

# United Nations Women

Economic Rights of Women

Delegate Background Guide



# A Letter from Your Chairs...

Dear Delegates,

Hello and welcome to COMMUN! Our names are Olga Kazarov and Amalya Labell, and we will be your chairs. We are seniors at the Commonwealth School, located in the beautiful Back Bay neighborhood in Boston, MA. Like you, we began participating in Model UN in middle school. While it was at first challenging to be a confident speaker and to put ourselves out there, we quickly learned that Model UN is a safe space for exploring new ideas—we assure you, the more you put yourself out there, the easier it gets.

Our committee is UN Women, a United Nations organization fighting for women's empowerment and equality, and we will be discussing how to reduce economic barriers for women. This is not an easy topic as it involves challenging many ingrained societal and political practices and therefore has a lot of moving parts. We are so excited to hear your ideas and lead you through what we hope will be an engaging discussion and debate. Feel free to email us with any questions or concerns before the conference. We are more than happy to help wherever possible.

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# Problem Statement

“Greater gender equality is linked to a higher GDP per capita; women’s participation in the workforce and in income generation boosts economic growth and has an impact on society as a whole.”

— Michelle Bachelet, UN Women Executive Director October 2012

After many years of research by the International Monetary Fund, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the World Economic Forum, and other leading organizations, the link between higher rates of women’s participation in the labor force and economic growth has been undeniably confirmed. However, there are still many legal and social barriers inhibiting women’s full and equal economic participation.

As Michelle Bachelet mentions in the above quotation, gender equality is a priority for a multitude of reasons. According to The World Bank’s 2016 report on “Women, Business, and the Law,” of the 173 economies surveyed, 90 percent have at least one regulation in their laws that limits women’s economic opportunities. Gender-based job restrictions are also common: about 100 countries place limitations on the jobs that women can do. Of those 100, about thirty countries have at least ten laws inhibiting women’s economic participation. In eighteen regions, such as some parts of India and in Yemen, husbands or male guardians can legally prevent women, such as their wives, daughters or sisters, from working.<sup>1</sup>

The goal of this committee is to reduce the Gender Pay Equity Gap, which is the relative difference in the average gross hourly earnings of women and men within the economy. Factors such as rates of child marriage have decreased and women’s access to education have, on average, increased—but it is not enough to solve the problem. Achieving the goal of female empowerment in the workforce will require the delegates to think creatively and originally on the issue.

# History

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), was approved by the U.N. in 1979. It encourages governments to review their existing family laws and requires mandatory reporting and monitoring the situation of women’s rights. Civil society groups and opponents to female empowerment

have challenged these laws.<sup>2</sup> Their pushback makes meaningful progress difficult. Especially in the developing world, people are sometimes unwilling to leave behind traditional women's roles.

In many countries, more women and girls are going to school. They are living longer, getting better jobs, and gaining legal rights and protections. However, this is not the case in all countries, particularly in developing countries where poverty and illiteracy are still huge problems. In countries such as Pakistan, Syria, and Chad, there is often a stigma against women working. The traditional role of a woman is the homemaker and child-bearer. This limits access to educational opportunities and jobs.

Over the past 30 years, about 552 million people have joined the labor force internationally, and today, about 4 in 10 of those workers are women. Despite this, half of the world's working women are vulnerable in their employment, trapped in jobs with no security, or employed outside the confines of labor laws. They can be discriminated against because they are not 'formally' employed or work in sectors that aren't considered as serious such as agriculture, domestic work, healthcare, and social work. The labor laws of their country may not protect them.

