

Forum: *Human Rights Council*

Issue: *The feminization of poverty*

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Introduction

For centuries, women have existed on the edge of society, often marginalized for the sole reason of not being men. Women's suffrage was not achieved until 1893 in New Zealand-- the first country to grant women the right to vote. In the United States, this reality did not transpire until as late as 1920. It is often incorrectly assumed that social progress went hand in hand with economic development. Even with the rights women have today which were once reserved for only men, women, for the most part in the developing world, have remained in the chains of poverty. The majority of the 1.5 billion people who live on \$1 or less a day are women. This highly gendered nature of welfare and economic disparity remains largely unrecognized. In 1978, Diana Pearce coined the term "feminization of poverty" to explain the trend of income poverty being increasingly concentrated among women in the United States. After four decades, this trend has not only remained, but significantly deepened. In 1995, at the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing, it was announced that 70% of the world's poor were women. Since then, the "feminization of poverty" has been perceived as a global phenomenon. The declaration fueled momentum for establishing the 12 central priorities of the conference as "the need to address the persistent and rising burden of poverty upon women."

In this context, "poverty" does not refer to the mere lack of money, but rather the denial of access to basic needs and fundamental human rights, including property, representation, education, nutritious food, health, etc. Now an undeniable reality, the feminization of poverty has resulted in women being more likely to be poor and employed in low-paid, precarious labor. Moreover, women are less likely to have access to education, credit and land. Women not only suffer the disproportionate effects of poverty itself, but also from the mechanisms which govern poverty in society. In other words, being poor and female subjects individuals to unique forms of control and stigma. In many undeveloped and strictly governed areas of the world, abortion is prohibited, forcing women - particularly *poor women* - to seek unsafe abortion methods. Prostitution - a potential working avenue for most poor women - is also poorly

regulated in many countries, increasing the likelihood of women being criminalized and susceptible to various forms of abuse and assault.

Definition of Key Terms

Feminization of Poverty

The phenomenon where women represent a disproportionate percentage of the world's poor in comparison to men. Increasingly, the poor has been composed of women-headed households, or women in general. It is a trend that has continued to deepen in the past decade, particularly in developing countries. It combines two morally unacceptable phenomena: gender inequality and poverty.

Female-Headed Households

A household in which the adult female is the sole or main decision-maker and income producer. In most countries, women are not considered as heads of households unless no adult male is living permanently in the household. In developing countries, there is a general trend of more and more women being the primary source of economic support for their families.

Informal Economy

The informal economy is the diverse set of economic activities, jobs, enterprises and workers that are unregulated or not protected by the state. It comprises more than half of the global labor force, and half to three-quarters of all non-agricultural employment in developing countries. Although it is difficult to generalize the quality of informal employment, it is often associated with poor employment conditions and increasing poverty. A few characteristic features of the informal sector are lack of protection for workers in the event of non-payment of wages, layoffs without notice or compensation, compulsory overtime or additional shifts, unsafe working conditions, and the absence of various social benefits such as sick pay, pensions, and health insurance. Women, migrants and other vulnerable groups of workers who are excluded from other opportunities have little choice but to take informal low-quality jobs.

Unpaid Care Work

According to OECD, unpaid care work refers to any unpaid services provided within a household for its members, including housework, voluntary community work and care of persons. Such activities are considered work since one could theoretically pay a third person to carry it out.

