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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”: implementation of strategic objectives and action in the critical areas of concern and further actions and initiatives: review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcomes of the twenty-third special session and its contribution to sharing a gender perspective in the realization of the Millennium Development Goals

Women’s economic empowerment in the context of the global economic and financial crisis

Moderator’s summary

1. On 8 March 2010, the Commission on the Status of Women held an interactive panel discussion on women’s economic empowerment in the context of the global economic and financial crisis. Ms. Leysa Sow, Vice-Chair of the Commission, moderated the discussion. The panellists were: Ms. Alma Espino, economist at the University of the Republic, Uruguay; Ms. Mona Khalaf, economist and independent consultant on gender and development; and Ms. Rania Antonopoulos, Director of the Gender Equality and Economy Programme of the Levy Institute, New York.
2. Increasingly, it is acknowledged that women’s economic empowerment is necessary for equitable and sustainable economic growth and development. Despite considerable progress on many aspects of women’s economic empowerment through education and employment, deeply entrenched gender inequality persists as a result of discriminatory norms and practices. Even when equal opportunities are provided for women and men, the outcomes may be different. Promotion of gender equality in education and health, for example, does not necessarily lead to equitable outcomes for women and men in the labour market.
3. Women’s participation in the labour market is essential for their economic empowerment. In recent years, women’s access to the labour market has increased,

but there are ongoing concerns about their low wages, vulnerable employment, underlining limited job stability and lack of social protection. Gender wage gaps and occupational segregation persist, and women are overrepresented in part-time work. The application of the principle of equal pay for work of equal value is critical for the promotion of decent work for women. A range of measures have enhanced women's access to and participation in the labour market, including employment acts that promote equal opportunities for women, strengthened labour standards, guaranteed social security, tax credits to encourage women's employment, allowances for child care, work programmes and increased resources for job training.

4. In many countries, women's increased participation in the labour market has not been accompanied by an increase in men's participation in unpaid work. Women, in particular in developing countries, have to spend too many hours on domestic work, preventing them from participating in societal or development activities. Macro-level policies continue to neglect the existing inequalities in the gender distribution of paid and unpaid work, to the detriment of women. Primary areas of policy intervention have focused on reducing the burden of unpaid work, including through the reconciliation of work and family responsibilities, the provision of services and investment in public infrastructure. Time-use surveys undertaken in a number of countries have shown how women and men allocate their time to paid and unpaid work. The value and cost of unpaid work should be recognized and valued by all stakeholders, including Government and the private sector.

5. A large number of women remain concentrated in the informal sector. In times of crisis, women's participation in the labour market tends to increase, particularly in very precarious, poorly paid jobs with deteriorating conditions, in order to compensate for the impact of men's unemployment on the household. Such jobs, however, often are not covered by labour legislation or social protection. Efforts are therefore necessary to guarantee social protection to women in both the formal and informal sectors.

6. Owing to the existence of gender inequalities in the intra-household distribution of resources, an increase in women's income is not sufficient for their empowerment. A holistic approach to women's empowerment, which focuses on economic, social and political dimensions, is thus needed. While microcredit continues to be an important tool for poverty reduction in many countries, it should not be considered as a panacea for women's economic empowerment. Women need access to formal financial services, including credit, savings and insurance. Access to education, training, technology and markets are also needed for women's economic empowerment. Particular attention should be paid to matching women's fields of specialization with labour market needs, including through vocational training, particularly in non-traditional skills, and training in new technologies.

7. Access to land and housing is vital to women's livelihood and economic independence. Gender inequality in access to land, for example, continues to prevail due to discriminatory inheritance laws and traditional norms and practices. Land reform efforts can be instrumental in guaranteeing women's right to land, and gender-sensitive land registration processes should be expanded. Even when women are legally entitled to land, however, they often cede it to their male relatives as land is traditionally transferred through patrilineal lines. Priority should be given to

enhancing women's knowledge of their rights and the enforcement of legislation and policies to ensure women's equal access to and control over economic resources.

8. The current global financial and economic crisis poses a challenge to progress made in gender equality in many areas. Evidence from some countries suggests that while more men may become unemployed as a result of economic crisis, unemployment among women is more persistent than among men. Certain groups of women, such as migrant women and domestic workers, are especially vulnerable during times of economic downturn. The diminished flow of remittances negatively impacts households in countries of origin. Economic hardship and lack of jobs can also mean that women are more vulnerable to trafficking.

