ACTION COALITION ON
ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND RIGHTS

EXPAND DECENT WORK AND EMPLOYMENT
IN FORMAL AND INFORMAL ECONOMIES

#ACTFOREQUAL

GENERATION EQUALITY

Acknowledgments

Generation Equality is a multi-stakeholder initiative convened by UN Women in partnership with civil society, youth, governments, the private sector and philanthropists to catalyse partners, increase investments, drive results and accelerate the full and effective implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Sustainable Development Goals. The Action Coalition on Economic Justice and Rights is one of the six Action Coalitions of Generation Equality.

It has been a great imperative for the Leadership Structure of the Economic Justice and Rights Action Coalition to share with the world the conceptual architecture underpinning the development of its Global Acceleration Plan. The Leadership Structure understands the enormous effort required to address the critical barriers to gender equality and the challenges in achieving decent work for all. So, while guided by the understanding that this Blueprint on Decent Work will not capture everything we need to do to realise dramatic, irreversible positive change, the analysis and suggested solutions outlined in this document are considered most critical to unlock decent work and employment solutions in countries and contexts around the world, including in both the formal and informal economies.

This work could not have been accomplished without the dedication of the seventeen entities that comprise the Economic Justice and Rights Action Coalition's Leadership Structure. Led by the Action Coalition's Subgroup on the Decent Work Action, this paper represents the diverse perspectives and experiences from various stakeholder constituencies including youth-led organisations, civil society organisation, governments, philanthropy and private sector institutions, and international and United Nations entities. The Action Coalition is indebted to Dr. Elissa Braunstein who is Professor at and Chair of the Colorado State University's Department of Economics and Editor of Feminist Economics, whose extensive expertise and global experience on women's economic rights helped strengthen the perspectives that have shaped the narrative and call to action contained in this paper. UN Women's Economic Empowerment Section coordinated the research, outline and general oversight of the development and publication of this document, led by Venge Nyirongo (Action Coalition Thematic Lead) and Layla Mohseni (Action Coalition Programme Analyst).

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EXPAND DECENT WORK AND EMPLOYMENT IN FORMAL AND INFORMAL ECONOMIES

ABOUT THE ACTION COALITION ON ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND RIGHTS

Generation Equality is the world's leading initiative to accelerate investment and implementation on gender equality. It brings together organisations from every part of society to catalyse progress, advocate for change and take bold actions together.

Convened by UN Women, the initiative aims to ensure that the bold ambitions of the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action on women's rights are finally implemented, and that the Sustainable Development Goals are achieved. Generation Equality was launched in 2021 at the Generation Equality Forums hosted in Mexico City and Paris. The Forums launched the Generation Equality Action Coalitions, which take on six critical issues that underpin gender equality: i) Gender-Based Violence; ii) Economic Justice and Rights; iii) Bodily Autonomy and Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (BA-SRHR); iv) Feminist Action for Climate Justice; v) Technology and Innovation for Gender Equality; and vi) Feminist Movements and Leadership.

The Action Coalitions are bringing together these multi-stakeholder partnerships through blueprints for action co-created by Action Coalition Leaders, catalysing collective commitments, sparking global and local conversations between generations and across communities, and driving substantial increases in public and private funding.

As part of the collective work of the Generation Equality Action Coalition on Economic Justice and Rights (the 'Action Coalition'),[1] the 17 entities leading the work (the 'Leadership Structure') co-developed Blueprints on four prioritized Action Areas:

ACTION 1 INCREASE WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT BY TRANSFORMING THE CARE ECONOMY

ACTION 2 EXPAND DECENT WORK AND EMPLOYMENT IN FORMAL AND INFORMAL ECONOMIES

ACTION 3 INCREASE WOMEN'S ACCESS TO AND CONTROL OVER PRODUCTIVE RESOURCES

ACTION 4 PROMOTE GENDER-TRANSFORMATIVE ECONOMIES AND ECONOMIC STIMULUS

Each Blueprint lays out a rationale, presents important data and statistics and defines a powerful vision for success, as well as proposed strategies and tactics that are grounded in collaborative action through bold and, as much as possible, collective stakeholder commitments. Consequently, the Blueprints are meant to serve as guidance and inspiration for new and existing commitment makers to the Action Coalition, the other Generation Equality Action Coalitions, and the global community.

Together, the four Blueprints make up a Global Acceleration Plan to set a new, ambitious pace for the realization of economic justice and rights for women and girls in all their diversity, everywhere, propelled by an approach that inculcates equality, inclusion, intersectionality, feminist leadership, cultural relevance and transformative action and systems change, which have enabled the creation of grounds for measuring and monitoring the accountability of actors pledging to contribute to a complex web of collective efforts.

By embodying feminist lens in their creation, these documents have materialized from an intense, co-creation and collaborative process underpinned by the inclusivity of all stakeholder constituencies in the Leadership Structure. They represent diverse voices from around the world seen as equals in recognizing the need for shared responsibility to identify and suggest a revitalized global agenda for economic justice and rights that responds to both visible and unapparent structural constraints women and girls face in the economic system.

The Blueprints capture the most important aspects of intensive input and discussions on issues and strategies within the global Leadership Structure of the Action Coalitions. It is vital to note that they do not create obligations for the Leaders of the Action Coalitions beyond the individual and collective commitments pledged by each entity (available here). The diversity of the 17 Leaders of the Action Coalition means that not all strategies highlighted in the Blueprints must be pursued and supported by every Leader or Commitment Maker, with each able to address the recommendations in accordance with their attributions, functions and possibilities. At the same time, Leaders and Commitment Makers may go beyond the approaches captured within this framework in pursuit of economic justice and rights for women and girls.

