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Gender equality: a lot more needs to be done

The *Regional Preparatory Meeting for the 10-year Review of Implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action*, held in Geneva on 14 and 15 December, has concluded that the situation of women in the UNECE region has only partly improved and a lot more needs to be done to implement the Platform

for Action, especially in the socio-economic sphere. Discussions focused on such issues as the implications of the social security reforms on women and retirement schemes; women's employability; women's entrepreneurship; gender budgeting; and the economic roots of trafficking.

✍ **WOMEN, THE FORGOTTEN PARTNER OF SOCIAL SECURITY REFORMS**

Over the last decade social security schemes, including family benefits and pensions, have been an important arena of policy reforms throughout the UNECE region. But gender equality has been only a marginal consideration in the reform processes. Social security is an important tool for achieving gender equality. It is of key relevance for women's employability, and for achieving equality in the division of unpaid care work between women and men.



From left to right, Ms. Brigita Schmögnerová, UNECE Executive Secretary; Mr Pierre Muller, Mayor of Geneva; Mr. Carlo Lamprecht, State Council of the Canton of Geneva; and Mr Pascal Couchepin, Swiss Federal Councillor

In the field of pensions, the weakening of repartition pension systems hurts many women because of their weaker labour market position. Many pension systems penalize those who do unpaid care work and who work for a lesser number of years. In order to strengthen gender equality by promoting a more equal distribution of unpaid care responsibilities and to stress the social value

of care work, pension systems need to ensure that carers are not penalized. The detrimental effect of caring on pension entitlements constitutes a clear disincentive for men to take over a greater share of care responsibilities.



Chairperson of the Meeting, Ms Florence levers of Canada

Family benefits have an important effect on women's incentives to participate in the labour market and they should be designed to support women's employability. Making long-term home-care benefits available through the workplace or contingent on employment creates incentives

and rewards for labour force participation. Conversely if they are restricted to those with low incomes, the beneficiaries may become isolated from the world of work and find their integration or reintegration into the labour market in later years more difficult.

✍ **ECONOMIC ROOTS OF TRAFFICKING**

The past decade has seen a dramatic increase in the number of women being trafficked from Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States to North America and Western Europe. According to various estimates, up to 80% of them are destined for the sex services market. Lack of jobs and increased poverty, limited opportunities for legal immigration, and the resurgence of traditional discriminatory practices against women, among others, push them to choose the way of illegal immigration. Globalization and the opening of countries in transition to the world economy have created an opportunity for national criminal groups to extend their illicit economic activities by

establishing links with foreign and international criminal networks and maximizing their profits by creating economies of scale.

During the past two decades, most of the former socialist countries have been among the “sending” countries at some point in time. Some European estimates suggest that between 1990 and 1998, more than 253,000 women and girls were trafficked into the sex industry of the 12 EU countries. The overall number of women working as prostitutes in these countries has grown to more than half a million. The sex industry in the EU member States has become one of the most lucrative businesses. The total annual revenues of traffickers are estimated to range from US\$ 5 billion to US\$ 9 billion a year.

✍ DETERIORATION IN WOMEN'S EMPLOYABILITY

The goals of gender mainstreaming have not yet been fully achieved; the approach remains partial, with insufficient attention paid to either improving the quality of women's employment or bringing about the modernization of the employment and social



Ms Rachel Mayanja, Assistant Secretary-General, Special Adviser to the Secretary-General on Gender Issues and the Advancement of Women; and Ms. Brigita Schmögnerová, UNECE Executive Secretary.

systems, required for a more gender equal society. More action is needed to improve women's access to employment, facilitate women's continuity of employment; close the gender pay gap and remove the disadvantages of part-time employment; and to promote shared parental leave and provide more affordable childcare.

Women's employability and access to jobs, particularly quality jobs, is of serious concern for women in all countries of Eastern Europe and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Worsening labour market conditions there have seriously affected women's employability as reflected in the wage gap, and non-standard employment arrangements, such as part-time work or employment in the informal sector, which offer little or no social protection. The erosion of social benefits has made it more difficult for them to reconcile full-time employment with family responsibilities, which now embody more care functions.

These trends are worrisome because they suggest a reversal of progress in women's employability in these countries.

✍ GROWING SHARE OF WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP

As a result of new policy measures there has been a substantive increase in women's self-employment in all countries of the UNECE region over the last ten years. Progress and approaches vary by subregion and country. The share of women's entrepreneurship increased in many countries of Western Europe and there was also progress in countries of Eastern Europe and CIS, where women's self-employment is an important element of poverty reduction. Most progress was made in North America – for example, in Canada the number of women entrepreneurs increased 208% between 1981 and 2001, compared with a 38% increase for men.

Strategies for the implementation of policies to promote women's entrepreneurship vary; for example one approach emphasizes women as an untapped source of growth for the economy as a whole, some stress self-employment as an economic survival tool for poor women and their families, one rationale links self-employment and entrepreneurship, particularly among women, to broader strategies to combat unemployment. Challenges remain regarding access to finance, information and networks, markets and training.

✍ LIMITED GENDER CONCERN IN BUDGET PROCEDURES

The UNECE region has had little experience in gender responsive budgets, but is quickly accumulating more experience at national, regional and local levels. It is increasingly recognized that macroeconomic policy plays an important role in living standards and economic opportunities for the population in general, and women in particular, and increasing people's access to resources and opportunities has positive economic effects. This recognition is behind the economic rationale for introducing a gender perspective into budgets.

The areas of application are varied, ranging from tax-benefit systems to local employment and transport policies. Projects vary from country to country but are being more and more taken up by such countries as Belgium, Canada, Czech Republic, France, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United Kingdom and the United States. New initiatives are underway in Poland, The former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia and Hungary. The main problems relate to increasing awareness about gender and budgets, targeting the impact of the initiatives on concrete results, and guaranteeing the sustainability of initiatives. The involvement of civil society is another element that should be reviewed within most government initiatives.

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