Executive Summary

REVIEW OF THE
UN SECRETARY GENERAL’S HIGH-LEVEL PANEL (HLP) ON
WOMEN’S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT (WEE)

The High-Level Panel (HLP) for Women’s Economic Empowerment (WEE) was established by the UN Secretary General to bring together global leaders to accelerate action on jobs, incomes and economic opportunities for women. Specifically, the HLP was tasked with developing an action-oriented agenda in support of women’s economic empowerment in the context of the ambitious and transformative Sustainable Development Agenda 2030.

This initiative is supported by the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment (UN Women) in collaboration with the United Kingdom Department for International Development (DFID).

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The Outcome of the Secretariat’s High-Level Panel (HLP) on Women’s Economic Empowerment (WEE) project is “High-level leadership accelerates action to improve jobs, incomes and economic opportunities for women”. In its less than 2 years of operation to date, the HLP has done much to progress towards its outcome statement. The HLP not only supported and delivered to issues of genuine concern globally for WEE but fostered consensus building and mutual understanding between multiple stakeholders on the topic. The overarching 2030 Agenda principles (leave no one behind, intersectionality, universality and human rights) remained in sight and on board during the HLP discussions and development of reports and draft processes, showing how an investment in women’s empowerment is an investment across all Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The panel (and its various outputs) in this way have acted as an enabler and facilitator for the WEE agenda.

Progress has gone beyond milestones, which are outlined against the respective outputs in the full review report. Considering the relatively short and demanding timeframe of its operation, as a whole, the HLP members and deputies report a significant change in their own awareness and capacity to understand and deliver on the WEE agenda. This is due to the original collective and collaborative design and strategy of bringing a unique set of multi-stakeholders together, which do not usually sit on a panel under such a complex area (WEE). The collaboration and process proved both difficult but extremely rewarding as it set further foundations of alliances, partnerships and expanded knowledge and understanding of the realities of WEE through dialogue.

The **key results and achievements** have been in the following areas:

1. Delivery of two reports and seven toolkits with transformative recommendations, covering the ‘what’, ‘why’ and ‘how’ of women’s economic empowerment through a credible evidence synthesis of the latest research, and contributing a framework of seven drivers of transformation, four areas of work and the importance of an ‘enabling environment’.
2. Wide dissemination of the HLP reports to a diverse range of stakeholders and strong ownership among HLP members and the growing community, on taking forward the HLP’s vision.
3. The HLP on WEE is the first of its kind and through its influential leadership comprised of individuals who have deep knowledge and experience (e.g. government, business, civil society) the HLP has brought the women’s economic empowerment agenda more prominently onto the global stage.
4. There has been notable progress in the acceleration of media coverage and global reach exceeding the final milestone target of 250 million impressions over the program period to over 900 million impressions in total (this is as of April 2017). Further outreach was done through the updated and redesigned website (which went live in mid-June); with 5,000 page-views so far, of which at least half page-views were to the toolkits.
5. The Group of Champions issued a joint statement at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in July 2017, sharing with all Member States the importance of accelerating women’s economic empowerment in the discussions on the SDGs/Agenda 2030, during the high-level segment of the HLPF. They urged for HLP recommendations to be included in the Ministerial Declaration.
6. Statements made by 10 member states at the HLPF reflect the incorporation of HLP recommendations into national SDG implementation.

The overarching lessons are:

1. **Multi-stakeholder nature of HLP was valuable in delivering transformational results.**
   The DFID business case design of a multi-stakeholder high level panel on WEE which included private sector, civil society, multilateral institutions and government reflected a diversity that was effective in delivering reports, transformative recommendations and toolkits. The composition of the panel members, the diversity of areas they represented and worked, the richness of experience, commitment and personal investment of Panel members in the WEE agenda contributed to outcomes and delivery. The HLP design successfully brought together different views, power dynamics, and actors with varied WEE commitments and perspectives.

2. **Strong leadership from co-Chairs and facilitation on ‘common denominator principle’.**
   This was exercised when disagreements emerged and the HLP was unable to come to a consensus particularly on language or technical areas. By having strong co-chairs, it allowed for views to be expressed and shared but also that the direction would be set, and final consensus taken based on the common denominator approach.

3. **The UN Secretary General’s backing gave the authority, credibility and profile needed for the panel, and UN Women the necessary technical and advocacy capacity for WEE.**
   Without the UN and in this case the UN Secretary General’s support and approval, the Panel would have been less impactful and less successful in reaching larger audiences globally. The UN Secretary General’s backing gave the authority, credibility and profile needed for the Panel to achieve its mandate, and UN Women the necessary advocacy capacity on this specific topic.

4. **Stronger UN Women management oversight and ownership should have been supported and instituted from the beginning.**
   The governance structure of the Secretariat could have been fleshed out with greater clarity right from the start of the project. In its first year, the HLP Secretariat faced considerable operational and management challenges including high turnover of staff. In its second year, these challenges were resolved mostly when the inputs from UN Women came forward to support operations, finance, M&E, policy and coordination, and this was possible mainly because of the secondment of existing UN Women staff to the Secretariat, and oversight from UN Women management, which was not the case in the first year.