PHOTO: UN Women/Narendra Shrestha

WHY ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND RIGHTS?

Economic justice and rights (EJR) refers to how economic and political systems are designed, how their benefits or costs are distributed, and how institutions are held accountable for the economic outcomes they generate. This theme encompasses the full spectrum of women's access to and control over productive resources and economic opportunities, including within the world of work. It encompasses subthemes such as tackling systemic barriers in unpaid care and domestic work, time poverty and wage inequity, unsafe and unhealthy working conditions, including sexual and gender-based violence and harassment; addressing discriminatory public policy and laws (e.g., land rights and barriers to access finance or other productive inputs); and fostering accelerators to EJR such as digital and financial inclusion. EJR requires working towards more equitable structures to ensure women and girls, especially those facing intersecting forms of discrimination and disadvantage, can navigate and manage future crises with security and resilience—including through universal social protection. EJR addresses macroeconomic and microeconomic factors, e.g., how the economic system reinforces gender and intersecting inequalities; how much of the care work, mostly done by women, is systemically undervalued, unpaid/underpaid and marginalized; and how women and girls often lack the rights and access to resources and opportunities in order to fully realise their economic potential and rights.

Economic justice and rights were selected as an Action Coalition because they affect all women and girls globally. Twenty-six years after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, too little has changed. There, and at multiple forums since, world leaders have pledged to eliminate gender inequalities and realize women's and girls' human rights, including through the Sustainable Development Goals. At best, progress has been stalling—with gender gaps in financial inclusion and within the paid labour force stagnating.[2] Women, particularly migrant women and women in developing countries, are overrepresented in informal, precarious, unorganised and vulnerable forms of employment.[3] These forms of economic stratification, and the lived experiences of women and men that result from it, are shaped by intersecting hierarchies of gender, race, ethnicity, caste, class, sexual orientation, age, migration/refugee status, among others.[4] Current economic systems and the policies that shape them are rife with persistent structural and cultural barriers for women, resulting from dominant economic models that enshrine inequalities in their structures and unfairly concentrate and redistribute opportunities, resources and wealth.[5]

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exacerbated structural inequalities and rolled back progress on gender equality by a generation. This has been particularly pronounced for women and girls in developing countries, where there has been more limited fiscal capacity, access to healthcare, education and social protection, and a slower economic recovery.[6] The pandemic has increased levels of paid and unpaid care work and highlighted its importance. That a health crisis could cause an economic crisis has exposed the central importance of the care economy, which is built on the unpaid and underpaid labour of mostly women and girls.[7] Women's care responsibilities and roles as shock absorbers for their families and communities drew them out of paid employment and intensified their workdays.[8] Sustainable economic development and gender-just recovery from COVID-19 depend on the theme of economic justice and rights. More broadly, progress in women's economic justice and rights accelerates progress for sustainable development in all its dimensions—economic, social and environmental—as well as for all the other Action Coalitions.

PHOTO: UN Women/Ryan Brown

WHY DECENT WORK AND WOMEN IN THE WORLD OF WORK?

INTERLINKAGES BETWEEN GENDER AND THE RIGHT TO DECENT WORK

The **world of work** is gendered and bears significant implications for women's economic empowerment and economic rights. Gender is embedded in economic and social relations and structures that reproduce existing hierarchies, partly through regressive gender norms (rules about appropriate behaviour) and stereotypes (generalizations about the behaviour of group members) that are internalized by individuals.[9] Regressive gender norms and stereotypes assign disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work to women; limit women's access to the labour market and other economic resources and opportunities; and segregate women into the most marginal and low-paying segments of the labour market, segments that are most closely associated with and systematically undervalue women's traditional work. They perpetuate women's oppression partly through condoning gender-based violence and harassment; and provide a rationale for the persistence of discriminatory laws, policies, institutions and practices.

According to estimates from the International Labour Organization (ILO), the global gender gap in labour force participation was 25.3 percentage points in 2021, with women's labour force participation rate at 46.4 percent and men's at 71.7 percent. The gap varies by country, and systematically by level of development and geographic region. The average percentage point gender gap in labour force participation is lowest in high-income countries (14.1 p.p.) and the sub-Saharan African region (10.3) and highest among lower-middle income countries (38.4) and the Middle East and North Africa region (51.4).[10]

Regardless of level of development or region, however, relative to men, women across the world tend to work in less productive, lower-skilled jobs that are more likely to be informal, part-time or temporary jobs with poorer working conditions, fewer avenues for advancement, and less access to social protection. Women are less likely than men to own or manage firms, and when they do, they run smaller enterprises in less productive sectors.[11] Agricultural sector employment constitutes more than half of women's employment in low-income countries, as well as in the South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa regions.[12] Globally, women and girls perform more than three quarters of unpaid care and domestic work, and women constitute two thirds of paid care workers, many of them migrants and working in the informal sector for very low pay.[13] Women are also paid less than men around the world, with the global gender wage gap estimated to be 23 percent – an underestimate particularly for developing countries where informal employment is

dominant.[14] More than two thirds (69.9 percent) of the employed population in low- and middle-income countries are in informal employment, while the share is a little under one fifth (18.3 percent) in high-income countries.[15] Though gender-disaggregated data on informal sector earnings are limited, women are concentrated in the types of informal work with the lowest average earnings and highest poverty risk, including contributing family work, industrial outworkers or homework, and domestic work.[16]

