



Briefing note

Women's economic empowerment

Supporting transformative change

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Summary and key recommendations

Women's economic empowerment (WEE) is a **critical outcome** in itself and has the potential to enhance economic growth and wider development outcomes for women, their families and societies. International action has led to recent advances, notably the efforts to address Agenda 2030 and the gendered inequalities exposed and reinforced by Covid-19. However, funding for gender issues remains limited and many WEE strategies do not address the root causes of prevailing inequalities.

There is **growing evidence** of the components of WEE and how these can be supported in diverse contexts and for different groups of women. We highlight access to quality, decent paid work; the valuation and distribution of unpaid work; property rights and financial inclusion; social protection; education, skills development and training; health, especially sexual and reproductive health; and collective action and leadership. For each, we discuss gendered inequalities, changes brought about by the pandemic and the impact on WEE.

An **emerging consensus** on best practices for supporting WEE calls for investing in systems-level approaches seeking to address the root causes of gender equality. This involves promoting equitable norms; ensuring that women's preferences and priorities inform programming and monitoring; privileging the needs of women facing intersecting challenges; supporting women's and feminist movements; and allowing for flexible funding models that bolster recipient autonomy.

Philanthropic activity should not only focus on components of WEE as conventionally understood but also explore **gender-transformative** alternatives, including equitable economic models and approaches to 'green growth' that tackle the disproportionate effects of environmental degradation on women and girls.

1. Introduction

Women's economic empowerment (WEE) is a critical outcome in itself, with the potential to enhance economic growth and wider development outcomes for women, their families and societies. Evidence is accumulating on its components and how these can be supported in diverse contexts and for different groups of women. Its achievement has become a global policy priority given its potential contribution to Agenda 2030 – notably Goal 5 on gender equality and Goal 8, which strives to achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all.¹

The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the precarity of many recent WEE gains, with some reversals of progress in areas including labour force engagement, education, sexual and reproductive health, and early marriage. But it has also highlighted the importance of investments in key sectors such as care infrastructure and the extension of social protection and services to previously excluded groups. The moment is ripe to build on this momentum to bolster recovery and the ability of women and girls to withstand future shocks.

Advancing WEE can be challenging. The norms underpinning gendered outcomes can be 'sticky' or resistant to change, particularly when reinforced through social institutions. Progress is often non-linear, and subject to backlash and reversals (Marcus and Harper, 2014). Different understandings of WEE often translate into siloed approaches, while funding is relatively limited (Box 1) and not always delivered in ways that support systemic change. To have an impact, funders need to understand the landscape and make strategic decisions about key investment areas. Context-relevant strategies – particularly for marginalised women – will be crucial to ensure equitable outcomes. This brief aims to support this process by discussing the concept of WEE, highlighting key trends and evidence (with particular attention to the effects of Covid-19), and identifying principles to support transformative philanthropic activity.

Box 1: Funding for gender equality

Despite recent increases, only 2% of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Development Assistance Committee member aid targets gender equality in the economic and productive sectors as a principal objective (OECD, 2021a). Philanthropic finance has also been relatively limited: between 2016 and 2019, an estimated 8% targeted gender issues, of which 83% was directed to family planning and reproductive health (OECD, 2021b).² Within WEE funding, there is evidence that projects aiming to improve income-earning among women have received the least funding (Meeran, 2022).

1 Also relevant are Goals 1 on poverty, 2 on food security, 3 on health, 4 on education and 10 on inequalities.

2 Also see OECD Creditor Reporting System: <https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?DataSetCode=crs1>.

Background

2.1 What is WEE?

Despite considerable attention in recent years, there is no universally agreed definition of WEE, nor a single approach to supporting it. Increasing women's individual and collective economic advancement, agency and power to access and control economic assets and make economic decisions have long been core to many understandings of feminist academics and practitioners (Golla et al., 2011; Taylor and Perezniето, 2014). While some actors focus largely on 'economic inclusion', typically relating to women's labour market participation and/or financial inclusion,³ others emphasise terms of entry into the labour market, especially for poorer women, insisting on their dignity, a fair distribution of the returns to growth and decent working conditions (Eyben et al., 2011).