Across all regions and most occupations, women are paid significantly less than men for the same job and for work of equal value and time. In fact, in the majority of countries, women's wages amount to between 70 and 90 percent of the wages of men. All around the world, women are under-represented in supervisory jobs and in higher up management positions.<sup>3</sup>

## Discussion

### **Inequality in school enrollment**

Nations with less gender equality tend to also have fewer girls attending secondary school, fewer women in the formal workforce or running businesses, and a wider gender wage gap. A lack of educational opportunities prevents girls from learning the necessary skills and tools they need and directly contributes to the difficulty women face in finding a job. There are significantly more girls than boys not enrolled in school, due to factors such as early pregnancy, early marriage, and the pressure for girls to contribute to household work.<sup>4</sup> There are about 5 million more girls than boys not enrolled in primary school, and about 68 million girls are not enrolled in upper or secondary school.<sup>5</sup>

## Uneven Progress

Although some countries are making good progress towards achieving economic equality between the genders, others have not yet acted upon the UN's goals. Neglecting women's basic rights by not protecting them from violence and failing to keep them above the poverty line creates problems that affect later generations. Economic progress alone does not result in women's economic equality. Statistically, five years after a country adopts the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, the most comprehensive international agreement on human rights for women, its pace of reform almost doubles that of the previous 15 years.<sup>6</sup>

## Poverty

Poverty is one of the main barriers to economic stability for women. In order for women to escape the cycle of poverty, financial services are critical in helping women access capital to start and grow their own businesses. In economies where women do not control marital property, less than 1 in 5 women have an account at a financial institution.<sup>7</sup> This prevents them from being able to make their own financial choices, to leave unsafe home situations, or to support themselves and their children should they lose connection to a male relative.

## Decreased potential GDP

In America, according to one calculation, the GDP in 2013 was \$2 trillion—or roughly 14 percent—higher than in 1970 because of the increase in women's participation.<sup>8</sup> When women aren't allowed to work, the GDP suffers as 50 percent of the population is unemployed by default. This trend has been observed in all economies of the world.

# International Actions

Fortunately, over the past 20 years, an increasing number of countries have adopted further legislation that provides maternity and paternity benefits, which allow workers to meet their family responsibilities and continue to have a life outside of their jobs. Over half of all countries currently provide at least 14 weeks of maternity leave, and 48 percent of countries also have provisions for paternity leave. These measures often exclude workers in specific sectors or categories of employment, such as paid domestic workers, casual and temporary workers, and agricultural workers.<sup>9</sup>

# Ways to Achieve Gender Empowerment

## Improvements in Education

Promoting education needs to be a priority at all ages. For example, enrolling girls in schools early, providing scholarships ensuring they finish the high school level as well as providing job training and retraining programs for women who have been out of the workforce for reasons such as childbirth, etc.<sup>10</sup> Organizations such as Rise Up and Campaign for Female Education are tackling this issue by providing support for young girls and adolescents in marginalized communities.<sup>11</sup>

## Bloc Positions

### Europe

The European Union has taken measures to promote women's economic advancement. For example, the organization has embarked on the EU Gender Action Plan on Gender Equality and Women Empowerment (2016-2020). This Action Plan aims to increase the security of women and girls, while also empowering them with employment opportunities and strengthening their voices. According to a UN Development Program report, "with less than one-third of businesses in the Eastern Europe and Central Asia region owned or co-owned by women, urgent action needs to be taken to address gender inequalities in the labour market."<sup>12</sup>

### Africa

The European Union has set up many summits and projects in Africa to increase women's rights and access to leadership positions. The CEDAW in Nigeria and the Africa-EU Summit, with the theme of "Harnessing the potential of African and European youth," held last year, are some examples of the efforts Africa has made to improve the situation of women. During the Africa Partnership Forum held in Germany in 2007, it was noted that "In Africa, the gender gap is even wider and the situation is more complex due to the cultural and traditional context which is anchored in beliefs, norms, and practices which breed discrimination and feminised poverty." Africa's growth and development agenda can only succeed if they are able to draw on all their resources and talents, and if women are able to participate fully in economic, social, and political life.<sup>13</sup>

## South America

All Latin American and Caribbean states have signed the CEDAW. In the last 10 years, almost 100 million women have joined the formal workforce in Latin America and the Caribbean—this is said to be one of the most dramatic social changes in the region.<sup>14</sup> Many reports and analyses confirm that the wage gap between women and men in Latin America is still alarming.

