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Women’s economic empowerment in the changing world of work

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report examines women’s economic empowerment in the changing world of work at a time when the international community has made an unprecedented commitment to gender equality and women’s empowerment, in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The report clarifies the vital interlinkages between women’s economic empowerment and their rights to decent work and full and productive employment. It focuses on the obstacles women face in exercising their rights to and at work and suggests how these may be rectified. It analyses the opportunities and challenges for women’s economic empowerment posed by the increasing informality and mobility of labour and the technological and digital developments that are transforming the world of work. The report outlines policies and actions to address gender gaps in the world of work and to enable the realization of women’s rights and economic empowerment, calling for greater accountability to ensure that no one is left behind. The report concludes with recommendations for consideration by the Commission on the Status of Women.

* E/CN.6/2017/1.



I. Introduction

1. In accordance with its multi-year programme of work (2017-2019), the Commission on the Status of Women at its sixty-first session, in 2017, will consider “Women’s economic empowerment in the changing world of work” as its priority theme. The present report anchors the theme in women’s rights to and at work, as enshrined in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and several International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions.

2. Women’s economic empowerment and the realization of women’s rights to and at work are essential for the achievement of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (see [E/CN.6/2015/3](#)) and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Of particular relevance are Sustainable Development Goal 5 to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls and Goal 8 to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all, but also Goal 1 on ending poverty, Goal 2 on food security, Goal 3 on ensuring health, Goal 4 on quality education and Goal 10 on reducing inequalities. The sixtieth session of the Commission on the Status of Women provided a road map for the gender-responsive implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that highlights the significance for women’s economic empowerment of decent work, full and productive employment and equal pay for work of equal value (see [E/2016/27-E/CN.6/2016/22](#)). These commitments are also reflected in recent normative milestones, including the Paris Agreement under the United Nations Framework on Climate Change (see [FCCC/CP/2015/L.9/Rev.1](#)), the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (General Assembly resolution [71/1](#)), and the New Urban Agenda ([A/CONF.226/4](#)).

3. Realizing women’s economic empowerment requires transformative, structural change. These include policies to manage trade and financial globalization so that these forces, profoundly altering the world of work, will come as a benefit to women and the working poor in both rural and urban areas. It requires macroeconomic and labour market policies that create decent jobs, protect worker rights and generate living wages. It means harnessing technological innovations to accelerate progress for women’s greater financial and digital inclusion. It requires political will and partnerships to develop and implement policies that integrate gender equality perspectives in labour institutions and programmes at local, national and global levels; provide women workers with social protection and income security; and recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care and domestic work, so that women may enjoy economic opportunities and outcomes on an equal footing with men. Significantly increased financing from all sources is required for the full and accelerated implementation of new and existing commitments to empower women economically and provide decent work and full and productive employment for women.

4. The present report draws on the findings of the expert group Meeting on “Women’s economic empowerment in the changing world of work”, organized by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN-Women) with the technical support and collaboration of ILO from 26 to

28 September 2016 in Geneva. The report also relies on recent research and data from United Nations entities and other sources, including the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment.

II. The changing world of work

5. The world of work is changing in significant ways, marked by innovations — especially in digital and information and communications technologies — diffused around the world through globalization. The sheer scale, velocity and impact of these developments are unprecedented. Emerging areas, such as the green economy and climate change mitigation and adaptation, offer new opportunities for decent work for women. Yet technological change can be disruptive or productive for women's economic empowerment. As firms adopt more capital-intensive techniques of production in a region such as Eastern Asia, a “defeminization” of the labour force is apparent, particularly in manufacturing. While the overall share of women in manufacturing has declined significantly since 1995, women remain concentrated in manufacturing jobs that are more labour-intensive, in the textile, garment and electronics industries. Yet this may change since technological advances indicate that robotic sewing machines are on the horizon.¹

6. Over the past 20 years, women's participation in global production, from export industrialization to call-centres, non-traditional agriculture and global value chains, has been accompanied by the growing informality of work. While women are increasingly engaged in paid labour in both services and manufacturing sectors, increasing the potential for autonomy and independence in many contexts, there has been an entrenchment of women's poverty. These trends are related to the precarious and informal nature of work available to women in the global economy. Even as globalization has brought millions of women into paid labour, it has also reproduced gender inequalities by concentrating women workers at the bottom of the global value chain — in the lowest paid jobs, in piece-rate, subcontracted work, and insecure forms of self-employment, with little or no access to decent work and social protection.²

7. In many countries, macroeconomic, trade and financial policies have ostensibly supported the greater integration of national economies with global markets while prioritizing fiscal balances and price stability over growth and employment creation. With little job creation, women from low-income households have ended up in low-productivity sectors with inadequate earnings, lacking job security or safe working conditions. Government austerity measures and reductions in public sector spending, coupled with the privatization of public companies and of social services, have meant shrinking public sector employment in many countries,

¹ D. Kucera and S. Tejani, “Feminization, defeminization, and structural change in manufacturing”, *World Development*, vol. 64 (December 2014), pp. 569-582; United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), *Human Development Report 2015: Work for Human Development* (New York, 2015); World Economic Forum, Global Challenge insight report, “The future of jobs: employment, skills and workforce strategy for the fourth industrial revolution” (Geneva, 2016).

