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GENDER IN TIMES OF CRISIS - NEW DEVELOPMENT PARADIGM NEEDED

Social Watch Gender Working Group[1]

Despite some progress, commitments to gender equality are far from being implemented. Uneven progress towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – all of which have gender dimensions – as well as increasing poverty and inequality are due not only to external shocks and crises but also to underlying structural imbalances. Policymakers need to rethink macro-economics and recognize that economies depend on an extensive care economy in which the main workforce is female. The time has come for a new development paradigm with equal rights and opportunities for all. Will the new UN gender entity, UN Women, be able to catalyze such a shift?

In 1979, many of the governments of the world made legal commitments to women's rights by signing the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). Sixteen years later, in 1995, the 4th World Conference on Women adopted a comprehensive plan of action towards gender equality, the Beijing Platform for Action. In September 2010, the world's leaders will meet in New York at the MDGs Summit to assess progress towards the MDGs, including reducing poverty and inequality and discuss how best accelerate such progress in the face of multiple and overlapping crises on climate, food, energy, finances and the economy.

In spite of some progress, the commitments made in Beijing and the CEDAW are far from fully implemented, nor is gender equality always a component of sustainable economic and social development programs. By any measure, including Social Watch's Gender Equity Index (GEI), there is urgent need for progress in this area, since governments are quick to sign on to international instruments but slow to ensure their implementation.

Growing poverty and uneven progress towards the MDGs – all of which have gender dimensions—are due not only to external shocks and crises but also to underlying structural imbalances. In times of crisis, it is women who bear the brunt of decreased financing for development, having to find ways to feed and support their children and other dependants as household income falls, and taking on more unpaid work as social services are cut. The poor – and women are the poorest among the poor – have no cushions and reserves to cope with crises. Yet, the same countries that cannot find money to fund development mobilized trillions of dollars to rescue banks and corporations.

The quest for a new development paradigm

Crises such as the food, fuel and financial crises are not gender-neutral. They exacerbate already existing inequalities and highlight the negative effects on women and women-dependent economies. Yet, few measures that countries have taken to respond to the crisis have prioritized women's employment and livelihoods. Without carefully targeted measures, poor women are bound to fall through the cracks, obliged to seek more precarious jobs with lower productivity, meagre incomes and lack of social protection. Many become more vulnerable to trafficking and dangerous or illegal forms of work.

Measures to protect women from the worst impacts of the crises are essential. Also badly needed, however, are long-term social development policies that solidly embrace gender as a key step towards equality and increased human well-being. Social indicators take twice as long to recover from crises – as seen in previous crises in Asia and Latin America – and these must be carefully monitored along with economic growth. Economic growth is no longer a valid measurement of human and social well-being. A paradigm shift is needed which must be reflected in practice. It is not a question of aiming for growth and formulating some policies for women, or for poor families, but of designing and implementing a new

development paradigm with equal rights and equal opportunities for everyone.

Despite progress in terms of legal and policy frameworks towards gender equality, women's movements worldwide have become frustrated with the failure of States to implement these frameworks and deliver on their commitments. As Norah Matovu Wing, Executive Director of the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) stated: "The change achieved in the political, social, economic status and situation of African women cannot be denied. However, the concern is that those enjoying these benefits remain a minority."^[2] And changes in the daily lives of women are few and far, especially for those in rural areas and those forced to migrate within countries and abroad.

Gendered impacts of the economic crisis

The economic crisis in 2008 and the subsequent recovery plans at national, regional and international levels have failed to acknowledge, understand, analyse and rectify the gender impact of the financial crisis. Continuous denial of its gender impact coupled with the failure to include women as part of the solution runs the risk of returning to a "business as usual" recovery strategy which, in the long term, will have detrimental consequences on the real lives of women, men, and children as well as the environment.

