



Report

# Rights at Work – Rights for Women: Economic Empowerment through Decent Working Conditions

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## GAMZE ISCI

On the occasion of the 30th session of the UN Human Rights Council, the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) and the Program on Women’s Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (PWESCR) jointly organized a panel discussion on „Rights at Work - Rights for Women - Economic empowerment through decent working conditions”. The aim of the session was to analyse the prevailing situation of the human and labour rights standards for women, to identify the gaps in the current frameworks and to propose a holistic approach to ensuring rights at work for all women. This analysis is of particular importance against the backdrop of the persisting unfavourable working conditions of women who remain overrepresented in the informal economy, precarious works and low paid jobs, resulting in a lack of access to economic resources and basic services and consequent disadvantages in participation of the economy.

During her opening remarks, Priti Darooka from the Program on Women’s Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (PWESCR) emphasised the invisibility of women’s work resulting from a lack of acknowledgment of work such as care, domestic and subsistence work and other livelihood activities performed outside mainstream economies. Invisibility of women’s work thus adds to women’s vulnerability and human rights violations by having a negative impact on their social and economic development. In order to eliminate these disadvantaged conditions for women, strength-

ening the cooperation between the International Labor Organization (ILO) and UN Development Agencies to work towards just and fair conditions of work for women is crucial.

Vanessa Erogbogbo, Women and Trade Program Manager at the International Trade Center (ITC), proceeded to discuss the challenges women face on different levels of economic participation as well as the importance of women’s contribution to the economy. For instance, the ILO estimates that 865 million women around the world could be contributing more robustly to their countries’ econo-

mies were they allowed or trained to. Meanwhile, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) further calculates that the gender gap in labour force participation and entrepreneurship reduces per capita income by some 15%.

Ms Erogbogbo therefore called for a policy shift across the different levels of political decision-making. Firstly, without women's substantive contributions to the economy no country can manage to realise its full economic potential. In order to do so gender equality policies need further be accompanied by mechanisms for implementation as well as budgetary commitments for said implementation. Secondly, socio-cultural barriers constitute a barrier women's full potential as their businesses are often restricted to sectors regarded as suitable for „feminine skills“, such as wholesale and retail trade in garments. Such gender discrimination constitutes serious disadvantages for women such as lower earning potential and resulting limitations to their entry into more productive sectors as owners and/or workers. Women also tend to have lower levels of business training, and subsequently skill sets, available to them and are less likely than men to belong to formal business networks. As a result of a lack of access to information, technology, as well as the finance and capital needed to establish and grow their business, identifying and seizing market opportunities remains a challenge for women in business. The lack of social services such as low-cost day care and transportation facilities adds to the daily challenges women entrepreneurs encounter.

To counter these disadvantages, ITC in September launched a five year Call-to-Action in Brazil with the goal is to bring one million women entrepreneurs to the market by 2020 and growing the global economy through

women participation in trade. The Call-for-Action thus builds on the understanding that including more women-owned businesses in trade can help to enhance global growth and sustainable inclusive development.

In her remarks, Sejal Dand from the South Asian Feminist Alliance focused on a local approach to women workers' rights. Women who work in rural and agricultural areas are frequently not recognized as farmers despite constituting an enormous work force across Sub-Saharan Africa as well as South and Southeast Asia. Additionally, it is common for women to exercise no control and ownership over their resources. As the work site of women is most often a home or community Ms Dand emphasized the need to ensure that basic needs such as sanitation, roads or essential infrastructure are met.

Ms Dand furthermore called for the creation of just conditions of work for women farmers by ensuring independent access, control and ownership of resources. Further recommendations to improve the conditions of work for women farmers included investment in assets and infrastructure that support rural livelihoods as well as a reversal of the current trend to privatisation of resources. She furthermore highlighted that just and decent working conditions for women cannot be achieved without recognising unpaid work while simultaneously removing the denigration of care work as well as reducing the burden of work for women with the provision of public infrastructure and services and ensuring secure and sustainable livelihoods.

The international policy aspect of the issue of just conditions of work was elaborated by Ms Heisoo Shin in her personal capacity as a member of the Committee on Economic, Social and

Cultural Rights (CESCR). After outlining the legal framework of the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which covers just and favourable conditions of work in Article 7 (complemented by Article 6 which lays down the right to work and Article 8 ensuring the right to form trade unions and collective action) Ms Shin outlined the current work of the Committee on a General Comment on Just and favourable conditions of work.

She stressed that Article 7 includes provisions such as a need for remuneration as defined by fair wages and remuneration for work of equal value and in this context highlighted the significance of differentiating between equal pay for equal work and equal remuneration for work of equal value. While equal pay for equal work ensures that men and women receive the same wage for the same work, equal pay for work of equal value encompasses the concept of equal pay for different jobs. As women perform the majority of unpaid work at home as well as child care and domestic work the concept of equal pay for equal work undervalues women's contributions. In this context, the establishment of a system remunerating different work with the same value with equal pay is here crucial but currently underdeveloped, and thus leading to a pay gap between men and women.

In order to address additional challenges facing women at work, such as day care services, Ms Shin highlighted the importance of cooperation of international institutions such as the ILO as well as utilizing their established instruments, such as the Convention on Domestic Workers. She furthermore stressed the role of the Committee in creating good practice guidelines for state parties so that they in turn

can developed appropriate legislation and means of implementation.

The fruitful session that encompassed local, international and business level aspects of women's rights at work was concluded with the calls for increased collaboration of policy makers, business leaders and civil society actors especially women's organizations to identify and implement policies promoting women's equal participation in business life and eliminating their disadvantages resulting from gender discrimination as well as socio-cultural barriers.

#### On the author

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The views expressed in this publication are not necessarily the ones of the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

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