² UN-Women, *Progress of the World's Women 2015-2016: Transforming Economies, Realizing Rights* (New York, 2015).

creating downward pressure on wages and employment conditions. This is particularly critical for women because the public sector has historically provided good quality jobs in large numbers for women.²

8. Even though access to decent, good-quality paid work is critical for women's economic empowerment, gender gaps in the world of work remain persistent and pervasive across all regions. Productive employment, decent work and entrepreneurship enhance women's access to resources and decision-making in the household and in the wider community and economy. Women's economic empowerment in the changing world of work is fundamentally dependent on the employment opportunities in the private and public sectors and the terms and conditions of their paid and unpaid work. Despite some positive trends in closing gender gaps and improving women's labour conditions over the past several decades, gender inequalities in labour markets prevail worldwide and inhibit women's economic empowerment.³ These require policy action to strengthen opportunities and outcomes for women in the changing world of work.

III. Gender inequalities in the changing world of work

9. Structural barriers to gender equality and gender-based discrimination persist in every country, in both private and public spheres. These are manifested in the world of work as gender gaps in labour force participation and pay, occupational segregation, unequal working conditions and women's burden of unpaid domestic and care work, which characterize both the formal and informal economies. These gender gaps are rooted in historically unequal power relations between women and men in the household and in the economy and society more broadly; gender-biased design and impacts of macroeconomic fiscal, monetary and trade policies; discriminatory laws and social norms; and greater constraints on women in balancing work and family responsibilities. In 155 out of 173 economies, at least one gender-based legal restriction exists on women's employment and entrepreneurship.⁴ Even where gender-responsive laws, policies and labour regulations and protections are in place, compliance and accountability by public and private employers and means of redress and access to justice for women workers are often difficult to attain. These challenges are exacerbated in conflict and post-conflict, refugee and humanitarian settings, although it is in these areas that women's economic empowerment is profoundly lacking.

10. Structural barriers and discrimination related to sex and gender can be compounded by multiple and intersecting inequalities, exposing women and girls to harassment, exclusion and violence. Violence and harassment in the world of work affects women regardless of age, location, income or social status. Violence against women is an obstacle to gender equality in economic opportunities and outcomes, and its elimination is key if women are to manage their livelihoods. It can restrict women's economic and social potential, including their rights to education, freedom of movement and work. It has a significant impact on their physical and mental

³ International Labour Organization (ILO), *Women at Work: Trends 2016* (Geneva, 2016); United Nations, "World economic situation and prospects 2016" (New York, 2016); UN-Women, *Progress of the World's Women 2015-2016*.

⁴ World Bank, *Women, Business and the Law 2016: Getting to Equal* (Washington, D.C., 2016).

health, which can result in absenteeism, missed promotions and job losses. The cost to the global economy of discriminatory social institutions and violence against women is estimated to be approximately \$12 trillion annually. Such violence signifies high costs to women in lost earnings and wellbeing, stifles the voice and agency of women workers and compounds gender inequalities. Economic violence, which can adversely affect the options and means available to women dealing with violence, is covered in only 79 of 173 economies. Provisions covering sexual harassment in employment are in place in 114 economies.⁴ Yet the gaps between existing laws and provisions and their enforcement are clear (see [A/71/219](#)).

A. Labour force participation and sectoral and occupational segregation

11. The labour force participation of both women and men has decreased over the last two decades, but women's labour force participation continues to be less than men's worldwide. Women's global labour force participation declined between 1995 and 2015 from 52.4 per cent to 49.6 per cent, and men's from 79.9 per cent to 76.1 per cent.⁵ Global averages, however, mask significant variations among regions. In the Middle East, Northern Africa and South Asia, fewer than one-third of women of working age participate, whereas in Sub-Saharan Africa and Eastern Asia, it is nearly two-thirds.⁶

12. Wide disparities persist between young men and women, despite some progress in young women's labour force participation in some regions. This is of concern as the global youth unemployment rate is expected to increase from 12.9 per cent in 2015 to 13.1 per cent (71 million) in 2016 and 2017. The labour force participation rate for young men in 2016 was higher than for young women, at 53.9 per cent compared with 37.3 per cent. The situation is acute in Southern Asia, the Arab States and Northern Africa, where the gender gaps are well over 30 per cent. Young women's unemployment rates are higher globally than those of their male peers. In 2016, 13.7 per cent of young women in the labour force were unemployed — one per cent higher than their male counterparts. The largest gender gaps in unemployment however are in Arab States and Northern Africa, where they are twice those elsewhere, despite the rising educational attainment of young women in these regions. This indicates that education and training alone cannot surmount structural barriers to gender equality in labour markets.⁷

13. From 1995 to 2015, the service sector overtook agriculture in employing the largest number of women and men, about half the global working population (42.6 per cent of men and 61.5 per cent of women). The most striking increase in women's service sector employment has been in East Asia, rising from 32.7 to 77.0 per cent over this period. Most women also work in this sector in North America, the European Union and Latin America and the Caribbean. The terms and conditions of work vary greatly in the service sector, which encompasses technical and communications services, retail and clerical, and care and personal services. Yet even as service sector employment expands, most jobs are not in advanced high-

⁵ ILO, *Women at Work: Trends 2016*.

⁶ UN-Women, *Progress of the World's Women 2015-2016*.

