

**Session IV. “Responses to the Economic Crisis – Women’s Economic Security”
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**Improving women’s access to economic and financial resource
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Moderator,
Fellow panelists
Distinguished participants

I thank the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific for the opportunity to speak on this important topic today. I am going to base my remarks on a recent report prepared by the Division for the Advancement of Women for the Second Committee of the General Assembly, the 2009 *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development* which addresses the important theme of “Women’s control over economic resources and access to financial resources, including microfinance”.

The *World Survey* illustrates the importance of examining 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 and social protection; and land, property and other productive resources. It also points to the inter-linkages between different types of resources. The findings make clear that the approach to women’s economic empowerment has to be context-specific and that attention to any one single issue, such as employment or credit or social protection will not be sufficient. There is a need for a comprehensive multisectoral approach, in particular in the context of the economic and financial crisis.

There are a number of important policy mandates on increasing women’s access to and control over resources, including from the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), the 23rd special session of the General Assembly (2000), as well as other intergovernmental processes, including the Millennium Summit in 2000, the 2005 World Summit, the International Conference on Financing for Development in 2002, and the Follow-up International Conference on Financing for Development to Review the Implementation of the Monterrey Consensus in 2008. These mandates built on the recognition that the economic empowerment of women is critical for the eradication of poverty, for economic growth and development, and for the wellbeing of families and communities.

Despite these strong, comprehensive mandates, progress on women's economic empowerment, and on increasing women's access to and control over economic and financial resources, has been slow and uneven across regions. Long-standing inequalities in the gender distribution of these resources have placed women at a significant disadvantage in relation to men in the ability to participate in and benefit from economic development.

Labour is the most important resources available to the majority of poor people around the world and the primary means through which they earn a living. 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 vulnerable, poorly-paid, and uncovered by labour legislation or social protection. Occupational segregation and wage gaps persist in all regions of the world. Women's wages, according to the International Trade Union Confederation, are 16.5 per cent less than men's. The persistent unequal sharing of unpaid work between women and men, including caregiving, hinders women's choices in the labour market.

Women's livelihood strategies also require access to a range of productive resources. In many parts of the world, however, women continue to face discrimination in access to land, housing, property and other productive resources, as well as the infrastructure, services and technologies needed to facilitate their effective use of these resources. Women's access to financial services, including savings, insurance, remittance transfers and credit, which is essential to allow them to fully benefit from economic opportunities, is often limited. Microfinance institutions, while successful in reaching out to women, have not always reached poorest groups of women. And microfinance has not necessarily always empowered women; in particular, it has failed to meet the needs of successful women entrepreneurs wishing to expand their businesses. In addition, 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, including financial and economic crises.

Even when economic rights for women exist, they may not be enforced or women may not be able to claim these rights because of socio-cultural norms and practices. Efforts are needed to make the judicial systems more accessible and responsive to women and to provide legal aid to women seeking to claim their rights.

These gaps in implementation of the mandates on increasing women's access to and control over critical resources need to be urgently addressed. Let me raise a few of the overarching findings which emerge from the *World Survey* which I find of particular importance. Firstly, at the very basis of the discussion is the recognition that gender equality in access to and control over resources contributes to economic growth and development – with strong multiplier effects for a range of development goals, including in particular in relation to poverty reduction. In addition, there is evidence that increasing women's access to and control over resources has strong intergenerational impacts, significantly affecting the well-being of children.

The important work done in the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) in this region illustrated the strong evidence for the positive impact of gender equality on economic growth and development. It highlighted the economic losses incurred with persistent gender inequality. It is noteworthy that the reverse is not always true. Economic growth can build on gender inequality in the labour market, profiting from inequalities in wages and neglect of decent work provisions in areas where women have limited voice and access to decision-making.

Despite the key links between gender equality and economic growth and development, gender equality issues have been largely ignored in the formulation of macroeconomic policies, and equity-enhancing initiatives have mainly been taken at micro level. This is problematic since macro economic policies impact on gender equality through markets and state interventions which distribute key economic and financial resources. Gender-responsive macro-economic policies require a sound understanding of and attention to the distributional consequences of economic growth strategies and monetary, fiscal, trade and investment policies, as well as the specific constraints to women's economic empowerment.

The *World Survey* highlights the structural constraints to women's economic empowerment that result from the neglect of gender equality issues in macroeconomic analyses and policies. 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 raised as a particular concern. It is noteworthy that, 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. This clearly has a negative impact on women's choices in the labour market. Many women are forced to work part-time in order to be able to combine paid employment with unpaid responsibilities, which involves an immediate wage penalty as well as long-term impacts on pensions. The Commission on the Status of Women considered this problem in some detail at its recent session in March 2009 and adopted a comprehensive set of recommendations to accelerate needed change in this area.

It is important to highlight the finding that women are significantly under-represented in key decision-making bodies influencing the distribution of essential resources, which is a major constraint to their economic empowerment. Women are under-represented in management positions in both public and private sectors around the world, as well as on the boards of major companies. They are also absent from top management positions in the banking sector in both developed and developing countries. This situation exists, despite the fact that already almost 15 years ago, in 1995, the Beijing Platform for Action identified the participation of women in decision-making as a critical area of concern requiring urgent action.

