

WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT AFTER THE COVID-19: STATE OF THE ART AND SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY AGENDA

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to provide a global view of the significance and state of the art of women's economic empowerment and economic justice in post conflict settings for achieving not only gender equality but also the Women, Peace and Security Agenda as a broader goal in the framework of the 22th anniversary of the UNSCR 1325, the challenges this goal faces, opportunities, recommendations and future lines of research.

Gender equality, human rights, poverty, development, climate change and peace are very closely linked. As a consequence, gender inequality is particularly severe in conflict affected and post conflict settings. The inequality that women suffer in these contexts increase several times over because of the structural discrimination they experience (as problems to access to education, health care, decent works and lacks of representation in political and economic decision-making processes) added to their situation as victims of violence. But above all these issues, women should not be just considered as victims as it seems to have been the case often throughout the years. It is indispensable to recognize them as leaders, referents and agents of change and to ensure they count with the required tools to achieve their full or wished potential.

Women's economic empowerment, economic justice and inclusive economic growth are critical to reaching gender equality and human rights, sustainable peace and development and resilient societies. The consequences of gender inequality in these contexts not only affect women and their families but also the whole of society and countries, leading to a huge loss of their collective potential which impacts on every political systems, social welfare, economy and workforce for generations. In this regard, the COVID-19 increased poverty, insecurity, gender inequality and vulnerability all around the world, but especially in conflict, post conflict and humanitarian settings.

Keywords: Gender Equality, Post conflict Settings, COVID-19, Economic Empowerment, Economic Justice.

Introduction

Women's economic empowerment, economic justice and inclusive economic growth are critical to achieving gender equality, sustainable development and resilient societies. And, in general, the overall goals of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda³⁵. Gender inequality in post conflict settings do not only affect women and their families but also the

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³⁵ Further information can be consulted at: <https://peacekeeping.un.org/en/promoting-women-peace-and-security>

whole of societies and countries, generating a massive loss of their collective potential with direct impact on economies and workforce for generations. In this regard, the COVID-19 caused an economic crisis of unprecedented proportions affecting negatively women's rights all around the world, but especially in conflict, post conflict and humanitarian settings (OECD, 2021).

When women and girls are caught in post conflict settings as well as when they are forced to move, to migrate or flee from poverty, for family reunion or to search for economic opportunities and a better life, they have to combine these challenges much more intensively than men because of pre-existing gender-based forms of vulnerabilities (Dianova, 2017). In this regard, women can experience a greater risk of suffering abuse, violence, discrimination, sexual exploitation or being a victim of human trafficking if they do not have access to sustainable income generating activities in their home countries or the ones of destination.

With this respect, it should be stressed the conflict-poverty-gender inequality-climate change-migration nexus. The effects of climate change impact more on the most vulnerable of societies, including women and girls (Trevelyan, 2021). Climate change could only be effectively tackled placing inclusion in the centre addressing broader discrimination, sociocultural barriers and inequalities that reinforce vulnerability. If climate adaptation interventions do not consider gender inequalities, vulnerability is set to increase. These kind of actions should include the meaningful participation of women and girls in education, the economy, leadership, decision-making at all levels, the implementation of climate actions and the fair and equal access to resources and financial tools (including legal property rights).

Despite the differences between countries, there are similarities in the factors driving and perpetuating gender inequality, conflict and fragility. The prevalence of discriminatory gender norms and harmful cultural practices for women and girls' rights; widespread sexual and gender-based violence; weak institutions; women's exclusion from political (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2022), justice and economic meaningful decision making and, the lack of civil rights including freedom for civil society organisations are among the major drivers of inequality especially in fragile and post conflict contexts (OECD, 2017). In this sense, countries' domestic laws can perpetuate gender norms that limit women's economic participation with negative macroeconomic implications (Christopherson; Yiadom; Johnson; Fernando; Yazid; Thiemann, 2022).

In short, the inequality that women and girls suffer in armed conflict situations and post conflict settings increase several times over because they face the structural discrimination they suffer (as previously explained, problems to access to education, health care, decent works and lack of meaningful representation in political, social and economic decision-making processes) added to their situation as armed violence victims. Armed conflicts use to take place in countries with high rates of gender inequality (United Nations Development Programme, 2018), gender-based violence, human rights violations or endemic poverty (United Nations Development Program, 2010), so the discrimination at all levels that women use to deal with in these kind of situations is deep.

Based on the Social Institutions and Gender Index 2019, the Alert2020! Report on conflicts, human rights and peacebuilding launched by Escola de Cultura de Pau (Autònoma University of Barcelona) (2020) states that 14 of the 34 armed conflicts that took place before the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak during 2019 were located in countries with elevated levels of discrimination; 6 armed conflicts in states with medium levels of women's marginalisation