⁷ ILO, *World Employment and Social Outlook 2016. Trends for Youth* (Geneva, 2016).

tech services. Women largely remain concentrated in lower-paid, lower-skill segments with greater job insecurity.⁸

14. Despite shifts in the service and manufacturing sectors and the decline in the contribution of the agricultural sector to economies, agriculture work remains significant for rural women. A quarter of the world's women workers remain engaged in agriculture, constituting over 40 per cent of agricultural workers globally. Yet the share of women in agriculture is only 9.5 per cent in upper-middle-income countries and 2.6 per cent in high-income countries. In South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, however, over 60 per cent of all working women remain in agriculture, concentrated in time- and labour-intensive, informal and poorly paid activities. The pay gap between men and women doing the same work can be as high as 40 per cent.⁹

15. Occupational segregation persists in all sectors, with women typically occupying the lowest occupational categories, earning less and with fewer entitlements to social security and pensions. Skill-biased technological change¹⁰ over the past two decades has further exacerbated occupational segregation, particularly in developed and emerging economies. Between 1995 and 2015, employment increased fastest in emerging economies, with the absolute change in employment twice as high for men (382 million) as for women (191 million), regardless of skill level, reflecting gender gaps. In emerging economies, high-skilled occupations have expanded faster for women than for men, the only group of countries where a gender gap in high-skilled employment exists in women's favour.¹¹

16. Among the policy options available to Governments to encourage women's labour force participation and discourage occupational segregation are: (a) elimination of legal restrictions on women's economic participation; (b) policies that stimulate economic activity and increase demand for women's labour; (c) investment in public services to create decent jobs in health, education, child and elderly care, infrastructure development, public administration and agricultural extension; (d) fiscal measures that avoid higher taxes on married couples of which both spouses work, and provide tax credits for low-wage workers, including women; (e) support for women's educational attainment and skills development; and (f) measures that provide affordable or subsidized quality childcare, parental leave and greater flexibility in working arrangements without reductions in labour and social protections.

⁸ ILO, *Women at Work: Trends 2016*; UNDP, *Human Development Report 2015: Work for Human Development*.

⁹ ILO, *Women at Work: Trends 2016*; Marzia Fontana and Cristina Paciello, *Gender Dimensions of Agricultural and Rural Employment: Differentiated Pathways out of Poverty — A Global Perspective* (Rome, 2010).

¹⁰ Skill-biased technological change is a shift in production technology that favours skilled over unskilled labour, and is related to wage inequalities.

¹¹ ILO, *Women at Work: Trends 2016*.

B. Constraints on women's entrepreneurship

17. Jobs in small and medium enterprises account for half of formal employment worldwide, and, in developing countries, the largest share of employment. Significant focus has been placed on such enterprises as potential motors for job creation, including in green economy sectors such as sustainable energy and climate-resilient agriculture. Available evidence suggests that small and medium enterprises are important in this regard but their significance and impact are still unclear. Women-owned enterprises account for a third of businesses in the formal economy worldwide, but the majority in developing and emerging economies are informal micro- and small enterprises with little growth potential. Women working in family-owned businesses are often not considered full shareholders or compensated equally. Nevertheless, women's enterprises can be important vehicles for economic empowerment, leading to improved incomes and contributing to poverty reduction in the household and community. Yet discriminatory social norms and family responsibilities can prevent women from even starting a business. Policies are needed to address discriminatory property and inheritance laws that inhibit women's entrepreneurship, as well as to facilitate women's access to markets, credit, financial services and products, infrastructure, procurement opportunities and social protection.¹²

C. Gender pay gaps

18. Sixty-five years after ILO Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951 (No. 100) ratified by 172 countries, gender pay gaps remain pervasive across regions and sectors. Despite the advances in many parts of the world in securing formal employment for women and raising their educational levels — sometimes exceeding men's — gender pay gaps characterize all labour markets. The gender pay gap, defined as the difference in average wages paid to women as compared with men, is a major cause of an overall lifetime income inequality between men and women. While the gender pay gap has decreased over time, women are still systematically paid less than men for work of equal value. The gender pay gap is estimated to be 23 per cent globally; although variable in size, it is persistent in all countries.¹³

19. At every level of education, women on average earn less than men. Where women are concentrated in the informal economy — which is the case for most women workers across the globe — the challenge of achieving equal remuneration

¹² Definitions and calculations of numbers of micro and small and medium-sized enterprises are varied and lack precision. International Finance Corporation, "IFC jobs study: assessing private sector contributions to job creation and poverty reduction" (2013); Jan de Kok and others, *Is Small Still Beautiful? Literature Review of Recent Empirical Evidence on the Contribution of SMEs to Employment Creation* (ILO and Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ), 2013).

¹³ UN-Women, "Tackling the Gender Pay Gap from Individual Choices to Institutional Change", policy brief No. 6 (New York, 2015b); ILO, *Women at Work: Trends*.

is greater because it would involve extending formal employment status and protections to those who work informally.¹⁴

20. The differences in gender pay gaps across countries are explained not by levels of economic growth or increases in per capita income, but rather by policies that distribute the gains from growth more equitably between women and men. In some countries, increasing the minimum wage has helped to reduce gender pay gaps. Other countries have enacted legislation that prohibits discrimination against women in hiring, training and promotions, and have repealed laws that restrict women's access to certain occupations. Additional measures include improving the valuation of women's work by strengthening legal and regulatory frameworks (job evaluations, pay transparency and gender pay audits), facilitating collective bargaining and increasing employment in the public sector for women, which tends to have a lower gender pay gap than the private sector.¹⁵

21. A related but distinct issue is the “motherhood pay gap”, which measures the pay gap between mothers and women without dependent children, and between mothers and fathers. The motherhood pay penalty constitutes a barrier to gender equality across countries, although available data indicates that the unadjusted motherhood pay gap tends to be larger in developing countries than in developed countries. The motherhood penalty limits not only women's wages and time spent in paid work, but also reduces pensions and increases poverty in old age. Gender pay gaps tend to be wider for parents than non-parents; up to 40 to 50 per cent of the gender pay gap in some high-income countries can be attributed to parenthood and marriage. In sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, women in households with children are associated with gender pay gaps of 31 per cent and 35 per cent, respectively, compared to 4 per cent and 14 per cent for women living in households without children.¹⁶

22. The motherhood wage penalty makes tangible gender norms that uphold women's obligation to relinquish paid work and income for childbirth and childrearing and excuse men their fathering roles; in contrast, working fathers usually earn more than their childless peers — the “fatherhood wage premium”. Such stereotypes also negatively influence the recruitment, remuneration and promotion of young women by employers who question their commitment to work, given their potential for motherhood.¹⁷ Legislation and policies are therefore needed to promote the recruitment, remuneration and promotion of young women, parental leave, quality affordable childcare, paid sick days, and support working mothers to negotiate equal pay for work of equal value. Addressing the gender and motherhood pay gaps means more equitable, transparent and just workplaces for all.

