrated what could be achieved, raising women's employment by almost 10 per cent in five years by freeing up time spent on domestic work.³¹

Furthermore, the lower value assigned to women's domestic work has a knock-on effect of reducing wages in paid care work, where women are clustered in areas like nursing and childcare. Working in paid care often entails what is called a *wage penalty*, which sees many care providers receiving low pay and entitled to only limited social protection or labour rights.³² Women's increased workforce participation in the Global North has not, on the whole, been accompanied by increased public provision of care; instead the deficit has been made up either by further increasing women's workloads (including those of grandmothers and young daughters), or by poorer and migrant women undertaking this work at low pay.

The socially defined norms that assign this type of caring work as 'women's work' are deeply entrenched in every society, and part of the solution will be to share this work more evenly between women and men. For many families, already time and income poor, this is not really a solution. High-quality public services are essential to free up women's time while also ensuring that quality care services are universally available. Carers should be actively included in decisions around care provision, while employers should be obliged by law to provide paid maternity and parental leave and flexible work commensurate with caring responsibilities.³³

Recognising the contribution of care work to the economy and society

The issue here is not just women's exclusion from paid work and other opportunities, but also the vital role that this care work plays in society. The contribution of unpaid care or *reproductive work* is both substantial and essential, underpinning the economy through the maintenance of the current workforce and the nurturing of future workforces, while at the same time providing services essential to society's wellbeing.³⁴

This work is not just unremunerated but also largely unrecognised, both within communities and by policymakers. Care, like the earth's finite resources, is taken for granted. Its supply is assumed to be infinite, and neither of these supposedly external costs is adequately factored into current economic policymaking. This failure to acknowledge and adequately value the care economy, combined with socially

constructed gender roles around male breadwinners and female caregivers, has had numerous repercussions: women's unpaid care work is not counted as economic activity and so is neither financially reimbursed nor accorded the status it deserves; investment in social infrastructure is underfunded; and employment in care sectors, where women predominate, is underpaid.

Nor is unpaid care work counted in national accounts or in the calculation of gross domestic product (GDP). A 2015 report by the McKinsey Global Institute makes a conservative estimate that unpaid work amounts to approximately US\$10 trillion a year – roughly 13 per cent of global GDP – and also asserts that women do three-quarters of this work.³⁵ UN Women's most recent *Progress of the world's women* report references estimates for unpaid care as high as 39 per cent of income for some countries.³⁶

Quality care is vital to the wellbeing and functioning of societies. The issue here is how to fully recognise its contribution and value in economic policymaking, remove the inequalities around who pays for and provides it, and increase the quality of care provided. One part of the solution is to recognise, measure and thus value the amount of unpaid care work that is carried out by women. Unpaid work in family businesses is already included in some national accounts; thus, it follows that unpaid care work could be included. The International Conference on Labour Statisticians agreed in 2013 that unpaid care and domestic work should now be classified as work, leading to better measurement and counting of these activities.³⁷ Time-use surveys have proved a valuable tool, donors and governments should look to fund such surveys in every country to count the full extent of unpaid care work.³⁸

As shown in the sections below, acknowledging the care economy will also have more profound implications for macroeconomic policy. In particular, cuts in public services are possible only because of the hidden subsidy of women's unpaid work.

3.3 Progressive taxation to realise gender equality

There are many examples of the ways in which economic empowerment, particularly for the most marginalised women, requires public investment. Social services, particularly around the provision of care, free up women's time. Sufficient funding for programmes and institutions (such as the judiciary) can prevent VAWG and provide support and redress. Funding for social policies can tackle discriminatory gender norms. For those without paid jobs, universal, non-contributory social protection can make better economic choices a reality; public sector investment creates more and higher quality jobs.

Maximising fiscal space

It is both necessary and possible for governments to increase the resources at their disposal to promote gender equality and the realisation of human rights, yet they do not always maximise the *fiscal space*ⁱⁱⁱ available to them.³⁹ As a UN Women briefing notes:

*The resources available to governments for implementing policies to advance gender equality and other social goals are not fixed but are determined, in part, by macroeconomic policies, including tax policies, decisions over deficit spending and the management of debt. The policy stances adopted by many countries in recent decades, including tax cuts and trade liberalization, have tended to reduce public revenues relative to the size of the economy, meaning that fewer resources are available to finance government outlays.*⁴⁰