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, women lost their livelihoods and employment faster than men because they were more exposed to hard-hit economic sectors, and were more likely to withdraw from the labour force completely because of their greater responsibilities for care. According to an analysis commissioned by UN Women and UNDP, 388 million women and girls will be living in extreme poverty on less than US$1.90 a day in 2022, compared to 372 million men and boys; the "high damage" scenario estimates that these figures increase to 446 million women and girls and 427 million men and boys living in extreme poverty.[17]

There is a significant **deficit of decent work** for women. Decent work, as defined by the ILO and endorsed by the international community, guarantees rights and a fair income; equal opportunities and equal treatment for all; the extension of social protections, including safe and healthy working conditions, freedom from gender-based violence and harassment, access to healthcare and family leave, and sufficient workers' compensation and regulation of working time; and it gives all workers, including women, the freedom to express their concerns, to organize and to participate in decisions that affect their lives.[18]

As half a billion people are affected by insufficient paid work, a situation that preceded the pandemic but has only gotten worse, inequalities and building better lives through work is a pressing challenge.[19] Decent work for women remains especially challenging given women's concentration in informal employment, the care economy and global supply chains. Racialized, indigenous and migrant women often experience greater barriers to decent work as a result of intersecting systems of disadvantage and discrimination, as do women and girls living and working in the Global South. They are more likely to do domestic work and be concentrated in the informal sector, where they face some of the most low-paying and difficult working conditions.[20] People who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex or queer (LGBTIQ+) can lack support structures in the workplace and wider society, increasing their risk of marginalization, violence and harassment at work. Achieving the transformative economic changes required to ensure decent work for all women and girls, regardless of race, ethnicity, caste, class, age, migration or refugee status, sexual orientation or gender identity, requires solutions that consider these intersecting systems.

PHOTO: UN Women/Staton Winter

WHY SHOULD THE WORLD ADDRESS BARRIERS TO DECENT WORK FOR WOMEN AND GIRLS?

Creating equal opportunities for and improving the quality of work for women and girls by realizing decent work is central to women's economic empowerment and realizing women's rights and gender equality. Securing decent work for women and girls is key to achieving the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 5 to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls, and Goal 8 to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all. Addressing barriers to decent work for women and girls enhances the well-being, safety and health of all, and counters systemic and structural inequalities.

The contributions that decent work makes to women's economic empowerment also have positive externalities for inclusive economic growth. Greater gender equality raises aggregate productivity, economic diversification and thus resilience; it is also associated with more income equality as well as greater investments in human capabilities.[21] Gender equality can also contribute to greater resilience to environmental, economic, social and political crises.[22] Preparing girls adequately for work through education and ongoing skills development throughout the life course is also critical, as it enables women's participation in the labour market in ways that challenge traditional gender norms and stereotypes, take advantage of ongoing changes in technology and policy, and strengthen resilience to changing economic conditions and livelihoods.[23] At the microeconomic level, gender equality at work is also good for business; greater diversity in employment and leadership has been associated with increased organizational effectiveness and expansion.[24]

PATHWAYS TOWARDS DECENT WORK

Turning to more specific policy interventions, **gender-responsive universal access to social protection** will help lift women out of poverty towards income security and decent work. Partly due to how social protection systems have been typically designed around models with male breadwinners, women are disadvantaged in these systems due to lower coverage rates and substantially lower benefit levels including old age pensions, unemployment benefits and maternity leave.[25] Gender-responsive universal social protection systems will promote gender equality at home and in the labour market, assisting in maintaining incomes in cases of unemployment and occupational injury, providing care credits for time spent out of the workforce caring for dependents, and ensuring equitable access to care and social services for all, including through child care and fully paid, non-transferable parental leave. Social protection should be inclusive, with access for the most marginalized, such as women without documentation, stateless and woman migrant workers. Universal and life cycle based systems of social protection reach marginalized persons more effectively than poverty-targeted programmes, and are the most effective at supporting women through work transitions.[26]

Some relevant international commitments include the ILO's Social Protection Floors Recommendation, 2012 (No. 202), to achieve universal coverage by guaranteeing basic income security and essential healthcare, which aligns with SDG target 1.3, to implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors, and by 2030 achieve substantial coverage of the poor and the vulnerable.[27] Other commitments are important for gender equality, such as the ILO's Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189), which guarantees domestic workers the right to a safe and healthy working environment.

Action is needed to **ensure equal pay for work of equal value**, including through the universal ratification and effective implementation and enforcement of the ILO's Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100); Equal Remuneration Recommendation, 1951 (No. 90); and Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention, 1958 (No. 111); and in line with the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women's General Recommendation No. 13 (eighth session, 1989) on equal remuneration for work of equal value. Pay transparency measures, gender-neutral objective job evaluations, the promotion of the right to collective bargaining, addressing vertical and horizontal occupational and sectoral gender segregation, revisiting the organization of work, including working time arrangements and limits, and measures to eradicate discrimination in employment and occupation, are all vital tools in closing the gender pay gap. For example, the Equal Pay International Coalition (EPIC), convened by the ILO, OECD and UN Women, is working towards an equal and inclusive world of work, in which women and men receive equal pay for work of equal value across all countries and sectors.[28]