¹⁴ UN-Women, “Tackling the Gender Pay Gap from Individual Choices to Institutional Change”; ILO, *Women at Work: Trends 2016*.

¹⁵ ILO, *Women at Work: Trends 2016*; UN-Women, *Progress of the World's Women 2015-2016*; UN-Women, “Tackling the Gender Pay Gap from Individual Choices to Institutional Change”; see also http://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/statistics-explained/index.php/Gender_pay_gap_statistics (accessed 14 November 2016).

¹⁶ Damian Grimshaw and Jill Rubery, *The Motherhood Pay Gap: A Review of the Issues, Theory and International Evidence*, ILO Conditions of Work and Employment Series, No. 57 (Geneva, 2015); UN-Women, *Progress of the World's Women 2015-2016*.

¹⁷ Grimshaw and Rubery, *The Motherhood Pay Gap: A Review of the Issues, Theory and International Evidence* (2015); UN-Women, *Progress of the World's Women 2015-2016*.

D. Gaps in social protection

23. Women are overrepresented among the 73 per cent of the world's population that has partial or no access to social protection. Women face gender-specific barriers to employment and income security because they participate less in the labour market, earn lower wages and enjoy less access to credit and assets than men. They therefore have less access and lower coverage with regard to contributory social protection instruments, such as pensions or unemployment compensation and even health insurance. Globally, the proportion of women above retirement age receiving a pension is on average 10.6 percentage points lower than that of men. Strengthening social protection systems to support working, retired and unpaid women and their families thus becomes crucial to ending women's poverty and building their economic empowerment.¹⁸

24. Social protection policies play a critical role in reducing poverty and inequality, supporting inclusive growth and increasing gender equality. Many informal workers are women who may interrupt paid employment to take care of children, elderly parents, and sick relatives, thereby compromising their access to social protection. Well-designed social protection schemes can narrow gender gaps in poverty rates, enhance women's access to personal income and provide a lifeline for families. Social protection measures that countries have taken include universal health coverage, non-contributory pensions, maternity and parental leave, basic income security for children and public works programmes.¹⁸

E. Work in the care economy

25. Women bear the disproportionate burden of unpaid work, including unpaid care and domestic work, which is usually excluded from the calculation of the gross domestic product (GDP). The total value of unpaid care and domestic work is estimated to be between 10 and 39 per cent of GDP, and can surpass that of manufacturing, commerce, transportation and other key sectors. Unpaid care and domestic work supports the economy and often makes up for lack of public expenditure on social services and infrastructure. In effect, it represents a transfer of resources from women to others in the economy. Recognizing and valuing unpaid care and domestic work means measuring it through regular, periodic time-use surveys across countries. Disaggregated time-use data — by sex, income, age, location and other relevant factors — can inform policies that aim to improve women's economic empowerment. Policies that reduce and redistribute women's and girls' unpaid care and domestic work by providing social protection — child and elder care services, universal health care, parental leave — and infrastructure — such as universal access to potable water and clean, modern energy — can create employment, improve women's labour force participation and increase retention of girls in school.¹⁸

26. Expanding public and private sector paid jobs in the care economy can make a significant contribution to gender equality and women's economic empowerment. Quality in care services is inextricably linked to working conditions for care

¹⁸ UN-Women, *Progress of the World's Women 2015-2016*; ILO, *Women at Work: Trends 2016*.

workers, whether public or private. The care economy is characterized by absence of decent work and labour rights, particularly for migrant workers, who make up a substantial portion of the labour force, and care deficits in both home and host countries. Globally, 10.3 million additional health workers (physicians, nurses and midwives) are required to ensure the effective delivery of universal health care, the majority in Asia (7.1 million) and Africa (2.8 million). It is estimated that 27 million more teachers will be needed worldwide to achieve universal primary education by 2030. This presents a major opportunity to create decent, good quality jobs for women in these sectors, as well as in elder-care and childcare services.¹⁹

27. A new study shows that investment into the care economy of 2 per cent of GDP in just seven countries would create over 21 million jobs and help countries overcome the twin challenges of caring for ageing populations and tackling economic stagnation. The study demonstrates that investing in care can narrow the gender pay gap, reduce overall inequality and redress the exclusion of women from decent jobs. Up to 70 per cent of the directly created jobs would be taken up by women and the employment multiplier effect from these new jobs would also increase men's employment overall by up to 4 per cent in some countries.²⁰

IV. Increasing informality and mobility of labour

28. The increasing informality and mobility of labour reflect changes in the world of work brought about by globalization and interconnected global value and supply chains, technological advances, the shift of manufacturing to developing countries and the growth of the service sector. Over the past two decades, the informal economy has come to dominate the world of work in both developing and developed countries — and women are overrepresented in the informal economy around the globe. It includes workers and employers in informal enterprises, own-account workers, and those in formal public, private or non-profit enterprises and domestic workers in households without social protection. A defining feature of informal employment is the lack of social protection and labour rights, which constitutes a challenge for women's economic empowerment.²¹

