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Follow-up to the Fourth World Conference on Women and to the twenty-third special session of the General Assembly, entitled “Women 2000: gender equality, development and peace for the twenty-first century”

Ministerial round table: making the economy work for women and girls

Chair’s summary

1. On 10 March 2015, the Commission on the Status of Women held a ministerial round table on the topic “Making the economy work for women and girls” under the overall theme “Priorities for future action to realize gender equality, the empowerment of women and the human rights of women and girls”. The participants in the round table focused on the current challenges in the economic sphere for women and the way forward in achieving economic equality for women and girls to accelerate the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

2. The Federal Minister of Welfare and Social Security of the Sudan, Mashaair Ahmed Elamin Aldawalab, chaired the round table and the General Secretary of the International Domestic Workers Federation, Elizabeth Tang, served as moderator. The meeting opened with brief introductions by the Chair and the Moderator. Ministers and high-level officials from 19 States Members of the United Nations participated in the round table.

Addressing the barriers to women’s economic empowerment

3. All participants confirmed that gender equality and women’s economic empowerment continued to be a national priority. Participants recognized the strong link between women’s participation in the labour force and positive economic and social outcomes and, consequently, the need for women to have access to decent work. However, participants also identified a number of key challenges that continued to hinder progress for women and girls in the economic domain.



4. According to participants, a major barrier to women's economic empowerment continued to be structural inequalities, which were rooted in restrictive social norms and institutions and in discriminatory laws and practices affecting women's access to work and their rights at work. One particular concern raised by many participants was the unequal sharing of domestic and care work. The burden of unpaid work continued to be borne disproportionately by women. Ministers underlined the need for policies that supported better work-life balance and sharing of care responsibilities, in particular childcare, between men and women, and gave examples of good practices in that regard. Paid parental leave, flexible work arrangements, State subsidies and allowances and affordable childcare were mentioned as ways to address that issue. Targeted initiatives that encouraged men to share family responsibilities, for example through allowances and bonuses when fathers took parental leave, were also mentioned.

5. Participants acknowledged gender disparities in pay as a major impediment to women's economic empowerment. Women often remained confined to the least remunerative and least protected segments of the formal and informal economy, which contributed to the persistence of the gender pay gap. While participants welcomed the significant progress in improving women's access to education, those gains had not translated into sufficient economic empowerment for women. Ministers were therefore concerned that women continued to be underrepresented at the senior management and executive levels in both the private and public sectors. A number of participants described efforts to increase women's participation in top decision-making structures, including through mandatory quotas for women on corporate boards.

6. Several participants highlighted the challenges in improving conditions for the informal labour force, which was disproportionately made up of women. Speakers pointed out that women who worked in the informal economy often lived in poverty, lacked access to social protection and were unable to realize their economic and social rights. As their working conditions were unregulated, workers in the informal sector were often subjected to exploitation and violence, with little or no access to remedies. Participants highlighted the important role of labour laws and institutions in protecting women's rights at work, and of efforts to expand such protection and benefits to women working in the informal economy.

Enhancing women's access to resources, markets and economic opportunities

7. Participants stated that women's economic empowerment was being held back by pervasive gender disparities in access to and ownership of land, resources, technology and agricultural inputs. Such disparities in access were exacerbated and compounded by shocks, such as the economic and financial crises and environmental disasters of recent years. Women workers and entrepreneurs also faced barriers in access to markets, including to production chains with significant value in exports. To rectify some of those disparities, speakers provided examples of laws and policies aimed at increasing women's access to productive resources in general, as well as of targeted efforts, such as dedicating portions of arable agricultural land specifically to women.

8. In a number of countries, creating public sector employment opportunities for women was a priority. Efforts were also being made to increase women's economic opportunities in the public sector, with participants giving examples of affirmative

action policies, including in procurement procedures, as successful strategies to increase women's engagement in and sourcing for the public sector.

9. Participants acknowledged the urgency of increasing women's participation in sectors that had traditionally been male-dominated and drew particular attention to the science, engineering and technology sectors. Participants called for investment in skills and vocational training for women in those industries.

10. Ministers emphasized the importance of supporting women's entrepreneurship as a strategy to promote their economic empowerment. A number of national measures were mentioned, including improving access to formal credit and productive assets, creating tax incentives for women-owned enterprises, supporting women's agricultural production and providing business-related training opportunities. In some instances, such measures were combined with childcare benefits for parents participating in vocational training. Participants also highlighted the importance of creating mentorship networks aimed at fostering women's entrepreneurship, as well as initiatives that encouraged public-private partnerships.

Ensuring an enabling economic policy environment

11. Participants discussed the lack of gender sensitivity of macroeconomic policies and public sector reforms enacted in the wake of the 2007 and 2008 global economic and financial crisis. Speakers noted that austerity measures often had a greater impact on women who relied on the State for social services and employment, and stressed the need for greater attention to such imbalance in economic policymaking, for both economic and social reasons. In addition, participants noted that a narrow focus on raising the gross domestic product contributed to gender inequalities in the economy being overlooked, thereby limiting support for women workers and entrepreneurs.

12. In relation to macroeconomic policies, participants also noted the gender-specific impacts of investments in infrastructure and therefore the need for gender-responsive infrastructure policies. Investment in electrification was cited as key for enabling women to allocate time to engage in income-generating activities instead of to fetching water and wood.. Lack of transportation was another barrier for women to access employment opportunities. Women's economic empowerment therefore required greater attention to gender perspectives in infrastructure and transport policies.

13. Additional areas requiring attention to make the economy work for women were gender-responsive budgeting and national planning processes to ensure that macroeconomic policies supported gender equality. National action plans for gender equality could be used effectively to promote such efforts. Participants agreed on the importance of sex-disaggregated data to inform gender-responsive economic policymaking.