A pervasive consensus remains among most governments and IFIs, north and south, on the neoliberal model that prioritizes deficit reduction, debt repayments and low inflation while advocating a reduction in public expenditure.⁴¹ These are political choices, reinforced by policy advice coming in particular from the IFIs: in the context of the recent global financial crisis, the IMF's own Independent Evaluation Office acknowledges that it was initially receptive to countries' needs to protect investment and growth, but later pressured states prematurely to impose across-the-board expenditure cuts.⁴² Across Europe, austerity policies have undermined the realisation of the SDGs, and specifically WEE.⁴³ Moreover this fiscal contraction has been accompanied by a failure to curb tax dodging and illicit financial flows, as recently demonstrated by the Panama Papers scandal, despite commitments made by both the G20 and G8 since 2009, further restricting the revenue available for public expenditure.⁴⁴

Progressive taxation

There are different ways of raising taxes, with varying effects on the redistribution of resources and gender outcomes. The current trend in tax policy towards favours wealthier men, with increasing consumption taxes, reduced tax rates for corporations and higher-income individuals, and comparatively low taxes on wealth and property.⁴⁵ Consumption taxes, though easy to administer, can have particularly regressive impacts on the poorest who spend a higher proportion of their income on basic consumption, and particularly on women whose gendered role as household managers and caregivers assigns them responsibility for making a small household budget go further.

The tax base, at both the national and global levels, has been further eroded by outdated tax rules and secrecy jurisdictions that reduce the tax contributions of

ⁱⁱⁱ Fiscal space is defined as the "room in a government's budget that allows it to provide resources for a desired purpose without jeopardizing the sustainability of its financial position or the stability of the economy." In Heller, P. 2005. 2005. 'Back to basics – fiscal space: what it is and how to get it', *Finance and development* 42.2 (June). Available at: <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/fandd/2005/06/basics.htm> (accessed 24 Apr 2016).

transnational corporations and wealthy individuals. UNCTAD has recently estimated that wealth held in secrecy jurisdictions amount to an annual loss of public revenue of between US\$190 and US\$290 billion.⁴⁶ Tax incentives are still offered as part of a business-enabling environment to attract foreign direct investment, despite evidence that they are never a primary reason for investment.⁴⁷ In Special Economic Zones, tax breaks not only cause revenue loss but can also subsidise the creation of poor quality, exploitative employment and environmental degradation. Better government regulation of corporate tax should be complemented by corporations committing to pay their fair share of taxes in the countries in which they operate and acting as sector leaders by supporting the regulation of corporate lobbying against tax enforcement.

Trade and financial liberalization have further reduced fiscal space through the loss of tariffs and tax. On average, developing countries lose a higher proportion of their income with a reduction in trade tariffs and export taxes than OECD countries.⁴⁸

3.4 Investing in social infrastructure and gender equality

The value of social investment

Increased public sector investment is not only socially necessary but also economically self-sustaining. Arguments around the value of public investment to create jobs, soften the impact of economic shocks and fuel economic growth are well rehearsed elsewhere and derived from Keynesian analysis.⁴⁹ While governments have successfully applied such measures in the past, they are less and less common today. Traditionally this type of public investment has been reserved for physical infrastructure such as roads and bridges, which are seen as capital investment with benefits that accrue over time. Under most orthodox economic policy frameworks, governments can legitimately incur debt to make such capital investment, but debt to fund what is seen as current expenditure is frowned upon, including things like salaries for teachers, health workers and other carers – which are conventionally viewed as consumption rather than investment. This categorisation of certain spending as investment and other, equally vital spending as consumption is reinforced by IMF technical assistance to Global South economies and OECD guidance to its members. The long-term contribution of social investment through creating and maintaining a productive labour force goes unacknowledged.

More recently, though, two new arguments have been made: first, that social spending – whether on health, education or care – sustains the workforce of today and tomorrow, and so should be considered investment rather than current expenditure; and second, that investment in social infrastructure has a more positive impact on WEE and gender equality than investment in physical infrastructure. A recent report by the ITUC finds that investment in both physical and social infrastructure will create jobs, but that the latter will create considerably more jobs for women than the former. The report also notes that such investment is sustainable, increasing the productive capacity of the labour force and so generating more tax revenue in the future.⁵⁰ UN

Women similarly concludes that the social investment needed for WEE is likely to lead to an increase in future government revenue, making it a sustainable use of this kind of fiscal expansion.⁵¹

Failure to recognise the value of this policy approach appears to be rooted in the fundamental undervaluing of the reproductive economy and the gendered division of labour, with men as primary breadwinners and women as carers. The work done, mostly by women, in ensuring a productive labour force is not seen as a long-term investment the way that building a road is seen. During times of recession, this bias is even more evident. Men's employment is seen as more of a priority than women's. Cuts in social spending are frequently seen as the easy option under austerity measures, with women's unpaid care work filling the gap and masking the impact.⁵²

In spite of this, there is a win-win scenario. Investment in social infrastructure is self-sustaining in that it increases future government revenue streams by increasing employment, while also specifically increasing women's employment opportunities. In ensuring better provision of care for the whole of society, this investment also improves the productivity of the workforce in the long run, contributes to overall wellbeing and reduces women's disproportionate burden of unpaid care.

