

WG Statement

Beijing+30 UNECE Regional Review – Women and the Economy

Definition and approach

‘Women and the economy’ refers to women’s equal participation in both the monetised and non-monetised economy. It covers women’s equal participation in the labour force, women’s access to social protection, women entrepreneurship and access to financial resources and markets, women’s unpaid care work, and more generally women’s economic empowerment. It is also about women’s meaningful participation in economic decision-making at all levels.

A lot has happened since 1995. Women have made headway in the economic sphere, and the majority of UNECE countries now have legal frameworks in place in a number of areas related to women and work. For example, all UNECE countries have laws that prohibit discrimination in employment on the basis of gender; the vast majority also have laws mandating equal remuneration for work of equal value¹. Yet, women continue to experience discrimination in employment and the Gender Pay Gap remains unacceptably high in most countries. More generally, progress has stalled and gender equality remains elusive.

The world has also changed tremendously; first, with the advent of the Internet, mobile communication and more recently AI, but also as a result of the multiple and intersecting global crises which all impact the economy and women in different ways.

This statement therefore looks at root causes and more systemic issues, questioning in particular the current patriarchal and neoliberal economic system.

Introduction

Thirty years after the Beijing conference, gender equality in the economy remains a critical challenge across the region. Women continue to face multifaceted structural barriers that impact their economic participation, inclusion and autonomy.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant and disproportionate impact on women, causing economic insecurity with job losses, increased unpaid work and entrepreneurial challenges.

The economic impacts of the Russia/Ukraine and Israel/Palestine wars on women are profound; affecting their employment, education, health and overall economic participation. The Ukraine war and sanctions against Russia have also seriously affected global supply chains, in particular in the energy and agricultural sectors, as well as the global food supply, triggering inflation in many UNECE countries. This inflation disproportionately affects women who usually have lower wages, in

¹ Only 10 UNECE countries do not have such laws - See the World Bank’s 2024 Women, Business and the Law report and data set

particular single mothers and older women with low pensions. It also increases unpaid housework as women look for ways to save money, by cutting on expenses on food and support services.

The shift of public resources from social security and public services to military expenditures² as well as subsidies to the private sector (for example, in Germany to mitigate rising energy prices) disproportionately impact women and deepens society's reliance on unpaid care work as a shock absorber.

Gains & achievements

Since 1995, women have made significant strides in the economy, contributing to economic growth and societal development. Achievements include increased labour force participation, work-life balance reforms, childcare policies and a reduction of the gender pay gap.

For example, the 2019 EU Work-Life Balance Directive, is a significant step to improve family and work reconciliation for both men and women. The 2024 Directive on corporate sustainability due diligence is also a step towards greater cross-border corporate accountability, including on women's and girls' rights.

There are also good initiatives at the national level. The 10\$ a day childcare policy in Canada is one example, although its implementation is difficult due to low wages and benefits for childcare workers and insufficient facilities.^{3 4} In Bulgaria, the "Back to Work" programme, which promotes mothers' return to work by offering free care for children up to 3 years of age, is another good example⁵.

Many governments have made commitments to gender-responsive budgeting, although implementation has been slow and the impact limited.

Lastly, a few UNECE countries – namely Canada, Finland, Iceland, Scotland and Wales, have embraced the concept of a well-being economy⁶, i.e. an economy that serves the sustainability of life. They have committed to prioritising the wellbeing of people and the planet over GDP growth and started to transform their economic and social systems.

Gaps and challenges

Women continue to face numerous challenges when it comes to employment. The inequitable distribution of unpaid care and domestic work, lack of childcare, intersecting discriminations against women on the grounds of age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, maternity, etc., all affect their right

² See figures on <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2023/world-military-expenditure-reaches-new-record-high-european-spending-surges>

³ <https://globalnews.ca/news/10449624/child-care-canada-report/>

⁴ For a detailed analysis of the situation of the \$10/day childcare policy see: <https://policyalternatives.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/publications/National%20Office/2023/05/not-done-yet.pdf>

⁵ Source: ILC112 report on "Decent Work and the Care economy"

⁶ See <https://weall.org> and <https://weall.org/wego>

to decent work and equal pay. Even prior to COVID-19 women already spent up to twice as many hours performing unpaid care and domestic work than men in Canada, Switzerland, the United States, Kyrgyzstan, Portugal, the United Kingdom and Belarus. In some countries like Serbia, North Macedonia and Kazakhstan, this ratio stands between 2 and 3 times, and at over 5 times in Turkey⁷. Since 2015, less than 20% of UNECE countries have conducted time-use surveys to measure unpaid care work – target 5.4 of the 2030 agenda⁸:

Population ageing, which affects most UNECE countries, is driving a looming care crisis. However, even when remunerated, care work remains mostly done by women and undervalued and underpaid; it is also highly racialized and dependent on migrant workers.

In recent years, the situation has worsened in many countries, and women's labour force participation rates have stagnated or declined. The quality of jobs has been deteriorating, with stronger work pressure, reduced social protection, and limited opportunities for career development. Furthermore, jobs have become more precarious, women continue to dominate part-time work, or choose unprotected freelancing for the flexibility it can bring – with limited social benefits such as access to healthcare and pensions.

In addition, when they exist, minimum wages are often not 'living wage', not covering the actual – and rising – costs of living. In the context of conflicts, the situation is even worse: in the Ukraine, women's economic vulnerability has increased significantly as 47% of women lost their monthly income partially or completely⁹.

