

Commission on the Status of Women

MCGSMUN 2018

Study Guide

Letter from the Executive Board

Hello Delegates!

Welcome to the MCGSMUN 2018 simulation for the Commission for the Status for Women. The topic under our discussion today is regarding the economic empowerment of women. The focus of this agenda, while primarily looking at the economic sphere, will also require you to research on the surrounding aspects that contribute to women's empowerment in general. The reason for this is simple: development in one area is dependent upon other areas developing equally as well. While we would like to believe that the economic development of our society is separate from its social and political development, that is not the case. All of them are interrelated and dependent on each other and therefore, need to be given equal importance while studying why a certain problem has arisen in one sphere.

The focus of the committee is to encourage constructive debate through concept-based arguments and not information-heavy ones. MUN committees are famous for being intensely concentrated on international law, UN conventions and resolution documents. While those are important as well, we would like to encourage you to look at arguments and solutions that look at the agenda from a ground-level approach. Look at your surroundings, the people you stay with and who form a part of your community. How are they affected by the questions being asked through this agenda? Are there any women that you know in your day-to-day life that are economically empowered? What makes them empowered/not empowered? Start thinking on these questions so that you can think of problems and solutions in a real-life scenario. When you propose policies, they will be effective based on how well they are able to realistically solve problems. What better way to find that out than through your own neighbourhood? We would therefore, highly urge you to go out of your house and talk to the women and men you encounter every day. Learn their stories, assess their problems and then think of solutions to those problems. Think small so that you can think big.

Having said that, we are open to innovative solutions from your end. The purpose of this committee is to learn- about the agenda, what your country portfolios are doing to solve them and how they are important on the international scale. Your contributions to the committee will be assessed on how well you have researched on these levels and if you are able to put forward your argument in a clear and logical manner. We hope to contribute to your growth in the committee and learn more from you as well!

In case of queries, I can be reached on my email id: shubhangni.gupta92@gmail.com.

Good luck!

Shubhangni Gupta

Chairperson

Agenda: Economic Empowerment of Women

So let us first see what does the Commission on the Status of Women do. It is a subsidiary body of the UN that functions under the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). It was established on 21st July 1946 and is committed to the political, social and economic empowerment of women in all spheres of life. Additional to their commitment towards empowering women, they also endeavour to work towards establishing gender equality between men and women.

Since our focus is on the economic empowerment of women, let's take a look at the developments that the commission has taken in that direction.

- 1) The UN Fourth World Conference on Women, September 1995 (also known as the Beijing Platform for Action)

The Platform of Action identified certain strategic objectives under its 'Women and Economy' section that it would urge member nations to strive towards and take action over¹:

- i) Promote women's economic rights and independence, including access to employment, appropriate working conditions and control over economic resources.
- ii) Facilitate women's equal access to resources, employment, markets and trade.
- iii) Provide business services, training and access to markets, information and technology, particularly to low-income women.
- iv) Strengthen women's economic capacity and commercial networks.
- v) Eliminate occupational segregation and all forms of employment discrimination.
- vi) Promote harmonization of work and family responsibilities for men and women.

These objectives were a stepping stone to determining what the problem areas were for women and what was stopping them from being economically empowered. But it was important to revisit these objectives over regular periods of time to check whether they had been successfully achieved and what were the obstacles stopping them from doing so. This was in the form of Beijing+5.

- 2) Five-Year Revisit of the Beijing Platform for Action, 2000 (also known as Beijing+5)

The Beijing+5 meeting held as a special session of the General Assembly in 2000 assessed what developments had taken place since the Platform for Action in 1995. It looked at the different areas that the Platform had endeavoured to work for, what steps had been taken by various countries to implement changes and the obstacles faced in the execution and implementation of these objectives.²

Some of the key areas of impact that this revisit was able to identify dealt with:

- Unequal nature of the pay structure for men and women in the employment market,
- Status of disabled people and their right to economic security and

¹ <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/economy.htm>

² <http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/csw/ecn6-2000-pc2.pdf>, pgs 61-68.

- Mapping women's rights in terms of their lack of control over economic opportunities and resources
- Deteriorating conditions of work and exploitation of economically-disadvantaged women

Additionally, the revisit also looked at the different steps countries had taken to comply with their standards of improving the empowerment and economic status of women. Some countries ratified various conventions of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) dealing with fair wages, proper working conditions, eliminating occupational segregation and preventing sexual harassment at the workplace. Others introduced new programmes in the same areas in addition to ratifying the ILO conventions, to strengthen the position of women working within their own economies. Some of these measures included advanced skill training for women employees to upgrade their existing working skill-sets, launching projects that encouraged an entrepreneurial spirit and re-employment programmes to rehire women from sectors that they were formerly let go from.

