



A FEMINIST APPROACH TO WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT: A COLLABORATION WORKSHOP DISCUSSION PAPER

By Oxfam Canada and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC)

Introduction: context and objectives of the collaboration workshop

The overarching context for this collaboration workshop is a shared commitment to putting gender equality and a transformational feminist approach at the heart of women's economic empowerment (WEE) programming. Our aim is to identify opportunities for action on WEE as the Canadian government develops its implementation strategy and action area policies for the Feminist International Assistance Policy. Specifically, the objectives of the workshop are to:

- Develop a shared understanding of a feminist approach to WEE;
- Identify latest research and best practice on taking a feminist approach to WEE;
- Understand Canada's approach to WEE programming and identify global gaps and Canada's value-added globally;
- Start to identify entry points, partnerships and opportunities for scaled action, investment and global leadership on WEE by the Canadian government, and how to work together to move this agenda forward.

To address our rationale and meet these objectives, Oxfam Canada and IDRC have commissioned this discussion paper, which sets out our thesis, position, and questions for discussion regarding the adoption of a transformational feminist approach to programming on WEE.

Defining women's economic empowerment

It is important to note that the feminist approach adopted by the Canadian government for its Feminist International Assistance Policy is not defined. In fact, there is no universally-accepted definition of WEE, leaving many key global actors to define it for their own purposes:

- **Global Affairs Canada** notes that, "in simple terms, economic empowerment combines the concepts of empowerment and economic advancement".¹



- **OECD DAC Gender Network** focus more on outcomes, defining WEE as women's capacity "to contribute to and benefit from economic activities on terms which recognize the value of their contribution, respect their dignity, and make it possible for them to negotiate a fairer distribution of returns".²
- **The United Nations (UN) Women High-Level Panel on WEE** emphasizes women's economic agency, specifically, "women's ability to succeed and advance economically and their power to make and act on economic decisions".³
- **Oxfam** adopts a more holistic rights-based definition, including women's "rights to control and benefit from resources, assets, income, and their own time" and "the autonomy and self-belief to make changes in their own lives, including having the agency and power to organize and influence decision making, while enjoying equal rights to men and freedom from violence".⁴

Feminist approaches to women's economic empowerment

Feminist approaches to WEE are diverse and have changed over time. The first major approach to focus on women in development was the Women in Development (WID) approach. Grounded in liberal feminism, WID advocates the need to integrate women into existing economic systems.⁵ Its relatively tractable and integrationist mandate helped to draw the support of international governments and development agencies for WID policies and programs.

To address critiques, the WID approach gave way to the Gender and Development approach (GAD)⁶, among others. However, an examination of international commitments and global strategies, to date, demonstrate the predominance of liberal feminist approaches that promote, almost exclusively, increasing individual women's entry into the labour force as well as opportunities for microfinance, cash transfer programs, financial inclusion, skills development, and entrepreneurship training for women. Under this approach, WEE is heralded as "a prerequisite for sustainable development and pro-poor growth",⁷ quoting projections such as:

- closing the gender gap in labour force participation will increase economic growth: boosting GDP by anywhere from 5 percent to 20 percent for most countries,⁸ and increasing global GDP by \$28 trillion by 2025.⁹
- WEE will contribute to reduced poverty, better household nutrition, and improved child health and education.¹⁰

While the liberal feminist approach has been important for mainstreaming gender equality issues in development programming, it also has several limitations. First, the focus on economic growth and increased GDP as a rationale for WEE runs the risk of privileging



economic growth at the expense of women’s human rights, gender equality, and social change. This is problematic ethically as well as practically, since evidence shows that although women’s increased labour force participation can support economic growth and wider development goals,¹¹ not all forms of economic growth are associated with an increase in decent employment opportunities and rights for women.¹² Second, the emphasis on individual women’s opportunities is insufficient without due consideration of the structural barriers they face.¹³ Third, strategies that are employed when WEE is viewed in individualistic terms tend to target women for specific interventions based on a view of women’s experiences as universal, and do not recognize intersectionality.