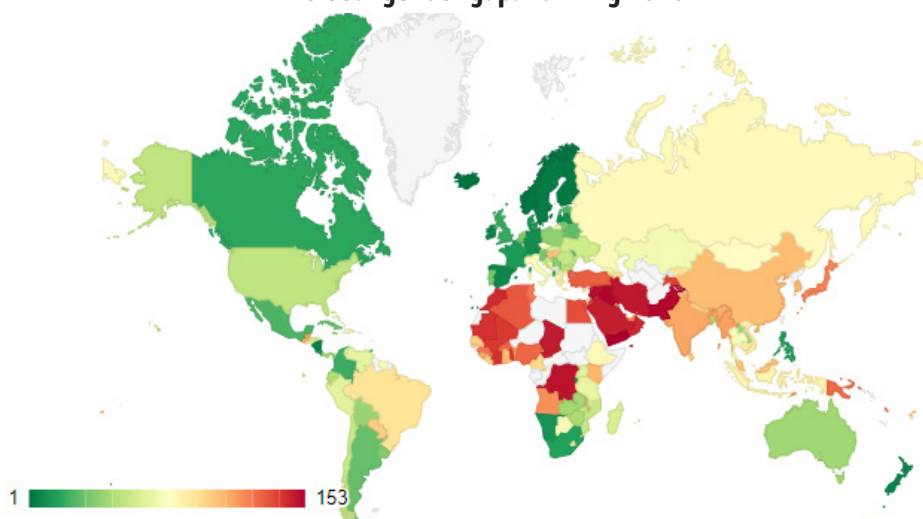
and 10 in countries without available data in this respect (Algeria, Burundi, Egypt, Israel, Libya, Niger, Palestina, Syria, Somalia, Sudan and South Sudan).

As above mentioned, sexual violence is one of the most serious vulnerations to their human rights that women and girls may face in conflict-settings and one of the biggest concerns for the achievement of women's empowerment at the short and long-term due to the grave repercussions at all levels that this crime generates in women and girls. According to data on "sexual violence in conflict" or "conflict-affected sexual violence" collected by ACLED (2019), when the gender of victims is explicitly reported, over 95% of cases reported have women or girls as the victims. However, data shows examples from the DRC, Rwanda and elsewhere that demonstrates that women have also developed active roles with regarding armed conflicts which include ordering or perpetrating rape (United Nations, 2019).

Ultimately, the worsening of living conditions in post conflict increase the economic and social burdens of both women and men but women suffer from pre-conflict legacies of weak investment in gender-equal economic and social development of education and inequalities with respect to healthcare, food security, access to clean water, property, inheritances, formal employment and land rights. For instance, it should be noted that despite women play a major role in the agricultural sector, they hold yet less than 15 percent of the world's land (Trevelyan, 2021). In short, women disproportionately carry the burden of war and structural barriers limited women's economic empowerment (WEC).

Moreover, women and girls are usually considered to be the main carers of their families due to traditional roles, idiosyncrasies and religious practices deeply established in most societies, seriously undermining their ability to lift themselves out of poverty. Because of that and together with the fact that women face high levels of insecurity, sexual and domestic violence after conflicts and gendered socioeconomic inequalities, their access to economic empowerment is further restricted (Relief, 2013).

Global gender gap. Ranking 2020



Source: [Country economy](#)

Consequently, women's economic empowerment and economic justice in post conflict settings should be a top priority for all concerned stakeholders in the implementation of

peacebuilding processes, recovery actions and global sustainable development programs: the international community, donors, practitioners, national and local governments, public and private sectors, communities and civil society. Economic empowerment increases women's access to needed resources and opportunities including formal jobs and tools for entrepreneurship including digital literacy, financial services, property, learning and development skills or market information, which are absolutely key elements for achieving their economic independence. Progress on WEC has a positive impact on peace and prosperity.

The economic empowerment of forced displaced and migrant women must also be a key element of concern of the whole of societies due to migrant women are frequently marginalised from professional opportunities in favour of jobs for men (The World Bank (b)). Cultural differences, language barriers, restrictive gender-roles, lack of education, household responsibilities, denial of work permits, insufficient or inexistent integration processes often limit women's possibilities to achieve their economic empowerment.

Recovery measures should address women's political, social and economic needs and priorities with well-planned and long-term support to achieve gender equality. It is essential to strengthening the leadership and meaningful participation of women in all the decision-making processes, from the ones focused on women's empowerment to peace-making and peacebuilding in its broadest sense.

This article is structured as follows: after the introduction, the article analyses the background to the research question, which is focused on the significance of WEC in post conflict settings after the COVID-19 for achieving not only gender equality but also the WPS Agenda as a broader goal in the framework of the 22th anniversary of the UNSCR 1325. The next section addresses the literature review for the study of this topic. The following part explores the methodology that has been used for conducting this research. The subsequent points discuss the result of this paper through the study of: The challenges and opportunities of WEC after the COVID-19 and its significance for the WPS Agenda; Lockdowns and national emergency laws during the COVID-19 pandemic; Strategies and evidence-based research; Budgets for WEC in post-conflict contexts and, the significance of the gender digital gap. The final part provides conclusions, recommendations and proposals for futures lines of research.

Literature review

The concept of gender is referred to the "socially constructed roles and relationships, personality traits, attitudes, behaviours, values, relative power and influence that society assigns to the two sexes on a differential basis. Moreover, gender pertains to the relationship between women and men (UN Women, 2014 cited in Strachan and Haider, 2, 2015). Evidence-based research shows that women and men experience armed conflicts and post conflict situations differently. Gender inequality, gender-based violence, human rights violations and endemic poverty are particularly grave in countries where armed conflicts use to take place (United Nations Development Program, 2010).