## Asia

Women are playing an increasingly significant role in the economy in Southeast Asia especially. There has been a push for the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to honor its gender equality commitments. According to the International Institute for Sustainable Development, “Women should be put at the centre of trade policy analysis and deliberations in the region. Increasingly, women play significant roles in the economies of Southeast Asia. Any trade policy changes that affect the society at large must take into account the concerns and aspirations of women’s groups.”<sup>15</sup> Asian countries are working to prioritize women’s concerns in economic reforms, recognizing how great an impact is possible through work in this area.

## North America

The United States has a history of leading the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), an intergovernmental economic organisation with 35 member countries, in terms of women’s labor force participation, with a historically high share of women in their workforce employed in full-time work. The 2017 OECD report, “The Pursuit of Gender Equality,” claims that “these gains have stagnated in recent years. Progress in American women’s employment rate has stalled and is now slightly below the OECD average even though young American women are about eight percentage more likely than men to complete a college education.”<sup>16</sup>

## Middle East

The World Bank’s report “Women, Business, and the Law” from 2014 shows that this region had the second-highest proportion of legal restrictions on women in 1960 and the highest proportion today. Since 2009, countries in the region have started to focus their efforts on getting more women to join the workforce, but cultural barriers to female employment are still prevalent. According to an analysis by Brookings, these barriers “remained unaddressed by policy solutions that are focused on solving the more objective barriers to employment, such as daycare centers and transportation. As a result, female workforce participation rates in Jordan, for example, have remained dismal.”<sup>17</sup>

# Questions to Consider

1. How can the international community work together to increase the participation of women in the workforce?
2. How can countries that have high levels of female employment support countries that have low levels of female employment?
3. How can the international community reduce economic barriers for women, given that there are many complicating factors such as social-cultural norms and poverty?
4. How can international organizations empower impoverished communities to help them achieve women's rights?

## Video Sources

“Understanding The Barriers Women Face”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v95bg6zdRAw>. CEO of Women Unlimited, Rosina Racioppi, talks about the problems some women face when advancing in the workplace

“Four Things You Need to Know about Women, Work and the Economy”, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qrwhdAq8KjE>. This video explains the role of women in the economy and how they are vital to countries that wish to grow and improve their economic status. In other words, the video highlights the need for energy in carrying out daily tasks that will benefit a person's family and country, and points out that the energy comes from food.

“Empowering women to overcome economic barriers”, <https://www.creativeassociatesinternational.com/afghanistan-pakistan/multimedia-afghanistan-pakistan/afghanistan-empowering-women-to-overcome-economic-barriers/>. This video talks about the importance of education for women. With education they are able to go further and put their skills to use and help educate the next generation. The U.S. Ambassador's Small Grants Program helps to raise women's voices and empower them.alarming.

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## Endnotes

1 "Tackling Barriers to Women's Economic Participation," Council on Foreign Relations, accessed December 26, 2019, <https://www.cfr.org/blog/tackling-barriers-womens-economic-participation>

2 "Economic Development = Equal Rights for Women?" The World Bank, accessed December 26, 2019, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2013/09/24/Economic-Development-Equal-Rights-for-Women>

3 "Removing barriers to women's participation fuels economic development," UN Women, accessed December 26, 2019, <http://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2012/12/removing-barriers-to-women-s-participation-fuels-economic-development>

4 "SDG 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all," UN Women, accessed December 26, 2019, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/women-and-the-sdgs/sdg-4-quality-education>

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6 "Economic Development = Equal Rights for Women?"

7 "Legal Restrictions Are Not the Only Challenges Women Face to Economic Empowerment," Women for Women International, accessed December 26, 2019, <https://www.womenforwomen.org/blog/legal-restrictions-are-not-only-challenges-women-face-economic-empowerment>

8 "Removing barriers to women's labor force participation," Brookings, accessed December 26, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/removing-barriers-to-womens-labor-force-participation/>

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- 9        “The World’s Women 2015,” United Nations Statistics Division, accessed December 26, 2019, <https://unstats.un.org/unsd/gender/chapter4/chapter4.html>
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- 16      “Women’s Progress has Stalled in the United States,” Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, accessed December 26, 2019, <https://www.oecd.org/unitedstates/Gender2017-USA-en.pdf>
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