Proponents of broader interpretations of WEE tend to focus on a range of core components (Figure 1). Consensus has grown around the multi-faceted nature of WEE, whereby securing advances requires change in women's lives individually, collectively and at the structural level, including in political and economic institutions (Hunt and Samman, 2016; UNHLP, 2016). No single intervention or approach is likely to address all aspects and be effective for all women (Cornwall and Edwards, 2016). Rather, it is important to take an intersectional approach which recognises that women experience inequalities differently depending on aspects of their identity, experience and/or location. WEE cannot be achieved unless the lives of the most marginalised women in societies are transformed (Hunt and Samman, 2016).

3 e.g., The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development's approach to 'Gender equality and inclusion': <https://www.ebrd.com/gender-equality-and-inclusion.html>

Figure 1 Components of women's economic empowerment



Note: Adapted from Hunt and Samman (2016)

2.2 Why support WEE?

WEE can have far-reaching benefits. The UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on WEE highlighted those relating to human rights, growth and human development, and business, and recommended that interventions span all three spheres (UNHLP, 2016; 2017). Key justifications are as follows:

- Human rights:** WEE is a critical element of women's rights, and its advancement requires analysis of the power relations affecting women's lives. Ensuring equal economic outcomes for women and men is essential to fulfil international human rights standards such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women, as well as globally agreed policy frameworks such as the Sustainable Development Goals.

- **Human development and growth:** WEE has significant human development impacts – rises in women’s share of household income are positively associated with investments in children’s education and health, and reductions in household poverty and vulnerability to economic shocks (World Bank, 2012; 2013). Gender equality can boost per capita income, economic growth and national competitiveness (Woetzel et al., 2015; UNHLP, 2016). In 2020, management consultancy firm McKinsey estimated potential gains of \$13 trillion in global GDP by 2030 if countries achieved gender parity in line with the fastest-improving country in their region (Madgavkar et al., 2020). World Bank research shows that if women and men worked at equal rates, for equal pay and equal hours, this could lead to a global gain of \$160 trillion; instead, gender inequality costs countries 14% of their wealth (Bourgault et al., 2018).
- **Business:** Women’s inclusion and advancement within company workforces, management and boards bolsters organisational effectiveness and economic returns. Analysis covering 15 countries found a 48% performance differential between the most and least gender-diverse companies. Still higher returns to racial and ethnic diversity highlight the value of empowering minority women.⁴

These potential returns notwithstanding, there is no automatic ‘win-win’ between gender equity and wider outcomes (Kabeer and Natali, 2013; Graham and Chattopadhyay, 2012). Instead, realising WEE requires concerted, targeted efforts that prioritise women’s needs and preferences and recognise their heterogeneity. Moreover, approaches focused on WEE as a means to advance growth, development and business have been accused of instrumentalising women, subsuming ‘intrinsic’ gains for women under wider development and economic objectives. Some feminists contend that these approaches leave dominant economic thinking and systems untouched and therefore offer limited potential to support the environmental, economic and social shifts needed to achieve durable change. Such approaches neglect, for example, the profound linkages between environmental degradation and gender equality. Instead, this critique goes, only approaches to WEE which foreground new, equitable economic models and environmental sustainability can deliver genuine change (e.g., GADN, GAPS and the SRHR Network, 2015; Aguilar et al., 2015).

2.3 Global action to promote WEE

Internationally-driven action underpins many WEE advances. Critiques notwithstanding, the High-Level Panel’s key legacy was to mobilise interest in WEE among policy-makers, funders and practitioners (Box 2).

4 (Hunt et al., 2020). The analysis covered over 1000 companies with annual revenues exceeding \$1.5 billion in Australia, Brazil, Denmark, France, Germany, India, Japan, Mexico, Nigeria, Norway, Singapore, South Africa, Sweden, the United Kingdom and the United States.