At the same time, economic empowerment is defined by the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development as "the capacity of women and men to participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth processes in ways that recognise the value of their contributions, respect their dignity and make it possible to negotiate a fairer distribution of the benefits of growth" (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2018).

When referring to WEC, although it is a complex concept to define and measure, it could be explained as a key element in the work to reduce poverty and women's inequality. In this respect, women should be considered just as men, as economic actors as well as obvious and vital agents of change (Ruiz, 2009, 5-6). In essence, WEC is about an increased ability to make choices, to access to income and assets, control of and benefit from economic gains and to own the power to make decisions (Gates Foundation).

Economic empowerment can provide women more bargaining power to negotiate their needs, rights and priorities at the household and society. In this sense, economic equality is considered as a powerful tool to bolster gender equality at the political level increasing women's agency to influence decisions and impact on resource distribution. Their meaningful access and control over resources (as paid work, entrepreneurship, ownership of goods and financing) has a key positive long-run impact on growth and poverty reduction within countries (UN Capital Development Fund; UN Women; UN Development Program, 2021).

Some of the social and political factors influencing women's ability to participate in the economy can be external, related to the economic environment and the functioning of the economy and would affect women and men alike (e.g. high rates of unemployment or deficient infrastructures) (Justino et al., 92-94, 2012).

Progress in making women equal to men in the economy is extremely slow (UN Women, 2015, 25-29) and women are still more likely than men to live in poverty. In addition, data shows that the COVID-19 pandemic affected women much harder than men. With this respect, before the pandemic evidence proved the gender wage gaps and female labour force participation rates were below 50% in a third of all countries (Fu; Brix, 2022).

Many more obstacles to the achievement of WEC are found when analysing this issue in post conflict settings. In this sense, it should be noted that WPS is a policy framework that recognizes that women are disproportionately affected by conflict and that they are critical actors in all efforts to achieve sustainable international peace and security. With this respect, women's equal and meaningful participation in peace processes, peacebuilding and security is required. The WPS Agenda has its origins in the U.N. Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, adopted on October 2000. This resolution addresses four pillars: participation, protection, prevention and relief and recovery (United States Institute of Peace). Subsequent resolutions³⁶ have continue complementing UNSCR 1325 over the years.

Armed conflicts alter women's economic role in the household and broader society, although rigorous evidence is limited. There is insufficient longitudinal research to ascertain whether temporary adjustments to gender roles through periods of conflict have had lasting impacts (Strachan and Haider, 11-12, 2015). While the practices of social institutions may change in conflict-affected contexts, they use to be to a limited degree and women's vulnerability to poverty may persist across generations.

Female employment usually involves vulnerability with lower-paying and skilled jobs, self-employment in the informal sector and unpaid family labour. In this sense, advancing

³⁶ The resolutions on WPS adopted by the United Nations Security Council can be analysed at: <https://www.un.org/ruleoflaw/blog/document/security-council-resolution-1325-2000-on-women-and-peace-and-security/>;
<http://www.peacewomen.org/why-WPS/solutions/resolutions>;
<https://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/peace-and-security/global-norms-and-standards>

towards women's full participation in the countries' economy could increase their GDP with benefits for all if an equitable distribution is pursued (The World Bank (a)).

It is also of utmost importance to note that social, economic and political gains that women may have achieved during the conflict tend to disappear in the post-conflict period. (Justino et al., 92-94, 2012). And on the whole, the economic opportunities open to women are shaped mostly by culture and tradition, education opportunities and access to land and resources (O'Connell, 2011 cited in Strachan and Haider, 11, 2015). With this regard, donors are recommended to adopt a political economy approach to gender analysis (Castillejo, 25, 2011), as well as integrating gender issues into any conflict, security, and economic analyses.

In sum, key obstacles are rooted in gender-based social institutions and norms (The World Bank (c)), that could be reflected in significant elements as the referred to female illiteracy, gender-biased land legislation, domestic burden, gender discrimination and segregation in the labour market, women's mobility constrains, poor access of women to healthcare, gender-biased violence, gender wage gap, women's low decision making power, low self-image and self-esteem or women's low participation in society (Ruiz, 2009, 10).

Women's economic empowerment bolsters productivity, increases economic diversification and income equality as well as other positive development outcomes (International Monetary Fund, 2018, 1-2). In this sense, social and economic development are needed for lasting peace. But growth does not automatically lead to a decrease in gender inequality, being necessary to make the economy work for women (Kabeer; Natali, 2013, 34-39). In this respect, a structural change is required globally and institutions supporting patriarchal structures and norms need to be transformed.

Because of that, the way towards the achievement of WEC requires the creation of decent and quality work opportunities for them and also increasing their meaningful decision-making power. This is totally necessary for fulfilling women's economic rights, reducing poverty and achieving broader development goals (Oxfam, 2017, 2).

WEC is indispensable for sustainable growth and development and for the achievement of more equitable and inclusive societies. It is necessary to develop and implement sound public policies, a holistic approach with long-term commitment and gender specific perspectives must be integrated when designing and programming such policies (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2012, 3-4).

