Putting Violence Against Women at the Centre of the Agenda for Women's Economic Empowerment Agenda

At last it seems the world is recognising that economies built on a foundation of patriarchy are inefficient as well as unequal and unjust. As the 60th Commission on the Status of Women opens in New York this week, a series of promising global initiatives are underway to address women's systematic exclusion from economic advancement. This calls for celebration – but some careful warnings too.

This year's CSW is dedicated to the theme of Women's Empowerment for Sustainable Development. In January of this year, the UN Secretary General announced the appointment of a High Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment, dedicated to unlocking the economic potential of the millions of women who are absent from the labour force, or working in sub-optimal conditions. Among the panel's focal areas, it is encouraging to see crucial issues including unpaid care, the gender pay gap, women's ownership of assets including land, and the quality of work available to women. In December, the World Bank produced an 8-year gender strategy to guide its work on economic growth and poverty reduction. Just last month, the IMF also published a working paper on gender equality and women's advancement. Clearly, there is high level momentum behind the need to integrate women fully in a global economic system that to date has been profoundly patriarchal.

While we celebrate this development, it's important to note: unless violence against women is placed at the centre of this agenda, it won't be successful. This is for two reasons: individually, women cannot engage in economic activity unless the many realities of violence against them are identified and addressed; and structurally, we cannot expect economies to grow and thrive while they are being held back by the substantial impacts of gender-based violence.

Violence against women removes women from labour markets, and undermines their work in the home. For example, women in Vietnam missed paid work for 5.5 days following an incident of violence, translating into more than 15.8 million workdays[i]. Witnessing violence traumatises children and takes girls out of education. Violence underpins and reinforces the discriminatory attitudes, which facilitate gender-based occupational segregation and a global gender pay gap of nearly 50%. Moreover women who experience violence have lower earnings – by nearly 35%[ii]. Violence costs states money: in health treatment and disability costs, police time and court time. In Australia approximately $7.8 billion is spent annually on providing health care, criminal justice and welfare programmes associated with domestic violence[iii].

The review theme of this year's CSW is eliminating violence against women – an issue last addressed by the Commission in 2013. The Agreed Conclusions from CSW57 highlighted that the elimination of violence against women was imperative, including for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Those same Agreed Conclusions provide clear guidance on ways that VAWG can be practically eliminated. Yet in spite of an extensive suite of international resolutions, declarations, laws and other tools, the problem remains persistent. It is time that economic decision makers recognised that violence affects not just individuals but whole economies and societies.

If global initiatives are to be believed, we are soon to see governments and private businesses making a concerted effort to get women working, in quality jobs, on an equal footing with men. We are going to see initiatives to provide childcare and parental leave, for both mothers and fathers. We will see laws passed and enforced to ensure that women are paid the same as men for equal work; and we will see industrial policies that prioritise jobs for women. In one of the

few initiatives that recognises the central place that violence plays in women's working lives, we will see safe, clean public transport systems where harassment is a thing of the past. Yet, such initiatives still neglect violence within the home, whose impact ripples through community projects, markets, factories, and offices.

The new agenda of economic empowerment continues a decades-long trend of marginalising violence against women as a health and a human rights concern. Policy makers are waking up to the fact that gender inequality is holding back economic development. It is time that they recognise that gender-based violence is having the same effect, that it is dragging on economies, and that it is holding back the immense potential of individual women and the collective power of women in society and the economy.

In order to truly unlock the social and economic potential of gender equality, policy makers must finally take the issue of violence against women seriously. At the CSW, resources for eliminating violence must be dedicated. At the high level panel on women's economic empowerment, data on the impact of VAWG on economies must be considered, and strategies devised which address the complex interaction between economic independence and violence. And in countries, businesses and communities, more effort should be made to engage with those who are affected by violence against women.

Gender inequality is unquestionably holding back sustainable development. Violence is a piece of that problem that we ignore at our peril.

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[i] Duvvury, N., Minh, N. and Carney, P. 2012. *Estimating the Costs of Domestic Violence against Women in Vietnam.* Ha Noi: UN Women

[ii] Duvvury, N. Callan, A., Carney, P. and Raghavendra, S. 2013. *Intimate Partner Violence: economic costs and implications for growth and development.* Women's Voice, Agency and Participation Research Series No 3. Washington: World Bank

[iii] "The cost of domestic violence: Australian economy robbed of billions" news.com.au, November 22, 2015. Available at http://www.news.com.au/national/the-cost-of-domestic-violence-australian-economy-robbed-of-billions/news-story/655a55c524aabdb4640e3bfdeac2865e