

First report of the High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment: Response by the Gender & Development Network

Background

Over the last year the existence of the UN Secretary General's High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment has brought increased attention to the issue of economic equality for women in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Along with colleagues internationally, we prepared a submission to the Panel outlining recommendations, particularly in relation to macroeconomic policy.¹

This short briefing is our initial response to the Panel's first report, *Leave no one behind: a call to action on gender equality and women's economic empowerment*, outlining its strengths as well as the areas where more work will be needed as we move forward to the Panel's next report in March 2017.²

Summary of GADN's response

Overall, the report touches on some vital issues for achieving women's economic empowerment (WEE) by putting both unpaid care work and discriminatory social norms high on the political agenda for the first time, and by making clear that freedom of association, collective bargaining and adequate minimum wages must be part of the solution.

Given the broad and diverse composition of the Panel, the report goes further in many areas than might have been expected, and there are some important points made. The seven principles outlined in the report contain commendable aspirations; however, the actual commitments in these areas will need to be substantially strengthened in the Panel's next report if its call to action is to be a truly transformative agenda.³ Perhaps most surprising was the missed opportunity to clearly state that WEE and gender equality are important for their own sakes, rather than as means to other ends, and in so doing to use the power of such a Panel to shape future discourse.

One major omission is any strong recommendation to address the underlying economic barriers to progress – most notably, the role of macroeconomic policy, trade and investment agreements, and corporate regulation – in shaping the broader context in which WEE takes place.

Below, we outline some areas that need greater attention in the Panel's deliberations in advance of its second report in March 2017.

¹ <http://gadnetwork.org/gadn-resources/2016/7/7/breaking-down-the-barriers-macroeconomic-policies-that-promote-womens-economic-equality>.

² UN Secretary General's High Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment (2016) *Leave no one behind: a call to action on gender equality and women's economic empowerment*. <http://www.womenseconomicempowerment.org/reports/>

³ Page 8 *ibid*

The guiding principles

Five of the report's seven guiding principles in particular contain important aspirations that are worth highlighting: focusing on women "at the base of the pyramid", ensuring women's voice and participation is central to all actions, an equal focus on human rights and economic gains, tackling the root causes of inequality, and respect for human rights agreements and labour standards.⁴ In addition the report does well to recognise that women are not a homogeneous group, but rather that they have different needs and priorities around the world.

Moving forward

Despite its title, the report does not focus enough on women living with poverty and marginalisation, nor does it put their voices at the centre of the debate. It is not written from a human rights perspective and only tackles some of the root causes of gender inequality – notably omitting the role of macroeconomic policy in perpetuating gender inequality. The next report will need to integrate these aspirations and analysis more fully – and take a more forceful approach to challenging, rather than responding to, political agendas.

WEE as a human right

The report includes vital recognition that achieving WEE is the right thing to do, in and of itself, and is necessary in order to meet human rights obligations. At the same time, however, the report tempers this stance with a call for an *equal* focus on "rights and gains" as part of its seven principles for a transformation agenda.⁵

Moving forward

A Panel with such influential membership has the power to shape future agendas as well as respond to existing ones. We propose that the Panel could be much bolder in stating that the achievement of WEE (and gender equality more generally) is valuable for its own sake and 'the right thing to do'. As Panel co-chair Simona Scarpaleggia of IKEA Switzerland has pointed out, "You don't need a business case to promote human rights."⁶

Unpaid care

Significantly, the Panel has put the issue of unpaid care work firmly on the international political agenda, recognising its centrality in the achievement of gender equality and importantly acknowledging that unpaid care work is indeed *work*. This is a major step forward. In its analysis of care work, the report also uses the valuable "3R" framework first coined by Diane Elson, outlining the need to *recognise*, *redistribute* and *reduce* unpaid care work.

Moving forward

Much of the report's discussion of the drivers for change on unpaid care focuses on redistributing care work from women to men and helping mothers back to work. While these are crucial points, they are just one part of the story, and respond more to the experiences of wealthier parents than to the lives of marginalised families globally.