Background Information

Globalization

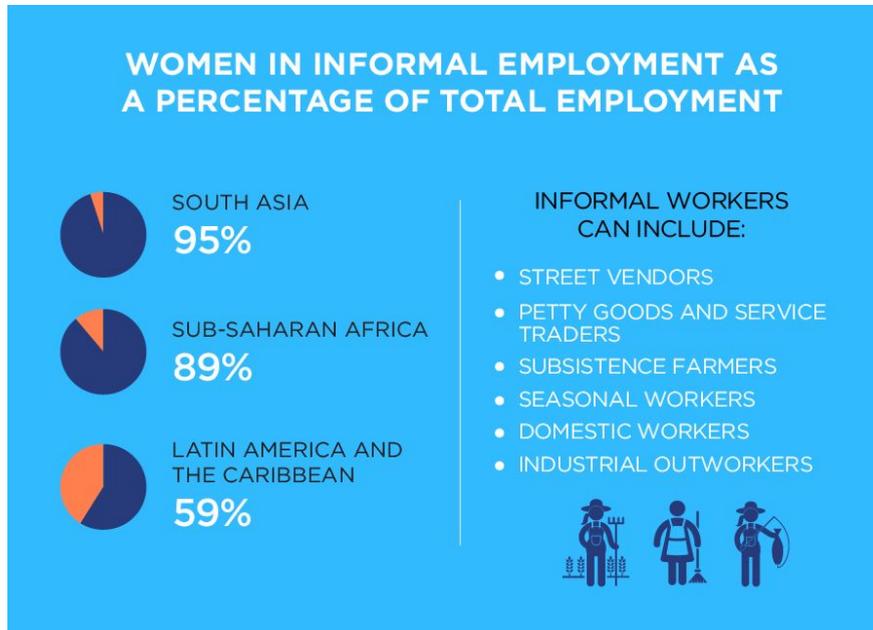
Though the fruits of globalization of the world economy come as exorbitant profits for conglomerates and corporations in the developed world, the negative impact is borne disproportionately by women. Certainly, globalization have contributed to new opportunities for many workers, particularly those who are education, possessing the skills required in the high-tech global economy; however, it has deepened poverty and insecurity for many others who lack the skills needed to compete nor the means to acquire them. As national economies become increasingly linked to global markets, it may lead to a reduction in social programs and public spending, pushing the expenses on to families where it is generally the women who shoulder the additional burden in female-headed households.

Informal work

Informal workers exist everywhere, on every continent and in every country. Most of the working poor of the globalized economy are in insecure and unregulated jobs, in conditions that are more often than not unhealthy and unsafe. Increasingly, rather than witnessing informal work becoming formalized with the growth of the economy, work is instead, moving from regulated to unregulated, from formal to informal. Working in the informal sector would cause workers to lose, among other benefits, job security and medical insurance. This reveals that economic growth does not automatically 'trickle down' to the poor. To the contrary, it can widen the gap between the rich and the poor. As globalization intensifies, it is unlikely to obtain formal employment in many places, with "footloose" corporations outsourcing production to unregulated zones to less regulated areas elsewhere, hiring workers in casual work or informal contract with low pay and little to no benefits.

Women are overrepresented in the informal sector, and there are several dimensions to this basic fact. First, in most developing countries, the informal sector serves as the primary source of employment for women. Available data suggests that the majority of women whom are economically active in developing countries are primarily engaged in the informal sector. In certain countries of sub-Saharan African, virtually every female non-agricultural labor force works in the informal sector, with over 95% of women workers outside agriculture in Mali, Chad and Benin. In Indonesia and India, the informal sector comprises of 90% of women working outside of agriculture. According to available data, in four East Asian countries and in ten Latin American countries, half or more of the female non-agricultural labor force is in the informal sector. Secondly, according to UN statistics, the informal sector is a far larger source of employment for women than it is for men. The proportion of women working in the informal sector exceeds that of men in most countries. Thirdly, women's share of the total informal workforce

outside of agriculture is higher than men's share in 9 out of 21 developing countries for which data are available.



Caption #1: Women in Informal Employment Statistics ([UN Women](#))

Female-Headed Households

There have been few documented programs that target female headship and their consequences. Nonetheless, the number of female-headed households have increased in both developed and developing countries. As such households lack access to remittances from male earners, they are generally assumed to be poorer than male-headed households. Female-headed households are thus, more vulnerable to not only increased unemployment, but reductions in welfare and social spending as well.

Key Issues

Gender-specific measures of control against women

Government policies or the lack thereof can play a salient role in shaping the social and political context in which women live in, particularly poor women; political institutions possess the ability to provide new opportunities for women to rise out of poverty, if they choose to do so. Current government policies in a large number of countries achieve the opposite, in that they constrain a women's capacity to realize their full potential in the working economy.

