

A 'woman's place' is...in her union for economic justice and empowerment!

More than twenty years after the adoption of the most far-reaching internationally agreed instrument on women's rights to date – the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action – many would agree that global commitment to achieving gender equality has never been greater. For the first time ever, governments have set a deadline for ending gender inequality once and for all, including in education.

Recognising the centrality of women's economic empowerment to the 2030 agenda, UN Secretary general, Ban Ki Moon, established a High Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment in 2016. The Panel *'seeks to corral energy, commitment and action to accelerate the economic empowerment of women across the world'*. According to the Panel's first report, women's economic empowerment can be understood as the ability to 'succeed and advance economically and to make and act on economic decisions'.

If we are to meet the 2030 deadline, accelerating efforts to achieve economic justice for women and girls is critical: only half of women and girls over the age of 15 were in paid employment in 2016, in comparison to three quarters of men; women continue to do as much as three times more unpaid work than men; and 700 million fewer women than men of working age are were in paid employment. This is despite the fact that in many countries, more women than men complete tertiary education, and often outperform their male counterparts. Having an education is proven to increase a woman's chances of securing paid employment. However, this is not the reality for millions of women.

And *still in 2017*, when women do find paid employment, and perform the same jobs as men, or perform jobs of equal value, on average, they are paid less than men. This is the case even in professions like teaching where, on the whole, women are in the majority, the gender pay gap persists. Notwithstanding variations in the size of the gap in different regions, there is not a single country where the gender pay gap has been closed.

It goes without saying that trade unions have a central role to play when it comes to accelerating the economic empowerment of the world's women, as reflected in the inclusion of the International Trade Union Confederation's General Secretary, Sharan Burrows, on the High Level Panel.

More than 1.3 billion women are currently employed in the global economy. It is clear that their economic empowerment depends on securing their right to education, as well as their labour rights, including the right to work, the right to assemble, organize and form trade unions as guaranteed by the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, and in a number of International Labour Organization (ILO) agreements. More than 70 million women are organised in trade unions today, with millions more in different types of worker's rights organisations.

As education unions, EI member organisations are uniquely positioned to highlight the links between fulfilling the right to education for women and girls, and ensuring that education leads to real advancements in their economic empowerment. SDG4 in the 2030 agenda outlines a framework for achieving 'equitable and inclusive quality education and lifelong learning for all', which must be operationalised by governments in the broadest possible terms to ensure that over and beyond their right *to* education, girls' and women's rights *within* education are also fulfilled.

Human rights are indivisible: unless girls' and women's other human rights are robustly promoted and defended, their right to education can never be fully realised, and vice versa. When girls and women can access and fully participate in quality, equitable, inclusive education, their options for earning a living that is not restricted to poorly paid, casual jobs on the margins of the labour market are vastly improved, and must be made a reality.

As we celebrate International Women's Day once again, we join with others in recognising the centrality of the fulfilment of women's and girls' rights to education and economic empowerment; not just because of gains in efficiency or productivity, or positive returns to investment, but because *women's rights are human rights*. Education trade unions are key actors in advancing those rights.