In its recent report, however, Eurodad sounds a note of caution about the way such investment should be funded. Many governments, encouraged by development finance institutions, are employing public-private or blended financing models to finance both physical and social infrastructure. While guaranteeing returns for private partners, the experience of these models in other areas is not always positive, with increased transaction costs, potential long-term costs to the public budget, and sometimes negative impacts on wider social and environmental goals. Such funding schemes should therefore be thoroughly assessed both for their impact on access to services but also for their long-term sustainability in terms of debt.⁵³

Social protection

Social protection floors provide basic income security, irrespective of employment history and ability to contribute to social insurance, and are a particularly important part of achieving WEE. The majority of women's paid work is in the informal sector, making broad-based, non-contributory social protection critical to support their income throughout the lifecycle. Women earn less than men, are less likely to hold paid or secure employment, have less access to credit and are more likely to stop work to care for dependents. These factors both increase women's income insecurity and reduce their eligibility for contributory pensions and other social protection schemes. As a result, women are overrepresented among those excluded from social protection. Designing schemes that are gender-sensitive and context-specific is crucial. Interventions such as India's National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (NREGS) can also combine the provision of basic income with longer-term employment creation.⁵⁴

Gender-responsive budgeting

To ensure that sectoral spending can close gender gaps and contribute to women's empowerment, gender-responsive budgeting (GRB) has proved a valuable tool to monitor and influence policymaking. GRB itself is an umbrella that covers a variety of measures that assess the impact of government policies and spending on gender equality, including gender audits of departments and ministries, gender assessments of specific policies and gender training programmes at all levels of government, amongst others. Governments and donors should use GRB to guide fiscal policy decisions and monitor public expenditure. In Nepal, for example, a GRB committee housed in the Ministry of Finance monitors budget allocations and public expenditures from a gender perspective; assesses the impact of policies on women and men; and provides ministries with guidelines for applying GRB.⁵⁵ The resulting transparency will also make it easier for civil society to hold governments to account for their decisions.

3.5 Creating decent work

Central to gender equality is an increase in women's power to make and act on choices. All labour force participation is not equally empowering, and access to high-quality paid work is one of the main factors in determining WEE.⁵⁶ Research by Oxfam has shown how upgrading women's choices over the kind of work that they can do is essential to making work empowering.⁵⁷

Although patterns vary by region, in many areas the challenge is not just the inclusion of women in the paid labour force but the terms on which they are included. The gender pay gap is important, with women earning less than men for doing work of equal value, but the problem extends deeper with women workers more likely to occupy low-quality jobs with insecure terms of employment.⁵⁸ While export-oriented growth has expanded opportunities for women in paid work, these have largely been in low-wage sectors with poor conditions and little security, and there is some evidence that as countries move into higher value-added stages of production, the opportunities for women decline.⁵⁹

There is increasing recognition that GDP growth does not automatically lead to job creation, and certainly not to the kind of quality employment needed for WEE.⁶⁰ The absence of labour rights, collective bargaining and the freedom to organize and negotiate working conditions is in part responsible. Once again, the devaluation of women's caring work is also part of the problem: discriminatory social norms around 'women's work' have had a profound impact in legitimising both occupational segregation and women's predominantly junior status within sectors, thus justifying women's low pay. Other non-economic barriers to women's decent work^{iv} also exist; to that end, the ITUC is calling for an ILO convention on gender-based violence in recognition of its impact on women's labour force participation.⁶¹

^{iv} For more information on the definition and importance of *decent work*, see ILO. Undated. *Decent work*. Available at: <http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang--en/index.htm> (accessed 19 May 2016).

Implementing these measures will require a mixture of business standards to promote best practice and government regulation to enforce compliance. Corporations should act as responsible employers throughout their supply chains, going beyond minimum standards on wages and employment rights and enabling the effective exercise of freedom of association and collective bargaining in line with ILO conventions.^v Three interventions, explained below, stand out as crucial.

Public sector job creation

There is space for pro-active government policies that create more public sector employment, and of a higher quality, than the jobs on offer through global supply chains. As discussed above, public investment in social infrastructure will target sectors and occupations where women predominate. With the right accompanying social policy, investment in the care sector has the potential to challenge traditional gender roles and break down gender stereotypes and occupational segregation, ultimately reducing the gender pay gap.