This current economic crisis is unlike previous recessions in that this recession has had – and will continue to have – a much greater, albeit differentiated, impact on women. In contrast to past periods of economic downturn, women today "are the single biggest – and least acknowledged – force for economic growth on the planet," at least according to *The Economist*, which suggested that, over the past few decades, women have contributed more to the expansion of the world economy than either new technologies or the emerging markets of China and India.^[3] This reality is being completely ignored. Furthermore, the unprecedented numbers of women in the labour market means that they contribute to household incomes far more than ever before. Therefore, women's integration into the workplace will mean not only a greater direct impact of the crisis on women themselves but also on households, where incomes will be significantly affected by female job losses.

But more importantly, the economic position of women at the start of the recession was by no means equal to that of men. With employment patterns characterized by gender segregated labour markets, gender gaps in pay, higher levels of part-time work and high concentration in the so-called informal sector with lower earnings and little or no social protection, women are not in an advantageous position to weather the crisis.

It is important to recognize the interdependent and multi-layered dimensions of the financial and economic crisis in order to understand their full impact on women and gender relations now and in the future. For the most part, the gender dimensions of this crisis have been overlooked. Official unemployment predictions in Europe, for example, give similar figures for women and for men. However, these fail to take into account the over-representation of women in part-time work, an area which is excluded from unemployment statistics. In 2007, the percentage of women working part-time in the EU was 31.2%, four times higher than for men.^[4] Women are also the main providers of public services, representing up to two-thirds of the workforce in education, health and social care; it is therefore likely that female unemployment will rise disproportionately with cutbacks in public sector spending.

In order to understand the effects of public spending cuts on women, in both the short and the long term, a gender impact analysis should be conducted before the cuts are made. State responses to this crisis have focused on male-dominated sectors (e.g., the car industry or the construction sector), but reductions in public expenditure will undoubtedly result in the transfer of services such as caregiving back to women, further restricting their ability to fully participate in all aspects of life. Similarly the impact of expenditure cuts to support services in socio-economically disadvantaged communities will result in a greater reliance on women both within families and in the community.

All over the world, women's unemployment rates are increasing due to outmoded gender conceptions and cuts in public spending, while at the same time their participation in the informal economy and in

“voluntary” work has increased as social protection measures are removed and women are expected to fill in the gaps.

Global challenges: a quick overview

In Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America and the Middle East, women’s movements have acknowledged the positive effect of international agreements on the lives of women and girls. However, some regions are also registering increases in religious extremism and/or right-wing conservatism that is linked to the perpetuation and propagation of discriminatory laws against women. Many States and political parties are manipulating the right of people to cultural and religious diversity as a pretext for violating human rights, including the rights of women, girls, people living with HIV/AIDS and persons with different sexual orientations.[5] The political oppression of women and their rights is also compounded by armed conflict and an excessive focus on militarization rather than human well-being as a means of security.

Variations of this phenomenon are visible in Africa and other developing regions the crises have reached through various channels of transmission. It has also become necessary to use a gender perspective to decode situations within households, since people who share the same space have asymmetric power relationships.[6] Moreover, despite current changes in social roles, the division of labour by sex within households is still very rigid. The limitations placed on women by this division of labour, as well as the social hierarchies based on it, determine an unequal situation within three closely-linked systems: the labour market, the welfare or social protection system and the household.

Latin America and the Caribbean: lack of gender policies

The decrease in trade – both in volume and in value –, the drop in remittances and unemployment along with an increase in poverty are the principal negative consequences of the global economic crisis in Latin America. Over 2 million people lost their jobs in 2009 and, despite forecasts of greater economic growth in 2010, those jobs will be difficult to recover.[7] This is compounded by the report by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) that 2009 exports dropped by 24% as a result of the crisis.[8]

So far, responses to the crisis in the region have focused on stabilizing the financial sector and on actions to sustain demand, employment and support for vulnerable populations. However, very few of the measures taken by governments in Latin America and the Caribbean mention women, despite the fact that the impact of the recession is greater on them, in terms both of unemployment and of more precarious work, with lower productivity and less social protection. Gender inequality needs to be taken into account in these policies since accumulation of profit is not only based on the exploitation of natural resources, but also on the basis of cheap labour, women’s labour being the cheapest of all.