The right to a world of work free from gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) should also be prioritized. Men's violence against women and girls emanates from and reinforces unequal power relations and gender inequalities in society, which are in turn reflected in the world of work. No country, sector or occupation is immune. GBVH is human rights abuse and is incompatible with decent work. It compromises the well-being of women and girls, and can also prevent women from obtaining and staying in work, and accessing opportunities at work. The ILO's Violence and Harassment Convention, 2019 (No. 190) (C190) and its accompanying Recommendation, 2019 (No. 206) (R206) enshrine the right of everyone to a world of work free from violence and harassment, including gender-based violence and harassment. C190 and R206 are strong and inclusive in scope, covering all workers regardless of their contractual status, including those employed in the informal sector, and wherever they work. These instruments also recognize the impact that domestic violence has on the world of work, such as physical or psychological abuse and controlling behaviour that inhibits women from being able to carry out their work, and call for measures to address this persistent problem. The wide ratification and effective implementation of C190 and R206, accompanied by the necessary relevant national reforms, will help to eradicate GBVH from the world of work.[29]

The right to organize and to collective bargaining (enshrined in ILO Conventions No. 87 and No. 98) is fundamental for women to achieve decent work. Through social dialogue and collective bargaining, women can negotiate equal opportunities to access decent jobs and skills, realize family-friendly workplace policies including paid maternity and parental leave; negotiate fair wages and equal pay for work of equal value; and demand effective policies to prevent and protect against violence and sexual harassment in the world of work. This is even more crucial in times of crises, as revealed by the COVID-19 pandemic, where women have been disproportionally hit by retrenchment due to their contractual status and years of service (often interrupted in their careers due to their disproportionate share of caring responsibilities) and increased care responsibilities due to deficits in availability of care services, and face long-term risks to access paid employment opportunities and quality jobs.

Entrepreneurship is a potentially promising field for women's economic engagement and needs to be covered by decent work and social protection schemes. The social and structural barriers women face to entering business and/or starting their own significantly impact the rate at which women engage in entrepreneurship. Freedom of association and collective bargaining are important for strengthening women entrepreneurs' voices. At the same time, however, entrepreneurship is not a panacea for the failure of economies to produce sufficient opportunities for decent work, particularly in developing countries. Job scarcity is the most commonly cited motivation for starting a business among both women and men, especially in low- and middle-income countries.[30] Relative to men, women run smaller businesses, are more likely to run single-person businesses, and are younger, poorer and less educated than men entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurship surveys typically show that women experience lower business closure rates than men, but the concentration of women's businesses in sectors hard-hit by the COVID-19 pandemic reversed this pattern, and women were 20 percent more likely than men to report closing due to the pandemic.[31] In many ways, women's entrepreneurial success is conditioned and constrained by the same factors that inhibit gender equality and decent work in the labour market more generally. And as in the wider world of work, sparking the benefits of entrepreneurship for women's economic empowerment and more inclusive growth and development requires more than gender-equal access to resources like business skills and finance.[32] The process requires the broader, transformational agenda that underlies ensuring and expanding opportunities for decent work for all women and girls.

Similar conditions apply to the growing gig economy, where digital platforms connecting buyers and sellers of services hold the potential for significant growth in women-dominated sectors such as cleaning, cooking and care work. Limited but emerging research in the Global South indicates that while women gig workers appreciate the potential for flexibility that makes it easier to combine paid work with family responsibilities, the financial precarity and other challenges associated with broader economic conditions make gig work more similar to traditional informal sector work, albeit a digitized manifestation, than a modern, more promising alternative.[33]

CONTEXT: THE CURRENT STATE OF PLAY FOR DECENT WORK

Working conditions for women are contextualised within the legal frameworks for conditions of work. Relevant starting points include the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW); Article 23 of the Human Rights Charter; the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR); the ILO's eight fundamental conventions that provide grounds for decent work for men and women, and ILO's Future of Work Agenda.[34] More significant guidelines are set out by the G20's 2014 Brisbane target for reducing gender gaps in labour force participation, and the recommendations of the 2016 UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment.[35] The ILO's decent work agenda highlights four pillars of needed intervention: employment creation, social protection, rights at work and social dialogue. Guidelines to mitigate business-related human rights impacts are provided by the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights, the 2019 corresponding report about gender dimensions for all 31 guiding principles, and the OECD's Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Business Conduct.[36] An important recent success is the ILO's 2019 Violence and Harassment Convention No. 190 that aims to protect workers from violence and harassment in the world of work.[37] However, to date only 31 governments have ratified the Convention, and thereby committed to translating its provisions into national laws and policies.

PHOTO: UN Women/Joe Saade

Advancing these policy agendas are essential because women's participation in labour markets and paid work has not produced commensurate gender equality in pay and status.[38] Instead, women's increased labour force participation has coincided with the growth of informal, unregulated and unprotected forms of work, particularly in developing countries.[39] Jobs created through the growth of international trade and production along global value chains in export-oriented manufacturing firms, on farms producing non-traditional agricultural exports, and in services like call centres and tourism have benefited many women. However, globalization and trade have generally been disappointing in generating broadly shared, high-quality employment.[40] Occupational and sectoral segregation by gender continues, and women earn less and face inferior working conditions across all sectors, particularly the ones into which they are crowded.[41] As industries move up the value-added ladder and jobs improve, women tend to lose these better jobs to men, reinforcing the systematic disadvantage that women face in increasingly globalized labour markets.[42] The best policy to access the benefits of technological change, international trade and participation in global value chains is to make all work decent work, regardless of gender.[43] Merely increasing women's participation in paid work does not automatically contribute to women's economic empowerment, gender equality, or faster or more inclusive growth and development, as the vast majority of women who access paid jobs are concentrated in low quality, poorly paid, precarious and informal jobs. The connection between increasing participation in paid work and gender equality depends on wider social and economic structures and conditions, and the policy frameworks that shape and regulate them.[44]

