

Women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work Recommendations to governments

The 61st Commission on the Status of Women (CSW61)

CSW61 will bring together governments from around the world to discuss gender equality and to produce an outcome document of agreed conclusions on 13-27 March 2017.¹ The priority theme this year is *women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work*, also the subject of a new report by the UN Secretary-General.² In addition, the review theme is *challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls*, revisiting the agreed conclusions of the 58th session, while the emerging issue/focus area is the *empowerment of indigenous women*.³

This fact sheet looks at the structural economic barriers to women's economic empowerment (WEE) and makes recommendations as to what should be included in CSW deliberations. The Gender & Development Network (GADN) has also produced in-depth briefings on these issues that can be found on our website.⁴

What is WEE – and why is it important?

In every country, women have fewer economic choices, less income and less control of assets than men.⁵ They are more likely to work in low paying, insecure jobs, often in the informal economy and without legal protection. Eighty per cent of household food is produced by women, but globally they control less than two per cent of land.⁶ Women's labour force participation rates are as low as 20 per cent in some regions and the global wage gap sits at 23 per cent, leaving women of all ages at a distinct economic disadvantage.⁷ Women also make a substantial but invisible contribution to the global economy through their unpaid care work, which in turn reduces their access to income.⁸

There is no universally agreed definition of **women's economic empowerment** (WEE). Any description of WEE should include women's capacity to benefit from economic activities on terms that recognise the value of their contribution, respect their dignity and enable them to negotiate a fair distribution of returns.⁹ Other definitions suggest that women's economic empowerment is achieved when women of all ages have equal access to and control over resources and equal participation and influence in economic decision-making.

WEE entails building women's capacity and autonomy to exercise real power in their own lives, with women organising themselves for change – and governments respecting, protecting and fulfilling their rights to do so. It also requires governments to recognise and remove the social and economic barriers to women, and particularly those facing multiple discriminations of race, sexuality, migrant status or other factors. This 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.

A complex mix of interdependent interventions is needed. Past debates on WEE have primarily focused on providing opportunities for individual women in the forms of skills, training and credit, while the structural barriers, and particularly the economic ones, have too often been overlooked. Every aspect of work will need to be addressed – paid and unpaid work, informal or formal employment, in the home or elsewhere.

Here GADN outlines a list of areas that we consider central to achieving progress, areas where urgent action is both needed and possible, as well as our proposed recommendations.¹⁰

Decent work

Getting women into paid work is often seen as the solution to WEE, but work is not necessarily empowering if the jobs are poor quality, low paid, insecure and dangerous. Globally, the majority of women in paid work are in the informal sector, where the problem is particularly acute with little or no regulation and no work-based health or unemployment benefits.¹¹ Many workers in the new “gig economy” are also now excluded from minimum wage regulation and have less access to rights or protection in than in formal economies.¹²

The answer lies in **decent work**, which includes empowering elements such as adequate minimum wage (shown to be one of the best ways to reduce the gender pay gap), the right to join a trade union (supported by freedom of association and collective bargaining), parental leave and flexible work legislation, and measures to improve safety at work such as the proposed ILO convention on gender-based violence in the world of work. For the many women, extending social and legal protection in a way that benefits informal and own-account workers will be part of the solution.¹³

Recommendations on decent work

- ⇒ Governments should promote and protect labour regulations, including collective bargaining and freedom of association, that promote ‘decent work’ for all women.
- ⇒ Governments should create more decent work for women by investing in public sector jobs where women are disproportionately represented.
- ⇒ Governments should ensure that employment regulations and social and legal protection are extended to cover workers in the informal economy.
- ⇒ Governments should set, and enforce, minimum wage levels sufficient for workers to attain their right to an adequate standard of living.
- ⇒ Governments should support the proposed ILO convention on gender based violence in the world of work and ratify Convention 189 on domestic workers.

Decent work: The ILO and others use the concept of decent work, which “delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men.”¹⁴

Informal economy: This refers to work not monitored or regulated by governments, where employees have limited labour rights and so may face poor pay and conditions without social benefits such as sick pay or pensions. Women, in particular those who are migrants or unskilled and with less access to capital and other productive resources, have restricted opportunities in the formal economy and are disproportionately represented in these informal low-quality jobs.¹⁵

Gig economy: Advances in technology have made a new relationship between employer and employee possible, replacing the traditional contract with the much looser contract between service purchaser (or “clients”) and service providers (workers). Possibly the best known example globally is taxi provider Uber, yet the gig economy has also taken hold across sectors where women are traditionally overrepresented, including the care and domestic work sector.¹⁶

Universal social protection

For many women, particularly older women or women with disabilities, paid work may not be an option. **Universal social protection** is vital to ensure WEE across the life cycle. In particular, pensions and other benefits should not be based on in-work contributions, as this disproportionately excludes women who take time off paid work or rely on informal sector work because of their unpaid care work burdens. The design of social protection measures should be gender sensitive, taking into account the particular barriers faced by women at each stage of their lives.¹⁷

Recommendations on social protection

- ⇒ Governments should ensure adequate social protection is universally available, irrespective of past in-work contributions.