Regulation of Sex Work

Prostitution, or sex work, is often an industry which women enter due to desperate economic circumstances. The regulation of sex work creates the conditions for poor women to be exposed to criminalization, surveillance and invasion of privacy. Evictions, raids, detention, deportation and removal of children are usually carried out without formal arrest, warrant or other due process, as if one's right is waived and significantly reduced if she is engaging in sex work. What is perhaps most appealing is that in many countries, abuse by law enforcement and other state agents including rape, murder and extortion is carried out with impunity-- free of legal ramifications. Many existing laws severely restrict sex workers' freedom of movement through registration and zoning, barring them from residing in the same area, or assigning their work to isolated regions, rendering them more vulnerable to various forms of violence. Criminalizing prostitution serves to drive sex workers to distance themselves from public services and the authorities, forcing them to hide in the shadows of poverty and isolation, endangering their health. As such, the majority of sex women whom are poor are unable to access fundamental rights such as privacy, equality, association, family life, health, education and housing. Sex workers may further be put at risk by experiencing various forms of discrimination due to their race, ethnicity, disability or sexuality. In the criminalization of prostitution, it is always the women who are punished for the action or "crime" which undeniably involves a man.

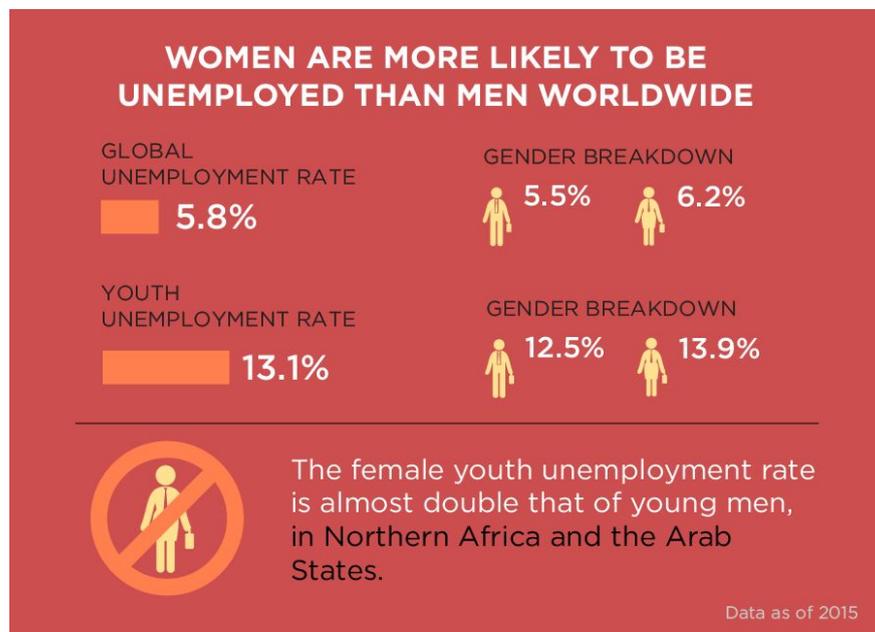
Legal Barriers

Barriers that impede gender equality continues to exist in every country, both in the public and private sphere, rooted in historical relations of unequal power between men and women. Legal barriers serve to exacerbate gender inequality, and a few examples of such are "fewer girls attending secondary school relative to boys, fewer women working or running businesses and a wider gender wage gap" (UN Women). Today, there exists at least one gender-based legal restriction for women involvement in entrepreneurship and employment in 155 countries; in 18 countries, husbands are granted the legal right to prevent their wives from working; and gender-discriminatory laws in hiring practices are in place in 67 countries. Legislations in countries must come in line with CEDAW-- the Convention on the Eliminations of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women -- in order to create conditions that will allow women to fully realize their economic potential.

