

Center for Women's Global Leadership



awid women's rights

act:onaid



ESCR-Net  
Red-DESC  
Réseau-DESC

Women and ESCR Group



Feminist Alliance for  
International Action  
L'alliance féministe pour  
l'action internationale

WIDE  
Globalising  
Gender Equality  
and Social Justice



feminist task force



## Call for UN Women to Design its Policy and Program on Women's Economic Empowerment from an Economic, Cultural and Social Rights Framework

March 2011

We welcome the inauguration of UN Women and look forward to productive collaboration on creating a human rights' framework for your program work. To this end, we call upon UN Women to stand for women's equality and human rights by building overall internal capacity on human rights, particularly building expertise on economic, social and cultural rights, and the relationship between the realization of these rights, substantive equality, and non-discrimination and economic and social policies. For example, UN Women can promote understanding of the macro, meso and micro dimensions of women's economic empowerment and rights from a substantive equality and holistic human rights framework; and by positioning itself as an essential partner in economic policy analysis, providing technical advice and expertise within the UN system on economic, social and cultural rights and the CEDAW framework for substantive equality and non-discrimination.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Beijing Platform for Action, the adoption of CEDAW and OP-CEDAW as well as other human rights instruments have been key gains for women, both in concretizing women's human rights as well as in developing State obligations to ensure women's substantive equality. As UN Women enters its inaugural phase, leveraging the human rights framework will be essential to ensuring it is able to meet both the challenges and potential this entity has for championing human rights.

UN Women has an important opportunity to take a lead role in mainstreaming substantive equality principles and economic, social and cultural rights within economic policy analysis with particular emphasis on mainstreaming those rights set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights; the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW); the Declaration on the Right to Development, among other human rights standards and treaties. UN Women's identified focus on economic empowerment must be inextricably linked with and informed by its focus on human rights and on CEDAW in particular. To do this, UN Women must strengthen its own capacities to challenge and change the economic, political and cultural factors that prevent the full realization of human rights and gender equality; the capacities of women's organizations to hold governments accountable for their commitments; and the ability of governments to design new policies

and implement existing ones that are in compliance with their obligations regarding substantive equality and economic, social and cultural rights.

### **The current context**

Women tend to be disproportionately affected by economic inequality and by social marginalization due to, among other factors, historical oppression that has yet to be remedied. The fact that the majority of the world's poor are women is no coincidence, but rather a direct result of gender-based discrimination and inequality, which results in women having less than their fair share of social, economic and political power. In turn, the economic inequality many women face reinforces their subordination, and constrains their enjoyment of the full spectrum of human rights.

All too often, the focus in economic policy has been only on raising women's participation in the formal economy, without considering how to ensure true fulfillment of substantive equality and economic, social and cultural rights across all sections of the economy. Economic policy also often neglects to consider the full impact of the formal economy in creating and perpetuating discrimination against women, particularly in relation to economic, social and cultural rights, for example through the commodification of water and land resources, on which poorer families' survival and well-being heavily rely. Therefore, UN Women must strengthen its capacity – including its political capacity - to contribute to closing these gaps; and to linking women's economic opportunities with the realization of their human rights and the elimination of discrimination.

### **Building a Common UN Women Framework**

Given the current context, it is highly important that UN Women make human rights a common framework for their policy and programming and to inform its Strategic Partnerships—with special procedures and mechanisms, Regional Commissions, and treaty bodies. UN Women must also build on the lessons learnt over the past 40 years, from the work carried out by women's machineries (WM), other UN agencies, key institutions and CSOs in advancing gender equality. Additionally, UN Women needs to have clear mechanisms in place to ensure alignment and coordination between key areas of work, including between research and conceptualizing units and field and operationalizing units within UN Women. For example, the policy programming bureau should be clearly aligned with the strategic partnerships, advocacy, communications and civil society area. These strategic partnerships are important to how UN Women advances its work and it is equally important that they not be seen as completely separate from each other.

