



The centrality of sexual and reproductive health and rights to achieving women’s economic empowerment

A briefing demonstrating the interlinkages between sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) and women’s economic empowerment (WEE)

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Introduction

This briefing is intended for civil society advocates working on influencing the outcome of the [Commission on the Status of Women \(CSW\) 61](#) and working within the field of women’s rights and gender justice. It sets out why SRHR must be considered a central part of programming and advocacy on WEE.

Policy focus and attention given to gender equality and women’s empowerment has been growing over the last decade, and there are some areas where links are established more conclusively. Although there is strong documentation on the health benefits of investment in sexual and reproductive health, until recently the non-medical benefits, such as higher levels of social and economic participation, have been largely ignored, partly because they are difficult to measure. While the social and economic implications of sexual and reproductive health and rights are often overlooked, they are no less real. Urgent policy attention is needed to recognize the links between SRHR and WEE.

The priority theme of the CSW 61 is women’s economic empowerment in the changing world of work and the review theme is challenges and achievements in the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals for women and girls. It is important that the Agreed Conclusions adopted by the CSW 61 include strong language on women’s sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) as a central part of enabling women’s economic opportunities and freedom. The following section details why SRHR is key to achieving WEE, and identifies key recommendations for governments:

1.) Sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) are central to women’s economic empowerment

Women’s economic rights, especially in relation to work and income, advance economies, sustainable development and improve livelihoods. However, women still remain more affected by poverty, unpaid care burdens and insecure work than

men. The realization of sexual and reproductive health and rights plays a crucial role in empowering women economically. Realizing SRHR is necessary for women and girls to stay healthy, to participate in education, and to participate in all facets of life, including economic life, free from violence.

Recent studies have begun to build a strong evidence base indicating when women are able to choose if and how many children to have, this can have a positive influence on their lives. For example, studies have shown that, globally, female labour force participation decreases with each additional child by about 10 to 15 percentage points among women aged 25 to 39.¹ Despite this, however, the extent to which women's increased entry into the labour force may be empowering, or even, arguably, improve their well-being, depends on the context, the reasons for women's economic participation, the existence of regulatory frameworks to support women's economic participation, and the type and conditions of the work.² These factors are all heavily influenced by the extent to which women can act freely upon their SRHR. From being able to plan and choose if and how many children to have, to being supported when in work with childcare responsibilities, to having protection from violence in the workplace; the SRHR of women play an important role in shaping future economic opportunities.

Recommendation: *Governments must respect, protect and fulfill women's SRHR. This includes ensuring access to comprehensive and quality SRH services, including family planning, reproductive health supplies, information and education in order for girls and women to make informed choices about both their reproductive and economic lives. It is also important that regulatory measures and gender responsive services are in place that can support women once they are in work.*

2.) The interlinkages between the realization of SRHR and girls' education and future economic opportunities

The education of women and girls is widely recognized as a powerful tool to empower women and girls within the family and society, and is considered a key pathway to employment and earning. Educated women are more likely to marry later, use family planning and access health care; and to understand their rights and have the self-confidence to act on them. Each additional year of schooling for girls improves their employment prospects, increases future earnings by about 10 per cent and reduces infant mortality by up to 10 per cent.³

Post-primary education has far stronger positive effects on empowerment outcomes than primary education.⁴ This means that enabling adolescent girls to continue to secondary school is particularly important. Girls with only primary education are

¹ Grepin KA and Klugman J (2013) Investing in Women's Reproductive Health: Closing the Deadly Gap Between What we Know and What we Do. Washington: World Bank. Available at Accessed 14 January 2015

² Ibid.

³ World Bank (2002) Opening Doors: Education and the World Bank. Available at Accessed 14 January 2015.

⁴ United Nations Millennium Project Task Force on Gender Equality (2005) Taking Action: Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women.

twice as likely to be married before the age of 18 as those with secondary or higher education.⁵ Lack of access to SRHR acts as a significant barrier to post-primary education for girls so addressing this barrier remains a priority.