The production process includes, though does not formally acknowledge, a double burden on women within the household (or “voluntary” work) and through lower wage jobs in order to increase profits. Over the last decade, salaries went down in most of the countries of the region, largely due to the inclusion of more women in the labour market.

At the 10th Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean, in August 2007, 33 governments approved the Quito Consensus calling for the adoption of all needed affirmative action measures and mechanisms, including legislative reforms and budgetary measures, to ensure women’s participation and rights.[9] The inability to enforce the commitments made in Quito demonstrates deficiencies in gender equality policies which are linked to the weakness of States in adopting and enforcing mechanisms for the advancement of women and to the predominance of skewed “welfare” policies, based more on charity than on human rights.

At the recent 11th Regional Conference on Women in Latin America and the Caribbean in July 2010 in Brasilia, Brazil, ECLAC presented a paper that examines the achievements made in gender equality and the challenges women still face in the region. [10] This proposes a new social covenant to redistribute the

total workload (paid and unpaid) between men and women, in order to facilitate women's access to the labour market.[\[11\]](#)

African region: a drop in the ocean

Despite the advances in legislation geared towards gender equity and judicial process, African women expressed disappointment with their Governments for being quick to sign onto human rights instruments and endorse different policies at the international and regional levels but extremely slow in delivering on their commitments.

The Africa NGOs Shadow Report on the Beijing +15 found that “the many practical steps taken over the last five years are a drop in the ocean when assessed against the many promises made by African Governments on the fundamental issue of achieving gender equality, equity and women’s empowerment. In short, African leaders are falling far short of the expectations of African women.”[\[12\]](#)

While State policies currently do reflect some elements of “gender equality” frameworks, on the whole, these stop short of fully addressing issues of women’s empowerment and in particular, sexual and reproductive health and rights.

In the context of the global economic and financial crisis, the first people to lose jobs in the formal sector in Africa have been those at the lower levels, and the majority of these are women. Women still remain largely invisible in the formal economy, and women’s unpaid labour continues to be unrecognized and increasing as they are forced to shoulder the social and economic impact of macroeconomic policies.

Feminist economists have repeatedly noted that gendered impacts of the global crisis have increased within a political context that impinges upon the time burdens of women and forces women to absorb additional care burdens as market-based services or public services become less accessible. This context also includes higher unemployment rates for women and/or an increase in women’s marginalization into the informal sector, and potentially a worsening of their working conditions.[\[13\]](#)

The Arab region: economic empowerment for women

Contrary to the myth of a single homogenous “Muslim World,” women’s groups in the Arab region have been pushing for transformation from within their communities, fighting against conservative interpretations of Islam that deny gender equality and for gender justice at the local level. Despite the common culture, there is a marked difference among Arab countries in terms of implementing the Beijing Platform. This can be traced back to several factors, including the way in which different countries interpret religious texts in relation to women, which are reflected in the personal status laws and the responsibilities that they are allowed to exercise outside the boundaries of home and family.

Although all Arab States have signed and ratified the CEDAW, they have done so with so many reservations that the purpose of the convention is defeated. Other countries, such as Afghanistan, for example, have ratified the Convention but have never submitted a report to the CEDAW Committee.

Much has been said about the role religion plays in the region especially in terms of the advancement of women. The use of the word “fundamentalisms” to refer to conservative interpretations of Islam has long been debated by feminists in the region[\[14\]](#) and new initiatives are emerging that seek to reform Muslim Family Law from within.[\[15\]](#) Women’s groups in the region acknowledge that a lack of political will – rather than religious tradition – is the main obstacle to increasing women’s participation in positions of leadership.