Discussions on UN Women's work on economic and social policies and economic, social and cultural rights should be grounded in an understanding of the varied and vital roles women play in development/communities – and of crucial knowledge of survival, environmental stewardship, development etc. In other words, while economic policies that do not respect human rights often have detrimental effects on women, women themselves –from the grassroots up– have important knowledge on economics and management (they are active players in economics) that is crucial for the development of program and analysis within UN Women.

### **Recruiting for Programming on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights**

UN Women needs to provide analysis and advice on economic policy, gender equality and economic, cultural and social rights, comparable to that provided by UNICEF on economic policy and children's rights. To do this, UN Women will need to mobilize new resources through hiring the services of feminist economists, social scientists, and women's human rights practitioners and advocates with real-world experience as well as high-level education and training in relevant areas, including Doctorate degrees in Economics, and a track record of policy-relevant research and public policy engagement on gender equality, economic, social and cultural rights, and economic policy. They should be people who will be able to command the respect of economists, government delegates and policy-makers in other parts of the UN system and with International Financial Institutions (IFIs); and who have a history of engagement with and expertise on the UN human rights system, especially CEDAW.

As soon as finances permit, UN Women should aim to recruit well-qualified feminist economists and experts on economic, social and cultural rights and substantive equality principles to high level positions at its headquarters and at the regional and national levels. In

addition, UN Women should hire permanent staff persons with complementary expertise in areas including feminist political economy, public finance and governance. This complimentary expertise will allow UN Women to provide a nuanced economic analysis that engages fully with the questions of governance, institutional change and program delivery from a human rights perspective.

### **Areas of Focus for UN Women**

What follows is a list of recommendations that will assist UN Women in incorporating a human rights framework into its policy and program design in areas related to women's within UN Women's economic, social and cultural rights work:

1. If UN Women is to undertake a framework based on women's economic, social and cultural rights, it needs to uphold and institutionalize the BPFA and recognize and reaffirm the synergetic relationship to CEDAW. UN Women's programming should be based on the principle that CEDAW sets out legally binding obligations while the BPFA and its 12 critical areas of concern provide a policy and programmatic agenda for implementation of the Convention.
2. A response from UN Women to the current economic and climate crises must be reflected in their program work. This response must be harmonized with international standards and commitments to gender equality, human rights and empowerment. And it must ensure concrete recommendations on new foundational and structural agreements on global development and economic and financial governance that fully integrate gender equality and human rights based on internationally agreed principles and obligation, including the Beijing Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) and International Labour Organization Conventions.<sup>i</sup>
3. UN Women must engage in, and promote, the re-positioning of the UN's leadership role in a new global development, economic and financial architecture that fully integrates gender equality and human rights, including economic, social and cultural rights.
4. UN Women should provide technical expertise to national field presences and States, regional commissions, Women's Machineries, human rights and women's organizations in conjunction with OHCHR to advance economic, social and cultural rights and the implementation of CEDAW-by integrating of a gender perspective in all areas of governance.
5. UN Women's programmatic Human Rights framework must include capacity building for States to strengthen the implementation of CEDAW and ICESCR with the integration of a gender perspective in all areas of governance, particularly vis-à-vis the advancement of economic, social and cultural rights.
6. UN Women needs to advance a concerted review of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) through the lens of human rights and gender equality. UN Women should also refocus the attention on restructuring the global governance system for the realization of human rights and gender equality at local, national, regional and global levels toward the realization of rights-based sustainable and equitable development.<sup>ii</sup>

### **Programming that Stresses Coherence among Actors on the Realization of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and Substantive Equality**

In addition to the aforementioned overarching areas, UN Women must include programming that stresses coherence – between economic policies at national, regional and international level - and policies promoted by different actors (government, IFIs, G20 etc.) and ensuring these policies are in line with human rights obligations, and in particular substantive equality, non-discrimination and economic, social and cultural rights. By stressing a Human Rights based programming that ensures coherence, UN Women will move beyond the practice of carrying out project-based policy and program and create a concerted pattern of change in the UN and other relevant institutions by acting as a catalyst for change, building capacity and monitoring progress.

