



Bringing a women's rights perspective to the table

Notes from a roundtable with the UK Secretary of State for International Development, women's rights organisations and NGOs

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Women's rights organisations (WROs) are a particular subset of civil society, striving to represent the specific views of women in their diversity and promote their rights. They are frequently smaller and less well funded than other civil society organisations, and have less access to power and to decision makers. As part of the consultation process for the High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment (WEE), there have been calls for consultation with WROs in particular; this entails ensuring that they have the space to be heard and the funding to respond to opportunities.

The aim of this roundtable, organised by the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Gender & Development Network (GADN), was to bring the views of WROs to the UK Secretary of State for International Development, herself a member of the Panel. We were particularly pleased to include the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), given the large number of WROs with whom they work globally. But, without funding, it was not possible for more WROs from the Global South to attend. Instead a small number of UK-based international organisations and networks who work with WROs were asked to share the experiences and views of their partner organisations. Significantly, domestic UK and European WROs were also invited in an important recognition of the universal application of Agenda 2030. The following is a note of some of the points raised in the meeting. The views expressed do not necessarily represent the views of all the organisations in attendance.¹

A women's rights perspective on WEE

Any discussion on WEE must focus on women's empowerment and equality as a clear goal and end in itself. Framing women as instruments or drivers of economic growth, and what

¹ The organisations in attendance were ActionAid UK, Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID), Christian Aid, Fawcett Society, Gender & Development Network (GADN), Institute of Development Studies (IDS), International Planned Parenthood Federation, Oxfam, Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising (WIEGO), UK Women's Budget Group and Women Working Worldwide. The European Women's Lobby were unable to attend, but their points have been included in the summary.

AWID has called the hijacking of the women's development agenda by some in the development sector, has skewed the debate on WEE and led to policy prescriptions that frequently fail to achieve women's empowerment. If a rights based approach to WEE is adopted instead, then the need to tackle certain issues becomes apparent such as the importance of investment in those sectors that are central to women's well-being including social and care services. Issues around labour laws and unionisation will also have to be addressed. Acknowledgement of the role women have been assigned in reproduction, community or care work and production will also be essential, alongside measures to reduce the unequal burden of unpaid care work.

Many international instruments already exist that provide a road map to achieving WEE such as the Beijing Platform for Action. A strengthening of accountability mechanism is necessary to ensure both governments and businesses adhere to specific international and regional agreements that prevent the exploitation of women.

Women's rights organisations as partners in implementation

WROs are an important partner in the promotion of WEE and the realisation of any action plan agreed by the Panel. Their involvement runs as a critical thread throughout the areas of change covered below. The successful implementation of Agenda 2030 is dependent on the involvement of women and their institutions. Research has shown a clear connection between the successful implementation of the MDGs and women's involvement, countries where women's rights organisations and movements were involved had better scores than in those where they were not.¹

To date, inadequate funding severely hampers the ability of WROs even to take part in consultation processes, let alone to implement recommendations in the future. Recognising the need for adequate, appropriate funding for such organisations must be part of the Panel's recommendations going forward.

To gain the support and trust of WROs, the Panel will also have to be clear that the promotion of women's rights is at the heart of the drive towards WEE. Arguments that increasing female labour force participation is good for economic growth will not serve to galvanise WROs behind the Panel's action plan.

Public expenditure and revenue

The present economic outlook is bleak and not conducive to women's employment or WEE. Many economists recommend public sector investment to kick start the economy, where this advice is followed it often takes place in physical infrastructure – roads, telecommunications, bridges and rail networks. New research carried out by the UK Women's Budget Group for the ITUC analyses the impact on employment and economic growth of given percentages of GDP spent on physical infrastructure (specifically, the construction sector) and in social infrastructure (the caring industries – elder care and childcare).² For seven OECD countries – UK, USA, Denmark, Germany, Italy, Japan and Australia – the impact on both economic growth and employment would be higher (in varying degrees) with investment in social infrastructure. Furthermore over time the investment would be likely to pay for itself. Interestingly, if the investment took place in the caring industries, more of the jobs created

would go to women, lowering the gender employment gap as a consequence, but nonetheless nearly as many jobs would be created for men no matter which sector received investment.