Box 2: Key examples of the WEE agenda at the international level

Since 2015, numerous international actors have launched initiatives to take forward WEE. Notable examples include:

- Implementation of **relevant Sustainable Development Goals**, notably Goal 5 on gender equality and Goal 8 on decent work. The UN Commission on the Status of Women provides an annual stocktake of progress, with Agreed Conclusions on ‘Women’s economic empowerment in the changing world of work’ reached during the 61st Session in 2017 and reviewed during the 66th Session in 2022.
- The **Generation Equality Forum**, convened by UN Women and co-hosted by the governments of Mexico and France in 2021, reaffirmed the scope of WEE and galvanised action among UN Member states and a diverse coalition of supporters and funders, notably through the Economic Justice and Rights Action Coalition commitments in the Generation Equality Forum five-year ‘Global Acceleration Plan’.
- The **Global Alliance on Care**, launched at the 2021 Generation Equality Forum meeting in Mexico, features governments, trade unions, non-governmental organisations and other civil society actors, philanthropic organisations, private sector actors and international institutions mobilising towards the achievement of a feminist care agenda by 2026.⁵
- The **Donor Committee for Enterprise Development**, comprising government, philanthropic and multilateral agencies focused on private sector development, established a WEE Working Group to support the implementation of gender-sensitive programming.⁶

Many other initiatives support WEE in practice even if they are not ‘badged’ as such. These include the adoption and ratification of new International Labour Organization (ILO) standards, including Convention No. 190 for the eradication of violence and harassment at work, alongside wider efforts to support women’s access to decent work under its core mandate.

Components of WEE – current issues

Core components of WEE, which can enable or constrain progress, include decent work, unpaid care, property rights and financial services, social protection, education and training, health (especially sexual and reproductive health), collective action and leadership. This section discusses gendered inequalities and the impact of Covid-19 in each area. Annex 1 (available online)⁷ outlines potential policy responses and key stakeholders.

5 For more information see: <https://alianzadecuidados.forogeneracionigualdad.mx/?lang=en>.

6 See: <https://www.enterprise-development.org/implementing-psd/womens-economic-empowerment/>.

7 <https://odi.org/en/publications/women's-economic-empowerment-supporting-transformative-change>

3.1 Access to quality, decent paid work

Though rising female labour force participation is one of the most remarkable economic developments of the last century, it has not increased much since the millennium and remains well below that of men (Klasen, 2019).⁸ The participation of mothers has lagged behind women's overall participation and is substantially lower than that of fathers. This gap is one element of the so-called 'motherhood penalty'. Working fathers, in contrast, enjoy a 'fatherhood premium', being more likely to participate in the workforce than all men in the same age group (ILO, 2022). Across diverse countries, women earn, on average, 20% less than men (ILO, 2019). This is attributed to their over-representation in sectors and occupations with a higher incidence of low pay, reflecting the undervaluation of so-called 'women's work'; discriminatory hiring and promotion practices; and a higher likelihood of being in part-time work (ibid). Women are more likely to be in informal employment, notably domestic, home-based or contributing family work, putting them at higher risk of precarious working conditions and poverty (ILO, 2018b: 20-21; Chen, 2012; Carre et al., 2020). Workplace violence is pervasive globally – especially sexual harassment, experienced by roughly half of women over the age of 15, which goes largely unreported to employers (ILO and UN Women, 2021).⁹