1. The Bretton Woods Institutions, including the World Trade Organization, continue to exert pressure on the United Nations System in promoting a neo-liberal macroeconomic policies and a model of development in which human rights and gender equality remain marginalized and segregated by efficiency considerations in support of profit accumulation. UN Women must exercise the role of

a human rights ombudsman with these organizations rather than simply partnering with them. Gender inequality and resultant violations of the human rights of women are embedded in asymmetrical economic structures and systemic processes that underpin the uneven spread of financial risks and widen social disparities which are experienced more acutely by already disadvantaged groups, including women. To simply partner with these institutions ignores that this model of development and implementation of macroeconomic policy undermines the human rights of women, especially their economic, social and cultural rights, and substantially contributes to some of the worst and most widespread violations of human rights. This process will allow UN Women to first and foremost lead governments and institutions in implementing a new strategy based on existing international mechanisms and obligations already agreed to by governments and to base its programming activities on this programmatic agenda.

2. UN Women should strengthen the capacity of human rights institutions at global and regional levels to effectively monitor in a gender disaggregated way the impacts of the global financial crisis on human rights and actively engage in policy dialogue with the organizations with economic policy mandates that are directly designing, developing and implementing response measures. <sup>iii</sup>
3. UN Women must promote the strengthening of national commitments to, and enforcement of decent work, women's access to livelihood and women's right to an adequate standard of living. It must do so by giving special attention in their programming, research and advocacy to: the need for quality jobs with adequate benefits for women workers; understand and address the economic, social and cultural barriers to women's full and equal enjoyment of their rights including rights to adequate housing, water, sanitation and food skills training that improves women's options across different sectors of the labor market; access to finance and credit for women entrepreneurs, especially in small and medium enterprises; the need for strengthened social protection policies including provision of health insurance, inclusion in the social security system, access to reproductive health care services, and provision of maternity benefits and access to affordable child care; addressing gender stereotypes which restrict women's ability to exercise their economic, social and cultural rights; and to protecting the rights of women workers and women's rights defenders to self-organization, freedom of speech and self-representation.
4. UN Women must support the development of coherence between various frameworks that exist that are meant to address women's social and economic exclusion and marginalization: including the substantive equality framework contained in CEDAW, economic, social and cultural rights, the MDGs, women and development, etc. To this end, UN Women should promote the utilization of Gender Responsive Budgeting in planning and implementation of official development assistance (ODA) funded projects and programs both on the part of the donor and recipient countries.
5. Several actors, with different legitimacy, are involved at the global level influencing the realization of human rights, gender equality and ultimately the right to live with dignity. UN Women must play a key role to in raising awareness among all actors involved that Human Rights are obligations accepted by Member States and not conditionalities. Obligations to advance gender equality and women's rights therefore, cannot be imposed in form of conditionalities because they are key commitments made by all States. The manipulation of Human Rights as 'positive' conditionalities imposed as part of trade, investment or aid agreements undermines human rights and development effectiveness, and reinforces unequal power imbalances between rich and poorer countries. Conditionalities imposed by donors and financial institutions are not consistent with Human Rights standards and undermine the self determination of people, the democratic ownership principle and the right to development. UN Women can play a remarkable role in promoting a human right based approach to strengthen Member States in the fulfillment of their human rights obligations, prevent financial institutions (among other actors) from undermining human rights and gender equality and support people as rights holders to strengthen their capacity to participate in public life and hold their governments accountable.
6. UN Women should also make efforts in support of mutual responsibility and accountability by funding research to develop gender-sensitive indicators, tools and methodologies for the evaluation of the quality and development effectiveness of aid and the extent to which aid allocations address or do not address the achievement of economic, social and cultural rights and gender equality.<sup>iv</sup> Achieving development effectiveness requires the use of a human rights-based approach in the design and implementation of policies and programs by all Member States.
7. UN Women must promote Gender Participatory Budgets and Gender Responsive Budgets. To be efficient, effective and accountable, Public Finance Management Systems and practices need to be supportive rather than undermining of participatory and gender responsive budgeting.<sup>v</sup> To this end, it is important that UN Women promote and support the collection and utilization