PHOTO: UN Women/Ryan Browne

PHOTO: UN Women/Narendra Shrestha

CONSTRAINTS TO PROGRESS

Gender norms and stereotypes, and the underlying discrimination that they reflect and reproduce, lead to women's occupational and sectoral segregation, as well as the systematic undervaluation of women's work in both the home and the labour market. One of the results is that women are overrepresented in the most marginalized forms of work, including informal and domestic work, and in subsistence and seasonal agricultural work.[45] They also discourage women from pursuing opportunities in more highly paid science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields, as well as those identified as central for the transition to greener economies.[46] These gender norms and stereotypes intersect with other forms of stratification based on race, ethnicity, caste, class, migration or refugee status, among many others, creating labour markets that are stratified in multiple ways.

Women's and girls' disproportionate responsibility for unpaid care work is a key driver of gender inequality in the labour market. Globally, women spend an average of 3.2 times more time on unpaid care work compared to men.[47] Even as women's market labour force participation has increased and men's has declined across almost all countries over the past decades, gender gaps in unpaid care work have been slow to change.[48] This disproportionate responsibility results in a "double day" for women who also undertake paid work. Adding together the hours spent in paid and unpaid work, across all regions of the world, women work longer hours than men.[49] The inequitable distribution and the time and opportunity costs of unpaid care work are key factors in determining whether women enter into and stay in employment, as well as how much time they have for professional advancement, with negative consequences for women's economic empowerment and gender equality.[50]

Despite 1,500 reforms to enhance women's economic empowerment in the last 50 years, in 190 economies women still have only three quarters of the legal rights of men.[51] **Discriminatory laws and regulations,** including discriminatory family laws, hinder women's decisions to join and remain in the workforce. They also restrict women's workplace rights and their secure access to land and non-land assets, including financial resources. In 88 countries, women are barred from entering certain professions; in 34 countries, only husbands are entitled to manage and dispose of property.[52] And despite the proliferation of laws designed to reverse gender inequality, customary laws remain a major impediment to women's access to productive resources: in 123 countries, traditional laws and customs limit women's freedom to claim land assets.[53] Economic structures can also make legal reforms difficult to monitor and enforce. This is particularly true for industries in which women's employment is concentrated: in the informal economy, the care economy and production for global value chains, where tiers of subcontracting create especially challenging circumstances for encouraging and regulating decent work. The private sector can thus also play an essential role in advancing decent work for women by generating decent employment and ensuring that labour and other laws and regulations are enforced.

There is significant potential to **increase funding and public investments in support of gender equality** in the economic and productive sectors. The OECD reports that aid to support gender equality in economic and productive sectors has been increasing over the past ten years and represents 47 percent of Development Assistance Committee (DAC) members' total bilateral aid in these sectors (US$18 billion). However, only 2 percent of the aid to these sectors targets gender equality as a principal objective, a significantly lower share than the 5 percent in all sectors.[54]

PHOTO: UN Women/Joe Saade

IMPACTS OF COVID-19

While signs of global economic recovery from COVID-19 began emerging in late 2021, although largely concentrated among higher-income countries, were set back by war in Ukraine. Inflation spurred by ongoing supply chain bottlenecks, and then price increases for energy and food, have led towards tighter monetary policies in most countries. Financial fragility is increasing among developing countries, as capital outflows have put downward pressure on their currencies, exacerbating inflationary pressures. And calls for fiscal austerity are on the horizon, as the combination of pandemic spending, public debt and inflation (especially for developing countries that are also net food importers) raise concerns of an intensifying economic crisis.[55]

In this context, it is important to understand and account for how women experience the ongoing socioeconomic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic in a manner different from and disproportional to men. As they are generally earning and saving less and often engage in insecure and/or low-paying jobs, their financial capacity to absorb economic shocks is less compared to men.[56] The unequal division of care and domestic work and lack of social protection that already affects women's employment opportunities are exacerbated during crises. And many of the risks have been heightened for other groups of women workers, such as those at the frontline, who have continued to serve and provide essential services through the COVID-19 pandemic, often with little protection and very low remun-eration. Women's equal representation in COVID-19 response planning, addressing the gender care gap, access to fiscal stimulus packages and social assistance programmes, are critical to mitigating the social and economic costs of the pandemic on women and gender equality.