During the Covid-19 pandemic, female job loss rates (5.7%) were nearly double that for men (3.1%) (Madgavkar et al., 2020). Women were more likely to reduce their hours or leave the workforce entirely to fulfil care responsibilities, and were over-represented in many of the hardest-hit sectors.¹⁰ This signalled a dramatic reversal of a slow but steady upward trend in the labour market participation of women with partners and small children (ILO, 2022). Informal workers (61% of workers globally) bore the brunt of the crisis given the nature of their work and a dearth of labour and social protections.¹¹ Unsurprisingly, poverty rose, with disproportionate effects on women, especially those of reproductive age (Azcona et al., 2020b). The effects were amplified for women facing intersecting inequalities: in a representative sample of five European countries,¹² lower-income women, ageing women and single mothers were at greater risk of poverty (Profeta et al., 2021), whereas in low-income countries (LICs) and middle-income countries (MICs), women in informal work and migrant women were singled out (OECD, 2020). The then-Executive Director of UN Women, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, called it 'the most discriminatory crisis we have ever experienced' (Alaoui, 2021). In 2021, the World Economic Forum concluded that it would take 136 years to achieve gender parity, 36 years longer than it had reported in 2020 (WEF, 2021).

8 Per ILO, the ratio of female to male labour force participation over the past five years has averaged 68% (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SL.TLF.CACT.FM.ZS>)

9 ILO Convention 190 (2019), which calls on governments to address violence and harassment in the workplace, had been ratified by 15 countries as of May 2022 (<https://tinyurl.com/3t4bunb8>).

10 e.g., hospitality (accommodation and food services), retail and care work (notably domestic work).

11 In lower-income countries, 92% of female workers and 87% of male workers work informally (Bonnet et al., 2019).

12 Italy, France, Germany, Poland and Sweden.

3.2 Valuation and distribution of unpaid work

The constraints to women's participation in paid work and the quality of that work often link directly to disproportionate unpaid care responsibilities (Samman et al., 2016; ILO, 2018c). Globally, women carry out 76% of unpaid care work, a figure which falls to 65.5% for high-income countries (HICs), although income-related differences within countries also exist. There is no country where men participate either equally or more than women. Links to women's employment, especially informal work, are well documented. For example, Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) has shown how care responsibilities channel women towards more flexible, insecure and poorly paid occupations, reduce their availability for paid work, lead them to work at less profitable times of the day and, when young children accompany mothers to work, render them subject to distractions that lower incomes (Rogan and Alfery, 2019). Even before Covid-19, the ILO (2018c: xxvii) had warned of 'a severe and unsustainable global care crisis', while in 2015, UN Women estimated that just 4% of women in 31 LICs and MICs had access to quality childcare services (Staab, 2015). Childcare is a constraint in HICs too: in the United States, poorer women spend 17% of their income on childcare compared to 8% for richer women (Fabrizio et al., 2020).

During the pandemic, time spent on domestic work rose for both men and women, but women reported far greater increases in time spent and in the intensity of this work (Seedat and Rondon, 2021). Only 40 countries – mostly HICs – introduced additional childcare measures in response (World Bank, 2021). This begs the question of how countries can build **durable and inclusive government-led childcare systems** that meet the needs of economically vulnerable women. A related issue involves investments in the care workforce – a potential win-win for WEE, equity and groups needing quality care (Box 3).

Box 3: Returns to WEE from investments in the care workforce

Demographic trends signal increased demand for care services, a sector absorbing a high share of female workers. The related growth in 'global care chains' sees large numbers of female workers migrate internally and internationally to fill care-related jobs, typically outside the remit of full labour and social protections. Recent and projected trends in labour migration suggest that mobility will grow in the years to come. While growing demand for care risks perpetuating gender disparities in work and related social protection gaps, it also presents an opportunity to tackle such gaps by presenting paid employment opportunities for migrant women. Efforts to extend social protection legislation to the care sector are vital, as are those to promote the portability of social protection benefits. Though important steps have been taken, more remains to be done, including addressing challenges to implementation and enforcement.