Early marriage reduces girls' access to education, and anticipation of an early marriage often prevents secondary education for girls. Recent field research in Uganda showed that the limited expectations of girls beyond marriage and the family, as well as the need for girls' labour at home, all make parents less likely to invest in the education of their daughters.⁶ Studies have shown that for each additional year that marriage for girls is delayed, her likelihood of being literate increases by 5.6 per cent and the prospect of her completing secondary school rises by 6.5 per cent.⁷ Moreover, adolescent childbearing may interrupt school attendance and impair young women's long-term social and economic mobility and, indirectly, their empowerment.⁸ However, girls and young women often do not have access to the contraceptives they want and need; in sub-Saharan Africa and South Central and South East Asia, more than 60 per cent of adolescents who wish to avoid pregnancy do not have access to modern contraception.⁹

Recommendations: *Governments must prioritize access to youth-friendly SRH services including family planning, reproductive health supplies, information and education as a key strategy to support girls to stay in school and delay pregnancy and the subsequent effects on their future earnings and employment prospects.*

Governments, educators and civil society should work with communities and parents to build a culture that supports choice and respect for young people and their sexual and reproductive health and rights.

3.) The interlinkages between unpaid care work and SRH and RR

Care work is directly linked to SRHR on several levels. Women's levels of care work affect their access to SRH services, both in terms of time burdens as well as practical barriers, such as being confined to the home due to caring responsibilities. The reverse is true as well: without access to SRH services such as family planning, women cannot choose if, when and how many children to have. This can, in turn, increase their care burden and exacerbate already existing inequalities in women's share of care-giving, as well as the health and economic consequences that result from unplanned and/or frequent pregnancies, such as unsafe abortions, pregnancy complications, and increased rates of maternal and infant mortality.

⁵ UNFPA (2012) *Marrying Too Young: End Child Marriage*. New York: UNFPA. Available at Accessed 8 January 2015.

⁶ Watson C et al (2013) *Good Policies Versus Daily Discrimination: Adolescent Girls and Gender Justice in Uganda*

⁷ World Bank (2012) *Child Marriage and Education: A Major Challenge* (draft). Available at Accessed 15 January 2015.

⁸ Hindin M (2012) *The Influence of Women's Early Childbearing on Subsequent Empowerment in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Cross-national Meta Analysis*.

⁹ UNFPA (2013) *Motherhood in Childhood, Facing the Challenge of Adolescent Pregnancy*. New York: UNFPA. Available at Accessed 14 January 2015.

The care economy is directly tied to both the formal and informal economies. Gender inequality in care-giving responsibilities impacts on women's ability to enter the formal economy and their conditions of work in the informal economy. For example, a woman may be unable to commit to a formal job at regular times every day because she is required to be at home to look after others and perform household tasks. This may lead her to take up work in the informal sector which offers more flexibility (for example, in working hours, location and so on), but more insecure and precarious working conditions. Where women are working in the formal sector outside of the home, there is a knock-on effect in that there will then be care roles that they can no longer perform; this means that there is therefore also a demand for other women to undertake these care roles such as cleaners, child-minders and nursery staff. So, in addition to the unpaid work done primarily by women and girls, the care economy also includes the growing paid care work sector.

Given the role of care work in women's lives, it is unsurprising that more recent studies find that women's empowerment in formal wage employment is tied to the presence (or lack) of regulatory frameworks: that is, the laws and policies that work to either encourage or discourage women from participating in the formal economy. The most frequently cited policies are parental leave, child care and access to contraceptives, and other policies that are often described as 'family friendly' or 'equal opportunity' and that ease the care burden that many women face. However, the full reach of the regulatory environment as it impacts on women's economic empowerment is much broader and includes, for example, equal pay auditing in parts of the Global North and the legal rights of women to own property in parts of the Global South. Lack of these policies, together with a lack of policies which seek to distribute care work evenly (both between women and men and between the state and private households) are cited as reasons that women in many regions remain in the informal or agricultural sectors, and are therefore more vulnerable to poverty, ill health and precariousness.

