

Unpaid or invisible?

Ensuring that women can be what they choose to be

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The 61st session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW61) took place at the United Nations Headquarters in New York, from 13 to 24 March 2017. This year's session saw some of the highest numbers in terms of participation of Member States, and of organization of meetings and events. Representatives from 162 Member States, including 89 ministers, and more than 3900 civil society participants from more than 580 organizations and 138 countries attended the session.

Additionally, the International Federation for Family Development was able to join the 131 written statements submitted to the Commission [1]. More than 600 events were hosted by Member States, UN entities and civil society on the sidelines of the two-week session; approximately 200 took place on UN premises while roughly 400 were staged within the proximity.

On the substantive preparations, the Expert Group Meeting was convened involving the participation of experts from government, civil society, and academics, in close collaboration with the ILO [2]. A Report of the Secretary-General on Women's Economic Empowerment in the Changing World of Work, which examines women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work at a time when the international community has made an unprecedented commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment, better in the 2030 Agenda, was the substantive basis over which the intergovernmental discussions were structured. [3]

"Women's rights are human rights – and attacks on women are attacks on all of us. That is why we have to respond together, [...] for the women domestic workers who globally do two and a half times as much unpaid work as men. And for the nearly one billion women who will enter the global economy in the next decade.

Empowerment will unleash the potential of all these women and girls – and they will lead us to a new future.

The United Nations and I will personally support you every step of the way. It is true, I have to confess, I am a man, but we need all men to stand up for women's empowerment."

From the Secretary-General's remarks at the Commission on the Status of Women 2017.

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Inspired in selected contents of the 'Report on CSW61 and Analysis of the Agreed Conclusions' by Lakshmi Puri.
Available at <http://bit.ly/2oP9UWA>.*

The Commission has been an opportunity for the Member States to re-commit to forge ahead on implementing the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment (GEWE) agenda promises of the Beijing plus 20 Political Declaration, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the Paris Climate Change Agreement, the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants, and the Quito New Urban Agenda, and with specific reference to the priority theme of CSW61 on 'women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work,' and its focus area on 'the empowerment of indigenous women.'

The Executive Director called in her statements this CSW "a barometer of the progress on achieving a world free of gender discrimination and inequality, a world that leaves no one behind." She affirmed that "women's economic success is critical for flourishing economies, a positive world of work and breaking repeated poverty cycles as well as for the success of the 2030 Agenda."

The Deputy Secretary-General Amina Mohammed addressed and inspired the young women and men at the historic CSW61 Youth Forum and called upon them "to work together so to ensure that young women can be whatever they want to be with nothing holding them back and called on young men to be allies and partners." She called upon youth to "go back to their communities and be the change agents and torchbearers the world so desperately needs."

It was emphasized the importance of SDG 5 and its implementation for their empowerment and set out a comprehensive 36-point agenda for action emphasizing that it is crucial to adopt and implement policies, resource programmes, and foster partnerships to economically empower all young women and girls, and sensitize men and young men to embrace this and share decision making space.

Conditions of work for women's economic empowerment

From informal to formal and decent work

The Commission expressed concern regarding unequal working conditions, limited opportunities for career advancement, as well as the growing high incidence of informal and non-standard forms of employment for women in many regions. As women employed in the informal economy and in less skilled work are especially vulnerable to abuse and exploitation, their transition to the formal economy and their equal access to decent work and full and productive employment, and to social protection systems are especially important to dignify their conditions and well being of their families.

In this regard, the Commission committed Member States to facilitate the transition of informal workers, including those engaged in informal paid care and domestic work, home-based work and in micro, small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as work in the agricultural sector and own-account and part-time work, to the formal economy and its recognition.

Actions such as the promotion of decent paid care and domestic work for women and men in the public and private sector; providing social protection and wages that allow for an adequate standard of living; promoting safe working conditions and equal pay for

equal work or work of equal value as well as the occupational safety and health protection to workers in the informal economy are called for.

Although there were strong references to the situation of women in the informal economy, and pathways to formalization and decent work, separate and targeted recommendations regarding women domestic workers by the Commission would have been most relevant.

Gender-responsive Social Protection and Pensions

New territory was covered on the need for gender-responsive social protection, social services and care infrastructure, with a focus on equitable, quality, accessible and affordable early childhood education, child care, elder care, health care, care and social services for persons with disabilities and persons living with HIV and AIDS, which meet the needs of both caregivers and those in need of care in the families.