Social protection: This encompasses a variety of measures used to prevent, manage and mitigate situations that harm people's living standards including parental benefits and legal protection, unemployment benefit, childcare provision, employment guarantees schemes and pensions.¹⁸

Unpaid care work

Women's disproportionate burden of **unpaid care work** creates a web of barriers to WEE. For individual women, time spent on unpaid care work prevents them from engaging in paid work, particularly in the formal sector, as well as participating in education, politics and social activity. Feminist economists see this work as crucial to the "care economy," sustaining both the labour force and others in society and enhancing the wellbeing of all. As such, it should be valued equally with the "productive economy." However the contribution of unpaid care work to the economy and society is often invisible and undervalued. Policymakers frequently ignore the enormous contribution unpaid care work makes to maintaining current and future workforces and improving the wellbeing of society. If its value were included in national accounts, unpaid care work in India would contribute 39 per cent of GDP, while in Mexico it makes up 21 per cent of GDP – more than manufacturing, commerce, real estate, mining, construction, or transport and storage.¹⁹ Women's time is seen as infinitely elastic, leading to poor policymaking. For example, austerity cuts in public services frequently assume that women will be able to fill in the gaps, creating extra burdens on women's time and reducing the quality of care available to those who need it.

Solutions lie in four key areas. First is the reduction of the time burden of unpaid care work through investment in time saving technology (like better stoves) and publically funded health and care services. Second is the redistribution of unpaid care work from women to men and, especially in marginalised communities, from families to the state through increased public spending on care services. Third, governments must recognise unpaid care work through investment in time-use surveys and inclusion of its value in national accounts.²⁰ Finally, governments must create avenues for carers to participate in decision-making and achieve meaningful representation of their views.

Recommendations on unpaid care work

- ⇒ Governments should reduce the time spent on unpaid care work by investing in labour saving equipment and infrastructure including water, electricity and public transportation.
- ⇒ Governments should ensure that high quality care services are accessible and affordable to all.
- ⇒ The economic value of unpaid care work should be measured, with better data collection, and included in national accounts.

Unpaid care work: Taking place both in the household and in the wider community, unpaid care work includes domestic work such as cooking and food preparation, cleaning, washing clothes, water and fuel collection, and direct care of people including children, elders, people living with disability or illness, and able-bodied adults. Unpaid care work is sometimes defined as including domestic work; in other cases the term unpaid care and domestic work is used to highlight the difference between these two types of activity. Unpaid care work does not include the unpaid work that many women do for their family businesses.

Discriminatory social norms

Behind many of the barriers to WEE are discriminatory **social norms** that reinforce assumptions about women as carers and men as breadwinners. These false assumptions legitimise economic inequality between genders, justifying occupational segregation and lower pay for women and making their exclusion from decision-making seem "natural," relegating them to the home and not the public world of paid work. Challenging these discriminatory norms requires education, awareness and also recognition of the value of

traditional “women’s work,” particularly around care. Acknowledgement of unpaid care work as *work*, and the central contribution of this work to the economy and society, will play an important role in paving the way for new more positive norms around women’s work.

Recommendations on discriminatory social norms

- ⇒ Social norms discriminating against women for example by suggesting that care within the household is “women’s work,” should be challenged by governments for example with publically funded education initiatives and advertising campaigns.
- ⇒ Governments should increase funding for women’s rights and feminist movements whose work challenges discriminatory social norms.

Social norms: Widely shared beliefs and practices often codified in formal and informal laws.

Corporate regulation

A more nuanced and critical approach is needed to **the role of the private sector** in the attainment of WEE. There are strong examples of best practice among corporations, but in too many cases the duty of the private sector to respect and promote human rights is not upheld, with abuses particularly evident in the operations of transnational corporations and ranging from low pay to dangerous working conditions.²¹ Predatory extractive industries have had a particularly devastating impact on local land access and the environment, exposing the need for tougher regulation and protection so that affected communities, and women within those communities, can freely exercise their right to informed consent.