Also, WEC is fundamental to advance women's rights enabling them to have control over their lives and to benefit home and host countries reaching their full potential due to gender equality and empowered women are catalysts for multiplying development efforts. In this regard, WEC is both a right and smart economies (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2012, 4).

Methodology

The author has analysed primary and secondary sources to design and develop this qualitative research. On one hand, primary sources are related to documentary resources, legal documents, official statistics, strategies and political statements from international organizations. Secondary sources are composed by scientific articles, policy briefs, op-eds and reports from international organizations and outstanding academics, researchers and think tanks.

It should be noted that the analysis of the research question face limitations due to many aspects of the WPS Agenda, armed conflicts and post conflict contexts usually lack systematic and accurate data. This is particularly relevant in the framework of this research question because it prevents further inclusion in mainstream scientific approach. Any data collected on conflict-affected and post conflict contexts may be incomplete and politically motivated, which means that the use of such data and related statistical findings must be considered cautiously (Ulrich, 2019, 18-19).

In this sense, significant transparent and quality (Buvinic; O'Donnell; Knowles; Badiie, 2022) gender data and gender statistics could provide key insights to accelerate women's empowerment (Fu; Brixi, 2022). The existing large gaps in gender data is due to countries usually do not invest enough in collecting gender statistics, data related to issues that women and girls face is not collected frequently and because there is a knowledge gap on collecting data on new and emerging matters (UN Women).

Results and discussion

a. Challenges and opportunities of WEC after the COVID-19 and its significance for the WPS Agenda

There is a tendency to consider women primarily as victims of violence (especially sexual violence), handicapping the many other roles that women play in the framework of armed conflicts and peacebuilding (such as combatants, mediators or negotiators in peace process) (UN Women, 1, 2012). But it is indispensable to not only recognize women's leadership and full potential, but also to meaningfully promote it.

Consequently, harmful cultural barriers for women's rights need to be identified and adopt the transformation of idiosyncrasies. Culture, tradition and history shape expectations about which attributes and behaviours are appropriate to women or men. The general pattern around the world is that women have less personal autonomy, fewer resources at their disposal and limited influence over the decision-making processes that shape their societies and their own lives (Ruiz, 2009, 10).

As explained previously, before the outbreak of the pandemic, women and girls were more likely to be at risk because they are more vulnerable to facing higher gender-based violence, difficulties to access basic goods and services, unpaid care work, early and forced child marriage and other abuses and human right violations in conflict-affected settings, post conflict and humanitarian crises. With this respect, donor strategies should strengthen the ability to formulate and advocate transformative changes with respect to detrimental gender norms for women (OECD, 2021) and actions to fight against gender inequality need to address all aspects of vulnerability.

Fragile economies, weak governance and high levels of corruption which are generalised in post conflict contexts make recovery difficult for the population, but particularly for women. It is noteworthy that women's economic incomes tend to be higher in post conflict settings where men have been especially affected by conflicts. Nevertheless, despite the fact that women frequently assume new economic roles during conflict, this does not necessarily enhance gender equality when men come from the battlefield and continue to control economic resources, stand against women's empowerment or perpetrate sexual and gender-based violence (O'Connell, 2011). After the cessation of violent conflicts and during

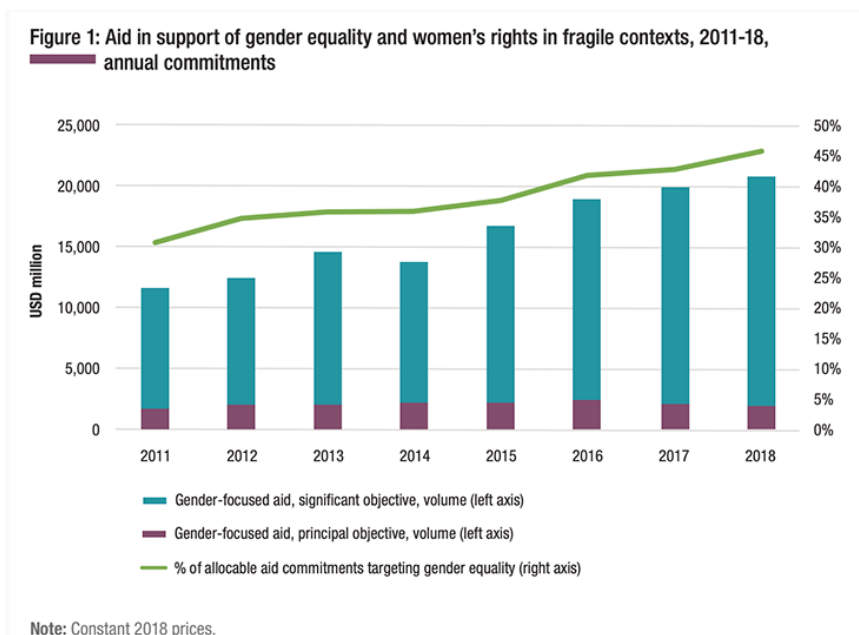
reconstruction and peacetime, men returning from war and demobilized soldiers often assume the economic activities that women had being developing previously (Hudock, 2016, 6-15). Nevertheless, WEC is a key enabler of participation and recovery in post conflict settings.