In addition, investing in social infrastructure and care has a positive impact on WEE. Not only does such investment contribute to employment but at the same time the provision of care makes it more possible for more women to work.

Public spending on social protection issues is particularly important for women. For example, the gender pension gap in Europe is 40 per cent and increasing. Current tendencies in Europe to increase retirement ages, strengthen the link between contributions and benefits and emphasise the role of second- and third-pillar pension schemes instead of the statutory state pensions are all problematic from a gender perspective. In some European countries, many women have no pension at all.

An equal-earner-equal-career model for both women and men is needed. Four policy proposals could help to redress the pension pay gap: first, develop European standards on care crediting to ensure that pension systems reflect life courses that include care periods; second, bridge the gender pension gap by addressing gender employment gaps and increasing care needs in the framework of the EU 2020 Strategy; third, ensure individual pension rights for the elderly women of today; and fourth, secure strong, statutory state pensions and address gender issues in the second- and third-pillar schemes.³

Taxation is relevant to WEE both because its achievement requires public expenditure and because different forms of revenue have different gendered implications. In working to develop a fair global tax system, it is vital to see a clearer and stronger understanding of the gender aspects and implications of taxation's different effect on women and men across the levels from national to global, and to recognise that revenue lost to tax dodging in developing countries could be spent on gender equality.⁴

At the national level, decisions about tax policy are vital to facilitating WEE. They determine how women are seen as economic actors for tax purposes and how their economic activity is classified, particularly in relation to unpaid work. Local organisations can play a vital role in holding governments to account through monitoring mechanisms, including gender-responsive budgets. The Zimbabwe Women's Resource Centre is one example; CODFEM in Guatemala is another.⁵

Decent work

The gender pay gap (GPG) is an indicator for a range of inequalities that women experience in paid work. For women working full time in the UK, the gap is 13.9 per cent. The right to equal pay has been an essential part of narrowing the UK's GPG; particularly important is the right to equal pay for work of equal value. However, illegal unequal pay is only one element of the GPG. Partly as a result of occupational segregation, women tend to be clustered in the lowest paid jobs. The introduction of the National Minimum Wage (NMW) in the UK was an important step forward, as was the introduction of the National Living Wage (NLW). The Resolution Foundation estimates that the NLW will boost the wages of 29 per cent of women employees by 2020, compared to 18 per cent of men. However, rights and

entitlements such as the NMW must be enforced to be meaningful. There is evidence to suggest that non-compliance could affect hundreds of thousands of workers UK-wide.⁶

Within global value chains (GVCs) there are power imbalances between brands and retailers and the businesses producing their products, between factory and farm management and workers (especially women workers), and also between men workers and women workers. Action research among local organisations working with women in GVCs shows that women are not paid at the same rate as men in similar jobs (for example, garment factories around Delhi) and that they suffer sexual harassment (for example, in horticulture) that they have to tolerate in order to get and keep their jobs. The key issue for women workers is a living wage to meet their basic needs (housing, food, transport, children's education, health and savings).

Women workers need to be able to be – or to choose – leaders, representatives and key negotiators who prioritise women's needs with their employers. The universal human rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining are important. However many women workers in GVCs find that the trade unions for their sectors are predominantly run by men who do not give women space or take their specific issues into account. Part of the solution is to work with women leaders. In East Africa the women's committee of the Global Horticultural Workers and Environmental Rights Network works with women leaders from NGOs and trade unions to become catalysts and analysts to fight for gender-responsive labour rights. Developing these kinds of movements takes time and funding.⁷

The informal economy is the "normal" economy for the majority of the world's working population; over half of the jobs in the world are informal, often in small and unregistered enterprises that are often owner-operated with support from unpaid family members. In the Global South the proportion is higher: over 80 per cent of work in South Asia is in the informal economy, about 65 per cent in both South-East Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, and over 50 per cent in Latin America. Women predominate in the informal economy, and the large majority of the lowest-paid and most insecure work is done by women.⁸

