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**Gender Empowerment and Corporate Sustainability**

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## Gender Empowerment and Corporate Sustainability

Empowerment characterizes the degree of autonomy and independence that an individual or community exercises to articulate its choices, preferences and priorities and its ability to control and arrange its lives and achieve its goals. It enhances and encourages civic engagement, minimizes the incidence of exclusion and promotes inclusive, consultative and participatory culture in the conduct of public affairs.

Gender empowerment refers to the empowerment of people regardless of their gender identity. Gender here has to be understood as role and different from the biological sex. The extent of gender empowerment in a society is assessed by the Gender Empowerment Measure (GEM) which generally indicates the women's participation and integration in social, economic, political and cultural spheres.

During the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing (1995), a platform of action for women's empowerment was adopted which, inter alia, aimed at removing all obstacles to women's active participation in all spheres of public and private life; economic, social, political, cultural, environmental and decision making. It explicitly advocates equality between men and women as a condition precedent for peace and security, development with equity and rights based approach to sustainable human development. Women Empowerment Principles (WEPs) include:

- Establishment of high-level corporate leadership for gender equality;
- Treatment of all women and men fairly at work – respect and support human rights and nondiscrimination;
- Ensuring the health, safety and well-being of all women and men workers;
- Promoting education, training and professional development for women;
- Implementation of enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices that empower women;
- Promoting equality through community initiatives and advocacy;
- Measuring and publicly reporting on progress to achieve gender equality.

Special emphasis has since been paid by the United Nations Women (UNW) and Global Impact to galvanize and encourage private corporate sector and businesses to embark on innovative ways and means to integrate gender in the corporate sustainability strategies and day-to-day operations. The focus has been on promoting Green Business with a gender equality perspective; advancing and empowering women in various spheres of influence and exploring the instruments for supporting and enhancing the gender equality agendas of the businesses through espousal of the Women's Empowerment Principles.

Significant strides have been made to emancipate the humanity from the scourges of poverty and alleviate the living conditions of the poor and marginalized segments of the society; a thumping majority of whom is women; the number of people living in extreme poverty has fallen in every developing region, including sub-Saharan Africa; the proportion of people living on less than \$1.25 per day by 2015 fell to less than half the 1990 rate; more than two billion people gained access to improved drinking water sources; the share of slum dwellers in urban areas declined from 39 per cent in 2000 to around 32 per cent in 2015, improving the lives of more than 100 million people.

However, the enormity of the development challenges characterized by the severity and rapidity of climate change, rising inequality and social disparity, and economic uncertainty and increasing incidence of unemployment, continue to baffle the humanity. Women own less than 15% of property worldwide. In the developing world that percentage drops to below 2%. Women in the U.S. currently earn only 77 cents for every \$1 earned by a man. In the developing world, that ratio is just 73 cents. The global female unemployment rate is 0.7% to 1% less compared to the males. In some regions, especially sub-Saharan Africa, women provide 70% of agricultural labor and produce over 90% of food. Approximately 60% of the world's working poor are women, primarily clustered in part-time, contract and other forms of informal employment; are badly paid; lack job security; and social protection.

A collective and concerted effort is thus required at local, national and global level to find sustainable solutions on sustainable basis. This, a priori, entails full integration of the troika of environmental, social and economic dimensions in the development effort on the one hand and earnest pursuit of inclusive approach on the other. The gender equality and the empowerment of women are undeniably fundamental to sustainable development.

Businesses play a vital role in addressing the sustainability challenges of the 21st century. Every aspect of the sustainability agenda overlaps with the core business and vital industries: energy, agriculture, water, mining, manufacturing, packaging, transport as well as the patterns of consumption. Sustainable practices indeed hold the power to transform lives and fate of the poor communities. Women who represent 50% of humanity's talent and potential; and, intellect and energy are an integral part of these practices and make out a strong case for driving gender equality and sustainability throughout the business, from the board to factory floor, throughout the supply chain and in the communities where business is run and done.

Sustainability results in innovation for developing organizations and social and environmental benefits that the world needs to thrive. Sustainable approach is the highest standard of business of which gender equality and women's empowerment constitute the kernel.

Research results show that the gender diversity positively impacts 'good' governance and the quality of CSR initiatives.

Women's empowerment is also the key to ensuring women's participation in social, political and economic life across all sectors. Addressing the barriers to women's empowerment can unleash huge reservoir of women's potential, reduce productivity gap up to 50%, increase output per worker up to 25%, and contribute to social stability, economic growth and sustainable development. For example, giving women the same access as men to seeds, fertilizers and tools could increase national agricultural output by up to 4 percent and reduce hunger by 100 to 150 million people. Women are generally more environmentally aware than men, in many countries around the world they are underrepresented in green jobs.

In order, therefore to maximize the gender sensitive sustainability gains:

- Businesses should take steps to ensure women and girls have equal opportunities for company-supported education and training and access and to take up green jobs especially in non-traditional job fields.
- Equal Opportunities in the work place should be the guiding principle for recruitment to new jobs.
- The private sector should focus on key elements integral to promoting gender equality in the workplace, marketplace and community; promote gender equality in employment and earnings; enhance the productivity of women in the labor force; and, promote equal opportunity procedures in the business world.
- Women entrepreneurs should be promoted to make transitions to low emission economies, climate-resilient communities happen.
- The private companies which demonstrate commitment to gender equality should be encouraged and incentivized. Criteria should be established to reward and recognized those companies which may include: (a) the CEO declaration and commitment to equal opportunities; (b) equal opportunities in job recruitment and selection; (c) equality in access to trainings and self-Improvement Activities; (d) equality in promotions and career growth; (e) established procedures for harassment and claim management in the Workplace; and (f) effective communication, advocacy and visibility of gender sensitivity.

It is also important to integrate gender equality and women's empowerment with poverty reduction, democratic governance, crisis prevention and recovery, and sustainable development. There has to be a commitment to ensuring that women have a real voice in all governance institutions: the judiciary; the executive; and the legislature; as well as in the private sector, civil society organization so that they are full and equal partners with men in

public dialogue and decision-making and influence the decisions that will determine the destiny of their families, countries and the world.

As regards Pakistan, a concerted and well-directed effort is required to inculcate a culture of gender sensitivity in the corporate sector though the IT and fashion design industries are taking the lead in the effort for gender and women empowerment. The country, as per the Human Development Report 2015, ranks 141 out of 142 countries surveyed for Gender Gap Index and 121 out of 142 countries on gender inequality index not to speak of gross inequality in terms of income and access to education, health and social services.