

TEXTBOX 1: Definitions of Women's Economic Empowerment

While there is currently no single definition of women's economic empowerment (WEE), the OECD's version is widely employed: "the capacity of women and men to participate in, contribute to and benefit from growth processes in ways that recognize the value of their contributions, respect their dignity and make it possible to negotiate a fairer distribution of the benefits of growth."⁵

Other comprehensive definitions expand on the OECD definition to bring in elements of agency¹ and resilience. A Policy Brief from UN Women (2012) defines women's economic empowerment as "increasing the ability of women to bring about change that drives valuable outcomes as a result of their increased economic capabilities and agency"⁶ including elements of participation (in markets, labour) but also in effecting changes to markets, the gender division of labour, access to resources and influencing institutions. The significance and centrality of agency is further reinforced in Laszlo et al.'s 2017 definition noting that women who are economically empowered are increasingly able to "acquire access to, and control over, economic resources, opportunities and markets, enabling them to exercise agency and decision-making power to benefit all areas of their lives."⁷

Despite some important social development gains for women over the past three decades (including reduced maternal mortality and improved access to primary education),⁸ progress on gender equality has overall been uneven, and the gains made, in many instances, are fragile and women's economic participation remains weak. The 20-year review of the *Beijing Platform for Action: inspiration then and now* found that "discriminatory norms, stereotypes and violence remain pervasive, evidencing gender-based discrimination that continues to be deeply entrenched in the minds of individuals, institutions and societies." The review also documents the many other barriers and constraints to empowerment and equality including vulnerabilities arising from conflicts, financial and economic crises, climate change and volatile food prices.⁹ The prevalence of women in informal employment and in poor working conditions, as well as the overwhelming burden of care work that women and girls carry and its associated impacts on women's participation in the labour market, earnings, pension gaps and retirement savings, also limits equality between men and women, and women's economic empowerment (see Figure 1).

The UN High-Level Panel (HLP) for Women's Economic Empowerment found four systemic barriers to women's economic empowerment that affect women's ability to participate in the economy: discriminatory laws and a lack of legal protection; the failure to reduce and redistribute unpaid household work and care; a lack of access to financial, digital and property assets; and adverse social norms.¹⁰ Barriers to women's economic participation also have negative impacts on businesses, communities and national economies. Tackling economic disparities must therefore address the broad-ranging social and other systemic barriers to gender equality and women's participation in the workforce, as well as the practical constraints to transformative growth and development.



After attending training, Patience expanded her business and increased her customer base and profit.
Credit: WUSC

Please refer to Section 3.3 for a full description of agency.