

UK NGO CSW Alliance

Priority Theme Issues Paper CSW 61

Succeeding in achieving women's economic empowerment is at the heart of succeeding in the attainment of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals. However, the promise of the SDGs, their targets and the optimism surrounding them remains critically challenged by persistent inequalities, prejudice and stereotypes and regression of rights and progress. Systemic barriers to women's economic, as well as political and social, equality enable violence against women including domestic abuse, rape and commercial sexual exploitation. This is exacerbated by austerity policies that disproportionately further disadvantage women across Europe. Critically, our world is facing a climate change crisis and demographic aging that is distinctly gendered, increasing sexualisation of women and girls as shown in the growth of porn and the denial of marital status rights as shown through the problems of early marriage and the situation of widows throughout the world.

Failure to ensure the participation of women of all ages in the economy through decent work is a limitation of women's rights and hinders growth and the economy. We need to underpin the political will for change by determined actions and gendered approaches across all sectors to ensure women and girls fulfil their full potential.

Women earn less, have fewer economic assets, carry out the majority of unpaid work and care, face greater poverty in paid and unpaid work and more often face risks from informal and unprotected employment than men.

Education and training

Education, formal and informal, has a vital role to play in ensuring that women of all ages are empowered in the changing world of work. Concerted action must be taken to ensure that women and girls are able to access continuing and lifelong education and training, both formal and informal, ensuring that women are able to adapt their skills as work changes. Increased access to education and training which provides technical skills and appropriate language skills are vital.

Women should be equipped with skills sets to pursue work and careers in multiple areas, and to become entrepreneurs. A specific focus on industries and sectors where women are under-represented, including STEM careers and subjects, will be fundamental for worldwide economic development.

Specific, targeted efforts, including reasonable adjustments, should be made to ensure vulnerable groups including migrant women, refugees, those living in rural areas, older women, disabled women and other minority groups access the education women need to be empowered in and for the world of work.

Legal protections

Steps need to be taken to end discrimination on the grounds of sex and multiple discrimination in the workplace and ensure legal protections for women throughout their life course:

- in relation to pregnancy and maternity discrimination;
- in relation to sexual harassment;
- in relation to parental leave and pay and flexible working arrangements that support women's progression in the workplace;
- in ensuring access to justice for those women subject to discrimination, including multiple discrimination based on their gender and other characteristics such as age;
- in protecting women from all forms of violence, including in workplaces
- in relation to commercial sexual exploitation.

Care economy

Steps must be taken to avert the developing crisis in care. Globally public policy fails to recognise women and girls of all ages spend more time on unpaid care work than men and boys and that these unremunerated contributions underpin the entire economy. Women and girls also make up the major part of the care workforce, often working in poorly paid, precarious jobs. Care responsibilities can prevent women from joining or progressing in the labour market, as well as from saving for later life or contributing to pensions, and reduce time for rest and self care. Performing household tasks and caring for other family members can prevent girls from attending school and so limit their life chances.

Migration, epidemics including of HIV and AIDS and the increase in non-communicable diseases and dementia have all also contributed to older women taking on a greater share of unpaid care. Older women are often main carers for spouses and grandchildren. The value of this unpaid care, too, often goes unrecognised and unsupported.

Limited investment in childcare, austerity programmes that are reducing public services and failing to take provision of child and adult care into account in other public policies such as working age adjustments or provision of public services in general, exacerbate the problem. The care economy, including childcare, care in the community and residential care should be underpinned by the principles of dignity and rights for women who use the services as well as for those who provide them, paid and unpaid.

Action is necessary including through:

- committing to research and analysis, including gender and age disaggregated time use surveys to: assess the issues, develop the means of responding to care demands, and rebalance care responsibilities within families and across communities;
- revaluing care and developing policies that take unpaid care work into account;
- changing attitudes to care and promoting shared family and caring responsibilities;
- ensuring appropriate, accessible and affordable childcare and adult social care.

The gender pay and pensions gap

The gender pay gap and resulting pensions gap¹, where pensions are available, must be closed through lifting women's income and developing a comprehensive action plan on both that adopts a whole life course approach including action:

- to eradicate gender stereotyping and its impact on subject choice and careers guidance in schools;
- to tackle segregation at work that drives women into low paid work and places barriers to their progression at work;
- supporting living wage commitments, including in procurement, in the public and private sectors to lift wages across the board;
- valuing care and improving provision and access to childcare and adult social care, parental and paternal leave and flexible working;
- to ensure equal access to social protection, including pensions, set at a level to provide an adequate standard of living, regardless of gendered life course and work patterns; and
- to end sexual harassment, discrimination and violence against women in the workplace.

Informal and precarious work

There is a growth of informal and precarious work, particularly in feminised sectors. Employment with insecure work contracts such as those known as zero hours contracts in the UK for example, has grown. Together with the lack of more secure employment and pressure from employers, women are compelled to accept these terms which bring uncertainty and can lead to financial hardship. Governments should protect against the impact of precarious work including by:

- protecting against contracts that prevent employees from taking other work;
- ensuring that systems like zero-hours contracts are not used in public or private sector employment.

In addition, we cannot ignore the move within some UN agencies to embrace the term 'sex work' in relation to women (people) sexually exploited through their involvement in prostitution which we believe, according to the UN's own conventions and treaties, to be a human rights violation.

Entrepreneurship

We ask that Government ensures the economic empowerment of women through promoting equality in work and in the economy. Actions include:

- recognising the rights of women to participate, use their potential and enjoy economic independence,
- demonstrating the business case for equality and for women in decent work;
- promoting social capital;

¹ In the UK, in addition to the pensions gap caused by poorer pay and conditions, taking time out for unpaid care work, restricted progress *in* work, as well as changes to the pensionable age have all further disadvantaged women. (See for example: www.waspi.co.uk)

- ensuring that economic policies contain, as a measurement of success, a requirement of equality for their success;
- dedicating programmes and finance to women's entrepreneurship.

Consideration of women's entrepreneurship should ensure that only real entrepreneurship is reported on and not activities that have been made insecure, particularly following the financial crisis and austerity policies, including in the privatisation of care.

Leadership, commitment, facilitation and financial opportunity

We ask that steps are taken to ensure that, globally, political will is refreshed and institutions and public bodies work for gender equality using both mainstreaming and positive action measures. We ask that steps towards women's economic empowerment take account of women's experience throughout the life course and recognise that inequalities and barriers based on gender intersect with other characteristics such as age, disability, marital status, race and sexual orientation as well as socio-economic factors including migration and refugee status.

This will require action to ensure:

- robust and comprehensive gender and equality impact analysis;
- national economic, investment and growth strategies are developed and delivered to promote women's equality and rights at all ages;
- gender budgeting is at the heart of public spending practice;
- collection and analysis of data disaggregated by sex, age, other equality grounds and on the basis of socio-economic disadvantage;
- investment and micro-financing as well as social protection including pensions are targeted towards all women, including older women;
- access to digital and other resources is opened up for all women.

We ask that that women's voices are heard at the beginning and be central to all public policy and decision making, according to the CEDAW whole life view.

Conclusion

Failure to achieve the economic empowerment of all women will mean failure to achieve the SDGs as a whole. The UK NGO CSW Alliance supports and encourages the work of the High Level Panel for Women's Economic Empowerment in securing change across governments for women's rights and equality.