3.3 Access to property and financial services

In 40 of 41 LICs and MICs selected for a World Bank study, men were more likely to own property than women, with gender gaps most pronounced among already-disadvantaged groups – the rural population and lowest quintile (Gaddis et al., 2020). Laws governing property ownership explain most of this gap: women still encounter barriers to land rights in nearly 40% of countries.¹³ Property rights in turn are correlated with diverse WEE outcomes, including household decision-making, labour force engagement, and women’s earnings and investments in land.¹⁴ Crises can further disenfranchise women. First, where women depend on male relatives to access property, the death of that relative can compromise their tenure security. Second, shocks can reduce other assets such as wages and savings, making property even more important to a household’s portfolio. Where women lack financial resources, information or support to enforce their property rights, eviction can result; indeed, evidence from Kenya reveals widows being thrown out of their homes during the pandemic (Stanley and Prettitore, 2020).

Where property rights are equal, women are more likely to have bank accounts and use property as loan collateral (World Bank, 2013). Even before Covid-19, gender gaps in access to, and usage of, financial services were ‘sizable and persistent’, with men being more likely to use commercial banks, and borrow and deposit more (Shirona et al., 2021: 5). In some countries, women relied on microfinance institutions relatively more, but typically borrowed less. Ample evidence links women’s financial inclusion — particularly through digital savings, credit and payments services — with greater economic security, personal empowerment and gains to their families’ health and education (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2019: 5). Changes in commercial bank access and usage brought about by the pandemic had no clear gender bias, but in microfinance institutions the number of loans and borrowers fell, in a few cases to below pre-pandemic levels. According to Shirona et al. (2021: 9), ‘women’s financial access has continued to deepen ... but there were also some cases of a widened financial access gender gap or a slowdown in narrowing the gender gap’. Gender-sensitive responses included income support, assistance to small and medium enterprises, tax relief and loan assistance. Among 68 countries the International Monetary Fund studied, most (59%) adopted one such measure, while just three adopted all four types (Shirona et al., 2021).

3.4 Social protection

Gender gaps in labour market outcomes combined with women’s greater propensity to work in non-standard forms of employment (with irregular hours and interrupted working

13 See the World Bank’s Women, Business and the Law data: https://wbl.worldbank.org/en/data/exploretopics/wbl_ma.

14 On decision-making, see Beegle et al. (2001) for Indonesia, Oduro et al. (2012) for Ghana, Swaminathan et al. (2012) for India, Mishra and Sam (2016) for Nepal, Behrman (2017) for Malawi; on intimate partner violence, Panda and Agarwal (2005), Oduro et al. (2015); on women’s education and health, Deininger et al. (2013, 2018), Roy (2015). All cited in Gaddis et al. (2020).

patterns) drive gender disparities in social protection (ILO, 2018a; Bastagli and Hunt, 2020). Furthermore, social protection policies and systems themselves may replicate and reinforce gender inequalities. A key issue concerns how work-related gender inequalities and policy eligibility rules together give rise to social protection gaps (type, coverage and adequacy). As a result, women experience both lower coverage and substantially lower benefit levels (UN Women, 2015). For example, nearly two-thirds (65%) of people above retirement age living without a regular pension are women, and within the European Union women's pensions are on average 40% lower than those of men (International Trade Union Confederation, 2018). The pandemic exacerbated these issues, given the gendered effects of lockdowns on labour markets and education systems. However, fewer than 20% of the initial social protection measures governments enacted globally were gender sensitive, while just 54 out of 195 countries (28%) introduced any new or amended social protection measures targeting girls or women (Azcona et al., 2020b).

3.5 Education, skills development and training

Much of the progress HICs have recorded in closing the labour market participation gap can be attributed to near-equal educational achievements and less restrictive gender norms regarding paid work (ILO, 2018a). Women are surpassing men in most regions as tertiary graduates, and advancing into the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) disciplines. Nevertheless, they lag behind men in STEM areas associated with more highly paid jobs (ILO, 2019). Estimates of the pandemic's impact on education vary greatly but concur in finding larger numbers of girls out of school. Adolescent girls took on more extra care work than boys (Azcona et al., 2020a), with Jones et al. (2020: 11) reporting that '[m]any adolescent girls are not doing any home schooling due to parental pressure to undertake domestic and care work.'¹⁵ Leaving school early, in turn, is associated with fewer job prospects and a higher likelihood of adolescent pregnancy and marriage.

