



Defining Women's Economic Empowerment and Resilience

NOVEMBER 2020

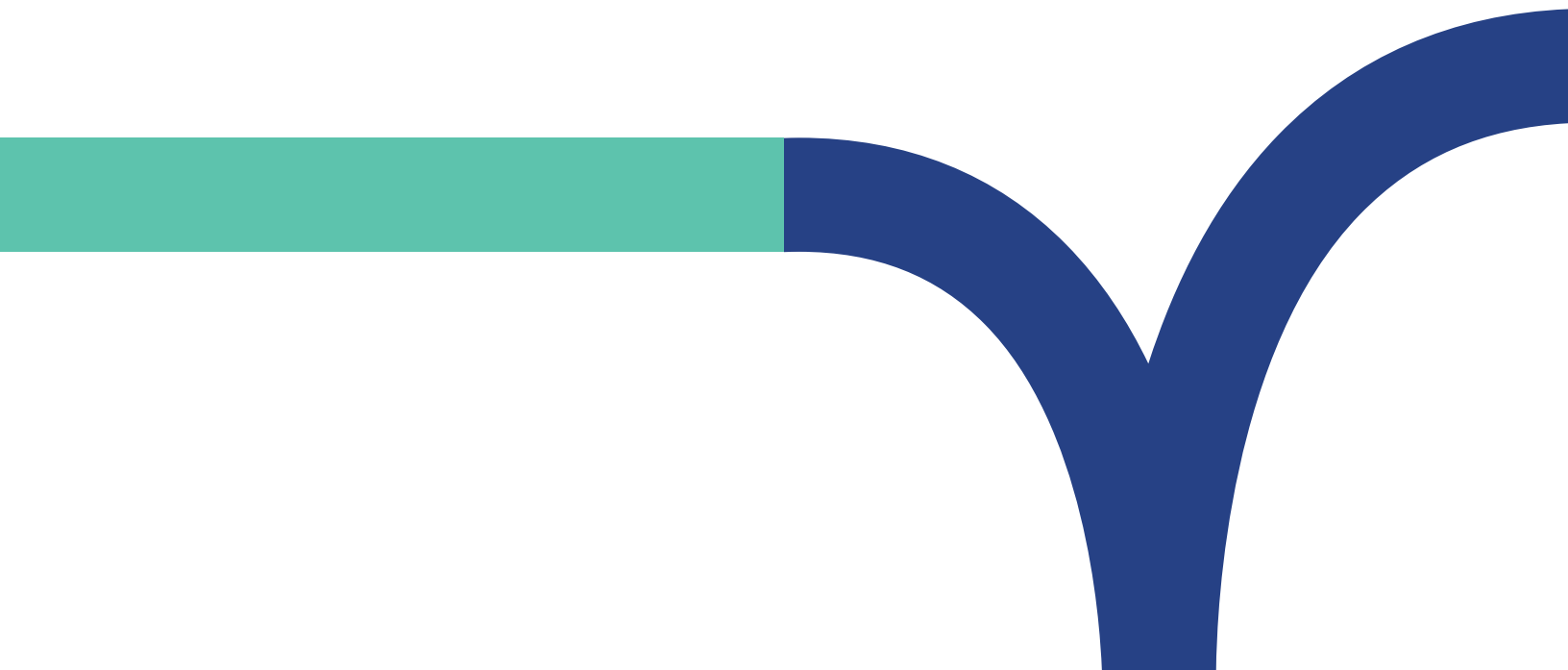
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**Building
Bridges** for
Women's Economic
Empowerment

Introduction

Women's economic empowerment (WEE) basically means enabling women to earn a decent living. It has taken on a variety of definitions and sometimes, even at the highest levels, is used without definition (e.g. the [Beijing Platform for Action](#), or the [2017 UN High Level Panel reports on WEE](#)). Proponents differ in defining the how and why to achieve WEE. How to tackle the wicked problems of poverty, exclusion, exploitation and gender inequality? And 'why'? Because WEE is a right irrespective of economic context or instrumental to sustained development or simply to drive business growth? Many assume these gains can go together. WEE has become a pressing priority in recent years, as governments, the private sector, and donor agencies recognize its potential to simultaneously catalyze economic growth and contribute to broader human development. Economically empowered women create healthier, more educated, and more productive societies, with advances in health, education and security improvements in women's own status and proven 'multiplier effect' benefits for whole societies. Despite major efforts from diverse proponents and the availability of tools and resources, progress is slow and during covid-19, WEE has lost hard-fought gains. The interests of women and business (or governments) do not always coincide, and it remains challenging to change business practices that rely on the cheap labor and unpaid care work of women. The pandemic and the deepening climate crisis highlight these fragile successes, making it clear that WEE can only be sustainable if it includes a deep focus on promoting women's economic resilience to respond to these entwined crises. This presents a unique opportunity to rethink how to 'build back better', by putting grassroots women at the centre.