Unemployment and Occupational Segregation

Globally, women are more likely than men to be unemployed. 197 million of working age people were unemployed in 2015 – 27 million higher than levels of the pre-2007 financial crisis years. Youth unemployment is a significant concern as it can have detrimental long term effects on individuals and

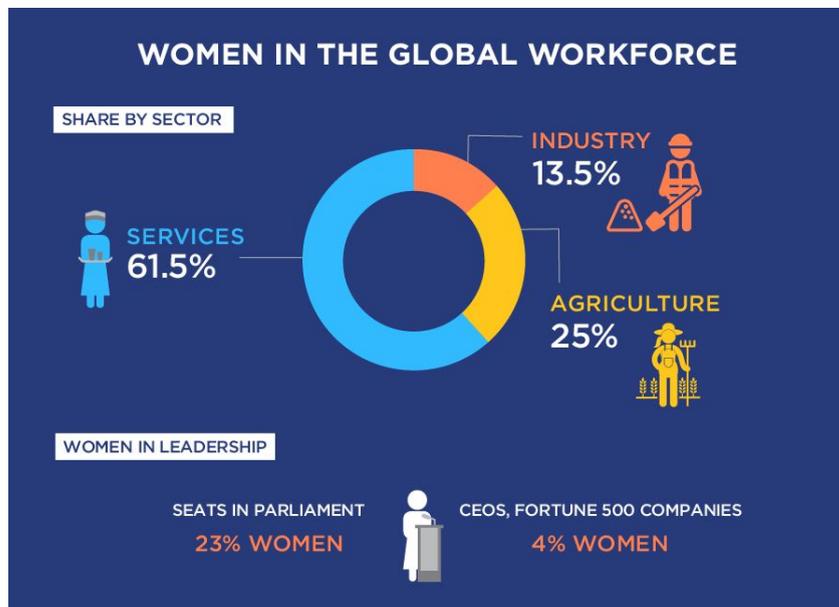
communities, such as poverty, livelihoods and psychosocial impacts. The youth unemployment rate in 2015 stood at 13.1 per cent, which was higher than the global unemployment rate-- 5.8 per cent. The gender disparity in unemployment is particularly acute in regions such as the Arab States and Northern Africa, where female youth unemployment rate is nearly double that of young men, standing almost around 44 per cent, despite rising education attainment for young women in these regions. This suggests that structural barriers in labour markets cannot be overcome by education alone.



Caption #2: Women Unemployment ([UN Women](#))

For the women that do attain jobs, most are concentrated in lower-skill, lower-paid work with higher job insecurity, and women are under-represented in decision-making fields and roles such as in science and technology. In the contemporary world, half of the global workforce work in services, a domain dominated by women. In East Asia, the percentage of women in services reach as high as 77, and in North America 91.4. The region and income-level of women contributes to the variation in where women actually work: in high-income and developed countries, women are largely concentrated in wholesale, education, health and retail trade sectors, whereas women in low/middle-income countries are concentrated in agricultural labour. Occupational segregation is a consequence of gender-based discrimination and structural barriers such as inflexible working hours, poverty or limited to no access to affordable and adequate child care, poor social attitudes and parental leave policies, among other factors. The involvement of women in employer/worker organizations, trade unions and corporate boards contributes to increased women leadership and representation in such areas, and thus plays a crucial role in ensuring adequate work choices and upholding fundamental labor rights for all. Putting women in power to represent such positions can help elevate the status of women in society, thus opening up new

employment possibilities as well as the enactment of policies which may work to the benefit of women in poverty.