The main obstacles that were identified in terms of hindering the Beijing objectives from being fulfilled mainly dealt with deficiencies in implementation and enforcement. Many sectors still failed to recognise the rampant gender discrimination that was taking place in their workspace and the economic disadvantages it posed for women. It led to a drop in the rates of women employed in certain industries, an increasing wage gap between men and women workers and no significant change in the lack of control of economic resources that women experienced. There had been steps taken towards the 1995 objectives, but there still was a long way to go.

The Beijing Platform for Action and its implementation is reviewed and appraised every 5 years. After the 2000, two more revisits have taken place in 2005³ and 2010,⁴ each with its own set of analysis and conclusion. Please read them thoroughly to be updated about the latest development in this area.

3) Sustainable Development Goals 2030

The role of the commission now also includes the follow-up to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development so as to accelerate the realisation of gender equality and empowerment of women. This was determined through an ECOSOC resolution adopted on 8th June 2015.⁵

Now that we have briefly seen what is being done by the CSW on this front, let us look at the areas of concern that we should understand with respect to this topic.

Economic. Empowerment. Women.

What do these three words mean individually? What do they mean together? Let's try and see.

Economic simply means aspects or characteristics that impact activities that involve money. The economy therefore, comprises of a space where the circulation of money takes place. This circulation takes place through employment opportunities, business and trade, consumers buying products, use of

³ <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N04/636/83/PDF/N0463683.pdf?OpenElement>. Pgs 55-62.

⁴ <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N10/305/76/PDF/N1030576.pdf?OpenElement>

⁵ http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=E/RES/2015/6

resources to run a household, etc. Economists try to understand how the economy will grow and change by predicting the outcomes of activities that control money and how the society reacts to it.

Some economic activities do involve the direct give and take of money but try to influence how the money is managed in the economy. Many aspects affect this. For example, a majority of professional chefs in the culinary industry are men. However, cooking in the household is conventionally perceived to be the domain of women. Cooking appliances and tools that are manufactured for purchase by consumers therefore fall into two categories. Simpler cooking tools that are geared towards household cooking are advertised to appeal to mainly women whereas more complicated industry-level equipment meant to be utilised in big commercial kitchens are marketed towards men. The circulation of money that is generated as a result of this behaviour-controlling strategy reflects in the type of consumers who buy these products and how much money they end up spending on them.

Which prompts the question: do economic activities affect different sections of society? How do we as a society think of our economy?

Empowerment means the ability of an individual to take control of their lives in all aspects. It involves the concept of 'agency', which simply means the control that a person has to make decisions regarding what they want to do with their life- where they want to work, what standard of living they want, what they want to eat and so on. An important part of empowerment is the creation of a space wherein individuals can actually achieve the life goals that they aspire to.

For example, let's assume that you want to become a football player. You have a passion for the sport and believe that with proper training you can be a very good sportsperson. But you do not have the financial resources to pursue that training, or there is a lack of sports infrastructure in your locality to help you pursue that sport. Maybe your family is not at all supportive of this aspiration of yours and this prevents you from going for training or put in the time required to hone your skills. Empowering you would thus involve enabling you to pursue your dream profession either by eliminating these limitations or helping you play football despite having them. Empowerment would mean putting individuals in a position where they can help themselves do whatever they want.

Which prompts the question: are some people more empowered than others? How does one determine that?

Women comprise of half the world's population. They are not just a gender, but individuals and human beings who have the capability of contributing to every sector of society, polity and the economy. Both men and women are individuals intrinsically, but they are perceived and understood in the light of the differences that they may exhibit. Societies have a tendency towards generalising traits, that is, characterising groups of people by putting a blanket habit/trait associated with them even if all members of that group may not have them. This has a particularly adverse impact on women as they are seen to be traditionally capable of only certain activities.

For a very long time, women were seen to be belonging to the kitchen. They cooked, cleaned, took care of the children and the household. The amount of work that was put in by them was seen as 'unpaid', that is, not equal to any economic value. We know that is not true. While household tasks are equally important for the functioning of families in society, their supposed lack of economic value render them to be seen as not at par with other salaried jobs. The burden of household work has, nevertheless,

pushed women to make choices between their salaried work and this 'unpaid' work or to do their best to pursue both simultaneously. Over time, we see a shift in the household space with regard to work. With more couples working in full-time jobs, more men have been taking up some of these household tasks- helping with cooking, taking care of the children, etc. The stigma and undesirability associated with these tasks are also slowly lifting away.