Furthermore, it is important that states work to create opportunities for women of all ages, including paid internships and structured mentoring that will support young women entering male dominated fields. This will not only expand workplace options for women but also reduce the segregation of women and men by sector.

Universal living wage

The existence of the gender pay gap has been well documented, with solutions proposed around occupational desegregation, anti-discrimination laws, training, quotas and the promotion of positive social norms – all important elements. However, there is growing consensus that minimum wages are one of the most effective ways of reducing the gender pay gap and increasing women's access to decent work, in part as a result of women's overrepresentation in low-paid work.⁶² For example, in Brazil, the narrowing of the gender pay gap has been attributed to the doubling of the minimum wage, while research in India has demonstrated the substantial potential of a minimum wage on reducing the gap.⁶³

When introduced in the context of the rights of freedom of association and collective bargaining, the implementation of a universal living wage policy (equally applicable to both women and men nationally) is an effective way of ensuring that women benefit fully from employment creation and that obligations under ILO conventions are met. In the context of the SDGs, the UN Secretary-General acknowledged that a living wage is a key component of a sustainable and inclusive economy.⁶⁴

^v The relevant core ILO conventions here are C87 and 98. All ILO member states have an obligation to implement, respect and promote these conventions, regardless of whether or not they have ratified them.

Support for collective action

Women's organising in the workplace has been instrumental to the improvement of wages and working conditions for women, including narrowing the gender pay gap.⁶⁵ In agricultural sectors, women producers who organised collectively were found to be more productive, received more income for their products, had improved access to credit, more power to decide how to use that credit and better access to market information.⁶⁶ Enforcement of existing ILO conventions on collective bargaining would contribute to ensuring that work is empowering – for men as well as women. Collective action can play a major role in improving women's access to decent work, both within trade unions and also in associations of informal workers such as the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India.⁶⁷ Given the number of women in the informal sector, this kind of organising is particularly significant. WIEGO, for example, promotes and supports training and education for women leaders in democratic associations of informal workers and works with domestic workers globally, supporting collective organizing both within and outside unions.⁶⁸

Decent work in the informal sector

The majority of women in paid work are in the informal economy.⁶⁹ In South Asia, over 80 per cent of women in non-agricultural jobs are in informal employment; in sub-Saharan Africa, the figure is 74 per cent, and in Latin America and the Caribbean, 54 per cent.⁷⁰ These workers face *decent work deficits*, identified by the ILO in its 2002 report *Decent Work and the Informal Economy*, and they tend to have access to fewer opportunities, rights, protections and social dialogue than their counterparts in formal employment. They need to see their earnings increase and the risks they face reduced.⁷¹

Creating decent work in the informal sector poses particular challenges. The answer is neither to ignore nor to eliminate informal work, but rather to ensure that policy responses are appropriate in protecting and promoting women's rights. This will require greater visibility for informal workers both in national statistics and in policymaking. Contexts vary widely and there is no blueprint solution, but WIEGO suggests that there are a number of areas that emerge as priorities: creating more jobs in the formal economy, regulating informal jobs in a way that benefits employees, extending social protection and legal protection to workers in the informal economy, and increasing the productivity of informal enterprises and incomes for informal workers.⁷²

3.6 Democratising economic decision making

The achievement of WEE will require lasting change in the way that economic decision-making takes place. The gap in economic decision-making must be addressed at all levels, from international agreements to intra-household choices.⁷³ While attention tends to focus on the absence of women in senior positions, whether in business or parliaments, the real challenge is to listen to and act on the missing voices of those women who are excluded and living in poverty.⁷⁴ Likewise, this work cannot be

seen in isolation from broader efforts to democratize decision-making, including curbs on inappropriate corporate influence.

Working with – and, importantly, funding – feminist groups and women's rights organisations would be a major move forward.⁷⁵ As a first step, the Panel should ensure that its findings are based primarily on the work of women's rights organisations, particularly those working with marginalised women in both the Global North and South, with substantial meaningful consultation at all stages of the process.

Looking to the future, meaningful participation comes with collective action, particularly for those most excluded from decision-making. In recognising the importance of these women's voices, the Panel should also recommend that financial and political support be given to women's rights organisations, which at present are chronically underfunded.⁷⁶

4. Conclusion

The High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment provides a welcome opportunity to reflect on the structural barriers that stand in the way of WEE and equality. It takes place in the context of Agenda 2030, which contains new language on the need to recognize structural barriers and agree transformative solutions, putting the goal of gender equality high among a list of social and economic goals. Just as important as the proposing of specific recommendations is the fact that this Panel will be well placed to challenge discriminatory social norms and promote alternatives by shaping the framework of the debate.