Repeated experience from every corner of the world demonstrates that economically poor women are not able to tackle the constraints that bind them without organising for representative voice. For example, the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) in India now has about two million members. When SEWA members were unable to mobilise credit through banks in India, they set up their own bank with the motto, "we are poor but we are many". The SEWA bank now has 400,000 members, and SEWA has since set up other financial products for its members, including insurance and home loans. The International Domestic Workers' Network (IDWN) was formed in order to push for the Convention on Domestic Work, which was passed at the International Labour Conference in 2011.⁹ Since then the IDWN has continued to grow, and to push for national ratifications of the convention and for national laws to implement it. In 2013, the IDWN federated as the first ever international union federation that is run by women.

The status quo sees informal work stigmatised and punished. Instead what's needed is support for associations of informal women workers, and for legal and regulatory change that supports the livelihoods of those informal women workers. Such changes will go a long way towards economically empowering women.

Further examples from across different continents highlight what more can be done to contribute to WEE. In Cambodia the Workers Information Centre (WIC) is an independent women-led workers' association comprised mainly of young women garment workers. WIC establishes drop-in centres near garment factories where women learn about their rights and labour laws, and are therefore less vulnerable to exploitation. The drop-in centres can also provide a stepping stone to these women joining trade unions. The major call of garment unions in Cambodia is currently for a living wage; this will be an important area of consideration for the HLP.

In Bangladesh Rights Cafes are held to support garment workers to learn about their rights. Collective bargaining was key to winning compensation for those affected by the Rana Plaza disaster. The Young Urban Women's Programme in cities in Ghana, India and South Africa empowers young women living in poverty – some formal and some informal workers – by linking their labour rights with their sexual and reproductive health rights, their right to bodily integrity and their burden of unpaid care work. The programme strengthens these young women's agency and voice in all these areas.¹⁰

The care economy

In the UK, in addition to decent jobs and equal pay, women also need support and infrastructure to get into and remain in work. Caring responsibilities mean that many women are unable to access work or are forced to work in jobs below their skill levels that fit in with their wider responsibilities. In the UK, there are 1.3 million women who are economically inactive but want work. Women are much more likely to work part time (42 per cent versus 11 per cent of men). These jobs are typically lower paid with fewer opportunities for progression. It is essential that wider social care and childcare infrastructure is in place to enable women to achieve their full potential at work.

Rights at work are essential but not enough on their own, as gender stereotypes and prejudice still hold women back in the workplace. Fawcett Society research has found that those with responsibility for interviewing and hiring in organisations often have more conservative views of women's rights than the wider population.¹¹ For instance, they are twice as likely as the wider population to be against equality of opportunity for women. The survey of 8000 people UK-wide also found that whilst 46 per cent of people think women become less committed to their job after having a baby, 29 per cent of people think men become more committed.

Globally, it is important to understand the vital role that the care economy plays in sustaining and reproducing the market economy. Women are already working longer hours than men. Thus, the problem is not women's labour force participation, but rather that so much of their work is unpaid and unsupported care work. Achieving gender parity and WEE will not be possible without addressing the issue of unpaid care. This is especially critical for inter-generationally sustainable WEE.

As IDS research demonstrates, getting women into the labour market without addressing the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work that they carry will lead to three negative effects. First, there will be a negative effect on women's physical and emotional wellbeing. Second, there will be heightened tension in families and communities where care is no

longer being provided. Finally, the burden will simply be shifted to other women in the family including older women and younger girls, potentially limiting their engagement with education. There is a particular danger that a focus on women entrepreneurs ignores that the brunt of care work then passes to their daughters, thus reducing the economic empowerment of future generations.¹²

The Panel should focus on addressing unpaid care particularly through: public service provision (childcare, piped water, access roads); time and labour saving equipment (clean cooking stoves) and infrastructure (access roads to markets); provision of decent (including flexible) work for both men and women; and addressing cultural norms about gender and care provision. Specific evidence on what works is being collected and will be made available to the Panel.

Investment, both private and public, is needed in technology and infrastructure to make domestic work less arduous and more efficient. There is currently a gender bias in investment, with much more funding to develop agricultural equipment, technology and factories, and much less in laundry, cooking, and grain grinding equipment – where women do most of their work hours.