The Gender Pay Gap (GPG) remains high: women still only earn 82 cents for every Euro earned by men¹⁰. In France, in spite of a good childcare system, the hourly wages gap in the private sector has remained at around 20% since the mid-1990s – a persistent gap now attributed to maternity¹¹. Even in egalitarian Sweden, the GPG remains at 9.9%¹². With work interruptions and reduction due to maternity and care responsibilities, these GPG translate into even larger pension and wealth gaps.

As a result, women's financial independence remains elusive: an estimated 21% of women in couples aged 18-64 in the EU in 2019 lived with a partner who is the single earner, vs. 6% for men¹³. In the Netherlands, 34% of women are financially dependent either on a man's income or on social welfare¹⁴. These figures show that economic and financial literacy should be part of the educational curriculum.

⁷ Source: <https://w3.unece.org/sdg2022/story-1.html>

⁸ Source: <https://w3.unece.org/sdg2022/story-1.html>

⁹ Source: IOM Report: Movement in Ukraine, Survey of the General Population Round 12, January 23, 2023 (in Ukrainian) - available at: <https://reliefweb.int/report/ukraine/iom-ukraine-internal-displacement-report-general-population-survey-round-12-23-january-2023-enuk>

¹⁰ Source: <https://unece.org/snapshot-gender-equality-unece-region>

¹¹ Source INSEE, France: <https://www.insee.fr/fr/statistiques/4253041?sommaire=4253159>

¹² Source: <https://www.mi.se/app/uploads/Gender-pay-gap-2022.pdf>

¹³ Source: <https://eige.europa.eu/sites/default/files/documents/financial-independence-and-gender-equality.pdf>

¹⁴ Source: <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/nieuws/2022/48/3-op-de-4-vrouwen-willen-economisch-zelfstandig-zijn>

Furthermore, gender-based violence is rampant, severely impacting women's economic participation, reducing productivity, and leading to job loss. Survivors' trauma and physical injuries hinder their ability to maintain stable employment and economic independence.

Lastly, the rise of artificial intelligence (AI) is expected to disproportionately impact the work landscape for women, with many jobs currently held by women being at higher risk of automation and replacement.

The way forward

The fact that even the most feminist countries are no longer progressing towards economic equality for women raises questions. The policies and measures that are introduced only patch an economic system that is fundamentally not made for women. Furthermore, crises, in particular those related to wars and climate change, reduce and/or divert public funds, which could be invested in social protection and public infrastructure and services, which are vital to support women's economic empowerment.

It is therefore urgent to address these 2 systemic causes of economic inequality for women:

- Mobilise efforts to **cease all wars immediately** and strengthen women's leadership in multilateral governance to restore just and long-lasting peace. Leaders and governments have the responsibility and duty to prioritise the human rights and wellbeing of people over profits and corruption, beginning with the rights of children and women in all their diversity, and to create equitable societies where resources are directed toward gender equality, sustainability, environmental protection and the common good.
It is unacceptable to spend billions on wars that are devastating lives and the environment.

- Recognize that **our current extractive, neoliberal, and patriarchal economic system**, which ignores women's unpaid care work and environmental degradation, is at the root of gender inequalities and many of our crises (beginning with climate change, which must be addressed urgently).
Transition to a **feminist, sustainable and inclusive wellbeing economy** centred on care, education and the protection and rehabilitation of natural ecosystems.
It is urgent to change paradigm in all economic thinking and policy making, move beyond the GDP growth narrative, neoliberalism and profit maximisation economics, and:
 - 1) **redefine 'the economy' – it is more than GDP - and its main purpose**
 - 2) **transform all our economic and social systems at every level so that they first serve the wellbeing of people and nature in a sustainable and inclusive manner**

Recommendations

Short term:

- Implement **comprehensive accessible affordable quality childcare policy** to allow women to choose if and how they want participate in the monetised economy
- **Mainstream gender in all economic decisions and policy making**
Strengthen the implementation of gender-responsive budgeting, ensure its implementation at all levels of the revenue and expenditure cycles and related policy and program changes, and monitor its impact. Mainstream gender when deciding upon subsidies to the private sector.

Medium-term:

- **Address the inequitable distribution of unpaid care and domestic work as a root cause of economic injustice and poverty for women:**
 - Recognize and support unpaid domestic and care work by restoring and expanding public infrastructure and services (in particular accessible quality universal childcare) and social protection floors, which were cut or privatised under neoliberal capitalism
 - Promote a more equitable distribution of unpaid care and domestic work, in particular between men and women (e.g. through combating gender stereotypes and providing paid paternity and shared parental leave), but also across society, with every stakeholder – including the private sector – taking their share of responsibility and costs
 - Recognize and address the care-induced motherhood penalty to reduce the Gender Pay Gap and other economic gaps
 - Challenge the male breadwinner model: employers should adapt to the realities of women and household caregiving work and responsibilities – not the other way around
 - Develop the care economy, frame it as an investment, and finance it properly to ensure adequate living wages to care workers
- **Implement national tax reform and address tax evasion and off-shore tax havens** to ensure that everyone is paying their fair share of taxes, including rich individuals, and national and international corporations. This would help to increase national budgets and reduce inequalities, including gender inequalities, and increase fiscal space to properly fund health, social protection, care and education, as well as other basic public infrastructure and services, rather than relying on the market for essential services - which are vital for women. **Support the UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation for global tax justice.**
- **Assess and address the challenges that AI poses on women's access to decent work** through comprehensive policies focused on education, reskilling, and promoting gender diversity in tech and AI fields.