29. Informal workers are major contributors to the global economy. The informal economy encompasses more than half the workforce worldwide, except in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, where the figure is around 10 per cent. In South Asia it is 82 per cent; in Latin America and the Caribbean 51 per cent; in sub-Saharan Africa 66 per cent; and in the Middle East and Northern Africa 45 per cent. In 2015, 586 million women were considered own-account or contributing family workers. In India, 120 million women (around 95 per cent of women in paid work) work

¹⁹ Sarah Gammage and Natacha Stevanovic, "Gender, Migration, Work and Care Deficits: What Role is there for the SDGs?", background paper prepared for UN-Women expert group meeting (Geneva, 2016); UN-Women, *Progress of the World's Women 2015-2016*.

²⁰ International Trade Union Confederation, "Investing in the care economy: a gender analysis of employment stimulus in seven OECD countries" (Brussels, 2016).

²¹ ILO and Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing, *Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Picture*, 2nd ed. (Geneva, 2013); Joann Vanek and others, *Statistics on the Informal Economy: Definitions, Regional Estimates and Challenges*, Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing working paper (statistics) No. 2, (April 2014).

informally, as do around 12 million women in Mexico (around 60 per cent). Only in the Middle East and North Africa is informal employment a greater source of employment for men (47 per cent) than for women (35 per cent), which reflects the general pattern in the region of more men in any form of employment than women.^{21,22}

30. In developed countries informality does not affect most of the workforce, although non-standard employment arrangements — such as in the on-demand and gig economy²³ — are increasing and a large proportion of the workforce receives limited benefits and social protection. Part-time employment, one of the forms of non-standard work which affects women more than men, was between 25 and 37 per cent in selected Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries, increasing in the aftermath of the global financial crisis of 2007-2008. Working part-time is often described as a choice women make to spend time on domestic and care responsibilities. However, social norms, cultural constraints and the extent of public support for care and income security for children determine the degree to which women choose part-time work and reduced earnings. Occupational segregation, including stereotyping of part-time jobs as “women’s work”, means that some women who want to work full-time may obtain only part-time jobs.²⁴

31. The challenges women face in the formal economy are mirrored in the informal economy: occupational segregation, gender wage gaps, unequal access to resources and social protection, disproportionate burdens of unpaid care and domestic work, violence and harassment and even greater barriers to organizing and mobilizing. Paid domestic work, home-based work, street vending and waste picking are all sectors dominated by women, and they also tend to be the most vulnerable and precarious forms of informal employment. Women comprise more than 80 per cent of homeworkers (industrial outworkers); 30-90 per cent of street vendors; and 83 per cent of the world’s 53 million domestic workers. Globally, 57 per cent of domestic workers (29.7 million individuals) have no limitations on their working hours.²⁵

32. An estimated one in five people were working in global value chains in 2013 in 40 countries with available data (453 million people compared to 296 million in 1995), including 190 million women. While the integration of developing countries into global value chains may have increased opportunities for labour force participation and paid work for women, it is increasingly evident that factories have tended to hire younger women for low-skilled, low-wage jobs, in many cases

²² ILO, *Women at Work: Trends 2016*.

²³ The gig economy covers “crowdwork” through online platforms that connect clients and workers potentially on a global basis and “work on-demand via apps” that channel tasks such as transport, clerical, cleaning and running errands, and are managed by firms. Valerio De Stefano, *The rise of the “Just-in-Time Workforce”: On-Demand Work, Crowdwork and Labour Protection in the ‘Gig-Economy.’* Conditions of Work and Employment Series, No. 71, ILO (Geneva, 2016).

²⁴ Non-standard employment includes temporary, part-time and on-call work, and multi-party employment relationships. ILO and Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing, *Women and Men in the Informal Economy* (2013); ILO, *Non-standard Employment around the World. Understanding Challenges, Shaping Prospects* (Geneva, 2016).

²⁵ ILO and Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing, *Women and Men in the Informal Economy* (2013); Women in Informal Employment Globalizing and Organizing working paper (statistics) No. 2 (2014).

through subcontracting arrangements, with minimal labour protection and little likelihood of advancement. Many global supply chains have become profitable through an expanding informal labour force, often women working excessive hours for piece rates. Fewer opportunities exist for older women workers or those with higher skill levels.²⁶

33. Over the past 25 years, the number of international migrants has grown considerably, reaching 244 million in 2015, which represents a 41 per cent increase since 2000 and more than 50 per cent since 1990. Nearly three-quarters of this migration is from developing to developed countries, of people seeking, among other things, economic opportunities and refuge from political and armed conflict, environmental devastation and climate change. While a little over half the 150 million migrant workers in the world are men, there is a notable feminization of migration — although better sex-disaggregated data are needed. Globally, migrant women have higher labour force participation rates than non-migrant women, and are concentrated in female-dominated care and service sectors in the informal economy, since most cannot access formal labour markets. Poor working conditions in the informal economy are exacerbated by labour discrimination, sexism, racism and xenophobia.²⁷

34. Women migrant domestic workers are enmeshed in “global care chains” — the expanding transnational migration of care workers in response to care deficits in developed countries, which at the same time creates care deficits in countries of origin, often among their own family members.²⁸ As demand for care work in higher-income countries grows, a significant global concern is the large number of lower-income migrant women who are channelled into domestic work and the low-end of value chains. A related concern is the trafficking of such labour; the number of young women trafficked across borders because of coercion and deceit continues to grow. Unregulated and unethical labour brokers are key actors in precarious hiring arrangements that exploit migrant women workers, who are often subject to abuse (see [A/70/205](#)).