The COVID-19 had a greater impact for those caught in conflict-affected areas, post conflict and humanitarian crises contexts at all levels (Crisis Group, 2020). Klugman and Haiewen (2020) state two points of special interest to take into account in the framework of this research in the long term.

Firstly, the extent to which states are at risk of humanitarian crises and disasters that would overwhelm national response capacity is highly connected to the status and well-being of women in the country, despite not having proved causation. Secondly and directly connected to the previous point in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, countries at highest risk for and least prepared to deal with a national emergency were also the ones where women and girls are usually marginalised at all levels (including the economic one), justice for them is denied and face insecurity at home and in the community. As a consequence, these countries already have a much weakest capacity (being insecure environments with an extremely bad health infrastructure and food insecure in several cases with population depending on international aid for survival) to preserve women’s rights (The Women’s Peace and Humanitarian Fund, 2020).

In this connection, according to the Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development (OECD), Official Development Assistance is the second most important source of external finance after remittances in fragile contexts. Despite support for gender equality programs has increased in this kind of settings over the past decade, progress should not be lost in donor responses after the COVID-19 pandemic.

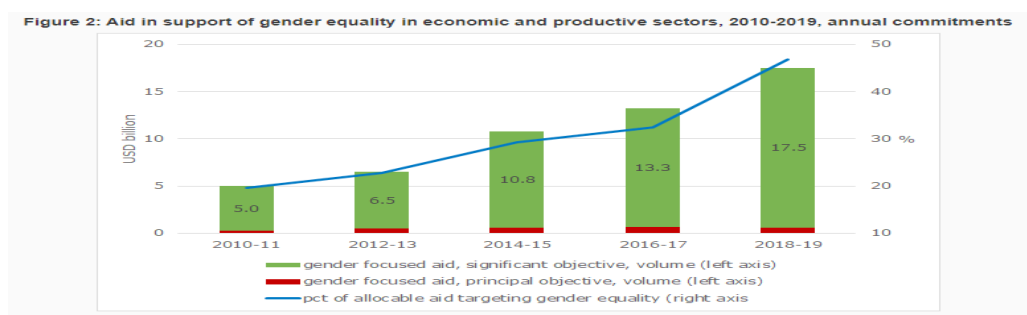
Aid in support of gender equality and women’s rights in fragile contexts, 2011-2018, annual commitments. OECD



Source: Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development. 2021.

As the image below shows, aid in support of gender equality in economic and productive sectors during 2010-2019 represented the 47% of the OECD Development Assistance Committee's (an international forum of many of the largest providers of aid) total bilateral aid in these sectors. Nevertheless, only 2% of this aid target gender equality as a main objective. This fact has a strong impact on women's livelihoods and their engagement as economic actors. Accordingly, donors as well as all the concerned social, economic, political and institutional actors should address meaningfully the key role women should have in crisis response and recovery, ensuring that development cooperation programs and financial tools work from a true and comprehensive gender perspective.

Aid in support of gender equality in economic and productive sectors, 2010-2019, annual commitments



Source: [Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development. 2021.](#)

b. Lockdowns and national emergency laws during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 posed a global challenge on a massive scale and the most marginalized and vulnerable households were the most impacted by the economic shutdown. Accordingly, the COVID-19 jeopardized attempts to address broader structural gender inequalities and promote inclusive peace, this is, the achievement of the WPS Agenda. Definitely, in times of crisis, gender equality tends to be regarded as a secondary goal (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2020).

This pandemic had multifaceted security dimensions and produced fissures in social structures (Baldwin and Taylor, 15, 2020), showing systemic weaknesses in national institutions worldwide. Health, social, economic, financial and political systems as well as governmental agencies and public officials from developed and developing countries were subject of a public scrutiny of their administrations' preparedness and ability to face crises as severe as the coronavirus outbreak (Klugman and Haiewen, 2020).

This pandemic exacerbated gender inequality in conflict-affected settings, post conflict and humanitarian crises contexts (OECD, 2021). Women and girls were more likely to be at risk in these settings because of the worsening of the bad conditions they already were suffering. The promulgation of lockdown measures and national emergency laws (including closed borders) exacerbated existing social and economic inequalities with major negative repercussions for them, further affecting their livelihoods and income (Women Around the World, 2020).

Lockdowns resulted in serious risks for WEC particularly in fragile contexts. Some of the conditions that undermined WEC increased significantly: the domestic burden; the loss of early learning and formal presential education due to schools and universities closures; stress from health conditions including problems to access to sexual and reproductive health services; crowding places; isolation or higher chances of suffering violence in their home including gender-based violence; services to protect women such as courts or shelters closed; exploitation; child labour and other harmful practices such as early, forced and child marriage (Plan International, 2020) or female genital mutilation (United Nations Population Fund, 2020). Domestic violence was considered as an emergency public health issue due to its strong increase during the COVID-19 pandemic and the seriousness of this crime against women (International Civil Society Action Network, 2020). Because of the above mentioned reasons, women's possibility of generating income outside decreased drastically in these kind of settings (ActionAid International, 3, 2020).

