

Statement by Mr. Juan Pablo Bohoslavsky

**Independent Expert on the effects of foreign debt and other
related international financial obligations of States on the
full enjoyment of all human rights, particularly economic,
social and cultural rights**

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**Mr./Ms. President,
Excellencies, Distinguished delegates,
Representatives from civil society, UN entities and agencies,**

I am honoured to be here with you today, presenting my fifth annual report to the General Assembly. In this occasion, I bring a strong, not often heard message, to this Committee: Women carry most of the burden of austerity measures, fiscal consolidation and other economic reform policies. These measures, instead of promoting women's human rights, add to existing structural inequality, and further entrench discrimination against women.

My annual report before you today addresses these main conclusions, and outlines evidence of the impact of economic reforms on women's human rights. This report is part of a series of reports that I have prepared, on the topic of the human rights impact of economic reform policies.

The other two reports, presented before the Human Rights Council in Geneva, complement this report. Last year I focused on labour rights and austerity. Earlier this year, in Geneva, I presented a mapping report, which describes the evolution in structural reform, austerity and fiscal consolidation responses to economic crises, explains how those policies affect human rights, and the limited and ineffective practices in assessing and preventing these effects.

Together, these series of reports constitute building blocks in a two-year process, in which I have embarked, to develop guiding principles for human rights impact assessments of economic policy reforms, that you, Excellencies, mandated me to prepare by virtue of resolutions 34/03 and 37/11 of the Council. I will officially present the Guiding Principles before the Human Rights Council in March, at its 40th session.

Distinguished delegates,

Zooming in on the effects of austerity on women helps to show that overly restrictive macroeconomic targets and spending cuts have devastating consequences on human rights. Furthermore, this study helps to understand, unravel and denounce the gender power relations that operate underneath the prevailing economic system of our times.

In this regard, I would like to highlight that a human rights perspective, combined with a feminist economics analysis, can help expose the policy biases that are involved. For instance, feminist economists have argue that mainstream economy's focus on "monetized aspects of economy" has ignored the value of unpaid care work. In fact, it was estimated in a 2017 report by the Commission

on the Status of Women that the total value of unpaid care and domestic work corresponded to between 10 and 39 per cent of the Gross Domestic Product. Feminist Economists have also pointed out that unpaid care work has contributed a great deal of support to the economic system and absorbed the consequences of crises.

Women and girls experience human rights impacts differently throughout their lives, hence the importance of a life-cycle approach. In addition, women experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination owing to a number of factors, like their socioeconomic status, age, or sexual orientation. Given that women are more likely to live in poverty, changes to benefits and public spending hit the most marginalized groups of women harder.

When it comes to illustrate the implications of economic reforms on women's human rights, the range of examples is wide and diverse. For instance, in some countries, the breakdown of social protection systems has had an impact on women's right to social security in many ways, including through reductions in various unemployment, social, family and maternity benefits and in aid to the elderly and to dependent persons. Regarding the right to work, examples include minimum wages that may have been reduced as part of austerity measures in some instances, or have not been adjusted to take into account inflation and the real cost of living, leading to a reduction in their real value over time.

According to UN Women, the number of women employed in the informal sector in non-agricultural jobs is of 80 per cent in South Asia, 74 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa and 54 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean. According to ECLAC; women's incorporation in the labour market is widely viewed as the most important development of the past century, however deep inequalities are still the norm with less than 50 per cent of women over age 15 with income of their own, as opposed to just 20 per cent of men. In the Latin American region, women's labour income is equivalent to 70 per cent of men's.

Others examples of impacts include the privatization of water infrastructure and water services, which often has negative consequences on women. Or, the removal of agricultural subsidies has increased the price of staple foods. One of the results of economic reforms and rising food and fuel prices has been an increase in large-scale land acquisitions. This is of particular importance as women make up the majority of the world's small-scale farmers. According to Oxfam, as women smallholder farmers face compounding layers of exclusion, they also produce 20 to 30 per cent less than men farmers.

Spending cuts can also affect the provision of social housing or reduce shelters that can protect women to escape domestic violence or to cope with homelessness. The closing of those shelters, which constitute alternative housing, may put women at greater risk of violence and contribute to

the occurrence of homelessness and poverty.

A crucial obligation of States parties is to take steps to the maximum of their available resources to ensure the progressive realization of rights. Such steps need to be deliberate, concrete and targeted and aim at the fulfilment of rights. Even in times of economic crises, States have to demonstrate that every effort has been made to do so and the keystone standard for the evaluation of economic reforms is the prohibition of retrogression in the realization of economic, social and cultural rights.

Distinguished delegates,

International financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (and many States) have adopted an instrumentalist gender agenda that focuses almost exclusively on growth. Although policies resulting in gender inequality in pay may indeed boost growth, the issue of gender equality cannot be reduced to women's labour force participation and should not be approached as a separate or emerging issue. The agenda of international financial institutions should be reshaped and bound by human rights considerations. It should also address the impact of prescribed macroeconomic policies, lending and technical assistance on women's opportunities to exercise their right to work, to social protection and to gain access to public services.

My report highlights that austerity-driven fiscal consolidation measures and economic reforms, such as those encouraging labour market flexibilization reductions in the coverage of social protection benefits and services, cuts to public-sector jobs, and the privatization of services, tend to negatively affect women more than men. In this regard, I would like to underline that human rights impact assessments, with a clear gender focus, can better ensure the realization of women's human rights by addressing structural socioeconomic barriers.

Distinguished delegates,

Allow me to highlight four main recommendations from my report:

- First, States should create an enabling macroeconomic environment for gender equality. In order to do this States should carry out gender-sensitive human rights impact assessments of economic reform policies, and ensure that they are undertaken in an independent, participatory, informed and transparent way.
- Second, States should consider alternative policies that avoid, or at the very least minimize and remedy, potential adverse effects on gender equality and women's human rights in designing and implementing economic reform policies;
- Third, International Financial Institutions should ensure that loan programmes are agreed upon only after human rights impact assessments with a clear gender dimension have been conducted, and that any potential deficiencies are remedied;

- Fourth, and most important, States and IFIs need to recognize, redistribute and reduce unpaid care and domestic work by recognizing unpaid care and domestic work as valuable work. We must strive to make clear and visible the actual economic value and contribution of such work to the economy and include it in national accounts. There is also an urgent need for redistributing unpaid care work from households to the public sector by investing more public funds in the care economy.

Distinguished delegates,

I take this opportunity to thank the Governments of Ukraine and Sri Lanka for their invitations and their full cooperation before, during and after the visits to their countries, carried out earlier this year.

Let me conclude by saying that, regrettably, some of my colleagues will not present their reports in person this year. A limited number of changes to the schedule were proposed in July to accommodate mandate holders while respecting the time allotted to us and preserving the thematic coherence of the clusters. We regret that these proposals were rejected as we attach great importance to our engagement with this Committee. We express the hope that a better consultation process would be put in place next year.

I thank you for your attention and I look forward to answering your questions and engaging in further discussion.

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