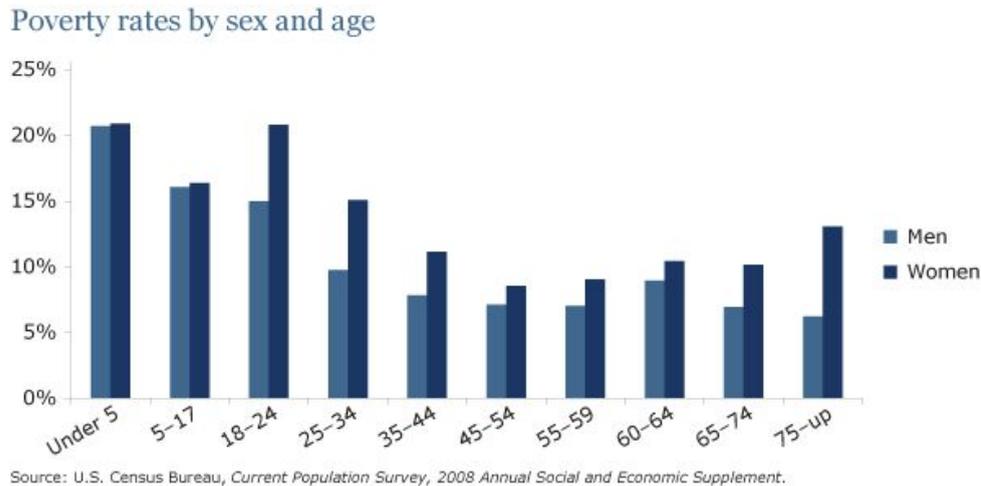


Caption #3: Women representation in workforce ([UN Women](#))

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

United States

Although the United States is often hailed to be among the countries with adequate living standards and an exceptionally high Gross Domestic Product (GDP), the feminization of poverty has been rampant in the United States. In 2015, the poverty rate for women were substantially above that for men. Over 1 in 8 (more than 16.9 million) and approximately 1 in 5 children (over 14.5 million) lived in poverty in the same year; over half of all poor children lived in female-headed households. Despite President Kennedy's passage of the Equal Pay Act in 1963, which made it illegal to pay women lower wages for comparable work, there still exists a great number of factors that contribute to the pay differentials between women and men. Women continue to be discrimination in hiring practices and in the workplace, with many pursuing "pink-collared" jobs-- jobs clustered in the fields of child care, nursing and education. Such jobs pay evidently less than "blue-collar," male-dominated jobs, and do not have the opportunities of upward mobility and certain benefits of higher-ranking positions. A point to note is that poverty rates are especially high for women of color; as such, poverty has been highly racialized in the United States as well.



Caption #4: Poverty rates by sex and age in the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau)

India

In India, the growth of poor women has occurred among landless and wage-dependent households, 9.6% - 7.5 million - of which are headed by women. Women in India work for lower wage scales for fewer hours, and have significantly fewer opportunities for employment. Lower earnings go hand in hand with differentials in demand for male and female labor in agriculture, as well as a crowded labor market. Women are primarily concentrated in less visible, nonmonetary domestic work and subsistence production; in short, they are predominant in agricultural activity, and in India, the status of women is highly influence by economic status, ethnic background and caste. Domestic work actually serves to increase the status of women and households. Poorer households have a higher rate of labor force participation, though as wage laborers rather than unpaid household workers. While there exists stark contrast in the survival and “value” of women regionally, the female labor force is particularly low in all Indian regions. The largest public works program in the world “Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme (MGNREGA) was established in 2006, India. It was designed by the government as a means of staving off migration to cities, building rural infrastructure and improving the alternatives available for those who would otherwise possess no bargaining power in their labor. Today, over half of the works days in the program are claimed by women.

Mali

While certain laws in Mali grant women equal property rights, these laws do not transpire in practice; women-- even education women-- have been prevented from capitalizing and taking advantage of their legal rights. Traditional practice has discriminated against women in matters related to inheritance, as men usually inherits a majority of the family wealth. Further, women’s access to economic, educational and employment opportunities are limited; women compose of approximately

15% of the formal labor force, whereas over 95 percent of women who work outside of agriculture is accounted for in the informal sector. Women are often subjected to harsh living conditions, especially in rural areas where they shoulder much of the laborious farm work and child-rearing. A 2004-8 National Plan of Action attempted to promote women's status, as the government continued to put effort into reducing inequalities between women and men.

Latin America and Caribbean

Whether or not women can make their own income in Latin America largely depends on the territory in which she lives in. The world bank reports that the region have been making considerable leaps towards gender equality. There exists various laws which impede a woman's capacity in entrepreneurship and employment; married women in particular are subject to legal restrictions that hamper their ability to seize economic opportunities. In **Trinidad and Tobago, Barbados, Belize, Dominica, Haiti, Grenada and St. Vincent and the Grenadines**, wives are required to provide additional documentation if they wish to apply for a passport, a policy not required for husbands. In the **Bahamas**, it is difficult for women to confer citizenship to their children, whereas in **Barbados** women are not able to so do at all. Such regulations can serve to significantly limit women's access to various government services. In **Bolivia**, women who are married cannot be employed for a job without their husbands' permission.

