

# 'In tackling global crisis, let's give women a better deal'

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Inés Alberdi

EVERY DAY we make choices. Over the last year, I have visited various countries where the UN Development Fund for Women works and I have met many who have told me how the impact of the financial and economic crises is affecting them, and the choices they have to make to provide for their families.

What began as a crisis of finance in the United States has rapidly engulfed the entire world in a global economic downturn. Earlier this year, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon warned that the economic crisis could "plunge millions more into poverty and risk social and political unrest". For this reason, he said, "our efforts to restore economic growth should be seen as an opportunity to take some of the hard decisions needed to create a more equitable and sustainable future."

Such a future means we have to look closely at how the crisis, and efforts to respond to it, is affecting women as well as men. Our work in different corners of the world indicates that

the threat to gender equality and sustainable development is even more serious now. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) warns that up to 22 million women may lose their jobs, jeopardising gender equality gains both at home and at work. Access to healthcare is falling, compelling women to take on more unpaid care-giving and restricting their opportunities for paid work. School attendance always declines during times of crisis; girls already accounted for 54 per cent of the out of school population in 2007, and this number is likely to rise. Some children may never return to school. As we saw during the 1997 Asian financial crisis, incidences of abuse and violence against women also increase during hard times, and this time it is no different.

However, the impact of the crisis will be most profound in the area of jobs and livelihoods. Today, women workers are especially vulnerable in the export industries of developing countries, where they often make up 70-80 per cent of



A Thai woman makes a wish and prays with her Krathong, a boat made from banana leaf, during the Loy Krathong festival celebrations in Bangkok on Monday. PHOTO: AP

workers. In India, data from garments and leather industries show that small falls in export orders led to laying off of temporary workers, a disproportionate number of whom were women.

The situation is worse in the informal economy. Over 60 per cent of the Asian labour force and almost 80 per cent of the female work force — are in informal employment, lacking social protection against hardship, illness or old age. In India, for example, approximately 370 million people, or nine out

of 10 employees, do not have formal social security. The ILO predicts that with the crisis, women globally will be pushed into insecure jobs at a faster rate than men.

Migrant workers, up to 80 per cent of who are women, are often the first to lose their jobs during economic upheavals. Far from family and their homelands, they are now finding any job they can, working longer hours, and earning less. They are vulnerable to exploitation and trafficking, because now they are compelled to take

more risks than before.

But every cloud has a silver lining, and every crisis is also an opportunity. Global crisis such as this one can upset the business-as-usual way the world operates, and build a foundation for a more prosperous, and equitable world. Many countries have already adopted steps to stimulate economic growth, and the gender-specific ways in which the crisis is impacting people makes it critical to question these measures.

Which industries are being supported — is it the small or

medium enterprises and export industries or just the big players like the auto industry? What provisions are there for those who lost their jobs — not just in the formal sector — but those in the informal economy as well? What steps exist for ensuring microfinance — which supports millions of women in low-income nations? What about services for victims of gender-based violence, which reports say, is already on the rise? Also, we need to look beyond jobs to see who the infrastructure will serve — will roads help women to get their goods to market, or their children to schools and clinics. Will clinics be provided in rural areas, or indigenous communities — and if yes, will women be encouraged to work there?

When old progress paradigms have fractured, in some cases collapsed, policymakers can rethink some fundamental economic assumptions and break away from outmoded gender stereotypes and examine new areas of economic growth. It is time to provide training and support so that women can compete equally with men. As governments reinvest in agriculture and rural development to stimulate new growth, they can invent a new kind of "green revolution", focusing on women small farmers — a majority of food staple producers — to break out of dependency on global commodity markets and food imports.

Yes, we make choices everyday. It is time to make some bold, wise ones.

*Inés Alberdi, executive director of the UN Development Fund for Women (Unifem), is now on an official visit to India*