

## **International Conference on Gender and the Global Economic Crisis**

**organized by**

**The International Working Group on Gender, Macroeconomics  
and International Economics**

**with the**

**Gender Equality and Economy Program, Levy Economics Institute of Bard College**

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**Statement at the Opening by Carolyn Hannan, Director  
United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women**

### **Introduction**

It is an honour to make opening remarks at the International Conference traditionally held at the end of the “*Knowledge Networking Program on Engendering Macroeconomic and International Economics*”, organized by the International Working Group on Gender, Macroeconomics and International Economics. The Knowledge Networking Program is an innovative initiative which the Division for the Advancement of Women was pleased to support in its start-up phase some years ago. We are gratified to learn each year of its continuing success and the growing strength of the substantive network.

The topic of this International Conference, ‘*Gender and the Global Economic Crisis*’ is highly relevant. The gender perspectives of the financial and economic crisis have been given increasing attention over the past year as the serious and widespread impact of the global economic recession on the real economy and on the lives of people, particularly in developing countries, are considered.

Experience from the past has shown that financial and economic crises have different and unequal impacts on women and men and their potential to respond and develop effective coping strategies. Economic recessions put a disproportionate burden on women, who are concentrated in vulnerable employment, are more likely to be unemployed than men, tend to have lower unemployment and social security benefits, and have unequal access to and control over economic and financial resources. Whether it is women’s or men’s jobs that are lost in crises, women make efforts to find ways to compensate for the loss of family income, often working in the informal sector, and at times under difficult conditions. Women also take on additional responsibilities to provide substitutes for market goods that their families are no longer able to afford, leading to a significant increase in their unpaid work. It is therefore critical to consider gender perspectives in both short- and long-term responses to the current crisis at local, national, regional and international levels.

The topic of the economic crisis is particularly urgent from a gender perspective because of the linkages with other global crises, such as increased food insecurity, volatile energy and commodity prices, and climate change. Although food prices had declined somewhat from the peak of the food crisis in 2008, the continuing economic crisis and its impact on the poor in both rural and urban areas undermines the livelihood strategies of women and threatens the well-being of their families.

You have gathered a wide range of expertise in the field for this conference and over the coming two days you will examine in detail many critical aspects of the current economic crisis. Since this international conference is being held for the first time in the United Nations headquarters, I will focus my opening remarks on the important global policy mandates that already exist to support work on women, gender equality and economic development, including in the context of crisis, as well as some of the efforts being made within the United Nations system to ensure a gender-sensitive response to the current crisis.

### **Strong intergovernmental mandates**

There are strong, comprehensive intergovernmental mandates on women, gender equality and economic development, and increasing references to the gender perspectives of economic and financial crises in intergovernmental contexts, which can be utilized more effectively to bring increased attention to women and gender equality aspects of the current crisis.

### **Platform for Action from the Fourth World Conference on Women**

The *Platform for Action* adopted by Member States at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995 included 'Women and the Economy' as one of the Critical Areas of Concern on which strategic objectives and specific recommendations for action were made. The Member States agreed to actions in a number of areas which are critical for ensuring a gender-sensitive response to economic crisis - to:

- Promote women's economic rights and independence, including access to employment, appropriate working conditions and control over economic resources;
- Facilitate women's equal access to resources, employment, markets and trade;
- Provide business services, training and access to markets, information and technology, particularly to low-income women;
- Strengthen women's economic capacity and commercial networks; and
- Eliminate occupational segregation and all forms of employment discrimination.

The framework remains relevant and is not yet fully implemented.

[The Platform highlighted the differences in women's and men's access to, and opportunities to exert power over, economic structures and recommended that Governments and the international community analyze policies and programmes from a

gender perspective to promote more equitable distribution of productive assets, wealth, opportunities, income and services.]

[The review of implementation of the *Platform for Action* in 2000 indicated that the economic and financial crises in Latin America, South Asia and Eastern Europe in the 1990s had the greatest impact on the most vulnerable social groups, and women in particular faced additional burdens of unpaid work. Member States noted, for example, the impact of cuts in government spending on social services. Women were especially affected by the resulting loss of employment in the State sector. The resolution adopted by Member States acknowledged that policies and programmes should be formulated to secure livelihoods and adequate social protection measures, including safety-nets and strengthened support-systems, and to promote equal access to and control over financial and economic resources.]

### Commission on the Status of Women

The Commission on the Status of Women regularly follows up implementation of the Critical Area of Concern on ‘Women and the Economy’ from the Platform for Action. The resolution adopted by the Commission on “*Economic advancement of women*” in 2005 called on Member States to develop the financial sector to increase women’s access to and control over savings, credit and other financial services, and to fully include women in management, planning and decision-making processes.