The level of care work that women face also affects their access to sexual and reproductive health services, both in terms of time burdens as well as practical barriers that directly limit their access to critical services. The reverse is true as well: without access to essential sexual and reproductive health services such as family planning, women cannot choose if and when to have children and how many to have. This can, in turn, increase women's care burden in real terms and exacerbate existing inequalities in their share of care work. Women also face the health and economic consequences of unplanned and/or frequent pregnancies, such as unsafe abortions. Well-resourced public services have the potential to support and reduce women's unpaid care work, meet their sexual and reproductive health needs and provide good quality jobs for women.

More investment is also needed in the collection of time use surveys. With advocacy training and context-specific evidence about care work and time use, women leaders have been able to challenge the perception that the problem of heavy unpaid care workloads is only about private life, cultural norms or family decisions. Women's groups have argued that unpaid care work is a poverty issue, a development issue, a public policy issue, as well as a women's empowerment issue. They have been successful in engaging officials, persuading them that it is in their mandate and interests to invest in infrastructure and technology to support care work and to use public communications to shift social norms about gender roles. Women's rights advocates persuaded a Honduran utility company to provide grain-grinding mills and water. Municipal water system and new laundry facilities were successfully campaigned for in the Philippines, and in Ethiopia partnerships were created to provide improved low-cost stoves; just some of the many examples of WRO's role in contributing to women's empowerment.¹³

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- ¹ Arutyunova, A. and C. Clark. 2013. *Watering the leaves, starving the roots: the status of financing for women's rights organizing and gender equality*. Toronto: AWID. Available at: http://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/WTL_Starving_Roots.pdf (accessed 26 May 2016).
- ² UK WBG. 2016. *Investing in the care economy: a gender analysis of employment stimulus in seven OECD countries*. Brussels: ITUC. Available at: http://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/care_economy_en.pdf (accessed 26 May 2016); UK WBG. 2016. "Investing in the care economy to boost employment and gender equality". Available at: http://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/De_Henau_Perrons_WBG_CareEconomy_ITUC_briefing_final.pdf (accessed 26 May 2016).
- ³ See www.womenlobby.org/
- ⁴ Christian Aid. 2014. *Taxing men and women: why gender is crucial for a fair tax system*. London: Christian Aid. Available at: <http://www.christianaid.org.uk/images/taxing-men-and-women-gender-analysis-report-july-2014.pdf> (accessed 26 May 2016).
- ⁵ Christian Aid. 2016. "Delivering for women and girls: the role of gender responsive budgeting". Available at: <http://www.christianaid.org.uk/images/gender-responsive-summary-march-2016.pdf> (accessed 26 May 2016).
- ⁶ See www.fawcettsociety.org.uk
- ⁷ See www.women-ww.org/
- ⁸ See www.wiego.org/
- ⁹ ILO 2011. *Domestic Workers Convention (No. 189)*. Available at: http://www.ilo.org/dyn/normlex/en/f?p=NORMLEXPUB:12100:0::NO::P12100_ILO_CODE:C189 (accessed 26 May 2016).
- ¹⁰ See www.actionaid.org.uk
- ¹¹ Olchawski, J. 2016. *Sex equality: state of the nation 2016*. London: Fawcett Society. Available at: <http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Sex-Equality-State-of-the-Nation-2016-FINAL.pdf> (accessed 26 May 2016).
- ¹² See for example <http://www.ids.ac.uk/project/highlighting-the-invisibility-of-unpaid-care>
- ¹³ See <http://policy-practice.oxfam.org.uk/our-work/gender-justice/womens-economic-empowerment/we-care>.

The Gender & Development Network (GADN) brings together expert NGOs, consultants, academics and individuals committed to working on gender, development and women's rights issues. Our vision is of a world where social justice and gender equality prevail and where all women and girls are able to realise their rights free from discrimination. Our goal is to ensure that international development policy and practice promotes gender equality and women's and girls' rights. Our role is to support our members by sharing information and expertise, to undertake and disseminate research, and to provide expert advice and comment on government policies and projects.

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