35. Similarly to international migration, rural to urban migration within countries continues at high levels, and increasingly so for rural women in low-income and middle-income countries. Over half of the world’s population was living in urban areas in 2014, and the number will double to some 6.4 billion by 2050. Even though migrant women are likely to work in low-paid, precarious jobs in the informal economy, such as domestic work, urban life can also represent economic independence and an alternative to confining gender norms.²⁹ Measures should be taken to protect and make informal employment more economically viable, such as extending and enforcing minimum wages and other labour and social protections for women informal workers, including migrant women and those working in domestic service, home-based work and small enterprises.

²⁶ UNDP, *Human Development Report 2015*.

²⁷ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2016). “International migration report 2015: highlights” ([ST/ESA/SER.A/375](#)).

²⁸ Gamage and Stevanovic, “Gender, Migration, Work and Care Deficits: What Role is there for the SDGs?” (2016).

²⁹ International Organization for Migration, *World Migration Report 2015. Migrants and Cities: New Partnerships to Manage Mobility* (Geneva, 2015).

V. Technology changing the world of work

36. Technological and digital developments, for example, automation, artificial intelligence, robotics, 3D printing, and internet connectivity, are transforming the world of work. Technological change can be either disruptive or productive. Disruptive technological change transforms the organization of work, production and distribution so that workers are reduced to piece-rate providers of goods or services as in the gig economy. Disruptive technological change diminishes workers' bargaining power and ability to organize collectively, obliges them to bear the costs and risks of production and bypasses the ability to demand from employers basic labour and social protection. In contrast, productive technological change increases the productivity of human labour, improving performance and reducing the drudgery associated with many tasks, particularly for unpaid work. The surpluses thus generated can be invested in labour-intensive work, for example in the care economy, sustainable agriculture and artistic and creative concerns, thereby enhancing women's economic empowerment and improving the quality of life.³⁰

37. The digital acceleration of the production and trade in goods and services globally has been facilitated by the more than 7 billion mobile phone subscriptions, 2.3 billion people with smart phones and some 3.2 billion people connected to the Internet, including 1.3 billion women users. They have also facilitated access in different sectors and at different income levels to banking, financial and information services. Increased Internet connectivity and mobile phone access are credited with spurring women's entrepreneurship in many countries, including in the green and care economies. Even so, gender gaps exist: over 3 billion people in low- and middle-income countries do not own mobile phones, and 1.7 billion of them are women. A worldwide gender gap of 12 per cent in Internet use was found in 2016, and 30.9 per cent in the least developed countries.³¹

38. Notwithstanding the gender gaps in access and use, digital connectivity has enabled new forms of work. Digital technologies can remove geographical barriers without requiring either employers or workers to change location or migrate. This is the case of "crowdwork" in the gig economy, which operates through online platforms that connect firms with workers, potentially on a global basis. Crowdwork platforms operate at extremely high speeds, minimizing transaction costs and maximizing the flexibility and scalability of the workforce such that huge numbers of people are available to complete tasks at specific times.³²

39. It is not easy to calculate the number of workers in the gig economy, but the 11 principal platforms and apps employ some 21 million workers worldwide. The data show that women participate in significant numbers in crowdworking and other e-services. On a major crowdwork platform based in the United States, 52 per cent

³⁰ ILO, "Technological Changes and Work in the Future: Making technology work for all", Future of Work Centenary Initiative Issue Note Series 1 (Geneva, 2016); Jayati Ghosh, "The future of work, the care economy and globalization", Laughlin Currie Memorial Lecture, National University of Colombia (2016).

³¹ International Telecommunication Union, *Measuring the Information Society Report 2016* (Geneva, 2016); GSMA Connected Women, *Bridging the gender gap: Mobile access and usage in low- and middle-income countries* (2015).

³² De Stefano, *The rise of the "Just-in-Time Workforce"*.

of workers are men and 48 per cent women; more men than women are employed on a crowdwork platform spanning 51 countries; and of the 5 million crowdworkers in the United Kingdom, women comprise 54 per cent.^{32,33}

40. Most crowdworkers are considered self-employed independent contractors who assume all the potential risks and liabilities of transactions with customers, with none of the benefits of fundamental rights at work, such as minimum wages, social security, anti-discrimination regulations, sick pay, holidays and unemployment insurance. While a flexible schedule or working at home have been identified as potential benefits, crowdworkers usually work long hours at often inconvenient times to make a living wage. The gig economy has eluded labour protection and employment regulation, although this is beginning to be contested.³⁴

41. The disappearance of jobs through technological change and automation is a source of concern, as is the potential for heightened inequality — stark increases in the number of low-income workers with precarious livelihoods, a shrinking middle class and huge gains for those at the top of the income scale worldwide. Some observers predict higher levels of inequality and polarization of the labour force as low-skill jobs continue to be automated, with this trend spreading to middle-skill jobs. This implies that developed economies may lose fewer jobs than developing economies with an abundance of low-skill labour. Other estimates indicate that more than 7 million jobs are at risk in the world's largest economies over the next five years, principally in office and administrative services, manufacturing and production, but also in health care, owing to telemedicine. Sectors that are expected to grow include the computer and mathematical professions, and the architectural and engineering fields. The industry expected to create the most jobs is information and communications technology, followed by professional services and the media, entertainment and information professions.³⁵

42. In this scenario, unless appropriate recruitment, retention and promotion policies are enacted and investments made in building new skills for women, women would tend to lose jobs since they are less likely to be employed in sectors where the adoption of new technology will create jobs, resulting in a widening of the gender gap. It is anticipated that women will lose five jobs for every job gained, while men will lose three jobs for every job gained. Women's relatively low participation in science, technology, engineering and mathematical professions, where jobs are expected to be created, results in women standing to gain only one new such job for every 20 lost in other areas, whereas the ratio for men is one new job for every four lost elsewhere.³⁵

³³ Janine Berg, "Income security in the on-demand economy: findings and policy lessons from a survey of crowdworkers", Conditions of Work and Employment Series, No. 74 (Geneva, ILO, 2016); Ursula Huws and Simon Joyce, "Size of the UK's 'gig economy' revealed for the first time" (Foundation for European Progressive Studies and UNI Europa, 2016); UNDP, *Human Development Report 2015*.