It is also worth stressing that the informal sector is highly composed by women and that this was the most vulnerable field in the context of the pandemic in part because informal jobs do not provide formally social protection (The World Bank Group, 8-12, 2020). Restriction of movements and self-isolation made very difficult or almost impossible for poor women and girls to obtain daily incomes (Mukhtarova, 2020). Women and girls carry out three-quarters of unpaid care work worldwide (Charmes, 2019, 3) and lockdowns increased their added responsibilities of looking after children, sick and older relatives (UN Women, 2020).

c. Strategies and evidence-based research.

In its more than 20 years long existence, the Women, Peace and Security-WPS Agenda (which was adopted by the United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325 in 2000 and the subsequent ones) has not provided significant results not only by itself, but also through its implementation via Regional and National Action Plans (The Georgetown Institute for WPS and the Peace Research Institute Oslo, 2019). The possibilities to develop successfully the WPS Agenda were particularly affected by pressing necessities as a result of the pandemic outbreaks.

According to the OECD (2017), in order to bolster WEC in fragile contexts development partners need a more holistic approach strongly focused on women as actors (avoiding the traditionally widespread role of passive victims or beneficiaries) and agents of change and on the root causes of gender inequality, fragility and long-term impacts of programming, including social norms.

It is necessary to address harmful social norms for women in fragile contexts by engaging more strategically with men and by supporting women's role as active agents in peacebuilding and state building processes. This fact would include working not only with men but also with community norm setters and potential resistance (such as religious authorities, local officials or politicians). In this respect, supporting women's meaningful leadership in these contexts could imply a strengthened focus on programming for women's economic empowerment.

Moreover, other key factors highlighted by the OECD (2017) focus on strengthening incentives, accountability and progress in monitoring, evaluation and sex disaggregated data collection to avoid gender-blind programming and adapt actions if necessary.

Definitely, gender-disaggregated data (including differential economic impacts) is crucial for designing and implementing inclusive and effective long-term policies to overcome gender inequality (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2020).

Gender-enabling policies from business and public investment projects are key to reduce women's unpaid care burden and to improve their access to formal jobs on equal basis as men. With this purpose, the Women's Economic Empowerment Index Tool and Guidance Note (UN Capital Development Fund; UN Women; UN Development Program, 2021) recommends to reinforce actions in these areas: to relax constraints on women's unpaid labour time to allow their participation in remunerative economic activities; to improve public investment in infrastructure projects that promote women's entrepreneurship and employment opportunities and improve their health and education; gender-equalizing conditions in the workplace and, to contribute to a macro environment that promotes gender equality.

Lessons learned and the implementation of best practices are key elements to empower economically marginalized women who have no or limited access and control over income-generating activities, economic and financial rights, resources or opportunities, particularly in fragile, conflict or post conflict contexts, including the displaced ones.

Moreover, the nexus between women, business, peace and security in fragile and conflict-affected contexts is noteworthy as companies may be key actors in the implementation of the WPS Agenda incorporating a gender-responsive lens to business operations is to ensure that the rights of women and girls are respected (Global Compact Network UK, 2021). Furthermore, the success and profitability of many business operations relies on the existence of socioeconomic stability and a more stable business environment so they should engage in peace promotion efforts

In sum, the private sector and private-public partnerships have a critical role in facilitating WEC, sustainable development and peace. Some global initiatives with local impacts could be highlighted. First, the Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund, which has supported more than 500 women's organizations in around 30 countries over the last six years, stimulates funding to promote women's involvement in the economic recovery of their communities as well as their full participation and leadership in decision-making processes (Women's Peace and Humanitarian Fund).

Second, the Network of Women Economic Operators of Segou in Mali is another remarkable example to note (United Nations, 2022). This network brings together almost 8000 women and works with 120 local women's organizations. Its goal is to invest in WEC generating short and long-term positive impacts and to enhance women's participation in decision-making and conflict resolution. In this sense, the network facilitates linkages with financial partners and the adaptation of their services to women's needs.

With this respect, according to Sidibé Moussokoro Coulibaly, President of the Network of Women Economic Operators of Segou in Mali, it is necessary that the international community and private sector facilitate women's access to sustainable and flexible funding sensitive to conflict-affected contexts and to especially support the economic sectors in which women are most active. In this regard, providing women tax facilities and access to public contracts, training, social services as school or nurseries for children and reproductive health would also improve WEC through the development of businesses and other entrepreneurship activities.

Third, Village Saving and Loans Associations is an outstanding example of programs working to reach this goal. These programs stimulate the creation of saving groups within communities, mainly composed by women. Saving groups work as self-managed groups of 15 to 25 people who save their money in a safe space, access small loans and get emergency insurance. This model allows women to increase their access and control over their resources, to obtain support to set up small business, negotiate fair prices and to gain further influence over decisions at home and at the community level (Care International).

d. Budgets for WEC in post-conflict contexts.

The United Nations General Assembly declared in 2010 its commitment to promote a partnership between the United Nations systems and Member States to ensure that at least 15 (United Nations General Assembly; Security Council, 2010) per cent of United Nations managed funds in support of peacebuilding would be dedicated to projects whose principal objective are addressed to women's specific needs, to advance gender equality or empower women. In this sense, the United Nations Peacebuilding Fund works with its partners on the advancement of gender equality in post-conflict contexts, supporting through the Gender Promotion Initiative (United Nations Peacebuilding Fund, 2016) to help meet the 15 per cent target and the consideration of gender issues as part of the analysis, priority setting, budget allocation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of its programmes.