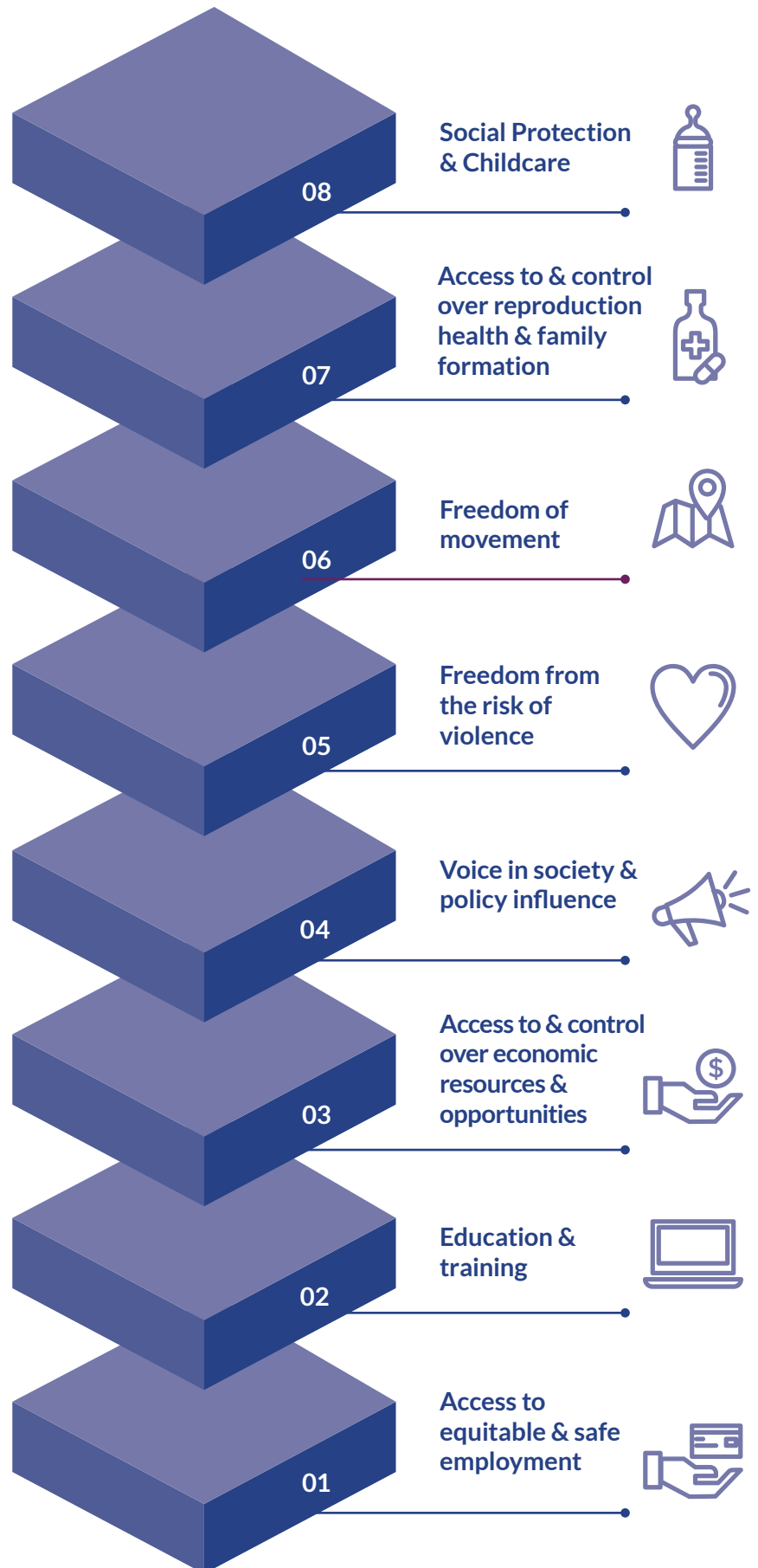


The key elements of women's economic empowerment and resilience

Win-Win Strategies/Women Win (WWS/WW) strongly believes that women's economic empowerment and resilience (WEE/R) requires a building block approach to address the underlying structural barriers that women face in their economic efforts. It identified eight building blocks that together create an enabling environment of access, voice and agency that allows women to achieve lasting economic advancement.