Which prompts the questions: how correct are we in attaching economic activities with particular genders?

Now that we understand these three terms, think about how they come together and what do they mean. Let's see the different aspects that you should look at while researching on the problems that affect the economic empowerment of women. It would be really useful to think of these in context of your surroundings and the solutions that you can come up with to solve them.

Women and Class



We know that individuals in society are impacted by their economic class. People who belong to a poorer section of society have difficulty in accessing education and employment opportunities due to lack of money. Wealthier sections of society are able to access these same opportunities due to their financial resources, and as a result are able to better their standard of life. This increases the gap between the two sections of society.

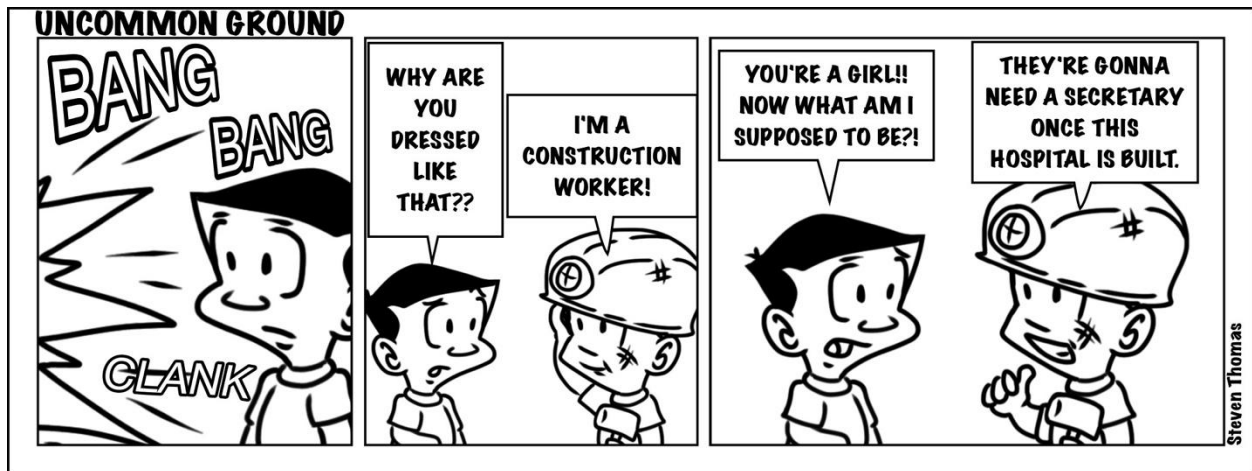
In addition to these difficulties, women are more adversely impacted by belonging to poorer sections of society than men. These can be due to a combination of many factors. As women, they are not prioritised for receiving education, especially in households that cannot afford to educate all its members. Due to the traditional roles of the householder that they are seen within, women do not get the opportunities to step outside the confines of their home and look for salaried employment elsewhere. The situation worsens as women in these spaces are not allowed to develop skill sets that they can utilise to contribute to their family income. They become financially dependent on the male

members of the household and are pushed into critical situations in the event of male deaths in the family.

Another aspect worth considering is the relationship between women empowerment and **caste**. We are familiar with how caste is directly related to monopolisation of resources in our society. Upper castes tend to have access to much better resources, and therefore are able to improve their lives by pursuing better educational and employment opportunities. They are able to do so by excluding members from what they consider to be as 'lower castes' and taking a majority share of resources for themselves. Caste essentially functions on the concepts of *exclusion, categorisation of different groups of people and purity*. In order for it to work, society needs to set down rigid rules for its various members that determine what they can do and what they cannot. Both men and women are adversely affected if they belong to a caste that is considered to be lower than the others. Combined with other factors like lack of education, preferential treatment towards boys and patriarchy, women from lower castes are even worse off than men. In a scenario where resources are already so few in number, they are often prioritised in the favour of men. Women from these groups therefore, find it hard to fend for themselves in a caste structure that already takes away so much from them.

Which prompts the question: Are caste and class related? How?

Women and Gender Stereotypes



Courtesy: Uncommon Ground

Women are often seen in terms of their biological identity. They are the givers of life and can produce children, therefore their identity gets attached to that of a mother. Often they are seen within the roles of a mother and wife conventionally, they are only perceived within these identities and have a hard time projecting themselves as entrepreneurs, educators, sportspersons, or any other profession they wish to pursue. This happens when women are associated only with their *gender* and not their *individual identity*.