Meaningful WEE “requires moving beyond helping women to benefit from existing economic opportunities... [to incorporate] an understanding of the unequal gendered power dynamics that infringe on women’s rights”.¹⁴ To this end, we advocate for *transformational feminist approaches* that are concerned with “address[ing] the root causes of structural and systemic inequalities and transform[ing] systems of power, many of which are grounded in social constructions of gender and patriarchal attempts to control women’s bodies and choices”.¹⁵

Principles of a transformational feminist approach to women’s economic empowerment

In recent years, the international community has prioritized WEE through a large and growing number of global commitments.¹ The diverse interpretations of feminist principles remind us that a common definition is not shared by all, and that actions to meet these commitments are determined by the kind of feminist approach employed. The following principles are central to a transformational feminist approach to WEE:

- *Address the structural and social causes of inequality*: To achieve meaningful WEE and growth that works for everyone, it is important to design programs adopting a holistic approach to address the underlying structural and social causes of women’s economic inequality, including creating and enforcing laws that ensure the rights of women, and changing attitudes, norms, and behaviours that perpetuate gender inequality.
- *Treat WEE as an end in itself*: A feminist approach that is transformational puts human rights and dignity at the heart of all interventions, treating them as ends in themselves. This requires a shift in focus from ‘advancing women’s rights for economic

¹ For example, the recommendations of the UN Women High-Level Panel on Women’s Economic Empowerment, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in which WEE is prominent in 10 of the 17 global goals and 33 of 168 indicators; the Addis Ababa Action Agenda of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development for which there are 5 areas of commitments and more than 16 policy and financing actions to promote women’s rights to economic and productive resources; the Grand Bargain and World Humanitarian Summit’s Agenda for Humanity; the Sendai Framework; the UN Global Compact; G7 commitments; etc.



development outcomes’ - for which women are employed as instruments for economic growth - to ‘improving economic systems and processes to ensure women’s rights and empowerment’. This also raises questions about the extent to which ‘win-win’ rhetoric for WEE and economic growth reflects transformational feminist goals.

- *Agency*: It is crucial to move beyond an approach that treats women as beneficiaries, and toward one that places women at the centre as decision-makers with voice and agency. Agency allows us to recognize that women are knowledgeable experts in their own right”.¹⁶
- *Invest in local women’s movements and organizations*: Local women’s movements and organizations are important partners to mobilize communities and effect social norm change. They are already on the front lines doing the heavy lifting, and they require resources to facilitate research and programming, build capacity, mobilize, innovate, and grow.
- *Incorporate intersectionality*: Those designing WEE programs must recognize women’s diversity and the ways that multiple aspects of identity intersect to create individuals’ lived experiences of economic inequality. It is also important to recognize and address the needs of women who are most marginalized in communities due to their race, class, age, sexuality, disability, marital or indigenous status, among other factors. Incorporating an intersectional lens to gender-based analysis, budgeting and reporting frameworks is an important first step.
- *Promote data collection and accountability*: The regular collection, analysis, and use of data disaggregated along intersectional and gender lines is necessary to benchmark progress and to hold governments and organizations accountable for their work on WEE. Progress has been made, especially in the Sustainable Development Goal framework, but challenges remain. Equally important are questions about how to accurately measure WEE, and assess and compare the impact of programs across diverse contexts.¹⁷ The lack of a clear and consistent definition of WEE is a serious limitation for data collection.

These core principles offer a starting point to develop a shared understanding and definition of a transformational feminist approach to WEE. Governments and organizations can drive this agenda, in part, by focusing on several currently neglected areas of WEE programming.



Neglected areas of WEE programming

The following programming areas are central to a transformational feminist approach to WEE that places women's rights and well-being at the center rather than prioritizing economic growth. Other areas also warrant further exploration – including migration, climate change, and sexual and reproductive health and rights – but it is beyond the scope of this paper to address all of them. The areas of analysis discussed in this paper are both international and domestic in scope.