Establishing or strengthening inclusive and gender-responsive social protection systems, including floors, to ensure full access to social protection for all without discrimination of any kind, as well as measures to progressively achieve higher levels of protection, including facilitating the transition from informal to formal work are posited as critical for the economic empowerment of women in the changing world of work.

Significant recommendations were made to improve the welfare of families in the public and private sector about paid maternity, paternity and parental leave, childcare and dependent care facilities, flexible working arrangements, etc., to address the disproportionate share of unpaid care and advance its sharing and reduction were made. [4]

The call to promote legal, administrative and policy measures that ensure women's full and equal access to pensions, through contributory and noncontributory schemes, independent of women's employment trajectories and reduction in gender gaps in benefit levels was a key value added.

Transforming unpaid care and domestic work

An unprecedented commitment

A major normative win and key conceptual and practical point for implementation was the the commitment to addressing unpaid care and domestic work. The Agreed Conclusions gave guidance how to concretely achieve SDG 5.4 and, going beyond, to recognize, value, reduce and redistribute women's and girls' disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work, and provisioning of related infrastructure and care services. Moreover, unpaid care work was highlighted in terms of the caring for children, older persons, persons with disabilities, and persons living with HIV and AIDS.

Although unpaid care and domestic work has been dealt with previously, including at CSW53, the continuum between the disproportionate burden of this work and its impact on women's ability to realize their full potential in productive employment, the formal economy and family responsibilities, is the value added in these Agreed Conclusions, as is the link to SDG 5.4 implementation.

A key element in this effort is the share responsibility at home between women and men and the prioritizing of social protection policies and infrastructure development. The Commission recognized the uneven distribution of care responsibilities as a significant constraint on women's and girls' completion or progress in education, on family development, on women's entry and re-entry and advancement in the paid labour market and on their economic opportunities and entrepreneurial activities.

The Commission also committed to promoting policies and initiatives supporting the reconciliation of work and family life and the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men, through flexibility in working arrangements without reductions in labour and social protections, provision of infrastructure, technology, and public services, such as water and sanitation, renewable energy, transport, information technologies, as well as accessible, affordable and quality childcare and care facilities and by challenging gender stereotypes and negative social norms and promoting men's participation and responsibilities as fathers and caregivers in the families.

The Commission called for measuring the value of unpaid care and domestic work to determine its contribution to the national economy, for example through periodic time use surveys, and for the inclusion of such measurement in the formulation of gender-responsive economic and social policies. In the data related commitments, the measurement of unpaid care work was considered an indicator of measuring progress in achieving women's economic empowerment and wellbeing of their families.

Work-life balance and family responsibilities

The Commission paid careful attention to balancing, and sharing work and family responsibilities, and the need to eliminate structural barriers for women to be able to participate fully in society, equally in the world of work and fulfil family responsibilities. In this regard, measures to be taken are the strengthening of laws and regulatory frameworks that promote the reconciliation and sharing of work and family responsibilities for women and men, including by designing, implementing and promoting family responsive legislation, policies and services.

When this reflection is linked to the reduction and redistribution of women and girls' disproportionate share of domestic and unpaid work and the role of men and boys, gender-responsive social protection and policies in recruitment, retention, re-entry promotion and progression, it marks an important normative progress.

Conclusions

The CSW61 Agreed Conclusions were adopted by consensus after over three weeks and more than 100 hours of intense and grueling negotiations among delegations supported by UN Women, with civil society including veterans and youth keeping watch and providing inspiration, insights and advocacy, a strong sense of

Unpaid work and equality

In all countries, women do more of such work than men, although to some degree balanced—by an amount varying across countries—by the fact that they do less market work. The unequal distribution of unpaid care work between women and men represents an infringement of women's rights and also a brake on their economic empowerment. Women typically spend disproportionately more time on unpaid care work than men. Time is a limited resource, which is divided between labor and leisure, productive and reproductive activities, paid and unpaid work. Every minute more that a woman spends on unpaid care work represents one minute less that she could be potentially spending on market-related activities or investing in her educational and vocational skills.