of gender disaggregated data, including time use surveys that measure women's unpaid work and its contribution to the national economy to raise the profile of women's contributions to the economy and gender responsive measures in the National Accounts System.

8. UN Women—with broad participation from civil society organizations, academic experts and intergovernmental organizations—should continue efforts to review and analyze the impacts of the financial and economic crisis on human rights (especially vis-à-vis women's economic, social and cultural rights), and to cooperate with governments and international institutions to bolster the design, implementation and monitoring of human rights-led and gender sensitive economic policy platforms.<sup>vi</sup>
9. National women's machineries, national human rights institutions, and civil society women's and human rights organizations need to be engaged in developing meaningful and adequate measures of women's economic and social well-being and trained in the use of the tools that will allow them to hold their governments to account for the realization of economic, social and cultural rights and substantive equality; governments need to be trained on how they can ensure that their economic policies are in compliance with their human rights obligations, in particular as set out in the CEDAW and ICESCR Conventions; and IFIs need training on how they can ensure that their policy advice and programs of lending are in line with their own and State's human rights obligations.
10. UN Women should carry out advocacy and, where appropriate, capacity building with treaty bodies, special procedures, IFIs, UNDP, UNCTAD, ILO, UNDCF, and UNICEF to fully integrate a substantive equality approach which advances realization of economic, social and cultural rights.
11. UN Women should link the work of relevant UN Treaty Bodies and Special Procedures as both accountability mechanisms in the implementation of policies, programs, and national development plans, as well as key sources of information for policy design and programming at different levels.
12. UN Women should establish a multi-stakeholder Group of Experts on human rights and women's rights responses to economic and financial crises, with the mandate to monitor economic policies, formulate recommendations on policy measures that could mitigate the impacts of the global financial crisis in an effort to ensure minimal violations of human rights in the event of future crises.<sup>vii</sup>

## UN Women and Civil Society

UN Women should work to ensure alignment between its programs and building strong and powerful partnerships with CSOs, particularly those working on women's and economic, social and cultural rights' groups with a view to the end goal of ensuring systematic, periodic, and substantive engagement with these groups and movements at all levels, and not limited to engagement through the proposed Civil Society Regional Advisory Groups. This approach should reflect the principles of inclusiveness and diversity, ensuring a place at the table for those whose voices are not commonly taken into so that UN Women is able to listen to women's diverse voices, and particularly, voices that are not normally taken into account in economic policy making (and other issues) – especially voices of women from the grassroots, women of color, poor women, disabled women, young women, elderly women, lesbian women, rural women, indigenous women, and other often marginalized groups of women. Civil Society has been at the helm of the struggle to create for the creation of UN Women and its innovativeness has led to the creation of this agency and many other mechanisms and processes. The wealth of information and strategic thinking [that was poured into the creation of UN Women can now be harnessed to will foster new and timely innovative thinking within UN women, allowing for and allow for programmatic responses that are based in touch with the reality of women's lives.

