

**Commission on the Status of Women
Fifty-fourth session
1 – 12 March 2010**

**Interactive expert panel on
“Women’s economic empowerment in the context of
the global economic and financial crisis”**

Monday, 8 March 2010, 3:00-6:00 pm

ISSUES PAPER

I. Background

The international community made strong and comprehensive commitments to women’s economic empowerment at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995, the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly in 2000, and other intergovernmental processes, including the 2005 World Summit and the Follow-up International Conference on Financing for Development to Review the Implementation of the Monterrey Consensus in 2008. Recent outcomes of the Commission on the Status of Women have addressed the issue within the context of its priority themes, and have focused on gender-sensitive macroeconomic policies, employment opportunities for women, and women’s equal access to and control over financial and economic resources and markets.

A number of ILO Conventions and international human rights treaties, including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, also contain provisions promoting women’s economic empowerment.

There is increasing recognition of the implications of financial and economic crises on gender equality and development. In its agreed conclusions on the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including caregiving in the context of HIV/AIDS, adopted in 2009, the Commission on the Status of Women expressed its deep concern over the negative impact of the global economic and financial crisis, which could hamper progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals and the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The 2009 United Nations Conference on the World Financial and Economic Crisis and Its Impact on Development recognized the disproportionate burden on women of previous crises and acknowledged women’s increased income insecurity and care burden during times of crises (A/RES/63/303).

In its resolution on “Recovering from the crisis: A Global Jobs Pact”, adopted in June 2009, the International Labour Conference noted that the current crisis should be viewed as an opportunity to shape new gender equality policy responses. Recovery packages should take into account the impact of the economic crises on women and men and integrate gender equality concerns in all response measures. The Conference also adopted comprehensive recommendations on gender equality in the world of work, including in

regard to employment, social protection, fundamental principles and rights at work, social dialogue, and tripartism.

The General Assembly, in its resolution A/RES/64/217 on women in development, outlined measures to facilitate women's economic empowerment in a range of areas, including in regard to the macroeconomic environment; full employment and decent work; land and other productive resources; financial services and social protection. It also expressed deep concern over the disproportionate negative impact on women of the multiple interrelated and mutually exacerbating current global crises.

II. Critical issues

Women's economic empowerment entails increasing women's access to economic and financial resources in a broad sense, including resources generated at national level through budgets, trade, and development assistance; financial services such as savings, credit, remittance transfers and insurance; employment; other productive resources such as land, and property; and social protection. The *2009 World Survey on the Role of Women in Development* makes the argument that gender equality in the distribution of economic and financial resources has positive multiplier effects for a range of key development goals, including poverty reduction and the welfare of children.¹

Despite considerable progress on many aspects of women's economic empowerment through increases in educational gains and share of paid work, deeply entrenched inequality persists as a result of discriminatory norms and practices. The pace of change has been slow and uneven across regions. In many parts of the world, women continue to face discrimination in access to land and other productive resources, as well as to infrastructure, services and technologies needed to facilitate their effective use of those resources. Their access to financial services is often limited. Without access to the economic resources provided through social protection, many women are unable to insure themselves against contingencies arising from old age, ill-health, disability, unemployment and other life-crises.

Although women have increased their share of employment globally, in many parts of the world they are disproportionately represented in informal work which is generally precarious, poorly-paid, and not covered by labour legislation or social protection. Occupational segregation and wage gaps persist in all regions of the world. Women also continue to be absent from key decision-making fora shaping the allocation of economic and financial resources and opportunities.

The neglect in macro-level policies of the inequalities in the gender distribution of paid and unpaid work – with implications for access to economic resources and opportunities – is a particular concern. Despite women's increased participation in employment outside the home, there has been no significant increase in the sharing of unpaid domestic work, including care-giving, between women and men.

¹ United Nations (2009). *World Survey on the role of women in development: women's control over economic resources and access to financial resources, including microfinance*. New York: Division for the Advancement of Women.

A variety of approaches are needed to promote women's economic empowerment. These include development of women's capabilities to adapt to changing labour market conditions, support to reduce unpaid care work, and gender-sensitive labour market regulations. Land reform, such as land-titling projects and resettlement schemes can play an important role in addressing gender inequalities in access to land and property.