In 2008, the Commission focused on ‘*Financing for gender equality and empowerment of women*’ as its priority theme. Governments were urged to undertake legislative and administrative reforms to give women full and equal access to economic resources, including the rights to inheritance and to ownership of land and other property, credit, natural resources and appropriate technologies.

When considering the priority theme: “*The equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, including care-giving in the context of HIV/AIDS*” in March this year, the Commission expressed its deep concern over the negative impact of the global economic and financial crisis, which could hamper progress in achieving the Millennium Development Goals and the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. The Commission urged Governments to develop and improve sustainable and adequate social protection and insurance schemes, including pension and savings schemes, that meet basic minimum needs. It recommended that appropriate measures be adopted to overcome negative impacts of the crisis, and that a gender perspective be incorporated into these measures to ensure that they equally benefit women and men.

In 2009, the Commission also selected ‘*The gender perspectives of the financial crisis*’ as its emerging issue. In an interactive expert panel, participants agreed that financial and economic crises had gender-specific impacts and placed a disproportionate burden on women, in particular poor, migrant and minority women. Some participants noted that, even though both women and men were affected by job losses, women were often laid off first, as men were traditionally considered to be the main wage earners.

While in some countries, traditionally male-dominated sectors were currently experiencing heavy job losses, in other countries jobs were being lost mainly in female-dominated sectors. Cuts in public expenditures in the social sector impacted negatively on the care economy, exacerbating women's unequal domestic and care-giving responsibilities. Participants noted that women in the informal sector were particularly affected. Since women constitute the majority of microfinance clients, their access to credit was also expected to decline due to liquidity problems in the financial sector. Participants recommended that gender perspectives be systematically incorporated in policy responses to the financial crisis.

### Second Committee of the General Assembly

The important role of the Second Committee of the General Assembly is less well-known. The Assembly addresses the issue of women in development, including in particular economic development, on a biennial basis. The most recent resolution on “*Women in development*” adopted in 2007, encouraged Governments to invest in appropriate infrastructure and other measures to reduce the burden of unpaid work and create opportunities for economic empowerment.

On a five-yearly basis, the Second Committee also considers a flagship report: *The World Survey on the Role of Women in Development*. The current *World Survey* - which will be presented to the General Assembly in October, and subsequently launched in New York and in the five regional commission, as well as in other locations - is focused on a critical issue in the context of the economic crisis, i.e. women's access to and control over economic and financial resources. Economic and financial resources are considered in a broad perspective, including employment; productive resources such as land, housing, natural resources, services and technologies; financial resources including credit and savings; and social protection measures. The *World Survey* notes that the existing constraints and challenges women face in many parts of the world in relation to resources can be exacerbated in the current crisis. It also notes the significant underrepresentation of women in all areas and all levels of economic decision-making. I would encourage you to use the occasion of the launch and the availability of the publication in all six languages of the United Nations to highlight the importance of consideration of women's access to and control over resources in the current economic crisis.

### Doha International Conference on Financing for Development to Review Implementation of the Monterrey Consensus'

The ‘*Doha Declaration on Financing for Development*’ (2008) from the ‘Follow-up International Conference on Financing for Development to Review Implementation of the Monterrey Consensus’ reaffirmed commitment to eliminate gender-based discrimination in all forms, including in the labour and financial markets, as well as in the ownership of assets and property rights. Importantly, Member States reiterated their commitment to promoting capacity-building of State and other stakeholders in gender-responsive public finance management, including gender-responsive budgeting

processes. In the context of economic crisis gender-responsive budgeting becomes even more important, to ensure that Government commitments to gender equality are matched with adequate resources, and that resources for the achievement of MDG3 and MDG5, as well as the gender-sensitive implementation of all other MDGS, are not reduced.

### Conference on the World Financial and Economic Crisis and Its Impact on Development

At the three-day Conference on the World Financial and Economic Crisis and Its Impact on Development, held in the United Nations headquarters from 24 to 26 June this year, the disproportionate burden on women of previous crises was recognized, in particular the impact on employment. Women's increased income insecurity and the burdens of care they face during times of crises were acknowledged.

In The Way Forward section of the '*Outcome document of the Conference on the World Financial and Economic Crisis and Its Impact on Development*', a number of processes and mechanisms are proposed which need to be considered from a gender perspective. The outcomes calls for, for example, efforts in support of national development strategies and in relation to migration and refers to the importance of ILO's Global Jobs Pact. The General Assembly is invited to establish an ad-hoc open-ended working group and encouraged to make the crisis a main theme of its 64<sup>th</sup> session. The ECOSOC is requested to make recommendations to the General Assembly on the possible establishment of an ad hoc panel of experts on the crisis and its impact on development. These present important opportunities for increasing attention to women's situation and gender equality aspects of the crisis.