The pandemic-induced recession negatively affected women's employment more than men's, earning it the name "shecession." A major part of this differential impact is women's concentration in sectors hit harder by the pandemic, including accommodation and food services; wholesale and retail trade; real estate, business and administrative activities; manufacturing; and domestic work. A second contributor is women's responsibility for unpaid care, the need for which exploded during the crisis. Increased demand for unpaid care was not just due to fulfilling pandemic-related healthcare needs, but also to the closure of schools and other care facilities. Among OECD countries, for instance, it was largely mothers that drove losses in women's paid work.[58] These findings echo those of UN Women's Rapid Gender Assessment Surveys, which found that partnered women living with children were more likely to lose jobs and working hours, and most likely to increase unpaid care and domestic work.[59]

At the global level, in May 2022 the ILO estimated that hours worked were down 3.8 percent relative to the pre-crisis benchmark, equivalent to a loss of 112 million jobs.[60] By the end of 2021, employment had returned to pre-crisis levels in the majority of high-income countries, but not in most lower- and middle-income countries. This divergence between richer and poorer countries is also reflected in the varying rates of recovery in gender gaps in paid work. By the end of 2020, the increased gender gap in hours worked was fully reversed in high-income countries, though employment-to-population ratios (employment rates) were still down for both women and men (comparing 2021 and 2019, the percentage point difference in employment

rates was -0.9 for women and -1.5 for men).[61] For low- and middle-income countries, the gender gap in hours worked is still wider than at the beginning of the pandemic. By the first quarter of 2022, the gender gap in hours worked was 1.1 percentage points higher than the pre-pandemic benchmark for this group. Employment rates were lower as well, with declines in 2021 relative to 2019 in low- and middle-income countries averaging -2.0 percentage points for women and -2.1 for men.[62]

These impacts have been particularly pronounced in the informal sector, where, among low- and middle-income countries, more than two thirds of the employed population works.[63] Informal employment had declined by 20 percent at the height of the crisis in 2020, double the impact on formal employment.[64] Women's informal employment was impacted more than men's, experiencing a decline of 24 percent at the height of the crisis compared to a loss of 19 percent for men. Employment recovery has been faster in informal than formal employment, increasing the share of informality in total employment. And recovery has gone faster for men than women in the informal sector.[65] However, as evidenced by surveys conducted by Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO), it is also important to assess recovery in terms of the days of work and earnings, which have yet to return to pre-pandemic levels across cities in a number of countries.[66]

From a public policy perspective, the COVID-19 pandemic laid bare the devastating impacts of decades of austerity and under investments in health and care systems, revealing a profound deepening of already existing gender and social inequalities across gender, caste, class and, in many cases, racialized and ethnic lines, and prevented already marginalized groups, including disabled persons, LGBTQI+ persons, racialized and indigenous peoples and migrants, from accessing affordable and quality public care and health services. And it laid bare how essential the health and care sector workforce, 70 percent of whom are women, is to keeping our societies going.[67] One in twelve (or 8.2 percent) women in employment has experienced sexual violence and harassment at work in their working life.[68] For many, the home has become the workplace during the pandemic, due to lockdowns and curfews. This has come with heightened risks of domestic violence and other forms of gender-based violence and harassment, such as "cyberbullying". This heightened risk is reflected in emerging evidence that the pandemic has brought about more violence against women, including physical and verbal abuse, denial of basic needs, and sexual harassment.[69] Rapid Gender Assessments conducted by UN Women in the second and third quarters of 2021 show 45 percent of women reporting that either they or another woman they knew experienced violence since the start of the pandemic; this has become known as a "shadow pandemic" of gender-based violence.[70]

The pandemic also underscores the significance of women's structural disadvantage in social protection systems, where they experience lower coverage rates and substantially lower benefit levels. Before the pandemic, only 31 percent of the global population was covered by comprehensive social protection systems; women's coverage was 8 percentage points lower than men's.[71] The gender gaps in social protection vary by region. In North Africa, 63.6 percent of elderly men receive an old-age pension, but only 8 percent of women do. Within the European

Union, women's pensions are on average 40.2 percent lower than those of men. In South East Asia, women are structurally less protected against unemployment. Globally, a large majority of women do not enjoy maternity protection or have access to childcare. The lack of access to social protection is particularly detrimental for migrant women that have lived and worked in several countries, as they will not have accumulated the required number of years of employment to benefit from a state pension or may be unable to access it owing to a lack of portability of benefits.[72] Even migrant women who remain in one country for a significant period of time often have fewer years of employment owing to past and current care responsibilities. Furthermore, migrant women are much more likely to be engaged in lower-paid, part-time and precarious work. Not only are these jobs generally excluded from contributory social insurance schemes, but without earning a decent wage it is much harder for migrant women to save money for their futures.[73]

Key factors for the gender gaps in social protection include women's under representation in the labour market, gender-based discrimination, discrimination in accessing employment, and overrepresentation in informal employment and in low-level and low-paid jobs with no rights to collective bargaining, as well as the gender pay gap leading to lower benefit levels, and women's disproportionate share of unpaid care work which causes women to interrupt their careers, work shorter hours, take up precarious work to be able to access paid work and combine it with unpaid care and domestic work at home.[74] Particularly during a health crisis, a lack of adequate social protection means income insecurity, poverty and hunger for millions of people, workers and their families.

PHOTO: UN Women/Ryan Brown

PHOTO: UN Women/Joe Saade

GEOGRAPHICAL DIMENSIONS

Actions to promote decent work must recognize the universal nature of the barriers to progress for women and girls in realizing decent work in both the formal and informal sectors, and as such, must engage economies in the Global North and Global South, and across all regions. However, binding constraints vary across regions and by levels of economic development. As noted above, the average percentage point gender gap in labour force participation is lowest in high-income countries and the sub-Saharan African region, and highest among lower-middle-income countries and the Middle East and North Africa region. Informal employment is the dominant form of employment in lower- and middle-income countries. The associated challenges for establishing decent work for women and girls differ not only by level of development, but also by region, countries within regions, and regions within countries, especially in urban versus rural areas. Just as significantly, women's migration, both internationally and within countries, is increasingly connected to pursuing paid work, particularly in the care economy. From a geographical perspective, special attention must be paid to migrant and refugee women whose contexts span regions and may be left out of nationally based strategies. The nature of women's participation in global value chains varies geographically as well; manufacturing production is more prominent in East and South East Asia, as well as parts of Latin America. The extent of informality in global value chain production varies systematically as well, with home-based work more common in Asia and the Pacific.[75] Taken together, these variable factors point to how essential it is to engage in dialogue by lifting up the local and grassroots voices of women and girls in order to tailor actions to local circumstances.