5. **Power dynamics within the group should have been managed more effectively, and clarity on ‘terms of engagement’ for HLP members was required.**
   Institutional political interests played a part in holding the panel work and discussions back.\(^1\) Although everyone was united around the bigger picture of the WEE agenda, institutional priorities emerged, and issues of language and wording were lengthy. With a diverse group of actors there was not a strong set of procedures and rules to ensure members did not try to impose power over other

\(^1\) Review interviews: Specifically members from bigger institutions hold a clear agenda of what they wanted and were little willing to listen to a more rights based perspective and challenging macroeconomic issues. The economic argument was dominating and it was even expressed that this is what was paid for. A willingness to address the micro level, but less willingness to address the macro level.
panel members. Power issues, power imbalances and political dynamics were present on the HLP. This is part of the process of establishing an on-going multi stakeholder dialogue and particularly the process of consensus building and developing mutual understanding – which is transformative by nature. This is an important lesson to be drawn from as consensus building and agreements need as a pre-condition a space to develop listening and mutual understanding. It is a long-term and very sensitive process that needs time and space to unfold and which has been well addressed through different forms of engagement, such as through participatory working groups, external moderators, strong consultants, leadership of both Co-chairs, as well as facilitation from the HLP Secretariat managed by UN Women.

6. **M&E plan for the project should have been stronger and sustainability strategy implemented from the beginning; also required greater investments in M&E (currently even less than the agreed 1.5%).** The log-frame could have been designed with a sustainability strategy at the output level linking the purpose of the whole project to it. That way a whole tracking system and regular monitoring of how to put the actionable commitments into practice could have been developed with indicators for progress and milestones set for a longer time-frame, up to 2030. The actual Sustainability Strategy of the project is a great outline that could have been taken to a much higher level with tangible outcomes for follow up and monitoring. The financing of the M&E plan was also inadequate; initially envisaged at 3% and later agreed at 1.5%, but finally even less was allocated to M&E.

7. **A clear need for a strategy and support for continued engagement on the HLP’s learnings.** The ownership and continued engagement going forward will be demonstrated by the on-going networking and advocacy activities by the members themselves. Advocacy skills and driver analysis have been built and therefore as a result panel members have more tools, more capacities and more connections/alliances than before they joined the panel. Their realm of engagement is far wider as well because of the profile the HLP offered. Where panel members were a little less visible before they explained they are now better able to push an agenda with evidence and confidence to engage with actors. The implications are positive because it is related to the scale up of transformational recommendations, which members have agreed and committed too. On the other hand, the formation of the Group of Champions (comprising of 19 countries so far), as well as the incorporation of the HLP’s learnings into UN Women’s own work, will form the basis for continued engagement on the legacy of the HLP.

**The recommendations of this review** draw on four main conclusions that were raised during the revision process and focus on a) the need of taking the momentum that has been created by the HLP on WEE forward, deepening the understanding of the relationship of macroeconomic issues and gender equality; b) the on-going work through established partnerships that have to be sustained and its accountability strengthened towards the diverse realities of poor women from the global South and their voices; c) establishing a strategy and follow up on accountability mechanisms for the 7 drivers of change; d) the leading role of UN Women in taking forward the work of the HLP. The key recommendations are:

1. **Leave no one behind** – It is recommended that the HLP’s vision be advanced with a focus on ‘leaving no one behind’, and in particular, on ensuring accountability to the voices of women who are poor and marginalised. While the Panel itself experienced a play of unequal power relations, it is recommended that future initiatives ensure an interactive dialogue with
civil society with inclusive and transparent ways of participation, and redefine empowerment as a collective process of change, not defined by outcomes but by the multiple processes initiated.

2. **Empower and resource UN Women to play an effective role in HLP follow-up leading with its triple mandate of normative support, UN coordination, and operational activities**, including the Secretariat hand-over and short close-out communication report, addressing the staffing requirement within UN Women and sustaining the momentum and outcomes of the HLP through the coordination/mainstreaming mandate of UNW, specifically through the System-Wide Gender Action Plan (SWAP) and interagency work, and ensure normative standard-setting and compliance through its intergovernmental work.

3. **Strengthening DFID’s institutional leadership on WEE to provide on-going support on WEE**, including financing a follow up of the HLP on WEE to ensure sustainability. And on-going mainstreaming processes of WEE into DFID structures/system is recommended.

4. **Continued Knowledge Management, on-going Awareness Raising and Capacity Building.** Panel member engagement (private sector, civil society and multilateral institutions) in a knowledge-brokering role to continuously bring WEE onto the global agenda, is recommended. This can be made possible by engaging with actors of specific sectors/areas and establishing expert groups, as well as promoting accountability mechanisms for each, involving thought leaders and academics as change makers to shift the political agenda, linking gender equality to macroeconomic policy issues and specifically giving voice to poor women and grassroots leaders, as well as on-going awareness raising and capacity building through multilateral stakeholder action.

5. **Define and institutionalize Accountability Mechanisms.** It is recommended that UN Women should develop and communicate a clear strategy and an Action Plan on how to report against the HLP recommendations, commitments and how to measure progress, applying a clear results framework in alignment with the 2030 agenda. Periodic monitoring and reporting against this framework should be undertaken, either within the framework of the HLPF for the SDGs, or through other global platforms.

6. **Deepen Member State engagement and intergovernmental processes** as legal reform and financial and political commitment has been identified as being key for the future work on WEE. UN Women and the Group of Champions working together with the support of other stakeholders can contribute to shifting agendas and fostering accountability towards the realities of poor women, including the implementation of a binding commitment on WEE in form of a declaration or framework convention.