In December 2009, a number of women’s organizations held a regional consultation meeting in Cairo to evaluate the achievements and challenges faced in the Arab region since the adoption of the Beijing Platform. The regional meeting included 235 women’s rights leaders and civil society representatives from 14 countries and concluded by outlining future priorities in the Arab region towards the fulfilment of the

Beijing Platform.[\[16\]](#)

Although women's labour force participation has increased in this region, it is still very low compared to other regions, and there is a high level of economic dependency with all the social consequences this implies. Women are often employed in the informal sector, and when they own their own businesses, they usually do not actually manage them, having to leave this to a male family member. When they are in formal employment, they typically are paid less than their male colleagues, although few countries collect this data.[\[17\]](#)

The Arab region is by no means immune to the effects of the global economic crisis which resulted in economic slowdown and affected people's ability to exercise their human rights. Some women's rights advocates argue that the current crisis has given governments the chance to change their macroeconomic policies to facilitate greater investment in advancing gender equality. Others have questioned this strategy arguing that in Muslim contexts, policies and programs to support women's empowerment cannot be effective if their implementation is blocked by forces located between women and the State institutions - such as traditional and religious customs and practices.[\[18\]](#)

Asia Pacific: progress and pending issues

In October 2009 organizations and networks from the Asia Pacific region representing a broad section of women and girls gathered at the NGO Forum on Beijing +15 and reaffirmed the Beijing Platform as a strategic document for women and girls' empowerment, human rights, peace, human security and gender-inclusive development. The Forum also identified the concurrent crises in development, debt, climate change, food security, conflicts and finances, and increasing violence against women as having the most severe impact on the rights of women and girls across the region.[\[19\]](#)

The Forum also highlighted the ratification of the CEDAW in all but four countries – Brunei Darussalam, Nauru, Palau and Tonga – as a positive step. Additionally, several countries in the region such as Thailand, Cambodia and the Philippines in Southeast Asia; and India, Nepal and Bangladesh in South Asia now have National Action Plans to combat violence against women.[\[20\]](#) Laws and policies are being adopted to strengthen women's economic security and rights in such vital areas as decent work and access to credit and markets. Some countries adopted quotas or other affirmative measures to increase women's representation in political decision-making in a number of countries, such as Afghanistan, Indonesia and Timor Leste, while others took steps to improve health outcomes for women and girls and implement measures to reduce gender gaps in literacy and in primary and secondary education.

Despite these advances, the Forum recognized the enormous and complex challenges still facing women and girls in the region and the struggle to cope with recurrent crises. Participants were especially concerned about the impact of these crises on women's rights. Participants called for sub-regional economic integration and national development plans that rest on the principles and practices of ecological sustainability, food sovereignty, financial inclusion, universal social protection, economic solidarity and fair trade.

Conclusion

The needs of women and girls today go beyond advancing the Beijing Platform for Action and implementing CEDAW to include sustainable development planning that places human well-being at the core. Regional forums such as the Asia Pacific NGO Forum point out to the need for sub-regional economic integration and national development plans that rest on the principles and practices of ecological sustainability, food sovereignty, financial transparency, universal social protection, economic solidarity and fair trade.

This global recession is a perfect time to create a new model of development in which gender equality and social inclusion must be a key priority. It is necessary to rethink macroeconomic models based on keeping inflation low and deficits in check and recognize that a growing economy demands liveable wages and the

contribution of all people to economic productively. This also requires the recognition that a productive economy depends on an extensive care economy in which the main workforce is female. The time has come for a new development paradigm with equal rights and equal opportunities for everyone.

UN Women born: can it meet the policy gap challenge?

Genoveva Tisheva and Barbara Adams

Women's organizations and groups worldwide celebrated the UN General Assembly resolution, adopted on 2 July 2010, to establish the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, or UN Women. This new entity will be headed by an Under-Secretary General and will consolidate and combine into one the four existing gender-specific entities, increase operational capacity at the country level and have greater authority and resources to advance women's empowerment and advancement.

Particularly notable in the resolution are the paragraphs regarding the importance of civil society participation in the new entity. The new organization will expand its operational presence at the country level including engagement with women's groups and other civil society organizations invested in gender equality and the empowerment of women.