³⁴ De Stefano, *The rise of the "Just-in-Time Workforce"*; ILO, "Technological Changes and Work in the Future: Making technology work for all" (2016).

³⁵ World Economic Forum, *Global Challenge insight report* (2016); UBS, "Extreme automation and connectivity: The global, regional, and investment implications of the Fourth Industrial Revolution", UBS White Paper for the World Economic Forum Annual Meeting (2016).

43. Digital fluency may help to close some gender gaps: if the pace at which women become frequent users of digital technologies is doubled, the workplace could reach gender equality much faster than many current estimates predict. Given women's rising science, technology, engineering and mathematical education levels in some countries, women could have significant potential in the global workforce. While men outscored women in digital fluency across all countries, that gap is narrowing and digital fluency could support educational attainment along with advancement in the workplace for both women and men.³⁶ These are policy options which Governments can consider, together with those that both manage the dilemmas posed by disruptive technological change — job loss and expanding gender inequality — and leverage productive technological change in favour of women's economic empowerment.

VI. Women's collective voice, leadership and decision-making

44. Women's collective voice and active participation in economic leadership and decision-making are essential for shaping the changing world of work to achieve gender equality and women's economic empowerment. Women's participation in worker organizations, cooperatives, trade unions and self-help groups has benefited women workers. Women's organizing is crucial for upholding fundamental labour rights, ensuring decent work and defining policy priorities. Governments are responsible as duty bearers to uphold women's rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining. Through collective bargaining, women workers can negotiate to reduce gender pay gaps, increase pay and benefits, and improve working conditions. Women's organizing has supported informal workers to gain recognition and access labour rights and social protection. Domestic workers have organized worldwide for the right to form unions, work regulated hours and receive minimum wages and paid benefits. Yet women's right to organize is at risk in many countries owing to restrictions on freedom of association; exclusion of workers from labour law; denial of collective bargaining to some or all workers; harassment, threats and violence; and narrowing of the space for civil society participation in public debate and policymaking.³⁷

45. Policies that support the recruitment, retention and promotion of women help ensure income security, professional advancement and women's management and leadership of public and private institutions and firms. Yet gender parity has yet to be reached. Women are underrepresented in decision-making positions at work and in leadership positions in trade unions, employer organizations and corporate boards. Fewer than 5 per cent of the chief executive officers of the world's largest corporations are women, and the 30 per cent of women-owned businesses are mostly small and medium-sized enterprises. Governments, employers and worker organizations should promote women to economic decision-making and leadership positions, shape gender-responsive policy and advocacy agendas and support

³⁶ Julie Sweet, "Access to digital technology accelerates global gender equality", *Harvard Business Review* (May 17, 2016).

³⁷ Lisa McGowan and others, "Women's Labor Rights and Economic Power, Now and in the Future", background paper prepared for UN-Women expert group meeting (Geneva, 2016).

women's organizing and collective bargaining. Tripartite arrangements among Governments, employers and trade unions have been effective in this regard.

VII. Conclusions and recommendations

46. **Women's economic empowerment is essential for the full, effective and accelerated implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Without it, the global economy will not yield inclusive growth that generates decent work for all, eliminates poverty, promotes equality — foremost, gender equality — and improves wellbeing and livelihoods. Achieving women's economic empowerment and realizing women's human and labour rights constitute a sustainable development solution for people, planet and prosperity that equally benefits paid and unpaid, formal and informal workers.**

47. **Transforming the world of work for women requires the elimination of structural barriers and discriminatory laws and social norms to create equal economic opportunities and outcomes. To leave no one behind, economic and social policies should target the elimination of inequalities and gaps related to women's labour force participation, entrepreneurship, pay and working conditions, social protection and unpaid domestic and care work, and strengthen education, training and skills development to enable women to respond to new opportunities in the changing world of work. Local and national governments need to pay particular attention to the situation of women in the burgeoning informal and migrant economies. Support for women workers' organizations, cooperatives and trade unions strengthens economic empowerment and the realization of women's labour rights, and allows women's voice and agency to enter public debates and policy formation.**

48. **All stakeholders must ensure that implementation, monitoring and accountability mechanisms of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development systematically support women's economic empowerment and rights to and at work, and promote decent work and full and productive employment for women at the global, regional, national and local levels. The United Nations system should provide coordination, operational and normative support to Member States, particularly UN-Women, with its mandate to promote gender equality and women's empowerment and the International Labour Organization (ILO), with its mandate to promote decent work for all and set international labour standards.**

49. **To achieve women's economic empowerment and rights to and at work in the changing world of work, the Commission on the Status of Women may wish to urge Governments and other stakeholders to take the following action:**

Strengthening normative and legal frameworks for full employment and decent work for all women

(a) **Achieve universal ratification without reservations and full implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of**

Discrimination against Women and relevant ILO conventions and recommendations;