1. Economic rights, finance and decision making

Dominant approaches to WEE programming have tended to prioritize individual women's finance and decision making, often by providing them with access to jobs, training, credit, and financial services. These are important issues, but a focus on individual women's opportunities obscures the structures that create gender-based economic inequality in the first place,¹⁸ leaving them intact. Emerging research finds that projects focusing on women's economic opportunities, access, and inclusion receive, by far, the most OECD donor investment (approximately 3.6 times more than other WEE programs).¹⁹ Other areas require attention from a transformational feminist perspective, such as women's economic rights, legal discrimination, and providing adequate social and legal protections to women in the informal labour sector.

Evidence and analysis of the main issues

Legal and customary gender discrimination

Discriminatory laws limit women's mobility, property rights, land tenure, and access to financing, hindering their agency and financial decision-making power. Out of 189 countries, nearly one third (30 percent) legally restrict women's agency or freedom of movement,²⁰ and more than half (55 percent) have laws preventing women from working certain jobs due to gender bias and discrimination. Women comprise just 20 percent of the world's landholders, and in many countries, have limited rights to secure land ownership; women may also be forced out of their homes upon the death of a husband or if an abusive partner kicks them out.²¹ Even when laws are in place to protect women's access to land or freedom to hold jobs, customary laws and practices still discriminate against women by restricting their control or ownership of land and property.²²

Women are the majority of informal sector workers

Most WEE programming has centered on promoting women's ability to participate in the formal labour sector, but this approach excludes women who work in the informal sector, where access to basic rights, social protections, and job security are especially lacking.²³ Among 43 countries with available data, informal employment accounted for more than 70



percent of total non-agricultural employment for women in 15 countries.²⁴ Women who work in the informal sector are often concentrated in the most disadvantaged, vulnerable and lowest-paid informal jobs, such as domestic work and piece-rate home-based work.²⁵

2. Decent work and segregation

The concept of 'decent work' is an internationally recognized labour standard endorsed by the UN and the International Labour Organization, among other multilateral institutions. Despite this, WEE programming has not sufficiently addressed the structural barriers that prevent women from accessing decent work – i.e. work that allows for safe, just, and favourable working conditions; equal pay for equal work; compensation sufficient to maintain an adequate standard of living; and social protections such as the rights to form and join trade unions, among others.²⁶ When so many women continue to experience low and unequal pay, exploitative and sometimes abusive working conditions, and gender and occupational segregation, promoting meaningful WEE demands a more holistic approach.

Evidence and analysis of the main issues

Occupational segregation

Working women are more likely than men to be employed in the agricultural sector, and in low-paying and gender-segregated jobs with few social protections, particularly in developing countries.²⁷ Women earn on average 24 percent less than men.²⁸ Not one country has gender parity in pay.²⁹ Women are also half as likely as men to work full time,³⁰ and less likely to receive a pension,³¹ which translates into large income inequalities throughout their lives. While there are potential benefits, particularly in service sector, there is a risk that occupational segregation and gender inequalities will become more pronounced as digital technologies and automation replace lower-skilled labour-intensive sectors that have a large share of female workers.³²

Inadequate social and legal protections

When governments do not adhere to international labour standards and social protections, women's access to decent work is also restricted.³³ The World Bank counted 167 out of 189 countries with laws that limit women's economic opportunities, and 104 with laws preventing women from working certain jobs, like manufacturing and construction, because of stereotypical ideas of what a woman can and should do.³⁴ Where laws do exist to protect women's economic and labour rights, they are often unevenly applied and inadequately enforced.