STAKEHOLDERS AND POWERHOLDERS

The key stakeholders for the decent work agenda are primarily women and girls who are, or face a high likelihood of, working in low-paying jobs and trades that are often unsafe and precarious, and lacking job and workplace protections with limited to no access to social protection. It is also a priority to focus on adolescent girls and young women who will or are in the process of transitioning into the labour force, as their economic empowerment and skills development is a key aspect of sustainable and inclusive growth.

Stakeholders key to championing women's empowerment and rights in relation to decent work must reflect the different situations and priorities in the Global South and the Global North. While the challenges associated with securing decent work are substantial in both contexts, the Action Coalition must identify the dimensions, realms and effects of these challenges in a nuanced way to forge a relevant, impactful action agenda.

In the Global South, a majority of working women are part of the informal economy, including day labourers, rural producers, horticultural workers, petty traders, street vendors, home-based or small shop piece and manufacturing workers, household domestic and childcare workers, service and food providers (beauticians, caterers, vegetable/fruit hawkers) and waste recyclers. Women entrepreneurs in the informal sector are also widespread in the rural and urban economies within the Global South, and are often connected through mutual self-help associations and networks such as cooperatives (rural producers, farmers, artisan/crafts and product groups) and savings and credit and trader associations. Such groups are well recognized by government extension and small business departments, banks and a range of industries who have supply relationships with them.

Throughout all of these efforts, taking an intersectional approach is critical because women's intersecting identities significantly shape the level of discrimination, disadvantage and oppression they face in accessing paid and decent work, markets and resources. Women's experiences of economic inequality are deeply entrenched in issues of race, ethnicity, caste, class, religion, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, migration status and more. These systems of social and economic stratification impact all women and girls.

GLOBAL ACTION FOR DECENT WORK

The Action Coalition on Economic Justice and Rights will further work to accelerate progress on the decent work agenda by driving a global multi-stakeholder approach to **create equal opportunities for women and girls and improve the quality of work for women by realizing decent work in the formal and informal economy while preparing girls adequately for the world of work.** In particular, the Action Coalition will drive concerted action to **create an inclusive and enabling legal and policy environment and engage women to expand decent work in the formal and informal economy to reduce the number of working women living in poverty by 2026 by a recommended 17 million and decrease the gap in labour force participation between prime-age[76] women and men with small children by half, resulting in an additional 84 million women joining the labour force.**

TACTICS

"Tactics" are defined strategies for action that are built on evidence and experience about what is most effective in driving change. Tactics often contain targets or goals through which the Action Coalition on Economic Justice and Rights will measure its collective progress and impact. Their success requires implementation involving all stakeholders: governments, the private sector, civil society and community organizations, and the UN system, as well as individual women, men, girls and boys.

Each tactic includes a list of exemplar stakeholder commitments. Commitments are an integral component to the Action Coalitions and are essential to accelerating investment in and implementation of the tactics to propel progress on gender equality. The suggested commitments are meant to serve as inspiration and provide stakeholders with examples of strong commitments. They are illustrative only and Leaders and Commitment Makers to the Action Coalition on Economic Justice and Rights are not bound to them.

The approach to addressing decent work and working conditions for women has five components; these have been formulated into five tactics in the areas of law and policy, service delivery, norms change, financing and education, as follows:

TACTIC #1: LAW AND POLICY

1

Eliminate gender-discriminatory legislation and policies address gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work and scale gender-just affirmative action, to measurably increase women's access to decent work, economic livelihoods and entrepreneurship opportunities, inclusive of those at risk of exclusion.

Suggested stakeholder commitments

1. Guarantee women's equal rights and opportunities to decent work in labour laws, policies and practices to ensure access to and retention of jobs, equal pay for work of equal value and access to social protection including in times of crises.
2. Joint collective commitment with the Gender-based Violence Action Coalition: Prevent and eliminate gender-based violence and harassment against women in all their diversity in the world of work, incorporating an inclusive, integrated and gender-transformative approach that applies to all sectors, whether private or public, both in the formal and informal economy, and in urban or rural areas; through one or more of the following: i) Advocacy for the ratification and implementation of ILO Convention No. 190; ii) Ratification of ILO Convention No. 190 and its effective implementation in line with ILO Recommendation No. 206; iii) Adoption and implementation of gender-transformative work-related policies and programmes in line with the provisions of ILO C190 and R206; iv) Create safe and healthy work environments that recognize the right of everyone to a world of work free from violence and harassment.
3. Create a legal and policy environment that facilitates the gender-responsive just transition to a green economy and women's equitable access to new green job opportunities (synergy with the Feminist Action for Climate Justice Action Coalition).
4. Ensure women's access to non-traditional decent jobs with decent wages, working conditions and market opportunities and to simple, responsive grievance procedures enabling women to report and remedy improprieties in formal and informal workplaces.