In the areas of employment and pursuing economic opportunities, women are often evaluated professionally based on their gender and not their actual professional capabilities. What does this mean? It means that women are at times evaluated for professions that are perceived as 'suitable' for

them because they match the skill profile associated with their entire gender as a whole. For example, women are seen to be suited to the medical nursing profession because it is assumed that they are biologically geared towards being more 'caring' and 'motherly'. Similarly, women working as construction workers is often perceived as an 'unwomanly' profession because it is often assumed to be a domain of men. Evaluating professional expertise based on the gender of a person and not their individual skill-set and merit becomes a problem in this domain.

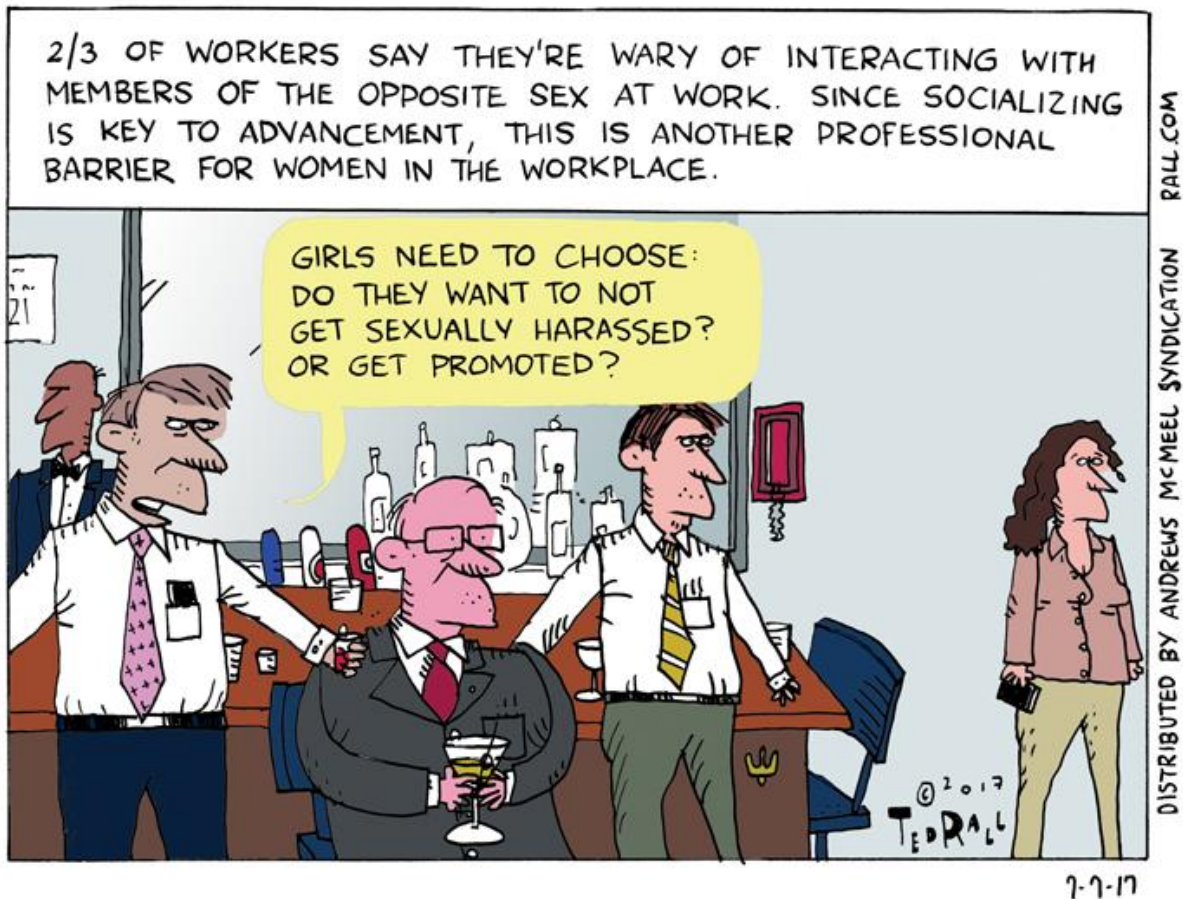
Another type of stereotyping involves looking at **religion** and its association with women in a certain way.