To ensure best practice among *all* corporations, legally binding regulation will be needed, including national action plans on business and human rights.²² As employers, transnational corporations must guarantee throughout their supply chains the right to freedom of association and collective bargaining, living wages, secure contracts and safe working conditions with zero tolerance for violence against women and girls. A group of governments, led by Ecuador, successfully advocated for the adoption of a UN Human Rights Council resolution to develop a legally binding instrument “to regulate, in international human rights law, the activities of transnational corporations and other business enterprises.”²³ Civil society organisations have supported the resolution and the establishment in 2014 of a UN Human Rights Council working group to consider such a legally binding instrument.²⁴

Corporations must also pay a fair share of taxes in each country in which they operate and stop lobbying for tax breaks and Special Economic Zones where workers rights are suspended in order to attract foreign companies to invest. National and international efforts are required to tackle global tax dodging and so increase the domestic resources available to promote gender equality.

Recommendations on corporate regulation

- ⇒ Governments should support the UN Human Rights Council working group in developing legally binding regulation to ensure corporations respect and promote women’s human rights.
- ⇒ Governments should develop gender-sensitive national action plans to implement the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights setting out the actions needed to ensure a gender sensitive human rights due diligence throughout global supply chains.
- ⇒ Governments must ensure that all corporations pay a fair share of taxes in each country in which they operate through support for public country-by-country reporting and by democratizing decision-making on global tax reform.
- ⇒ Governments should undertake gender equality, human rights and environmental impact assessments on the tax incentives they offer corporations.

Regulation of markets and corporations: Orthodox economists argue that markets should be regulated to protect corporate profit, which in turn will lead to increased growth. A range of alternative economists argue that markets should be regulated in pursuit of human rights and other social goals such as the SDGs. Progressive economists also highlight that markets alone cannot be relied upon to ensure sufficient decent work, to provide quality care for all who need it or to ensure environmental sustainability. A number of civil society groups have also pointed to the extent of corporate lobbying of decision makers, often blocking effective regulation measures before they can be adopted.²⁵

An enabling macroeconomic environment

Attempts to achieve WEE will be undermined without an **enabling macroeconomic environment**, which is essential to achieving gender equality.²⁶ Through their economic policies, governments make political choices about the way resources are raised and allocated. Good political choices on macroeconomic policy can promote WEE by, for example, ensuring there are sufficient public resources for gender equality; using gender-responsive budgeting to ensure these resources are allocated to implement laws, policies and programmes promoting gender equality; creating decent work through public investment; and increasing the provision of public services.²⁷ Such policies can also reduce the risk of economic shocks and crises, which tend to hit women particularly hard as they are more likely to lose their jobs and have to fill in the gaps created by austerity cuts in public services.²⁸

Creating an enabling macroeconomic environment is feasible. For example, research by the ITUC and UN Women has shown that governments that borrow in order to invest in “social infrastructure” (health, education and care services that are part of the fabric of the economy) can increase employment for all, but particularly for women, while also improving the availability of care services to communities. Moreover they found that this investment leads to greater tax revenues in the future, with more women working in better-paid jobs, and so is self-sustaining.²⁹

The orthodox macroeconomic policies favoured by many governments and international financial institutions tend to undermine gender equality and WEE.³⁰ The International Monetary fund in particular makes specific recommendations on macroeconomic policy to almost all countries in the world, and attaches stringent conditions to the loans it provides to developing countries, including increases in regressive forms of taxation, cuts in public services and restriction of labour rights – all of which constrain governments from pursuing WEE.³¹ In addition, governments’ efforts to promote WEE are constrained by trade agreements that can prevent them from protecting small agricultural enterprises that are frequently headed by women.³²

Recommendations on macroeconomic policy

- ⇒ Governments should publically and explicitly re-affirm their commit to ensuring that macroeconomic policy promotes gender equality and women’s rights.
- ⇒ Governments should maximise the resources available to promote gender equality and women’s rights using fiscal and monetary policy.
- ⇒ Gender responsive budgeting should be used by governments to ensure sufficient resources are allocated to implement laws, policies and programmes promoting gender equality, involving women-led civil society organisations in the process.
- ⇒ Governments should adopt progressive tax regimes that ensure revenue is raised in a way that does not reinforce economic or gender inequality.
- ⇒ Governments should use counter-cyclical macro-economic policies to reduce the risk of economic shocks, and ensure that women are not expected to bear the cost of economic crisis when they occur.
- ⇒ IMF board members should ensure that loan programmes are agreed only after gender impact assessments are conducted, to ensure that gender equality and women’s rights are not undermined.
- ⇒ In negotiating trade agreements governments should protect the policy space of all governments to pursue macroeconomic policies that promote gender equality.