The current global financial and economic crisis challenges progress made in gender equality in many areas.² Many women working in manufacturing and export-producing industries have already lost their jobs because of the decline in trade. In some countries, the global financial crisis has resulted in a decline in resources available for promoting gender equality and caused a shift in priorities, possibly resulting in diversion of funds from projects and programmes aimed at gender equality.

According to ILO, although reliable, comparable statistical data are not yet available, the current crisis is expected to have a more negative impact on female unemployment rates than male unemployment rates in most regions of the world, in particular in Latin America and the Caribbean.³ The differential impact, however, will vary across countries depending on the extent of gender-based job segregation.

A study led by WIEGO on the impact of the current crisis on home-based workers, street vendors and waste pickers in ten developing countries revealed that informal workers, mostly women, were negatively impacted by the decline in demand for their products.⁴ As a result of the crisis, informal workers had to overwork, take on additional risks and cut back on basic goods and services, while their incomes were shrinking.

Earlier economic downturns have witnessed women's role as a "safety net of last resort". Analyses of structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s illustrated the double burden women faced at the household level – increased demands on their unpaid labour caused by cutbacks in social expenditures and the need to intensify their livelihood efforts because of declining male employment and rising costs of living. Women's capacity to subsidize the economic impoverishment is wrongly assumed to be limitless.⁵

In the aftermath of the East Asian crisis, the heavy costs imposed by the neglect of social protection were recognized. Women are particularly affected by weak or non-existent social protection systems because they are located in more precarious jobs, can ill afford to save for the future or pay for private insurance and rarely own enough wealth to tide them through crisis or provide security in old age.

While the world economy is on the road to recovery with an increasing number of countries expected to experience positive quarterly growth of domestic product, increase in international trade and industrial production, the projected recovery is uneven and subject to uncertainties and high risk.⁶ Furthermore, recovery does not automatically

² E/CN.6/2010/2

³ ILO (2009). Gender equality at the heart of decent work. Geneva.

⁴ Horn, Zoe Elena (2009). "No Cushion to Fall Back On: The Global Economic Crisis and Informal Workers" Inclusive Cities Study Synthesis Report, WIEGO.

⁵ King, R. and C. Sweetman (2010). "Gender perspectives on the global economic crisis", Oxfam International Discussion Paper, Oxford.

⁶ United Nations (2010). World economic situation and prospects 2010. United Nations publication Sales No. E.10.II.C.2.

promote women's economic empowerment. Recovery measures taken by Governments can have disproportionate impacts on women and girls, possibly reversing gains made, particularly through cuts in public spending on health and education and through inequitably-designed safety nets.

The crisis should be seen as an opportunity to strengthen gender-responsive policies, programmes and strategies. Particular attention should be paid to gender equality implications of the recovery programmes and stimulus packages to ensure that previously made gains in gender equality and the empowerment of women are not reversed. Without adequate gender analysis, well-intentioned programmes, such as conditional cash transfer programmes or public works programmes, can reinforce conventional gender divisions of labour and gender stereotypes and reproduce gender inequalities.

III. Format and outcome of the interactive expert panel

The panel will take the form of an interactive dialogue. Three expert panellists will make presentations of 10-12 minutes. Member States, United Nations system entities and non-governmental organizations will be encouraged to share experiences, discuss specific challenges and/or respond to the panellists' presentations. Interventions from the floor will be limited to three minutes. A moderator's summary of the dialogue will be prepared and posted on the website of the Division for the Advancement of Women.

IV. Issues for consideration in the interactive dialogue

The following issues could be considered:

- What measures have been taken to address constraints to women's economic empowerment? What has worked and what can be scaled up?
- What successful measures have been taken to address the needs and priorities of women in formulating macroeconomic and trade policies?
- What measures can be taken to ensure that women and girls are not disproportionately affected by the financial and economic crisis? What role do different stakeholders play?
- To what extent have recovery plans and stimulus packages been gender-sensitive? What further measures are needed?
- What measures can be taken by Governments and the private sector in redistributing the burden of unpaid work – what has worked and what can be scaled up?
- What are some good practice examples of gender-responsive social protection measures, such as public job creation, taken in response to the financial and economic crisis? Do any of these measures address the vulnerabilities of informal workers?