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2021 SPECA Economic Forum

Session V: Women's economic empowerment for sustainable development: policy challenges during and after COVID-19 for the SPECA region

Thursday, 18 November 2021, 15:00-16:00, (UTC+5)

Virtual meeting

Your Excellency, Ms. Tanzila Narbaeva, Chairperson of the Senate of Oliy Majlis, Uzbekistan
Your Excellency, Ms. Sadagat Gahramanova, Deputy Chairperson of the State Committee for Family, Women and Children's Affairs, Azerbaijan, (and Chair of the SPECA Thematic Working Group on Gender and SDGs)
Ms. Olga Algayerova, Under-Secretary General and Executive Secretary, UNECE

Excellencies, dear participants,

I am delighted to join the distinguished panel at this important session of the 2021 SPECA Economic Forum.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

At the heart of the work of the SPECA Economic Forum is the belief that achieving SDG 5 on gender equality is not an optional luxury for the region's development but a necessity for achieving a sustainable, equal, and prosperous future for all.

Women and girls, everywhere, must have equal rights and opportunity, with women's equality and empowerment being one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, and integral to all dimensions of inclusive and sustainable development. In short, all the SDGs depend on the achievement of Goal 5.

Over the past decade, SPECA countries have begun to recognize this reality and have made great strides in adopting gender-sensitive policies, laws and regulations to enhance women's economic empowerment, political participation, and leadership.

From Kazakhstan's social protection system addressing maternity and childcare of women workers; to Tajikistan's Development Programme 2021-25 supporting women's participation in decision making and leadership; to the Azerbaijan Women Resource Centres for vulnerable and socially excluded groups of women; and Uzbekistan's Anti-Crisis Plan and presidential decrees to support vulnerable populations, including ensuring women's employment during the pandemic, countries in our region have adopted progressive measures to ratify laws and regulations that put a gender lens on decent work, on social protection, on health care and on support to victims of violence, to name a few.

While these examples inspire us, they also serve as a reminder that progress has been slow, unequal, and uneven. Not a single country - globally - has achieved gender equality. And the COVID-19 pandemic has but added insult to injury: many of the hard-fought gains over the past decades have been reversed and women's economic empowerment has been set back.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

We are gathered here today to discuss how we can build back more fairly, and more equal in the context of the on-going COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has exacerbated existing inequalities and highlighted a fundamental contradiction in our societies: we have placed the least value on the work that is most critical to the survival of our economies, systems and societies.

We have all witnessed first-hand how the introduction of lockdowns, mobility restrictions, and school closures have greatly increased the time spent on household chores. Women clean, wash, cook, and care for home-schooling children, the sick, and the elderly. In fact, on an average day, women spend two to three times more time on unpaid care work than their male counterparts in SPECA countries. While this is a better ratio than in other countries in our region, the long hours that women put into unpaid care work detracts from their ability to undertake paid work outside the home. From early in their lives, the gendered unequal burden of unpaid care and domestic work hinders the access of women and girls to quality education, to economic security, and to decent work.

As COVID-19 continues to rage, women will more than often systematically be the first to be made redundant and the last to be rehired into the workforce. Due to the stereotypical gender norms still prevalent in our region, women are also more likely to be the ones who must give up their paid jobs for unpaid care responsibilities. There is now a high risk of undermining the fragile but significant gains made by women over the last few years, limiting their ability to support themselves and their families.

Excellencies, ladies and gentlemen,

Let me highlight three key actions that countries in the SPECA region need to focus on to accelerate women's economic empowerment.

First, governments must continue to prioritise policies and measures to enhance women's labour force participation through job creation and skills development programmes, entrepreneurship development, support for increased female participation in higher levels of education, addressing gender bias in education, and expanding early childhood education.

Second, trends across all the SPECA countries show that entrepreneurship is a key pathway for millions of women to engage in the economy, improve the livelihoods of themselves and their families and gain a measure of financial independence. However, gender disparities persist in areas

ranging from access to finance to opportunities to acquire essential business skills. Women's engagement in entrepreneurship across SPECA furthermore tends to be concentrated in low value-added sectors, with home-based entrepreneurship an important factor in some countries, linked to women's disproportionate responsibilities for unpaid home care. As such, governments must continue to prioritise the development of women's entrepreneurship in national development and gender equality frameworks, supported by specific strategies, plans and programmes at different levels.

Third, investing in care infrastructure and care services is critical to reducing and redistributing unpaid care work. Government investments in the care economy will not only relieve the burden for women, but also generate decent jobs in the care sector and increase the resilience and long-term growth of economies. In addition, at the community and household level, we need to affect a social norm change that de-stigmatizes the contributions of male family members to the running of the household.

Excellencies, colleagues,

Let us be inspired today, to learn from one another, and to build economic policies that empower women. As in previous years, this Forum offers the opportunity to reinvigorate and generate further action. Pandemic recovery is our chance to engineer a reset, reignite the Decade of Action for the Sustainable Development Goals and chart a path to an equal future for women and men.

Together with UNECE we look forward to continuing our support to SPECA countries to promote gender equality and women's economic empowerment.

I wish you all a productive meeting.

Thank you.