

**UNITED NATIONS INDEPENDENT EXPERT ON THE QUESTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS
AND EXTREME POVERTY**

**WOMEN - POVERTY - CRISES - HUMAN RIGHTS
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**Contribution of the United Nations Independent Expert on the Question of Human
Rights and Extreme Poverty: Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona**

A human rights recovery from the crises: the gender perspective

Firstly, I would like to thank you for the opportunity to participate in this event. I am sorry I am not able to attend in person, but I hope that I can nevertheless usefully contribute to your discussion.

Let me begin by stressing that gender inequality causes and perpetuates poverty. Gender-based discrimination limits women's opportunities to access education, decent work, land ownership, credit, inheritance and other economic resources, thus increasing their likelihood of living in extreme poverty¹. As a result, women comprise the majority of people living in poverty.² Accordingly, it is widely accepted that improving the situation of women is essential for sustainable development.³ Eliminating extreme poverty in the long run therefore requires a careful consideration of the different types of risks and vulnerability to poverty experienced by men and boys, and women and girls. All efforts to eliminate extreme poverty must take into account the multifaceted nature of discrimination that women suffer that is a result not only of their gender but also of other factors such as race, ethnicity, disability, class, caste, sexual orientation, age and national origin.

Without a doubt, those who have suffered most because of the successive food, fuel and financial and economic crises are women. Because of ingrained discrimination and structural disadvantage, women have restricted access to services and social protection which help to cushion the shocks of such crises and are thus exposed to increased risk. As a result, they have suffered a disproportionately large share of the damage done by the global economic crisis, and have fallen further into disadvantage and exclusion.

Given that women hold the primary responsibility for the management of the household, they are the last to benefit from increased household income and the first to make sacrifices during difficult financial times.⁴ Women were been more likely to buffer the impact of the crisis by decreasing their own food consumption,⁵ and as a result are suffering from a higher prevalence of reduced weight and malnutrition. This has increased the likelihood that pregnant women will contract infections, experience miscarriage or premature labour, give birth in the home, and has decreased the likelihood that women will seek family planning services and antenatal care.⁶

¹ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report — Gender and Human Development* (1995).

² UNDP, *Human Development Report - Gender and Human Development*, 1995.

³ Overseas Development Institute, *Gender and the MDGs Briefing Paper* (2008).

⁴ UNICEF, *State of the World's Children 2007: Women and Children – The double dividend of gender equality*, 2007, available at <http://www.unicef.org/sowc07/>.

⁵ ODI, *Gender vulnerabilities, food price shocks and social protection responses*, Background Note, August 2009.

⁶ ODI, *Gender vulnerabilities, food price shocks and social protection responses*, Background Note, August 2009.

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Not only are women more likely to fall ill, they also face reduced access to health care compared with male family members.⁷ This is compounded by the reality that, as households attempt to cope with crisis, women's time burden has increased. Scarcity of food and increased food prices have required women to travel further to obtain food, and to spend more time on food preparation.⁸

The impact of the global economic crisis on employment has been disproportionately severe for women, who have been more vulnerable to job cuts than men throughout the downturn.⁹ Due to discrimination and gender inequality women are disproportionately represented in the informal economy and accordingly have less access to many social insurance benefits such as pensions and maternal, unemployment, and sickness benefits. The informal sector absorbed much of the impact of the crisis because of reduced demand, and women were the first to suffer.¹⁰

In the formal sector, women were already facing greater job insecurity and lower wages than men, and as a result were the first to lose their jobs when the crisis hit. Due to lower levels of education, less control of productive resources and access to different supportive networks, women have weaker negotiating positions than men and fewer options of finding other income-generating activities. In order to cope with job shortages, women in some countries have had to resort to migrating abroad to find employment in order to provide remittances to their families at home. Many of these women have been forced to take up insecure and risky employment as domestic workers, entertainers, mail-order brides and sex workers.¹¹ Studies have also shown that women whose husbands are experiencing prolonged unemployment are more likely to be subjected to domestic violence.¹²

While the impact of the crises has differed markedly in each country, all States must take into account their international human rights obligations when designing policy responses. Before implementing any policy measure, States must assess its social impact from a gender perspective, and should only adopt policies that are compatible with their international obligations regarding the human rights of women. Cuts in funding to social services that have the greatest impact on the lives of women living in poverty should be a measure of last resort, and should be taken only after serious consideration of all alternative policy options, including how funding to other areas not directly linked with the enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights might be otherwise reduced.