Macroeconomic policies: Those policies that affect the working of the economy as a whole and the distribution of resources within it. They include fiscal and monetary policy.

Fiscal policy: Laid out in government budgets and covering how governments raise revenue (usually taxation), how they spend that revenue and whether they spend more than they raise (budget deficit). There is debate among economists whether budgets should be large or small (raising and spending more or less), and whether governments should borrow to create growth (deficit financing). Under Article II of the International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights, each government is responsible for progressing towards realising rights “to the maximum of its available resources.”³³

Monetary policy: Determines interest rates, exchange rates and the regulation of the financial sector. Orthodox theory suggests that it should be used to keep inflation low, but other economists argue that some inflation is good as it means that interest rates can be lowered leading to more investment and so more employment creation.

Gender-responsive budgeting (GRB): Used to assess the impact of policies on gender equality and women’s rights and rectify imbalances. GRB includes tools like gender audits of ministries and gender impact assessments of specific policies.

Trade policy: Uses tariffs (taxes on exports and imports), import quotas (restrictions on the quantity of goods that can be imported) and export subsidies to reduce the cost of exports and incentivise sales abroad. Trade liberalisation, or efforts to make international trade easier, is the goal of current trade agreements but this produces winners and losers. Many governments have put restrictions on trade to protect nascent domestic industries from competition.³⁴ Under international law, trade and investment agreements are subordinate to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights.³⁵

Learn more

- **Transforming women’s work: policies for an inclusive economic agenda**, by Radhika Balakrishnan, Lisa McGowan and Cassandra Waters, 2016
- **Challenging corporate power: struggles for women’s rights, economic and gender justice**, by Rachel Moussié, 2016
- **Breaking down the barriers: macroeconomic policies that promote women’s economic equality**, by GADN, 2016
- **Sharing the load: unpaid care work and women’s economic empowerment**, by GADN, 2017
- **How governments can achieve women’s economic empowerment**, by GADN, 2017
- **Why macroeconomic policy matters for gender equality**, UN Women policy brief no. 4, 2016

¹ Expert group papers outline preliminary discussions on the theme: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/csw61-2017/preparations/expert-group-meeting>

² See the CSW61 official documents: <http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/csw61-2017/official-documents>

³ See UN Women. 2016. ‘CSW 61 (2017).’ <http://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/csw61-2017#sthash.IMzXkin3.dpuf>

⁴ Visit our website: <http://gadnetwork.org/gadn-publications/#Briefings>

⁵ See, for example, World Bank. 2014. *Gender at work: a companion to the World Development Report on Jobs*. Washington, DC: World Bank. <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/884131468332686103/pdf/892730WP0Box3800report0Feb-02002014.pdf>

⁶ FAO. *Women: the key to food security*. Rome: FAO, cited in Moussié, R. 2016. *Challenging corporate power: struggles for women’s rights, economic and gender justice*. Toronto: AWID and Solidarity Center.

https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/ccp_fullreport_eng.pdf

⁷ ILO. 2016. *Women at work trends 2016*. Geneva: ILO, xvi. http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_457317.pdf

⁷ Hunt, A. and F. Machingura. 2016. ‘A good gig? The rise of on-demand domestic work’, working paper 07. London: ODI. <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/resource-documents/11156.pdf>

⁸ For more facts and figures, see GADN, GAPS and UK SRHR Network. 2015. *Turning promises into progress: gender equality and rights for women and girls – lessons learnt and actions needed*. London: GADN. <http://bit.ly/2jUYVek>