Promote WEE and gender equality as goals in their own right

Perhaps the most important task facing the Panel is to promote WEE, and gender equality and women's human rights more broadly, as goals in their own right. As Ms Scarpaleggia, co-chair of the Panel, observed, "You don't need a business case to promote human rights."⁷⁷

Build on existing government commitments

Agenda 2030 is only the most recent of a wealth of international agreements, including the BPfA and Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), that lay out the existing responsibilities of governments. The Panel's recommendations should build on and work towards meeting these existing obligations.

Acknowledge and regulate against corporate abuses

That the private sector also has social and environmental responsibilities is increasingly clear, and corporate representatives on the Panel should promote best practice in their own sector, including tougher regulation to prevent abuses.

Create an enabling macroeconomic environment for gender equality

Alongside support for building women's agency and collective action, the creation of an enabling macroeconomic environment for WEE is critical. There are multiple measures that could contribute to such a setting, including social, political and legal ones, and the exact combinations will need to be context-specific. Some of the most important of these possible measures are listed below.

Recognise unpaid care in policymaking

The Panel should go beyond the issue of childcare and respond to the vast array of tasks – from water collection to elder care – that are performed without remuneration by the majority of the world's women. The full extent of the care economy must be recognized in policy making, so that those who provide care are consulted in decisions, while the economic contribution of unpaid care work can be measured through time-use surveys and included in national statistics.

Provide publically funded care services

Care work should be redistributed, and not just from women to men but – more importantly – from individuals and families to state-funded provision. High-quality public services will free up women's time for paid work as well as political and social activity, while also ensuring that quality care services are universally available. Investment in appropriate technology can further reduce the time burden of care work without compromising its quality.

Increase the resources available for WEE through progressive taxation

WEE requires public expenditure, not just on care services but also on social programmes that, for example, prevent VAWG or provide reproductive health care. Creating the necessary fiscal space should be promoted as the deliberate and conscientious political decision that it is, reflecting the priority given to women's lives and gender equality. Governments should raise revenue through progressive taxation designed from a gender equality perspective, and by curbing tax dodging by wealthy individuals and corporations.

Redefine spending on social infrastructure as investment

The Panel should acknowledge that investment in social infrastructure is self-sustaining, creating employment – and particularly employment for women – that will generate future government revenue streams. The Panel should call for increases in social investment, especially care services, which ensure better provision of care for the whole of society while improving the productivity of the workforce in the long run, contributing to overall well-being and promoting WEE.

Provide non-contributory social protection throughout the lifecycle

Increases in social investment should be well targeted – and monitored through GRB – to ensure spending best contributes to WEE and gender equality. Given the number of women in the informal sector, and the vast amount of time that women spend on

unpaid work, the introduction of broad-based, non-contributory social protection is particularly critical to support their income throughout the lifecycle.

Prioritise policies that promote decent work for women

The Panel should prioritise policies that promote decent work and so improve the terms on which women engage with the labour market. Such policies must be appropriate for women working in the informal sector as well as the formal sector. These will include increasing quality and quantity of jobs available to women in the public sector through investment in social infrastructure; implementing a universal minimum wage in the context of collective bargaining, as the best ways to reduce the gender pay gap; and enforcing existing ILO conventions while also funding and recognising women's workplace organizing, particularly in the informal sector.

Support women's political participation

Economic decision-making is a political process, not a technocratic one, in which all women and men should be empowered to participate meaningfully. Women's rights organisations provide a platform for women's organizing and collective voice, and as such they should be specifically included in the Panel's consultation process. In the longer term, these groups should also be adequately supported and funded to facilitate their role in supporting women's organising.

The challenge

A Panel of this stature must rise to the challenge, defining and prioritising the kind of far-reaching recommendations that will promote WEE. These recommendations must go beyond helping individual women, one by one, and seek instead to change the society within which they live and work, and in which their daughters and granddaughters will thrive as equals in the future.

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The Gender & Development Network (GADN) brings together expert NGOs, consultants, academics and individuals committed to working on gender, development and women's rights issues. Our vision is of a world where social justice and gender equality prevail and where all women and girls are able to realise their rights free from discrimination. Our goal is to ensure that international development policy and practice promotes gender equality and women's and girls' rights. Our role is to support our members by sharing information and expertise, to undertake and disseminate research, and to provide expert advice and comment on government policies and projects.

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