3.6 Health and sexual and reproductive health

Deficits in health, notably sexual and reproductive health, remain acute – in sub-Saharan Africa and LICs, some 40% of births take place without skilled attendance. A robust evidence base links adolescent motherhood with lower education, income-earning potential, financial autonomy and household decision-making ability, and higher rates of intimate partner violence, among other outcomes.¹⁶ Conversely, investments in family planning sustain women's labour force participation (Karimi, 2014) and enhance earnings and control over assets. One estimate, for Uganda, suggests that every dollar spent on adolescent family planning would save \$3 in reduced health costs,

15 Based on qualitative fieldwork in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Jordan and Palestine (Gaza). In Kenya, an estimated 60% of families previously using Kidogo childcare centres shifted care to girls as young as eight (Ford, 2021).

16 Branson et al. (2015) documents effects on their children including higher infant mortality and malnutrition, and lower educational attainment.

productivity and other benefits (Greene and Merrick, 2015). Disruptions in service provision have worsened reproductive health outcomes in several countries, largely owing to more limited service access but also to the deployment of health workers to Covid-19. Early estimates suggest that the pandemic may have resulted in 56,700 additional maternal deaths (Azcona et al., 2020b), with compounding effects for women facing intersecting disadvantages. In Brazil, the maternal death rate was twice as high for black women compared with white women (ibid). Owing to school closures, service disruptions, economic crises, early pregnancy and parental death, Covid-19 has spurred increases in early marriage and childbearing.

3.7 Collective action and leadership

Collective action takes many forms, including common resource management (water withdrawal, irrigation maintenance) collective enterprise (self-help groups, cooperatives) and securing finance (savings groups). Such activity promotes financial autonomy and solidarity, social networks and the respect of members among their households and communities. Yet women are often marginalised, especially the ‘poorest of the poor’ (Brody et al., 2017). Take formal trade unions: women’s underrepresentation in leadership and membership has led to the relative neglect of issues such as childcare or violence at work (Spooner et al., 2021: 21), underscoring the need for deliberate strategies to bolster women’s leadership and gender-responsive campaigns. Some women’s union activity has resulted in concrete gains, notably in legislation and social protections for informal workers. In India, for example, the Self-Employed Women’s Association trade union’s provision of community-based health insurance to informal women workers reduced catastrophic hospitalisations by more than 50% (Ranson et al., 2006).¹⁷ Change often results from a complex interplay between national and global mobilisation, as in the Philippines, where the trade unions’ campaign for expanded maternity leave drew support from international unions, women’s organisations, organisations of female informal workers and other non-governmental organisations (Serrano and Viajar, 2022: 24). Similarly, guided by both the ILO and national unions, 25 countries have ratified Convention 189 on domestic work, prompting significant national legislative reforms.¹⁸

Covid-19 limited physical gatherings, but these restrictions were somewhat offset by the rising use of digital technologies – specific examples include mobile phones facilitating communications on irrigation systems in Nepal and India, or WhatsApp being adopted by Self-Employed Women’s Association members in rural India and domestic gig workers in South Africa (Meinzen-Dick, 2020). Nonetheless, the digital divide reinforces inequalities between men and women and among women, affecting both their access to, and ability to use, new technologies.