To this end, UN Women should ensure that Financing for Development mechanisms, consultative processes, and opportunities for technical inputs in all of its multi-stakeholder arenas are effective and inclusive spaces for consistent and regular inputs on gender equality by women's rights organizations and networks as well as gender equality experts. Also needed is the strengthening of the institutional links and arrangements within the UN system to support women and women's organizations in all levels of planning, monitoring, and evaluation of development processes at the national and international levels and to ensure consistency with substantive equality, non-discrimination and economic, social and cultural rights standards and coherence between processes such as the Monterrey Consensus and the Beijing Platform for Action.<sup>viii</sup>

Additionally, UN Women should support and strengthen women's meaningful involvement in multi-stakeholder oversight processes and mechanisms related to trade agreements and reforms at all levels. Women are consistently not involved in a meaningful way in trade negotiations, nor are gender perspectives included in the analysis and understanding of the potential direct and indirect impacts of trade agreements and trade related adjustments. An effort must be made to draw up a list of indicators that are sensitive to uncovering contradictions in relation to the obligation to achieve gender equality and economic, social and cultural rights, and commitments within trade agreements.<sup>ix</sup>

## Conclusion

UN Women is uniquely placed to ensure that the links between economic policy and human rights, and their importance for gender equality and women's economic empowerment, are well-understood. Building the kinds of capacities we have outlined would be an important and original contribution to coherence in the UN system, and to gender equality, women's human rights and women's empowerment.

UN women should strengthen its capacity to link with issues and areas not traditionally identified with gender equality, including economic, social and cultural rights. Efforts should be consistent and reinforcing. This will lead to new thinking and strategies to promote gender equality, human rights, and women's empowerment in the context of building new consensus on development and global governance within the United Nations System.<sup>x</sup>

---

<sup>i</sup> <http://blog.choike.org/eng/news/559>

<sup>ii</sup> <http://www.awid.org/eng/Women-in-Action/Announcements2/DAWN-Statement-at-the-54th-CSW-The-Beijing-Platform-for-Action-15-Years-After-Surviving-Multilateral-Dysfunctionality-in-a-Fierce-New-World>

<sup>iii</sup> [http://www.escri-net.org/usr\\_doc/HRResponsestoEconCrisis\\_Final.pdf](http://www.escri-net.org/usr_doc/HRResponsestoEconCrisis_Final.pdf)

<sup>iv</sup> [http://www.ffdnngo.org/sites/default/files/WWG%20on%20FFD\\_Doc%202\\_Declaration\\_Jun%2008.pdf](http://www.ffdnngo.org/sites/default/files/WWG%20on%20FFD_Doc%202_Declaration_Jun%2008.pdf)

<sup>v</sup> [http://www.ffdnngo.org/sites/default/files/WWG%20on%20FFD\\_Doc%202\\_Declaration\\_Jun%2008.pdf](http://www.ffdnngo.org/sites/default/files/WWG%20on%20FFD_Doc%202_Declaration_Jun%2008.pdf)

<sup>vi</sup> [http://www.escri-net.org/usr\\_doc/HRResponsestoEconCrisis\\_Final.pdf](http://www.escri-net.org/usr_doc/HRResponsestoEconCrisis_Final.pdf)

<sup>vii</sup> [http://www.escri-net.org/usr\\_doc/HRResponsestoEconCrisis\\_Final.pdf](http://www.escri-net.org/usr_doc/HRResponsestoEconCrisis_Final.pdf)

<sup>viii</sup> [http://www.ffdnngo.org/sites/default/files/WWG%20on%20FFD\\_Doc%202\\_Declaration\\_Jun%2008.pdf](http://www.ffdnngo.org/sites/default/files/WWG%20on%20FFD_Doc%202_Declaration_Jun%2008.pdf)

<sup>ix</sup> [http://www.ffdnngo.org/sites/default/files/WWG%20on%20FFD\\_Doc%202\\_Declaration\\_Jun%2008.pdf](http://www.ffdnngo.org/sites/default/files/WWG%20on%20FFD_Doc%202_Declaration_Jun%2008.pdf)

<sup>x</sup> [http://www.ffdnngo.org/sites/default/files/WWG%20on%20FFD\\_Doc%202\\_Declaration\\_Jun%2008.pdf](http://www.ffdnngo.org/sites/default/files/WWG%20on%20FFD_Doc%202_Declaration_Jun%2008.pdf)