5. Promote legislation that protects girls from child labour, and women and girls from exploitation and sexual and gender-based violence and harassment.
6. Favour market and entrepreneurship opportunities for women-owned and women-led businesses including through:
    a) Establishing and/or promoting the increase of public and corporate procurement for women-owned businesses (e.g. quotas for at least 15 percent, towards the progressive realization of a 30 percent target) and certification processes that offer them decent work and improved market opportunities.
    b) Establishing gender-tranformative corporate policies and market linkages for engaging self-employed women and women-led businesses in both the formal and informal economy.
7. Design, implement and pursue gender-transformative and evidence-based policies and legislation for transformative trade.
8. Enact laws, implement policies and engage in social dialogue and collective bargaining to ensure decent work for women in all sectors includes solutions such as a living minimum wage; comprehensive and sustainable universal gender-transformative social protection; gender-sensitive, non-discriminatory and decent working conditions including maximum limits on working time and safe and healthy work; and human rights due diligence and accountability in business operations.
9. Align national labour laws with relevant international standards and ILO international labour standards and engage non-state actors to promote the ratification of ILO standards and their effective implementation, including the implementation of ILO Recommendations 202 and 204.
10. Enact laws, implement policies and engage in social dialogue to increase the number of women on boards worldwide to ensure equal representation in leadership.

TACTIC #2: SERVICE DELIVERY

2

Build capacities for women's groups and organizations to forge and champion the decent work agenda, enhance their economic and social security and validate women workers' rights to set work and employment standards and organize collectively to achieve them.

Suggested stakeholder commitments

1. Guarantee women's fundamental human rights of freedom of association and collective bargaining for all women workers in line with ILO Conventions No. 87 and No. 98.
2. Create market opportunities and establish gender-responsive corporate policies for women-owned and women-led businesses and women's business cooperatives that promote cross-border traders and promote women's participation in and leadership of business cooperatives, producer organizations and self-help groups.
3. Provide adequate funding and technical support to foster the competitiveness as well as access for women-owned businesses in global and domestic markets and value chains including through capacity-building and skills-building in entrepreneurship.
4. Promote women's representation, participation in and leadership in trade unions and the workplace across all sectors.
5. Develop, promote and campaign for support for informal own-account and microenterprises led by women for compensating revenue and wage loss during economic shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic.
6. Engage local actors to increase job and business opportunities and safety nets for women in the informal economy.
7. Mainstream public incentives and investment programmes for informal workers, including women agricultural producers, processors and manufacturers, in value chains, certification processes, and tendering and procurement opportunities that offer them decent work, improved market access and better earnings.

TACTIC #3: NORMS CHANGE

3

Promote gender-transformative norms, attitudes and practices by scaling up corporate and public practices to increase decent work for women and ensure women's voice, representation and leadership.

Suggested stakeholder commitments

1. Eradicate gender-based barriers and stereotypes within businesses and ensure decent work opportunities for women workers and women entrepreneurs by engaging governments, trade unions and employers (including the private sector) and women's organizations for women.
2. Promote gender-transformative norms, attitudes and practices in higher education and the world of work to enhance retention of women at work.
3. Ensure women's participation in and leadership of local small and medium enterprises, business cooperatives, producer organizations, self-help groups and trade unions.
4. Work with the private sector to address barriers to women's participation and representation at all levels of the value chain.

TACTIC #4: FINANCING

4

Increase financing for decent job creation and decent work infrastructure and services for women workers in the formal and informal economy, including women at risk of exclusion.

Suggested stakeholder commitments

1. Engage local actors to increase decent jobs, business opportunities and access to social protection for women in the informal economy.
2. Member States to promote and create decent work for women and where appropriate enable their transition from the informal to the formal economy in line with ILO Recommendation 204, while simultaneously improving conditions for those women unlikely to transition from the informal economy in their lifetimes.
3. Promote investment in comprehensive social protection and affordable, reliable and high-quality transport, housing, electricity, water and sanitation infrastructure through the allocation of sufficient public infrastructure budgets towards market infrastructure in rural communities.
4. Direct public resources towards safe, feasible gender and age-appropriate care and sanitation infrastructure in public places to advance women's work and entrepreneurship.
5. Mainstream public incentives and investment programmes for women in the informal economy, including agricultural producers, processors and manufacturers, that offer them decent work, improved market access and better earnings.
6. Scale up public and corporate financing for capacity development and on-the-job training for working women.
7. Resource and direct funding to specific sectors, including food and agriculture and renewable energy, and all areas where women can drive decent work opportunities.
8. The private sector to commit to the realization of decent work and the implementation of the five key policies as outlined by the United Nations Foundation's Five for 5 initiative.[77]
9. Invest in securing safe and centrally located markets and vending sites that welcome women producers, service providers and traders and ensure that local care, sanitation and storage infrastructure is available to them.

TACTIC #5: EDUCATION

5

Scale up investment in and promote public quality education for all girls and young women and vocational training to enhance essential skills for critical future work, bearing in mind the specific needs of those in vulnerable contexts.

Suggested stakeholder commitments

1. Expand public funding for gender-responsive and inclusive national public quality education systems that address the preferences of young women and girls to prepare them for work in non-traditional sectors.
2. Create incentive programmes for young women and girls to attend and transition through primary and secondary school, undertake higher education and vocational training or job placements.
3. Facilitate the transition from education and training to work, with an emphasis on the effective integration of young women and women from disadvantaged groups into the world of work.

ENDNOTES

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2 EXPAND DECENT WORK AND EMPLOYMENT IN FORMAL AND INFORMAL ECONOMIES