This resolution would not have happened without the strong advocacy and determined commitment of women's movements and other civil society organizations over the last four years, beginning with the adoption of the 2006 System-Wide Coherence Panel report on UN Reform, which included a recommendation to establish a new entity to increase the authority, resources and capacity of UN work on gender equality. Recognizing the need for a strong civil society effort to influence the shape of the new entity, many of these groups united in the Gender Equality Architecture Reform or GEAR Campaign. Charlotte Bunch, former Executive Director of the Center for Women's Global Leadership, a founding member of the GEAR Campaign stated: "We have high expectations for this new agency –the women's groups and other social justice, human rights and development organizations that played a pivotal role in this effort must now work to ensure that the new body has the human and financial resources necessary to succeed."

A lot depends on who the UN Secretary-General appoints to new Under-Secretary General position to head the new organization. There is general agreement that this person must combine the vision, experience and determination to not only expand the work of the UN entity for gender equality but to hold the other parts of the UN system accountable for advancing gender equality in all countries. This is particularly important in the current period, as both the international community and countries worldwide accelerate efforts to advance progress towards achieving the MDGs by 2015, while at the same time confronting the ongoing impact of the worse global financial and economic crisis in 40 years.

The first major challenge facing UN Women, therefore is whether it will adopt the traditional model of multilateralism where the decisions are made only by governments and the political process tends to water policy recommendations. This has failed to promote sustainable development to all countries or address the "policy gap" between macroeconomic policies and gender justice approaches. Gender equality advocates in CSOs, governments and UN agencies must start closing this gap, and the test for UN Women is whether it will provide the necessary vision and leadership.

The policy gap

The financial and economic crisis has challenged not only the resources for development but also the policies to make it inclusive and sustainable. As governments seek to reduce their budgets and their public expenditures in the face of the debt they have incurred to address the crisis, many of the areas in which these reductions will be felt are in the provision of social services, including education and health, which are essential for women's empowerment. This in turn threatens to reverse the gains in women's empowerment, not only because the services will become more limited and more expensive to access,

but also because the cuts will increase the unpaid labour of women in making up for them through what is known as the “care economy,” based on the incorrect assumption that women are by nature dedicated to care and that they have the time and capacity to provide it.

At the same time, it is these sectors in which women’s employment is most concentrated, thereby adding to women’s job losses, based on the assumption that if governments reduce spending on public services, and instead subsidize private sector initiatives, the private sector will step up provide them, thereby creating jobs for both men and women. This assumes not only sustained demand, despite the loss of household income and imposition of new fees, but also that the main source of household income is men’s employment, while women’s earnings are secondary. This at a time when the UN has affirmed – and the MDG targets reflect - that the key strategy with regard to reducing poverty is providing full, productive and decent employment, especially for women and youth. Policy responses to the economic crisis are in many cases perpetuating all of these outdated and discredited assumptions, thus disproportionately disadvantaging women and enhancing the policy gap.

This and other reports have stressed the need for developing countries’ governments, which had no part in causing this crisis, to be allowed sufficient policy space to expand fiscal policy to respond to it, in order to promote employment and protect social spending. In response, international lending institutions, such as the IMF and World Bank, have indicated a greater willingness to support more flexible fiscal policies and continued social spending, at least in some cases. What is most urgently needed therefore, is concerted efforts by civil society, including women’s organizations, to make sure governments take that space, in ways that protect the rights and promote the well-being of all sectors of their societies. This is the new direction that the new gender entity, UN Women, must inspire and lead.

The GEAR network of women’s and civil society organizations and networks is contacting UN representatives at all levels to work with the transition process and assure the new Under-Secretary-General of their readiness to support the new entity to advance gender equality and women’s empowerment. “We know that this is only the beginning,” said Rachel Harris of the Women’s Environment and Development Organization (WEDO). “We must continue to ensure that we are building a United Nations that really works for all women on the ground. This requires the active engagement of all stakeholders.”

[1] This article is the result of the work of the Social Watch Gender Working Group, based on findings from the *Social Watch Occasional Paper 06, Putting gender economics at the forefront* (March 2010). The writing was done by Enrique Buchichio and Amir Hamed, from the Social Watch Secretariat.

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