But definitely, there has been over the years a consistent failure of international funding to support women's economic empowerment as a principal target of aid funding. The investment in WEC has not received enough attention in post-conflict contexts (UN Women, 2011) and when speaking about the budgets dedicated to this aim (Hudock, 2016, 6-15), it has been reported that less than 5 per cent of proposed funding targets gender equality or women's specific needs (True, 2013). In this respect, long-term needs of transformation are relegated.

Economic empowerment is perceived as a development rather than a peacebuilding issue. For this reason, it is indispensable to address it as a priority during peace negotiations and in the immediate aftermath of the conflict (Women around the World, 2020).

Post conflict financing, needs assessments and resources on the ground should benefit women and men equally (UN Women, 2016) for advancing gender equality in society at large (United Nations Development Program, 2010). It is worth stressing that women (particularly the ones from civil society and generally who are not part of the social, political and economic elites) are usually under-represented in local and national governments and in public decision-making processes in post conflict contexts. Therefore, they are not in a position to preserve their interests and needs, including economic security.

Mainstreaming gender equality and WEC in post conflict situations requires an integrated framework of action (Relief, 2013) and gender-sensitive approaches when designing peace and stability policies in this kind of contexts, including from local governments. Appropriate National Actions Plans, National Development Strategies, accountability tools, lessons learned reporting programmes and partnerships between the private, public sectors and multilateral organizations are indispensable in these kind of processes.

Donors and the international community are key actors in the support of women's organizations for peace working for gender equality in post conflict contexts and providing specific mechanisms and culturally sensitive programmes that specifically guarantee WEC

through peacebuilding institutions, including them as a target group in the framework of the economic reconstruction programs. Also, it is essential to mobilise women to be aware of their rights and to focus on them as agents of peace and on their leadership for peacebuilding. WEC is not only important because they contribute to a sustainable peacebuilding and to security in general, but because it is a key issue of realizing women's equal rights.

Moreover, countries should focus on eliminating existing legal impediments and designing adequate incentives to increase women's participation in the economy. In this sense, law could act as a tool to create behavioural changes and shifts in perceptions and stigmas about women in the economy, incentivizing them to participate in the formal workforce (Christopherson; Yiadom; Johnson; Fernando; Yazid; Thiemann, 2022).

In sum, women's priorities, needs and rights are rarely taken into account in post conflict recovery processes (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2017). To address this challenge, it is essential to: 1) integrating the gender perspective in post conflict economic recovery decisions; 2) developing policies to promote sustainable livelihoods incomes for households headed by women, especially widows and women from other minorities and, 3) assisting post conflict countries to generate decent and formal jobs for women, to improve their business skills, to encourage them to join the workforce and, to guarantee that the financial services required by women to start business are provided (Relief, 2013).

e, The significance of closing the gender digital gap for WEC.

The digital world is considered as a robust source of economic productivity and growth for contracted economies after the Covid-19 outbreaks (The Alliance for Affordable Internet, 2021, 4) as digital platforms showed to be essential to create and guarantee opportunities for education, health, safety, businesses and jobs. This global health crisis has accelerated the transition to digitalization with many opportunities online for people, communities and countries (International Institute for Environment and Development, 2021), alongside with expectations of greater dependence on the Internet in the future (Economist Impact, 2022, 19). With this respect, the Covid-19 pandemic has escalated automation and digitalization, speeding up labour market disruption (The World Economic Forum, 2021, 6).

This pandemic has impacted health, income-generating opportunities and economies around the world, disproportionately affecting women and girls. Digital technology, online tools and evidence-based strategies have been particularly important to preserve women's rights and advance on WEC in fragile settings in the framework of the Covid-19 pandemic.

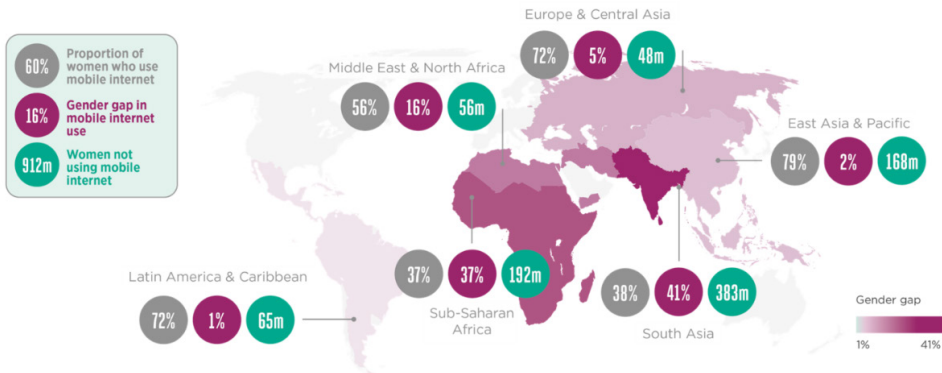
After the Covid-19, the digital gap in Internet access has continued to reduce in 2021. However, women still access the Internet at a rate of 10.4 percentage point less than men (Economist Impact, 2022, 18). According to the Alliance for Affordable Internet (2021), men are 21% more likely to be online than women at the global level, rising to 52% in the Least Developed Countries. This implies that men are more likely to access the Internet than women in many parts of the world. As a consequence, investment in gender-specific programs and policies is indispensable.