### Efforts of United Nations entities

As the web manager of the interagency information portal on gender equality and empowerment of women, *WomenWatch*, the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW) developed a feature-page to provide access to information on the efforts of the United Nations system to address the gender perspectives of the financial crisis. The feature page provides information from a number of UN entities, including the ECE, ILO, INSTRAW, UNCTAD, UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF, and UNIFEM, as well as the World Bank. These efforts cover a range of issues including employment, entrepreneurship, social protection, poverty eradication and the situation of migrant women workers. UNICEF has prepared a paper on "*The Impacts on women and girls of the current economic crisis and the implications for policy responses*" on behalf of, and building on the work of members of, the Interagency Network on Women and Gender Equality (IANWGE).

The Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) also has a webpage on the financial crisis which gives specific attention to gender perspectives.

The CEDAW Committee issued a statement in February this year to voice its concern on the impact of the financial crisis on women and girls, raising in particular the potential impact on the full realization of human rights of women and girls worldwide as

a result of social and economic consequences, such as unemployment, increase of responsibilities at work and at home, decrease of income and potential increase in societal and domestic violence. The Committee underscored the importance of recognizing the unique contribution that women can make in the timely resolution of the crisis and called on States to include women in dialogue and decision-making processes. The Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women also issued a statement on the economic crisis in March, noting that a systematic gender analysis of the current economic crisis is critical for developing viable solutions and upholding human rights standards.

Concerns have been raised by United Nations entities about the possible eroding of gains already made on gender equality and empowerment of women, as well as the risk of a reduction of funds available to support these critical goals. The challenges and constraints faced by women in access to and control over economic and financial resources outlined in the *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development* can be further exacerbated by the crisis, with serious implications for women's livelihood strategies in many parts of the world.

It is therefore critical, as the Under-Secretary-General of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Mr Zukang Sha, stated in his address to the Commission on the Status of Women in March this year, that policy responses to the crisis are gender-sensitive. He noted in particular the need to take gender equality perspectives into account in employment creation and investments in social infrastructure.

### **Critical opportunities for moving forward**

While many have warned for, and provided increasing examples of, disproportionate impacts on women, with negative effects for women and their families, others have noted that the responses and reforms underway to address the crisis may offer opportunities to increase attention to gender equality aspects of economic growth and development and to increase women's participation in economic decision-making. All efforts must be made to build on opportunities that arise to ensure positive long-term outcomes for women.

The opportunities global level over the coming year to raise the issue of the impact of the crisis on women and gender equality should be fully utilized by all stakeholders, including governments, the United Nations and other international and regional organizations, academics, NGOs and the private sector. The first and most important is utilizing the immediate and long-term follow-up to the General Assembly summit on the crisis discussed earlier. Other important opportunities include the discussion of the *World Survey on the Role of Women in Development* in the General Assembly in October this year and the subsequent launch in all five regions; the commemoration of the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the adoption of the *Platform for Action* in the Commission on the Status of Women in March 2010; as well as the Annual Ministerial Review and Development Cooperation Forum in July 2010 which will focus on gender equality and empowerment of women, and the general debate of the 64<sup>th</sup> session of the General Assembly which will focus on the crisis.

The expertise and unique perspectives of the participants at the conference – as researchers, advocates and activists/practitioners working at national, regional and international levels – is critical to ensuring a sound knowledge base and comparable, reliable data on gender-specific impacts and their consequences, as well as clarity on the measures required to address the specific challenges and constraints faced by women in different contexts.

In attempting to influence the response to the crisis at national regional and global levels, all efforts must be made to ensure clear commitment to, among other things:

- Stimulus packages in response to the financial crisis which include gender-sensitive investments in physical and social infrastructure, employment, and social protection and take into account both paid and unpaid work and the formal and informal sectors.
- Adequate levels of funding for gender equality and empowerment of women throughout the crisis and no diversion of funds.
- Equitable participation of women in decision-making processes at all levels.

### **In conclusion**

I hope that I have been able to provide a relevant United Nations setting for your discussions over the coming two days, by highlighting the importance of the United Nations for ensuring that responses to the financial and economic crisis are gender-sensitive. I have raised a number of important existing mandates that can be effectively utilized; efforts of United Nations entities that can be linked to; and up-coming opportunities for ensuring increased attention to women, gender equality and the economic crisis. I encourage you to find ways to support and contribute to the work of the United Nations and to systematically and effectively use the outcomes as critical instruments in your own work in this area.

Thank you.