(b) Strengthen the capacity and funding for national gender equality mechanisms to effectively support and monitor the mainstreaming of gender perspectives across labour and sustainable development policies, and work with labour institutions in their implementation;

(c) Strengthen laws and regulatory frameworks that prohibit discrimination against women regarding entry into the labour market and terms and conditions of employment;

(d) Strengthen and enforce laws and workplace policies that prohibit discrimination in the recruitment, retention and promotion of women in the public and private sectors, and provide means of redress in cases of non-compliance;

(e) Work to eliminate occupational segregation by addressing discriminatory social norms and promoting women's equal participation in labour markets, education and training, and encourage women to diversify their occupational choices and enter jobs in emerging fields and growing economic sectors;

(f) Undertake legislative and administrative reforms to ensure women's equal access to and control over productive resources and assets, such as land and other forms of property, credit, inheritance, natural resources and information and communications technologies;

(g) Strengthen and enforce laws and policies to eliminate violence and harassment against women in the workplace and support the development of an ILO instrument to provide an international standard to address violence and harassment against women in the world of work;

(h) Take special measures to ensure that women who experience multiple and intersecting forms of inequalities, discrimination and marginalization can pursue equal opportunities for decent, good quality work in the public and private sectors;

Implementing economic and social policies for women's economic empowerment

(i) Implement and monitor the impact of macroeconomic policies and reforms for job creation and the promotion of women's full, equal and productive employment and decent work;

(j) Increase and maximize targeted financing to accelerate women's full and equal participation in the world of work through all sources of funding, including domestic resources and official development assistance;

(k) Support the creation of decent, good quality jobs for women in the care economy in the public and private sectors;

(l) Expand and reprioritize fiscal expenditures for social protection and care infrastructure, such as early childhood education and health care, as a means of addressing the motherhood pay penalty;

(m) **Implement and enforce laws and regulations that uphold the principle of equal pay for work of equal value, in compliance with international labour standards, such as ILO Equal Remuneration Convention, 1951, (No. 100), and provide means of redress;**

(n) **Enact policies and special measures to ensure equal representation of women in economic decision-making structures and institutions, as well as in enterprises and on corporate boards;**

(o) **Establish universal social protection floors (see ILO Social Protection Floors recommendation, 2012 (No. 202)) as part of national social protection systems to ensure access to social protection for all, including workers outside the formal economy, and progressively achieve higher levels of protection in line with ILO social security standards;**

(p) **Ensure that both women and men have access to maternity or parental leave allowances and are not discriminated against when availing themselves of such benefits (see ILO Maternity Protection Convention, 2000 (No. 183) and Workers with Family Responsibilities Convention, 1981 (No. 156));**

(q) **Undertake targeted measures to recognize, reduce and redistribute women's disproportionate burden of unpaid care and domestic work, through flexibility in working arrangements without reductions in labour and social protections, and the provision of infrastructure, technology and public services, such as accessible and quality childcare and care facilities for children and other dependents;**

(r) **Systematically measure and incorporate the value of unpaid care and domestic work in the calculation of GDP and the formulation of economic and social policies;**

(s) **Prioritize the entry into and advancement in labour markets of young women by ensuring access to education and technical and vocational skills training and eliminating the barriers girls and women face in the transition from school to work;**

Addressing the growing informality of work and mobility of women workers

(t) **Make women's informal employment in domestic work, home-based work and small and medium-sized enterprises, as well as other own-account and part-time work more economically viable by extending social protection and minimum living wages, and promote the transition to formal employment in line with ILO Transition from the Informal to the Formal Economy Recommendation, 2015 (No. 204) and through ratification and implementation of ILO Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189);**

(u) **Adopt national migration policies that are gender responsive, protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for women migrant workers, regulate the role of private intermediaries and labour brokers in migration, and enforce laws against trafficking;**

(v) **Strengthen synergies between international migration and development by ensuring safe, orderly and regular migration policies that**

uphold women's human rights in the context of implementation of the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants (General Assembly resolution [71/1](#));

(w) Improve collection and analysis of data on the informal economy, disaggregated by sex, income, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other relevant factors, using the ILO definition of informality;

Managing technological and digital change for women's economic empowerment

(x) Support women's, particularly young women's, access to skills and training in new and emerging fields, especially science, technology, engineering and mathematical education and digital fluency, by expanding the scope of education and training opportunities;

(y) Ensure universal access to skills, knowledge, information and communications technologies that are economically, geographically, linguistically and virtually accessible to women workers, as well as increased broadband and mobile phone access for women;

(z) Encourage productive technological change in support of decent, good quality public and private sector jobs for women in the green economy, especially in the area of climate change mitigation and adaptation;

Strengthening women's collective voice, leadership and decision-making

(aa) Protect the rights to freedom of association and collective bargaining to enable women workers, including informal and migrant workers, to organize and join unions and participate in economic decision-making and design of policies for the world of work;

(bb) Support tripartite collaboration among Governments, employers and women workers and their organizations to prevent and redress gender inequalities in the world of work;

(cc) Encourage women's leadership in trade unions and workers' organizations and urge all trade union leaders to effectively represent the interests of women workers;

Strengthening private sector role in women's economic empowerment

(dd) Establish and strengthen compliance mechanisms that hold the private sector accountable for advancing gender equality and women's economic empowerment as articulated in the Women's Empowerment Principles;

(ee) Increase the share of trade and procurement from women-owned enterprises and female cooperatives in both the public and private sector;

(ff) Systematically undertake gender-sensitive value chain analyses to inform the design and implementation of policies that promote and protect women's rights and decent work in global value chains.