The insights in the report on microcredit are important. In the past, microcredit was seen as the panacea for women's economic empowerment. It is therefore interesting

to note that – as already mentioned - there is no consensus today on whether microfinance actually empowers women, despite the very successful outreach to women. It is also of particular concern that the trend towards increased commercialization of microfinance may have a negative impact on women.

A range of constraints to women's equitable access to and control over economic and financial resources have been identified. These include legislative issues, lack of attention to gender equality in policy contexts, unequal access to markets, institutional constraints in terms of rules and procedures in critical bodies and processes, lack of sex-disaggregated data, and discriminatory socio-cultural attitudes and practices. Legislative issues range from the lack of legislation and/or discriminatory legislation to the lack of enforcement of existing gender-sensitive legislation and women's inadequate knowledge of their rights and entitlements. Institutional constraints identified include discriminatory rules and membership requirements in many of the user-groups established to promote greater community management of natural resources, such as water (including irrigation) and energy. It is important give increased attention to identifying the specific constraints women face in access to and control over essential resources in different contexts and to finding innovative ways to address them.

The importance of gender-sensitive approaches in the design and implementation of programmes facilitating the distribution of resources, such as cash allowances, subsidies, conditional cash transfer programmes and work guarantee programmes - such as public works programmes, as well as pensions and health insurance, is highlighted in the *World Survey*. Without adequate gender analysis, well-intentioned programmes can reinforce conventional gender divisions of labour and gender stereotypes and reproduce gender inequalities. Even the types of training offered in programmes may neglect the real needs and priorities of women if they are not based on consultation with women. In some areas, women place high priority on training for men on the more equal sharing of unpaid work, and on violence against women which can be a significant constraint to women's economic empowerment.

Discussion of women's access to and control over resources is particularly relevant in the context of the current economic and financial crisis which can exacerbate the existing constraints and challenges women face in many parts of the world in relation to resources. The crisis can increase the risk of reduction in resource allocations to gender equality and women's empowerment - resources which were already insufficient for the implementation of commitments on gender equality before the crisis. The manner in which countries respond to the crisis can lead to disproportionate impacts on women and girls. Evidence from earlier crises indicates that women also face significant unemployment. Here too pathbreaking work by the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific in the context of previous crises in this region has provided important insights. Even if men's unemployment is higher, in many cases it is women who seek additional income, often in employment in the informal sector which is vulnerable, with poor working conditions and low pay. In addition, basic services are often reduced or become more expensive, significantly increasing women's unpaid work

as they attempt to compensate for these services and ensure the wellbeing of their families.

Stimulus packages designed in response to the current economic and financial crisis should provide investments in both physical and social infrastructure and in employment that benefits women as well as men and that takes both paid and unpaid work into account. Adequate levels of funding for gender equality and the empowerment of women must be maintained. Attention to the resource challenges women face in agriculture in many countries is also critical for effectively and systematically addressing the food and energy crises and the challenges of climate change, in both the short and long-term.

Gender-responsive budget processes at all levels are even more critical in the context of economic crises because they provide the opportunity to analyze planned expenditure and ensure the coherence between policies on gender equality and empowerment of women and allocation of resources. Improvement of sex-disaggregated data in all areas, including in economic decision-making, is also critical.

The *World Survey* concludes that the inequality between women and men in access to economic and financial resources represents a global challenge with implications at individual, family, community and national level. The inequitable distribution of resources not only leaves half of the world's population at risk, but it also involves a significant economic and development cost which affects the wellbeing of us all, given the strong correlation between the gender distribution of essential resources and growth and development.

An integrated economic and social policy framework is needed to promote the equitable distribution of the benefits of economic growth and development. Social objectives needs to be incorporated into economic policies. Economic growth strategies should give more attention to the real economy and focus on creating full employment and decent work for all as well as universal coverage of social protection measures. The interdependence between economic and social policies, the formal and informal economy, and paid and unpaid work must also be recognized and explicitly addressed.

The urgency of rethinking economic growth strategies and increasing attention to women's economic empowerment, and particularly their access to and control over resources, is increasing in the context of the current financial and economic crisis. We must not allow the lack of resources as a result of the crisis – or the use of the crisis as an excuse - to reduce attention to women's economic empowerment and reductions in women's access to and control over resources. The message on the positive impacts of women's economic empowerment and greater gender equality on economic growth and development, as well as women's critical role for family and community wellbeing in the contexts of crises, must be kept at the forefront.

Strong political leadership is needed to discrimination against women in access to and control over economic and financial resources – in the broadest possible meaning –

are identified and systematically and effectively addressed in economic policies at all levels. Appropriate responses to the existing inequalities in this area – particularly in the context of the economic and financial crisis – are critical to facilitate both the accelerated achievement of gender equality and empowerment of women as well as sustainable economic growth and poverty reduction, and long-term prosperity for all.

Thank you