Regulatory frameworks that address gender inequality are essential for women's participation in the formal wage economy. A 2013 report from Pathways of Women's Empowerment analyzes the effects of regulatory environments on women's participation in the formal economy, using data from Bangladesh, Egypt and Ghana.¹⁰ Findings from Egypt show that there were differences in regulatory frameworks between the formal and informal economic sectors, as well as the public and private sectors. These differences affect women's experience of work. For example, young women in Egypt indicated a fear and experience of sexual harassment and a higher gender pay gap in the private sector, where employers are not subject to 'anti-discrimination' legislation. Similar concerns drove women into the informal sector in Ghana, where lack of regulatory measures means that private employers are responsible for paying for maternity leave and child care

¹⁰ 3 Kabere N (2013) Paid Work, Women's Empowerment and Inclusive Growth: Transforming the Structures of Constraint. UN Women.

without government assistance. This factor, combined with lack of anti-discrimination legislation, means that private employers are less likely to hire women due to concerns about extra costs.¹¹ Given the benefits of child care and other support programs, and the fact that women will continue to work in both the formal and informal economy, support for care work remains extremely important to women's economic empowerment, and to the health and well-being of women and their families.

Recommendations: *Governments must include SRHR in regulatory frameworks that support women's access to decent work. Such frameworks should be expanded across the formal and informal economy.*

4.) Specific attention must be paid to marginalized groups of women, especially women working in the informal economy.

Women face added vulnerabilities depending on where they work in the economy. Although the percentage of women working in formal wage employment worldwide has increased steadily over the past half century, women around the globe are still more likely to work in the informal economy. Gender inequality is the underlying reason for this imbalance and it has severe effects for marginalized groups, including young women, immigrants, women with disabilities and transgender women.

Work in the informal economy tends to be more insecure and offers fewer benefits than work in the formal wage economy, with specific effects on SRHR. Women work in the informal economy for many reasons, including the growth in women's formal wage work, which has resulted in a need for paid care work; flexibility that allows for their own care work; immigration status; and sexual and gender discrimination in the formal economy. A large proportion of the research that has been conducted on women's work in the informal sector has been on domestic work and, in particular, focuses on trafficking and exploitation of children in domestic work. Girls outnumber boys whether performing domestic labour at home or as the victims of trafficking outside the home.

Migrant and immigrant women are often forced into the informal sector as a result of their immigration status, where the lack of regulations makes them more vulnerable to lower wages and workplace discrimination, including sexual assault, as well as less likely to be able to access health care, let alone maternity leave or child care. These shortcomings have resulted in discrepancies between the health outcomes of immigrant and non-immigrant women.

The informal economy is not going away. Regulatory frameworks, including ones that support and promote universal access to SRHR should be expanded to help women access decent work and become healthier and more economically stable. Access to support systems that are traditionally found only in the formal market is a

¹¹ Ibid. p.84.

key part of the story – for many regions and in many economies, the bulk of jobs for women are likely to remain in the informal sector. SRHR must be integrated into regulatory frameworks to support women’s work; in turn, rights delivered through such frameworks must reach women in both the informal and formal economies. These frameworks should be in line with internationally agreed standards.¹² In addition, the SRHR and unpaid care work of women should be taken into consideration in gender transformative programming on women’s economic participation by ensuring that child care and health needs are considered in programme design and implementation.

Recommendation: *Governments must ensure access to SRH services for women working in the informal economy, including migrant girls and women regardless of their immigration status and should decrease structural barriers that prevent migrant and indigenous women’s access to SRH services. Because marginalized women working in the informal economy are particularly vulnerable to sexual assault and gender-based violence, governments must ensure that domestic laws protect women from sexual and gender based violence in line with international obligations and commitments under human rights treaties and that these laws are enforced always.*

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¹² For example, the International Labour Organization Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No 183), its accompanying Recommendation (No 191) and the Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No 156), as well as internationally agreed rights obligations, such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which includes an article on anti-discrimination (article 2, 2) and an article on the right of everyone to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health (article 12,1), as well as progressive immigration policies.