Gender segregation in education and training programs

Although gender education gaps have significantly improved in past decades, women and girls remain highly underrepresented in certain fields deemed unsuitable for women,



including Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics (STEM) where they constitute just 30 percent of students enrolled in higher education,³⁵ and in emerging fields like renewable energy and environmental conservation. Gender segregation is further reinforced by trends in large-scale Technical and Vocational Educational and Training (TVET) programs that tend to be skewed in favour of men; globally, women comprise 44 percent of those enrolled.³⁶ Of the limited number of TVET programs available to poor women, most tend to focus on stereotypically female occupations such as beautician training, tailoring and embroidery.³⁷

3. The care economy

Women's unequal burden of care is increasingly being recognized as a barrier to their social, political, and economic empowerment.² Yet issues related to the care economy still do not get the attention they deserve from governments and aid agencies. The care economy receives very little financial investment from DAC donor countries, including Canada, constituting less than half of the amount that other types of WEE programs receive.³⁸

Evidence and analysis of the main issues

Gender care gaps

Women in every country around the world shoulder a disproportionate responsibility for domestic work and unpaid care. This work is often physically and emotionally demanding, inefficient, and unequally distributed, with women spending one to three hours more a day on housework than men, and two to ten times the amount of time each day to care for children, elderly, and the sick.³⁹ This is in addition to any paid activities, thus creating the 'double burden' of work for women. The gender care gap is most pronounced in developing countries, especially in rural settings and in contexts with high levels of male migration resulting in more single-parent female-headed households.⁴⁰

Lack of public infrastructure and basic services

The drudgery of daily chores is amplified when families lack access to time-saving equipment, public infrastructure like electricity, transportation, and running water, and basic services like child care.⁴¹ For women and girls around the world, household chores like laundry, cooking, cleaning, collecting water and caring for dependents take a huge amount of time and energy – between three and six hours per day, or more in rural areas.⁴² Poor households are particularly negatively impacted, as they have less resources to pay

² For example, Sustainable Development Goal 5 aims to empower women and girls and calls for greater recognition and redistribution of unpaid care and domestic work, and the UN High Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment identifies recognizing, reducing, and redistributing unpaid care work as crucial for promoting WEE.



for care services, and have less access to services and infrastructure that can help lessen the burden of domestic and care work.⁴³

Women's double burden also harms their children

Women's heavy workloads have consequences for their children, ranging from neglect to a transfer of work duties, undermining their schooling and health.⁴⁴ Many older children are expected to shoulder adult responsibilities, looking after younger siblings and sometimes helping with their mothers' paid work activities.⁴⁵ Recent research from IDRC's GrOW program shows that access to childcare can eliminate some of the potential harms to children and improve children's health and cognitive development leading to higher lifetime earnings and life expectancy,⁴⁶ and an increase in school enrollment for older siblings.⁴⁷ Moreover, it is widely recognized that addressing girls' unpaid care responsibilities, including childcare, is central to increasing girls' participation and attainment in secondary education.⁴⁸

4. Social norms and women's agency

The root causes of women's economic inequality can be traced to patriarchal social norms that drive expectations around women's role as primary caregivers, perpetuate gender bias and discrimination in the labour force, and dictate attitudes towards women's rights, their mobility, and the acceptability of violence against women.⁴⁹ Focusing on economic inclusion alone is not enough to guarantee women's broader empowerment – this requires additional approaches that seek to transform adverse social norms and promote women's agency, and methods to accurately evaluate this change.

Evidence and analysis of the main issues

Gendered socialization drives inequality

Gendered socialization starts early in life with girls spending 30 percent more time than boys on domestic and care work.⁵⁰ Later in life, social norms reinforce ideas about appropriate attitudes, behaviors, and activities for men and women.⁵¹ Internalized gender biases impact women's own attitudes and preferences toward work, leisure, and even their perceptions, and sometimes acceptance, of GBV. To facilitate a transformational feminist approach to WEE, programs should focus on reforming the unequal norms that structure households, communities, institutions, legal systems, and the economy, rather than focus on individual behaviour.