On account of gendered social norms that view unpaid care work as a female prerogative, women across different regions, socio-economic classes and cultures spend an important part of their day on meeting the expectations of their domestic and reproductive roles. This is in addition to their paid activities, thus creating the 'double burden' of work for women. How society and policy makers address issues concerning care has important implications for the achievement of gender equality: they can either expand the capabilities and choices of women and men, or confine women to traditional roles associated with femininity and motherhood.

Shared responsibility at home may be the missing link that influences gender gaps in labor outcomes. The gender gap in unpaid care work has significant implications for women's ability to actively take part in the labor market and the type/quality of employment opportunities available to them. The socially prescribed and entrenched gender roles that denote women and girls as care providers can undermine their rights, limit their opportunities, capabilities and choices, and so impede their empowerment. Prevailing gender norms mean that, across all societies, women and girls undertake the bulk of unpaid care work such as looking after and educating children, looking after older family members, caring for the sick, preparing food, cleaning, and collecting water and fuel. This unequal burden of unpaid care undermines women and girls' rights (to decent work, to education, to health, to rest and leisure), limits their opportunities and, therefore, impedes their economic empowerment. It hinders women from seeking employment and income, which in turn holds them back economically.

Written statement of the International Federation for Family Development for the Commission on the Status of Women 2017.

accomplishment, progress and sense of purpose was obvious.

The exemplary role of the CSW61 Chair, Ambassador Antonia de Aguiar Patriota of Brazil and of facilitator of the Agreed Conclusions related negotiations, Fatma Al Zahraa Hassan of Egypt were to truly be recognized and applauded.

CSW61 was an occasion to take stock of the why, what and how of bridging the gender gaps in the world of work decisively through the resolve, actions and investments of all stakeholders, addressing both the supply side and the demand side of the labour market and related enabling environments. Governments, private sector, civil society are expected to do so in the following action categories:

- Strengthening normative and legal frameworks;
- Strengthening education, training and skills development;
- Implementing economic and social policies for women's economic empowerment;
- Addressing the growing informality of work and mobility of women workers;
- Managing technological and digital change for women's economic empowerment;
- Strengthening women's collective voice, leadership and decision-making;
- Strengthening private sector's role in women's economic empowerment.

In comparison with previous Agreed Conclusions the latest document secured pledges on key aspects of gender equality and make progress implementing various family perspective path-breaking commitments and agreed language. Terms such as family responsive legislation, family responsibilities, family environment, welfare of women's families, women's dignified conditions for themselves and their families, rural women's economic wellbeing and their families are all positive outcomes. They are an important leap to build consensus and move from business as usual and focus on tackling the mere practical and pressing challenges that families face daily.

The paragraphs mentioned can be found on the Agreed Conclusions as follows: [5]

- The Commission acknowledges that structural barriers to gender equality and gender-based discrimination persist in labour markets worldwide, which impose greater constraints on women than on men in balancing work and family responsibilities and that those structural barriers need to be eliminated in order for women to be able to participate fully in society and equally in the world of work;
- The Commission recognizes that the sharing of family responsibilities creates an enabling family environment for women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work, which contributes to development, that women and men make a significant contribution to the welfare of their family, and that, in particular, women's contribution to the home, including unpaid care and domestic work, which is still not adequately recognized, generates human and social capital that is essential for social and economic development;
- The Commission expresses concern over the persistently low wages earned by women workers, which frequently prevent women from providing decent and dignified living conditions for themselves and their families, and recognizes the important role of trade unions and social dialogue in addressing persistent economic inequalities, including the gender pay gap;
- The Commission paid careful attention to the need to strengthen laws and regulatory frameworks that promote the reconciliation and sharing of work and family responsibilities for women and men, including by designing, implementing and promoting family-responsive legislation, policies and services, such as parental and other leave schemes, increased flexibility in working arrangements, support for breastfeeding mothers, development of infrastructure and technology, and the provision of services, including affordable, accessible and quality childcare and care facilities for children and other dependents, and promoting men's equitable responsibilities with respect to household work as fathers and caregivers, which create an enabling environment for women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work;
- The Commission committed Member States to facilitate to support the contributions of rural women and women farmers to the agricultural sector, food security and nutrition and the economic well-being of their families and communities.

[1] E/CN.6/2017/NGO/63.

[2] A/70/L.60.

[3] E/CN.6/2017/3.

[4] E/CN.6/2017/15.

[5] E/CN.6/2017/L.5, 15, 16, 21, 40 (i, ee).