How often have we heard- Islam is oppressive for women! It keeps women covered at all times and does not let them pursue any employment or economic opportunities. Or, Hinduism is all about worshipping a million deities and caste purity! Hindu women are therefore, not allowed to step out and should be within the house at all times. It is not that these scenarios are unheard of and do not happen. But to associate prevalent practice with religious doctrine requires a closer examination.

Sometimes, there is a difference in what a religion actually propagates and how it is practiced in reality. When women are not able to pursue economic or educational opportunities and are cited religious reasons, one needs to investigate if some other reasons are at play. Many factors may hinder the empowerment of women in a household- a patriarchal mind-set, lack of economic resources, lack of educational opportunities, amongst others. *No religion propagates oppression*, so it is worth understanding *why* individuals interpret religion in a certain manner, and more importantly, *how* is religion attached to larger social problems like the pursuit of empowerment of women.

Women and Sexual Harassment



Everyone should have the right to a safe and secure work space. But not everyone has this right. A major problem faced by many women while pursuing their professional activities is the danger of sexual harassment and misconduct by their colleagues, bosses, mentors and seniors. What contributes to this problem is the lack of an effective mechanism to identify, recognise and take swift action on such misconduct. While many professional spaces are including guidelines and grievance-addressing mechanisms for sexual harassment, many instances of harassment go unreported. Why?

The story of sexual harassment hinders the economic empowerment of women in more spaces than just at work. Domestic abuse and violence is a tool used in some households to threaten and discourage women from stepping outside the traditional confines of their homes. Additionally, the threat of sexual violence is an effective psychological mechanism to instil feelings of fear, helplessness and anxiety preventing many women from pursuing employment in their chosen fields. It does the opposite of

empowering women by taking away the control that they feel they can exercise on their body and their lives.

Have you ever wondered by certain professions are seen to be dominated by women and others by men? What is the wage gap problem between men and women in professional spaces and why does it exist? These questions are worth considering in the light of how certain industries employ skilled educated professionals that they consider suitable for different kinds of work.

Women and the Household



Courtesy: www.wsp.org

It is important to understand the significance of empowering women economically, not just out of the house but also inside it. In a traditional household, where the male member is the main financial contributor to the household income, the women are intrinsically involved in the management and distribution of the income for essential resources to run the household. The house too is an economic space where the ability to control money and decide where it has to be spent is important. It requires skills in accounting, management and saving. The role of women in the household is often discredited because her contribution in this space is looked at as *unpaid labour*. At times, they are expected to carry out their responsibilities towards the household, but not be given the economic or financial means to shoulder them. But in order to run a household smoothly, this labour is essential and no family can run without it. So, even though this work seemingly does not bring in any income, would it be correct to argue that it is *not economic*?

Because of the stigma attached with household work as 'women's work' and by extension undesirable, women find it hard to shoulder all their domestic responsibilities by themselves. In the scenario wherein

male members of the household do not help them out with this work, they may feel burdened and unable to aspire towards any other professional space even if they want to. Economic empowerment of women in the household therefore, is essentially tied to the roles and responsibilities that are carried out by all members of the household irrespective of their gender. Since domestic work is an irreplaceable part of every family, the way this work is distributed and the creation of spaces where women can additionally pursue other activities also contribute towards their empowerment. It also requires a redefinition of what we see as 'gender-specific' work, that is, specific work only to be carried out by either men or women.

Other areas of consideration include:

- Women and employment
- Women and disabilities
- Women and their relationship with society
- Women and education
- Women and feminism

Think about all these themes carefully. The purpose of this study guide is to give you direction in which you can think about the agenda. This is not an exhaustive guide by any means and will require additional research to supplement it. But it will be useful to use these as the foundations on which you can think of more complex arguments and think deeper about this agenda.

Some questions worth considering are:

- 1) What is the gender wage gap? Why does it exist?
- 2) How does the institution of marriage affect the system of inheritances for sons and daughters in a household? Does the daughter have an equal chance of getting a share of her parents' property after she marries?
- 3) How does the treatment of sons and daughters affect their economic empowerment?
- 4) Is employment directly related to economic empowerment? Is a wealthy housewife more empowered than her employed house-help or less?
- 5) Do educated women directly produce empowered women? Why/why not?
- 6) Does feminism impact economic empowerment of women? How?
- 7) Would you agree that human society is inherently misogynistic (hates women)? Why/why not?

In addition to the documents available at the CSW website, you find in these videos some food for thought:

Violence and Women:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vlsdFwCCyRU>

Women and the Wage Gap

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1oqyrfIOQFc>

Women and race

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MydjXCHoLo0>

Good luck! Eagerly waiting to see you all in committee.