Additionally, 16 economies in the region restrict women from performing identical jobs as men, according to a World Bank report. For example, women are not allowed to handle goods at docks or work at night in factories in **Belize**, and **Colombia** and **Honduras** prohibit women from performing work that are classified and deemed as "hazardous." In terms of various forms of violence against women, every nation in the region except Haiti has legislation related to domestic violence in place; however, the enforcement and implementation of such laws remain rather weak.

The region has been making progress on other fronts: the five economies of Mexico, Peru, Bolivia, Trinidad and Tobago and Puerto Rico have establish laws which prohibit gender discrimination in gaining access to credit.

Southeast Asia

In Southeast Asia, the number of Small-and-Medium Enterprises (SMEs) owned by women are rapidly growing, particularly in middle-income countries. The annual growth rate for women-owned SMEs in **Malaysia** is around 10 percent, and in **Thailand**, roughly 40 percent of *all* business are in fact, operated or owned by women. Women's economic empowerment has been a powerful tool in this region for boosting economic development at the domestic level, as well as the global level. Despite great

strides in access to economic opportunities for number, a large number of women still remain in the informal sector. **Vietnam** has over 18 million informal workers, accounting for around 57% of the entire nonagricultural employment nationwide, and 60% of whom reside in rural areas. 7 out of every 10 ignorant on employment policies, and over 40% unaware of the availability of voluntary social insurance.

Timeline of Relevant Resolutions, Treaties and Events

Date	Description of event
19 June - 2 July 1975	<p>First World Conference on Women in Mexico</p> <p>The first conference dedicated to discussions on issues surrounding predominantly women. Since then, significant advances have been achieved in raising the awareness of and attention issues related to gender equality, women empower and rights at the national, regional and global level. More attention has been paid to the circumstances of rural women in particular.</p>
December 18th, 1979	<p>Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination</p> <p>Adopted by the UN General Assembly, the document provided a framework for what constitutes as discrimination against women, setting up an agenda for actions on the national-level to end it. States that have ratified the Convention are legally bound to enact the provisions, and are required every four years to submit national reports that demonstrates they have complied with treaty obligations.</p>
September 15th, 1995	<p>1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing</p> <p>It was announced at this conference that 70% of the world's poor were women. Since then, the "feminization of poverty" has been perceived as a global phenomenon. The declaration fueled momentum for establishing the 12 central priorities of the conference as "the need to address the persistent and rising burden of poverty upon women."</p>
September 24, 2017	<p>Strengthening Women's Access to Justice</p> <p>A high-level lunch event co-hosted by Government of South Africa, Finland, and UN Women, which key figures and leaders participating at guest speakers. Discussions were held on member state's "concrete commitments to action and highlight initiatives to address challenges in women's access to justice, for</p>

example in the areas of legal reform, women's rights and access to justice within traditional and informal justice systems, and in conflict and post-conflict contexts" (UN Women).

Relevant UN Treaties and Events

- General Assembly Resolution on Human Rights and Extreme Poverty, 18 December 1992 (**A/RES/47/134**)
- General Assembly Resolution on the International Year for the Eradication of Poverty (**A/RES/48/183**)
- The Fourth World Conference on Women: Action for Equality, Development and Peace, 4-5 September 1995
- Security Council Resolution 1323 on Women, Peace, and Security, 31 October 2000 (**S/RES/1325**)
- The Commission on the Status of Women at its Fifty-fifth Session, held a panel discussion on "The empowerment of rural women and their role in poverty and hunger eradication, development and current challenges," 22 February – 4 March 2011
- The Commission on the Status of Women at its Fifty-sixth Session, adopted a resolution "Indigenous Women: key actors in poverty and hunger eradication," 27 February – 9 March 2012 (**E/CN.6/2012/L.6**)

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

There have been previous actions to counter the socioeconomic implications of residing in a **female-headed household**. The 1988 Budget Law in Italy appropriated 250 million lire to guarantee basic income for impoverished and poor families, the majority of which were headed by women. Japan and Iran have allocated funds to support programs that integrate female-headed households in rural areas into productive employment. In **Singapore**, the **Small Families Improvement Scheme** was designed and implemented to aid low-income families, specifically those headed by women, for them to gain access to housing and education. In **Greece**, allowances were instituted to benefit female-headed households.