17 Catastrophic hospitalisations are those whose cost exceeded 10% of annual household income.

18 See Samman et al. (2016: 65) on Philippines and South Africa, Poblete (2018) on Argentina, Chile and Paraguay.

Supporting WEE: insights and recommendations

The consensus emerging over the principles for supporting WEE suggests tackling the root causes of unequal outcomes rather than accommodating existing inequalities (Table 1). It also points towards centering women’s own accounts of their needs; ensuring the inclusion of marginalised women; and engaging flexibly with a range of partners, notably feminist and women’s movements (Box 4). Many on the frontline of securing WEE gains face critical funding gaps – e.g., women’s rights organisations, informal worker associations or advocates of Social Solidarity Economies. In addition to making strategic investments, philanthropic organisations can use their agility and autonomy to respond to the evolving needs of the WEE agenda in other ways, including convening and movement building – supporting diverse and non-traditional stakeholders to engage in policy conversations, and ensuring that the concerns of women, particularly those from the most marginalised groups, are amplified.

Table 1 Examples of gender-aware and transformative approaches to WEE

Constraint	Gender-aware		Gender-transformative	
	Approach	Example	Approach	Example
Unequal responsibility for unpaid care	Promote flexible work	Global gig economy discourse and policy (Hunt et al., 2019).	Shift norms around male involvement in unpaid care	‘MenCare’ global campaign, active in over 50 countries ¹⁹
Unequal pay	Equal pay for identical work	US, 1985 onward	Revalue worth of jobs in female-dominated professions	2020 law on pay equity, New Zealand ²⁰

19 <https://men-care.org/>

20 The law aims to eliminate the pay discrimination characterising jobs in female-dominated sectors by revaluing their worth with reference to similar jobs in male-dominated professions. A first application, focused on social workers, resulted in their receipt of a 31% pay rise (Sussman, 2020).

Box 4: Recommendations for funding and supporting WEE

Invest in system-level approaches that seek to address the root causes of gender equality rather than accommodate women's constraints, thereby enabling comprehensive, integrated and holistic responses.

Foreground women's preferences and priorities, ensuring that these inform policy and programming interventions and the monitoring of results.

Ensure an intersectional approach that privileges the constraints facing the most marginalised women. Interventions should recognise the specific needs of different groups, which often entails diverse programming and funding models.²¹

Promote equitable norms by critically examining gender norms and power relations, and drawing on promising examples of how these can be transformed.

Recognise the power and impact of women's and feminist movements, which are often at the forefront of mobilisation but are heavily underfunded.

Enable flexible funding models that support partners' autonomy to define and respond to emerging issues, and to adjust policy and programming as needed.

Supporting the drivers of change: looking forward

Even as the threat of Covid-19 begins to recede in some parts of the world, its lasting economic effects and the long-term contraction of fiscal space makes new thinking imperative. Moreover, the historical evidence suggests that periods of recovery from crises often rupture countries' usual patterns and disrupt inertia, providing a moment for change (McDonnell et al., 2019). Covid-19 has highlighted the precarity of recent WEE gains but has also opened avenues for the recognition of unpaid care work and the extension of social protection and services to previously excluded groups. The moment is ripe to leverage this political momentum by elevating gender priorities in policy conversations on the future of work. In addition to exploring the components

21 This could involve tracking whether and how WEE commitments reach the most marginalised women. A key critique of the Global Alliance for Care (see Box 1) concerns actions geared towards this group: to date, 'recognition of the effects of multiple, intersecting forms of discrimination stops short of providing significant analysis of how and why different groups are affected' (Clingain et al. 2021).

identified above, individually and jointly, philanthropic organisations could position themselves to ‘get ahead of the curve’ by investigating under-explored but potentially transformative areas – such as support for equitable economic models and ‘green’ growth, both of which would disproportionately benefit women.

Social Solidarity Economies organisations, including cooperatives, are critical and very well established in some contexts, including in informal economies – with demonstrated potential to bolster women’s individual and collective empowerment. But more effort is needed to understand how these could spur positive changes in working conditions, particularly for marginalised women – e.g., who is included or excluded, the types of macro support needed and how it can best be delivered. Finally, the far-reaching impacts of climate change on WEE have not received enough attention, suggesting a need to assess the extent to which WEE can be achieved within prevailing economic models that sideline climate as a concern, and a need to interrogate the role of green jobs and the transition to a green economy in the WEE agenda.

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