Creating or sustaining these building blocks requires action by the private sector, public sector, and civil society notably women's organizations, in a concerted way e.g. through multi-stakeholder collaboration. For each of the building blocks, tools and resources are available, e.g. the [toolkits](#) developed by the UN High Level Panel on WEE/R, and IFC's support to women's [entrepreneurship](#) and [employment](#).

Covid-19 has catalysed a new-found urgency for business to become more resilient as supply chain disruptions have rippled around the globe. As such, this is a critical moment to examine the broader role of women in value chains through gender-responsive due diligence. This process can guide companies to identify barriers to women's economic empowerment and resilience, which supports business continuity. Jobs with decent work conditions that are sustained by markets, while giving women voice and access to social dialogue will build women's economic resilience and business resilience.



Box 1 Kenyan tea and flower sectors enhance WEE/R through gender committees

In Kenya, the flower and tea sectors realized that gender-based violence (GBV) was widespread in the plantations, requiring action to ameliorate women's labor rights and avoid companies' reputational risks. Companies in both sectors established gender committees to comply with internationally recognized standards, helping raise awareness of and take action against GBV and its perpetrators. Gender committees have since become highly respected bodies helping companies address other gender topics such as exposure of women and their children to pesticides, insecure contracts, wage inequality for female employees, lack of career perspective and interest-free loans. In the Kenyan flower sector, job security improved over the course of 2003-2014 as permanent contracts rose from 35% to 80%. In the Kenyan tea sector, more equal employment policies resulted in 50% women in supervisory roles and 33% women in management positions, both of which contributing to reducing GBV.

Globally, most poor women do not have access to formal jobs, whether in global value chains or in the local private or public sector. These women rely on informal jobs and entrepreneurship to earn their living. International actors advocate for access to credit and access to markets as the key intervention strategies through [Market system development](#) and [Support to women-owned enterprises](#). The public sector is leading in [enacting and enforcing supportive legislation](#), (notably in the areas of family law, inheritance law, land law and labor laws), providing access to education and market-responsive vocational training, access to basic services including (sexual and reproductive) health care, and social protection. However, a crucial role is under-appreciated - that of women's organizations who lobby and advocate for binding standards and gender-responsive due diligence and enforcement. They drive action for WEE/R by supporting companies and harnessing grassroots women's voices and their power as consumers. By enhancing women's economic literacy and employability, offering tools, expertise and facilitation, multi-stakeholder partnerships can regain the progress made towards women's economic empowerment, and more importantly advance women's economic resilience, in increasingly uncertain times.

Conclusion

Whether driven by women's rights concerns or by alternative/sustainable economic development concerns, proponents largely agree that WEE/R is about enhancing women's **access, voice and agency** in the economic domain, leading to **sustained increased incomes** for women. Women must have sustained empowerment to protect fair wages or incomes, decent work conditions, and manageable care loads. Poor women with insecure incomes are the least resilient to crisis. Governments can support through [social protection](#) and the provision of basic services, the private sector through [insurance, decent work conditions](#) and sustainable business models. Women's organizations can combat negative [coping mechanisms](#) such as taking girls out of school, forcing girls to marry early or trafficking in women. As the pandemic has highlighted, economic resilience in the face of change and crisis is fundamental for companies and women as well as their families, communities and governments.

WWS/WW proposes as a working definition: '**Women's Economic Empowerment and Resilience is the process through which women gain sustained empowerment through increased access to economic opportunities (jobs and enterprises), assets (land and finance), basic services and markets, voice in economic decision-making and agency to act on their economic decisions, resulting in sustainably increased incomes, decent work conditions and manageable unpaid care work.**'

WEE/R is necessary to **counter the economic exclusion and exploitation** that characterize the terms of many women's economic engagement, and the covid-19 pandemic and the ongoing climate crisis increase the urgency for systematic attention to all of the building blocks for women's economic empowerment and resilience.