

# PAID WORK, WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND INCLUSIVE GROWTH

Transforming the structures of constraint



United Nations Entity for Gender Equality  
and the Empowerment of Women

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**PAID WORK, WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT  
AND INCLUSIVE GROWTH: TRANSFORMING  
THE STRUCTURES OF CONSTRAINT**

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**COVER IMAGE:** A member-farmer of the Cocamu Coffee Cooperative, Rwanda, sits amid her coffee trees. (UN Women/Ana Lukatela)



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\* Detailed analyses of the logistical regression results for Egypt, Ghana and Bangladesh are available on the UN Women website.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



UN WOMEN/ANINDIT ROY-CHOWDHURY

A woman works alongside men in her West Bengal fishing community.

## 1. Objective of the report

A recent review of econometric studies into the relationships between gender equality and economic growth distinguished between those that explored the impact of gender equality on economic growth and those that explored the impact of economic growth on gender equality. It concluded that there was persuasive evidence to suggest that gender equality in education and employment contributed to economic growth. This effect appeared to work through a combination of the impact of gender equality on overall labour productivity in the economy and its impact on children's health and well-being within the family, and hence the productivity and well-being of the next generation of workers.

The evidence for the reverse relationship—the impact of economic growth on gender equality—was weaker and less consistent. However, a tentative finding worth noting from this latter set of studies was that the impacts of economic

growth on different aspects of women's lives were most likely to be positive in contexts where economic growth was accompanied by rising levels of female education and employment. The enhancement of women's agency associated with education and employment appeared to be pivotal in helping to translate changes in the broader structure of opportunities into positive changes in women's survival chances, well-being and rights.

Such findings suggest a dual rationale for promoting women's access to economic opportunities: it has transformative implications for different aspects of women's lives and it contributes to the pace and inclusiveness of growth. However, given the high levels of aggregation at which the econometric studies were carried out, they provide little insight into factors such as the kinds of employment or levels of education that are most likely to be conducive to women's empowerment in different contexts. Nor do the studies describe what kinds of policy regimes and patterns of growth are most likely to generate these enabling opportunity structures.

This report seeks to address this knowledge gap by drawing on household survey data collected in Egypt, Ghana and Bangladesh as part of the Pathways of Women's Empowerment Research Partners' Consortium. The Pathways surveys were not designed to explore the linkages between economic growth and women's economic activity, both paid and unpaid, but rather took women's empowerment as a valued goal in its own right and set out to investigate the circumstances under which women's access to valued economic resources were likely to be empowering. Nevertheless, in the light of the macro-level finding regarding the likely impact of women's economic activity and education on growth, the Pathways analysis can provide more detailed micro-level insights into the 'resource' pathways that enhance women's agency and thereby contribute to the inclusiveness of the growth process. This report brings the Pathways household survey data together within a unified comparative framework in order to carry out a historically grounded and contextually located analysis into the extent to which the structure of economic opportunities generated by a country's growth strategies translated into positive impacts on women's lives in three very different contexts.

An all-female Bangladeshi police contingent arrives in Port au Prince to help with the reconstruction in quake-devastated Haiti.



UN PHOTO/MARCO DORMINO

**The Pathways analysis can provide more detailed micro-level insights into the ‘resource’ pathways that enhance women’s agency and thereby contribute to the inclusiveness of growth.**

## **2. Conceptual framework**

The conceptual framework adopted for the research took the capacity for choice and agency as central to its understanding of women’s empowerment, but recognized that this capacity was exercised within the ‘gendered structures of constraint’: the limits imposed by the structural distribution of rules, norms, resources and responsibilities that served to position different groups of women and men within the broader social hierarchies of their societies. This conceptualization of women’s empowerment not only encompassed women’s choice and agency as individuals, but also extended to their capacity to undertake action to challenge the gendered structures of constraint that curtail the life choices and life chances of different groups of women.

It is recognized that these gendered structures varied considerably by context. For example, the predominantly patrilineal-patriarchal-patrilocal structures of family and kinship in Egypt and Bangladesh, together with strict restrictions on women’s mobility in the public domain leading to historically low levels of female labour-force participation in both countries, meant that they shared important features of their gender relations. In Ghana, by contrast, matrilineal kinship systems coexisted alongside patrilineal ones, but both ascribed an important role to women in the productive sphere. Indeed, Ghana has been described in the literature as a region of female farming. While this description oversimplifies the considerable variations in women’s productive roles that exist in Ghana, it does serve to capture the prominent contributions that women make to the household economy.

At the same time, there is no reason to believe that family and kinship systems, and the gender relations to which they give rise, are impervious to change. They are constantly acted on, modified and transformed by a variety of forces. Some reflect purposive action on the part of different actors within the institutions of state, markets, civil society and within families themselves. Others may be the unintended consequences of such action as well as reflecting larger changes occurring at local, national and international levels.



UN WOMEN / FATMA ELZAHRAA YASSIN

A woman holds up her new National ID card in the Banha District, Qalyoubia governorate of Egypt.

The three country case studies provide a useful comparative framework for examining the interactions between pre-existing structures of constraint in different contexts and these broader forces of socioeconomic change. Each of the three countries began its post-colonial history committed to a nation-building project based on import-substituting industrialization combined with a socialistic policy discourse and commitment to redistributive welfare policies. Each abandoned these policies in favour of a broadly neo-liberal policy package along the familiar lines laid down by the Bretton Woods institutions, including public-sector cutbacks, state-owned enterprise privatization, trade and finance liberalization, exchange rate reform and labour market deregulation. However, each country started from very different initial conditions, undertook the transition to market-oriented policies at a varying pace and achieved varying degrees of structural transformation.

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