The UNDP has played a key role in fighting poverty and uplifting women in their national economics. They have tapped into various facets of different issues faced by women, and have achieved the following initiatives:

Poverty Reduction: In **Northern Ghana**, the Japanese government and the UNDP assisted over 200 rural women in establishing six training centers which trained them to produce high-quality, soap, shea butter and other goods that have become exports. Along with technical support from the UNDP, **Mauritius'** government utilizes the results of a national "time-use survey" to achieve more informed social policy decisions aimed at reducing daily work burdens for poor women and increasing their opportunities in and access to the labor market. In **Ecuador**, the Ecuadorian Coalition of Persons Living With HIV/AIDS and the UNDP trained 400 leaders -- who in turn conducted outreach with over 50,000 people -- in activism and prevention directed towards reducing discrimination, particularly against HIV positive women.

Environment and Sustainable Development: The UNDP collaborated with The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to work with governments in **Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso** to establish 600 sustainable, rural agro-enterprises purposed for mechanizing laborious tasks such as grinding grain -- equipping women with the capacity to increase their productiving and even sell their products at a higher-value, which in turn increases their income. In **Tanzania**, a Small Grants Programme launched by UNDP-GEF has allowed villagers to capitalize on solar energy for the purpose of pumping water used for drinking and irrigation; it further offers improved food and health security, and generates employment and income opportunities. UNDP has provided support for a Tongolese NGO in the learning of gender impacts on climate change, and to participate in negotiations at the global UNFCCC. As a consequence, the NGO has contributed to the national adaptation program at Togo.

Democratic Governance: The UNDP has partnered with the ministry for local governance, and civil society organizations in 10 Indian states to provide support for women to be elected into public office in over 2,600 village councils; there have been substantiated results of improved service delivery to the most marginalized areas of society. The UNDP also supported the national justice system in the nation of **Timor Leste** to select qualified women as prosecutors, public defenders and judges.

Crisis Prevention and Recovery: Under the "Eight Point Agenda," the UNDP has implemented a vast range of initiatives such as providing assistance to **DR Congo** in the training and sensitizing of their armed forces on gender-relevant issues; in western **Cote d'Ivoire**, they have also assisted a post-conflict support center operated by a local women's NGO, which provides economic, health and psychological services to girls and women affected by conflict. The UNDP a rule of law program in **Somalia** which ensured that approximately 10 percent of the graduates from police academy were women; they also assisted in the establish of the first Women Lawyers

Association in Somalia, which served to provide legal assistance to victims of domestic and violence and rape.

Possible Solutions

Microloans -- the practice of providing small loans to the extreme poor, along with other financial services such as financial training and savings accounts -- has proven to be effective in many developing countries, particularly in the first country which adopted it -- Bangladesh -- under economist Muhammad Yunus.

Organizations and the UNDP can work with national partners in order to promote girls' and women's economic opportunities and rights; assist governments in establishing policies that can meaningfully incorporate women into the budgeting, planning and policy-making processes; deliver environment and energy services such as clean water, mechanized power, and fuel to poor women; harness the local knowledge of women to sustain, manage and protect the environment and its resources.

Relevant organizations and political institutions can work together to increase the number of female figures in public office; promote women's leadership by reforming electoral processes, and ensuring that political parties are more accountable and accessible to women.

The decriminalization of prostitution is a possibility for states to provide greater access towards effective avenues of work for women; other possible policies may include greater access to abortion clinics-- women under strained economic circumstances would become even mired in poverty if forced to conceive a child against their will.

The most basic measure that nations can undertake in creating opportunities for women in the economy is by promoting the ratification, implementation and reporting on women's regional and international instruments including the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

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