- ⁹ Eyben, R. 2011. *Supporting pathways of women's empowerment: a brief guide for international development organisations*. Brighton: Pathways of Women's Empowerment, 6.
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a08ace5274a31e00007b6/Policy_Oct_11_Supporting_Pathways.pdf
- ¹⁰ GADN. 2016. 'Breaking down the barriers: macroeconomic policies that support women's economic equality'. <http://bit.ly/2gByRDU>
- ¹¹ ILO. 2002. *Decent work and the informal economy*. Geneva: ILO. http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_emp/---emp_policy/documents/publication/wcms_210442.pdf
- ¹² Burrow, S. and A. Byhovskaya, A. 2016. 'Assessing the social dimension of the digital economy: policy frameworks for quality jobs of tomorrow', *Transformations in technology, transformations in work*, edited by Just Jobs Network, 181-206;
- De Stefano, V. 2016. *The rise of the "just-in-time workforce": on-demand work, crowd work and labour protection in the "gig-economy"*. Geneva: ILO; all cited in Hunt and Machingura 2016.
- ¹³ WIEGO. 2016. 'Policies and programmes'. <http://wiego.org/informal-economy/policies-programmes>
- ¹⁴ ILO. 2017. 'Decent work'. <http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang--en/index.htm>
- ¹⁵ ILO 2016.
- ¹⁶ Hunt and Machingura 2016.
- ¹⁷ For more information, see UN Women. 2015a. 'Making national social protection floors work for women', policy brief no. 1. <http://www2.unwomen.org/~media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2015/unwomen-policybrief01-makingnationalsocialprotectionfloorsworkforwomen-en.pdf?v=1&d=20151216T170541>
- ¹⁸ UN Women. 2015b. *Progress of the world's women 2015-2016: transforming economies, realizing rights*. New York: UN Women, 206. http://progress.unwomen.org/en/2015/pdf/UNW_progressreport.pdf
- ¹⁹ UN Women 2015b, 199-200, Fig. 4.2.
- ²⁰ See GADN. 2017 (forthcoming). 'Sharing the load: unpaid care work and women's economic empowerment'. See: <http://gadnetwork.org/gadn-publications/#Briefings>
- ²¹ For examples, see AWID. 2015 'Webinar: corporate power and gender justice', 17 Dec. <http://www.awid.org/resources/webinar-corporate-power-and-gender-justice>
- ²² GADN and CORE. 2015. 'Why national action plans on business and human rights must integrate and prioritise gender equality and women's human rights'. <http://bit.ly/2kdQubX>
- ²³ Moussié 2016, 40.
- ²⁴ Treaty Alliance. 2014. 'Joint statement: enhance the international legal framework to protect human rights from corporate abuse'. <http://www.treatymovement.com/statement>
- ²⁵ See, for example, Global Policy Forum. 2014. 'Privatizing global governance: corporate influence at the United Nation', 1. https://www.globalpolicy.org/images/pdfs/GPFEurope/GPF_Briefing_1.pdf
- ²⁶ For a discussion of all the issues covered in this section, see GADN. 2017 (forthcoming). 'How governments can achieve women's economic empowerment'. See: <http://gadnetwork.org/gadn-publications/#Briefings>
- ²⁷ See UN Women. 2015c. 'Why macroeconomic policy matters for gender equality', policy brief no. 4, 4. <http://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/12/macro-economic-policy-matters-for-gender-equality>
- ²⁸ UN Women 2015c, 4.
- ²⁹ ITUC. 2016. *Investing in the care economy: a gender analysis of employment stimulus in seven OECD countries*. Brussels: ITUC. http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/care_economy_en.pdf; and UN Women 2015b, chapter 4.
- ³⁰ See chapter 4 of UN Women 2015b.
- ³¹ Bretton Woods Project. 2016. 'The IMF and gender: a critical analysis'. <http://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/final-gender-briefing-1-for-online-version-7.pdf>
- ³² See GADN. 2017 (forthcoming). 'Making trade work for gender equality'. See: <http://gadnetwork.org/gadn-publications/#Briefings>
- ³³ UN General Assembly. 1966. *International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights*, 16 Dec, UN treaty series 993, 3. <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b36c0.html>
- ³⁴ See GADN. 2017 (forthcoming). 'Making trade work for gender equality'. See: <http://gadnetwork.org/gadn-publications/#Briefings>
- ³⁵ United Nations. 1945. *Charter of the United Nations*, 24 Oct, UN treaty series 1. <http://www.refworld.org/docid/3ae6b3930.html>

Acknowledgements

This factsheet was produced by the GADN Women's Economic Justice working group and the GADN Secretariat as part of its Gender Equality and Macroeconomics Project. **GADN** brings together NGOs, consultants and academics committed to working on gender, development and women's rights.

For more information about this factsheet or GADN, please contact Marion Sharples, Gender & Development Network (marion@gadnetwork.org); Chiara Capraro, Womankind (chiara@womankind.org.uk); Francesca Rhodes, Oxfam (frhodes1@oxfam.org.uk).

Gender & Development Network

c/o ActionAid
 33-39 Bowling Green Lane
 London EC1R 0BJ

T: 020 3122 0609
 E: info@gadnetwork.org
www.gadnetwork.org
 Registered charity no. 1140272

Working groups

GADN brings together development practitioners, experts and academics working on thematic issues through working groups. The Women's Economic Justice working group works to develop and promote policy recommendations towards the achievement of women's economic rights and justice.

Disclaimer

GADN produces a series of briefings for use by our members and others, produced by the Secretariat in consultation with our Advisory Group and relevant working groups. They do not necessarily represent the views of all our members.