For the majority of women, public provision of care services is what will provide a workable solution – and public provision is actually in decline or even non-existent in many countries. The report

⁴ Page 8 *ibid*

⁵ Page 8 *ibid*

⁶ Scarpaleggia, S. 2016. Opening remarks at the consultation on the UN Secretary General's High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment at CSW 60. New York, 16 Mar

briefly acknowledges this problem. For example, there is recognition that investment will be needed in the provision of care from both public and private sector, and that publically supported care services should be provided.⁷ There is also recognition of the need to strengthen welfare systems in the face of an aging population.⁸ There is even acknowledgment that reductions in public spending are especially damaging for the women who have to fill the gaps in service provision.⁹ But these insights are not adequately reflected in the call to action. The future work of the Panel should therefore include much more of the wealth of existing analysis on how public spending can reduce women's care unequal care burden, generate employment and improve social development and mobility in the long term.

Labour rights

The report highlights the importance of women's collective action, both informally and in trade unions, and reasserts the importance of the rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining.¹⁰ It goes on to say, "Women's collective and representative organisations, especially those representing women at the base of the pyramid, are critical in driving women's economic opportunities."¹¹

The report details the value of adequate minimum wages which is identified as a proven solution that helps to reduce the gender pay gap and contribute to WEE. The benefits of social protection for all in promoting women's economic security are covered as well.¹²

Moving forward

This clear recognition of the importance of labour rights is welcome, and it would be good to see further discussion of how this and related government policies will be funded and enforced, in particular across global value chains.

Finding the funds and enforcing the rules

In general, the report makes some good suggestions for measures to tackle inequality, but it frequently avoids the question of how they should be funded or enforced.

Moving forward

There must be a full consideration of the ways in which fiscal space can be created to fund the necessary steps toward gender equality because, without funding, even the best proposals will be relegated to mere rhetoric. More discussion of both gender-responsive taxation and budget policies would be welcome here.

Corporations must also play their part in generating fiscal space, not just by paying a fair amount of tax in each country in which they operate, but also by committing to end lobbying for tax cuts. Additionally, while there are suggestions in the report for business best practice, there needs to be greater attention to regulation of corporate abuses, given their deep impact.

An enabling macroeconomic environment

The current macroeconomic environment is not identified as one of the listed "systematic constraints" in the report.¹³ Moreover, while there are brief mentions of the role of government

⁷ Page 5 op cit

⁸ UN (2016) Page 48 op cit

⁹ Page 18 ibid

¹⁰ Page 84 ibid

¹¹ Page 99 ibid

¹² Box 3.24 page 89 ibid

¹³ Figure1 page 3 ibid

policy and the need for public investment and spending throughout the report, these are not singled out amongst the “seven primary drivers of women’s economic empowerment.”¹⁴ Meanwhile there is scant analysis of the impact of existing policies that undermine efforts to ensure women’s equality.

While the report acknowledges the key role of governments in setting the framework for equality, its analysis of what governments should do focuses quite narrowly on procurement and public sector employment. Government policy itself is discussed largely in relation to legal constraints on women’s participation and access to assets rather than the overall direction of the economy.¹⁵

Most worryingly, the call to action incites governments to “Adopt macroeconomic policies to boost short-term and long-term inclusive growth.”¹⁶ How to boost growth in a way that promotes rather than undermines gender equality is the subject of much research and debate - that should have been addressed in the report. A much more nuanced call to action is needed to ensure government policy truly promotes WEE.

Moving forward

Creating an enabling macroeconomic environment for gender equality must be addressed if the report’s recommendations are truly to tackle the root causes of economic inequality. UN Women’s own flagship report, *Transforming economies, realising rights*, provides a number of starting points that could be built upon in the Panel’s next report.¹⁷ Unless these vital areas are addressed, the positive work of the Panel elsewhere will be undermined and WEE will remain elusive.

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¹⁴ See for example p.18: *Policymakers should recognize that reductions in public spending—including health, education, social services and social protection—are especially damaging for women. Women are more likely than men to work in the public sector, more likely to rely on government services and more likely to have to fill the gaps in family and social services when the government withdraws support for them. And public sector jobs are often better quality jobs—with higher incomes, more job security, more support for families and easier access to worker and social protection.* ; UN (2016) op cit Page 4

¹⁵ Page 7 ibid

¹⁶ Page 9 ibid

¹⁷ UN Women (2015). *Progress of the world’s women 2015-2016: transforming economies, realizing rights*. New York: UN Women. Available at: http://progress.unwomen.org/en/2015/pdf/UNW_progressreport.pdf (accessed 18 Apr 2016)