In addition to the short-term responses to immediately address the impact of the crises, States must adopt a comprehensive long-term strategy for sustainable development aimed at

⁷ UNRISD, *Conference News: Social and Political Dimensions of the Global Crisis – Implications for Developing Countries*, Report of the UNRISD Conference, 12-13 November 2009, Geneva.

⁸ ODI, *Gender vulnerabilities, food price shocks and social protection responses*, Background Note, August 2009.

⁹ Ronald Mendoza, "Inclusive Crises, Exclusive Recoveries, and Policies to Prevent a Double Whammy for the Poor," *Social and Economic Policy Working Paper, UNICEF Policy and Practice* (May 2010).

¹⁰ Naomi Hossain, Rizki Fillaili, Grace Lubaale, Mwila Mulumbi, Mamunur Rashid, and Mariz Tadros, *The Social Impacts of Crisis: Findings from community-level research in five developing countries*, Institute of Development Studies, Lembaga Penelitian Research Institute, BRAC Development Institute, DFID and Crisis Watch, May 2010.

¹¹ ODI, *Gender vulnerabilities, food price shocks and social protection responses*, Background Note, August 2009.

¹² ODI, *Children in times of economic crisis: Past lessons, future policies*, Background Note, March 2009.

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addressing the root causes of poverty. In this regard, respect for all human rights, including the rule of law, gender equality and empowerment of women, inclusive participation, freedoms of association and expression, and equal access to public services are essential for poverty reduction.

Studies by UNIFEM have shown that previous and current stimulus packages in several countries have tended to favour men over women, despite the fact that women have been more severely affected by the crises.¹³ If a gender approach is not actively considered, there is a serious risk that the recovery from the crises will also exclude women. There are several measures that States should take to ensure a gender approach in the design and implementation of recovery measures. For example, States should conduct a comprehensive and disaggregated gender analysis that assesses the vulnerabilities of both genders as potential beneficiaries of social policies, and design responses accordingly. In designing measures, policymakers should consider the impact of the crises on women's domestic (unpaid) and care work. According to the circumstances of each State, national development strategies should support the empowerment of women through small-scale farming through land redistribution, equal access to financial services and ensuring access to public services and infrastructure in rural areas.

Recovery measures should prioritize investments in education and skill development for women and girls, provide investment in sectors where women make up a considerable proportion of the labour force (such as in export manufacturing) and undertake gender budgeting to ensure that women benefit equally from public investments. Policymakers must design, implement, monitor and evaluate initiatives through a gender lens, so that policies are able to address asymmetries of power and structural inequalities, and enhance the realization of women's rights.

The challenge of recovering from successive crises presents a unique opportunity for States to formulate a transformative vision for the future aimed at the full realization of human rights for women. In putting human rights at the centre of their response to the crises, States ensure a recovery premised upon equality, inclusiveness and a genuine sense of social cohesion. The human rights framework orients the discussion about recovery away from deficit reduction and towards the reduction of deprivation and the eradication of obstacles to the realization of rights. There is no space in human rights for a trickle-down approach to the achievement of minimum essential levels of rights. From a human rights perspective, recovery must start with the most vulnerable and disadvantaged. Those who are living in poverty must be seen as rights-holders, not as burdensome or as passive recipients of charity.

¹³ See, for example, Adam McCarty, Lorraine Corner and Katherine Guy, "The differential impact of the Vietnamese economic stimulus package on women and men", UNIFEM and Mekong Economics, 2009; and UNIFEM, "Making economic stimulus packages work for women and gender equality", UNIFEM Working Paper, 2009.