9. The financial crisis is a product of the deregulated financial sector that focused on profit maximization at the expense of people. The emphasis on low inflation and fiscal balance has not delivered strong and sustained economic growth. Neglect of domestic demand and dependence on exports has made developing countries vulnerable to market fluctuations and created an environment that has not been conducive to women's economic empowerment. The financial and economic crisis presents an opportunity to implement and strengthen gender-sensitive policies, programmes and strategies. Economic policies and planning processes should pay systematic attention to the priorities and needs of women and girls to promote equitable distribution of resources. Policies should focus on employment creation and pro-poor growth that benefits all women and men. Women should be seen as agents of change in the response to the crisis.

10. Expansionary fiscal policies can alleviate negative impacts of the financial and economic crisis on women and men. Fiscal policies should prioritize investment in development, education, health and infrastructure. The financial and economic crisis should not be used as an excuse to reduce budget allocations that could benefit women. Financial resources for the promotion of gender equality can be generated through reductions in military spending, which is globally estimated to be \$1,464 billion in 2008, an amount equal to the over 24 years of additional aid required to reach the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. Gender-responsive budgeting can be used as a tool for ensuring that sufficient resources are allocated and spent to promote gender equality and women's empowerment in responding to the financial and economic crisis. Mechanisms such as gender equality observatories can be instrumental in monitoring responsiveness of budgets and economic policies to the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment.

11. Countries are responding to the crisis and its consequences with a diverse range of policies and measures depending on the impact of the crisis, the availability of resources and the capacity of Governments to implement counter-cyclical fiscal and monetary policies. While responses include Government bailouts of the financial sector and private companies, there are concerns that the sustainability of the financial sector is given priority over the well-being of households that are adversely affected by the crisis.

12. In response to the crisis, a number of Governments have introduced employment guarantee schemes, public service employment programmes, food for work, public works programmes and employment of last resort programmes to create jobs. These efforts need to ensure that they create jobs for women, include appropriate training and provide child care facilities. They should also focus on female-dominated sectors of the economy to counterbalance the employment

generation in infrastructure. Investment in the social sector not only promotes women's empowerment, but also makes economic sense. Evidence suggests that projects that focus on early-childhood development and home-based care have a stronger positive impact on employment, income and pro-poor growth than infrastructure projects.

13. As the crisis is expected to result in an increase in poverty, in particular for women, actions are necessary and should target poor households, particularly in rural areas. These can include access to affordable housing, free health services and vocational training and government-backed loans with low interest rates. Measures such as cash transfers, the provision of cheap fertilizers, microcredit schemes, establishment of women's cooperatives and promotion of women's entrepreneurial activities, also aim to tackle women's poverty. Microcredit schemes with no collateral and low interest have been successful in increasing women's access to credit. Poverty alleviation policies cannot achieve their goals, however, if they do not focus on rights, capacity-building and empowerment of women. Cash transfer programmes, for example, should also provide training opportunities and temporary employment for women. Particular attention should be paid to alleviating the burden of unpaid work of female-headed households to increase their opportunities for participation in the labour market.

14. Women continue to be largely absent from decision-making positions, in particular in the economic and financial sectors, with implications on the allocation of resources. Yet women in leadership positions can serve as role models to empower young women to seek opportunities in all sectors and levels of the labour market. Quotas have been effective in both the public and the private sector to address the underrepresentation of women in political and economic decision-making roles, for example as members of boards of directors of trading companies. Further measures are needed to ensure effective implementation of quotas and other temporary special measures to increase women's participation in decision-making.

15. Strong measures are needed to eliminate stereotypical attitudes regarding the role of women and men in society, which limit women's participation in the labour market. The role of families in early gender socialization remains critical in the elimination of gender stereotypes. In addition, opportunities should be sought to enhance the role of the media in providing a more balanced and realistic portrayal of women, including in leadership positions.

16. Labour market studies and expert meetings can serve to better understand the impact of the crisis on women and develop gender-sensitive responses. The availability of good and reliable data disaggregated by sex and age supports the formulation of gender-sensitive policy responses to the crisis.

17. Partnerships among different stakeholders have been instrumental in the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment. Coordination and collaboration between economic and social policymakers has contributed to the incorporation of social priorities in the design of economic policies. Partnerships with civil society, including women's organizations, in advocating for women's economic empowerment and raising awareness among women of their rights are needed and should be enhanced. Collaboration between the private and the public sector in job creation for women should be expanded and strengthened to promote women's economic empowerment. Trade unions should play an active role in improving the working conditions of women in the labour market.