Challenges of measuring of social norms and women's agency

Social norms and women's agency are often not clearly conceptualized or measured in international assistance indexes or programs. This is partly due to the difficulty of separating social norms from individual preferences and from actions,⁵² and of accounting



for differences across countries and cultural contexts. Moreover, institutions responsible for women's empowerment are often politically weak, poorly resourced, with limited capacity, and lacking clearly defined objectives and measurable outcomes and impacts.⁵³ This has led to an evidence base on WEE that focuses more on economic growth than on measuring women's subjective experiences of empowerment (women's agency, decision-making power, self-efficacy, etc.).⁵⁴

5. Gender-based violence

The UN has declared that violence against women and girls is a global pandemic and a serious obstacle to sustainable development that imposes large-scale costs on families, communities, and economies.⁵⁵ One in three women have experienced sexual or physical violence in her lifetime.⁵⁶ Most of this violence is intimate partner violence. Globally, almost one third (30 percent) of women who have been in a relationship report that they have experienced some form of physical and/or sexual violence by their partner.⁵⁷ Gender-based violence (GBV) also happens in the workplace and in transit. In many settings, women are vulnerable to abuse and violence when carrying out daily tasks linked to their livelihoods.⁵⁸ GBV in humanitarian crises and conflicts is particularly acute. Despite the known prevalence of GBV worldwide, the link between economic participation and GBV remains largely unaddressed in WEE programming.

Evidence and analysis of the main issues

Economic marginalization increases women's vulnerability to GBV

Women are more likely to experience GBV if they have low education,⁵⁹ and if they are members of marginalized groups like rural women, domestic workers, migrants, and low-skilled women.⁶⁰ Research shows that women who are exposed to intimate partner violence are employed in higher numbers in casual and part-time work, and their earnings are 60 percent lower compared to women who do not experience such violence.⁶¹ When women cannot work due to violence, their employment can be put at risk, jeopardizing much-needed income, autonomy and their ability to leave abusive relationships. Economic vulnerability can similarly lock women workers into dependence on exploitative employers, unethical recruitment agents and traffickers.⁶² Situations of conflict, post conflict and displacement can also exacerbate existing partner or non-partner GBV, or lead to new forms of violence against women.⁶³

Laws preventing GBV are non-existent, inadequate or not enforced

The root causes of GBV include unequal social norms, harmful practices and inadequate legal protections. Approximately 140 countries have passed laws on domestic violence and 76 have laws on marital rape,⁶⁴ meaning many countries still do not treat violence against women, particularly domestic or intimate partner violence, as a crime.⁶⁵ Where laws do exist



to end harmful practices like child, early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation, or domestic and workplace violence, adequate enforcement and government accountability are often lacking.

The links between GBV and WEE are not well established

Women face barriers discussing and reporting violence, including domestic or workplace retaliation, social stigma, and trauma recounting situations of violence, and due to these factors most quantitative approaches to document GBV risk underreporting and may not produce insight into the range of violence women face and associated risk factors.⁶⁶ Less than 40 percent of women experiencing violence seek help, less than 10 percent report the violence to the police.⁶⁷ It is also seldom that programming on WEE builds in components designed to track the impact of WEE activities on GBV, or to minimize its likelihood.⁶⁸ Yet research has shown that WEE programming can, in some cases, result in an increase in GBV for women who challenge the status quo.⁶⁹ We need more and better quality research on the links between GBV and WEE.⁷⁰

Questions for participant discussion and reflection

- How can donors and practitioners address WEE from a feminist perspective? What does a transformational feminist approach to WEE mean in practice?
- What commitments has Canada made already? What are the global gaps? What is Canada's value-added?
- How can "growth that works for everyone" and the FIAP address WEE from a feminist perspective? How does the FIAP live up to what we know from the research on WEE? What is missing and what do we need to know?
- What is the latest research and best practice on taking a feminist approach to WEE?
- What kind of partnerships need to emerge? What kind of investment is necessary? How do we take best practice to scale? What needs to happen to move the agenda forward?
- What strategies for measuring WEE are needed in order to realize the goals and the opportunities for action examined here?
- What limitations need to be identified and what strategies for overcoming these challenges are needed for moving forward?

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