The Covid-19 has strengthened the relevance of access to mobile and mobile Internet, allowing people to alleviate some of the negative impacts of the Covid-19. The research findings of the Mobile Gender Gap Report 2022 (published by the GSMA Mobile for Development Foundation and based on data from 2021) show that gender gaps in both

access to and use of mobile technology persist and, in some cases, have been exacerbated (The GSMA Foundation, 2022, 48).

Gender gap in mobile Internet use in LMICs, by region

Total adult population



Source: [The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2022](#), The GSMA Foundation.

At present, more than 3.2 billion people in low and middle-income countries (LMICs) access the Internet on a mobile phone. Mobile is the main way men and women access the Internet in LMICs. Mobile phones make feel women more autonomous and safe providing they access to information that they would not have received otherwise, healthcare, education, e-commerce, financial services and income-generating opportunities. This report shows that 84 % of women owned a mobile phone and 60 % used mobile Internet in 2021 in LMICs. Nevertheless, mobile ownership and use remain unequal and women are less likely than men to obtain access to mobile phones and use mobile Internet, mobile money and other kind of mobile services. Across low and middle-income countries, women are now 16 % less likely than men to use mobile Internet, which translates into 264 million fewer women than men (The GSMA Foundation, 2022, 4-5).

The most underserved women are the most affected by the lack of access to mobile phones and mobile Internet (such as women with low levels of literacy and incomes, disabilities and living in rural areas) and particularly face this kind of gender gap. In cases where women have similar levels of education, income generation, literacy and employment as men, they are still less likely to own a mobile phone or use mobile Internet, indicating other issues to consider in the analysis, such as discrimination or harmful gender social norms (The GSMA Foundation, 2022, 4-5).The main barriers to mobile ownership are affordability, literacy and digital skills and safety and security. In this context, evidence-based data explains that among low-income groups, the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic made handsets and mobile Internet even less affordable and affected access to smartphones and mobile Internet use.

To recapitulate, recovery measures and revitalization policies need to be adopted globally through gender-responsive frameworks and effectively inclusive budgets. In this sense, gender equality and WEC should be understood from a universal human rights

perspective, based on the fact that all women and girls deserve to achieve their full potential, needs and dreams.

For that purpose, the design and implementation of capacity building programs for improving women's digital fluency skills are essential (Mariscal; Mayne, Aneja; Sorgner, 2019, 10-11) and interventions to address women's digital exclusion should deal with prevailing socio-cultural norms, considering for instance informal learning spaces exclusive to women. It is worth stressing that strategies to address gender digital gap should be complemented by long-term new masculinity narratives and programs as key tools to transforming men's perception of social and cultural barriers preventing women and girls to achieve their full potential.

Conclusion

Gender equality and WEC are not women's issues: it is about human rights, smart economies (including socioeconomic and financial stability, reducing income inequality) and sustainable and lasting peace. Accordingly, it is key to focus the role of women as actors and agents of change, not as passive victims and beneficiaries of economic support. In this sense, it is indispensable to assure that all women's needs and priorities are considered, not just the ones from economic, social and political elites.

The international community, countries, civil society and other key stakeholders should move beyond the rhetoric of gender mainstreaming and further advance in putting gender inclusive reforms theory into practice. This is more urgent than ever as the COVID-19 showed that disruptive global crises may deeply worsen the hard conditions (particularly poor) women and girls were already suffering in complex settings with long-term consequences.

Although women's increased role as income providers may led to some change in men's and women's attitudes about gender equality and women's empowerment, this process seems to not to be likely to generate easily long-term transformation because of the existing and significant social, cultural, political, legal and institutional obstacles. It is essential to mobilise not only all women to be aware of their rights, but also men and local community leaders to recognize and support this universal social public good at the long-term.

Despite some issues relating to WEC may be particularly challenging or sensitive, the international community, international and national institutions and multi-donor trust funds should further integrate gender-specific and adapted perspectives at the design stage of policy and programming to finance WEC projects.

At the national levels, countries should continue launching, supporting and monitoring effective National Actions Plans and other National Development Plans to promote the WPS goals. They should promote good practices, tools and guidance on WEC, eliminating discriminatory practices that for instance prevent women from access to capital to create business or other kind of entrepreneurship activities, their access to quality financial products and services like saving accounts or loans. Moreover, WEC policies and programs should consider gendered climate-resilient investments and the differentiated impacts of climate risks on women, as well as training (including digitalization) and social protection programs

Finally, it would be interesting that future lines of research target the most vulnerable women's needs and priorities in post conflict settings (such as widows and their families,

IDPs, refugees, women suffering COVID-19 consequences or stigmas, women and girls with disabilities and the ones from other minorities and remote rural areas) and transparent and quality gender disaggregated data to formulate and develop appropriate policies and programs.

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