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There has never been a greater need for women to work together internationally as the global economic recession threatens women's economic advance in every country and future economic growth demands women's contribution in every country.

And there has never been a greater opportunity for women to work together internationally. There are now, for the first time in most of the developed countries and many of the developing countries, women in leading positions in their executives and in their legislatures.

As the recession hits women in the developed and in the developing world, there are now, for the first time, women around the world who are in a position to do something about it.

## **The increase in women's economic activity**

Previous recessions have been seen primarily as an issue of concern for the jobs of men in the economy and the impact of male job loss on them and their family.

This economic downturn comes at a pivotal time for women's economic status. In the developed world more women are going out to work. Over the last 25 years in the UK, the number of women in employment has increased by nearly a third to 12.5 million women. Women now form 45.8 per cent of the total economically active population. Women's work is important to women themselves, to their families and to the economy.

Many women work out of choice, no longer prepared to inhabit only the "private sphere" of unpaid work in the home and be constrained by financial dependence on a husband or partner.

Most women work out of necessity. Women's earnings are of increasing importance to their families, and in the UK they contribute 32% of household income. And that picture is repeated throughout the developed world. For example, in France women contribute 28% of household income, and in Germany that figure is 29%.

There are more families headed by a lone mother. The importance of her work is not just the income for her children but also for her work to serve as an example to her children that their future life is about the opportunities and independence provided by work, not about dependence on state provision of benefits. In the UK the lone parent employment rate is 57.8%. In Germany, the lone parent employment rate is 70.4% and in the European area as a whole it is 73.1%. Again, this is a trend reflected throughout the developed world.

Women's work is of growing importance to the economy. There is no part of either the public or private sector which does not

depend on women as well as men's work. For example, in the UK women make up 70% of the public sector workforce, 44% of the financial and business services sector and 20% of the construction and manufacturing sector.

In developing countries, women's economic activity is key in protecting children from poverty and in contributing to prosperity and growth.

## **The impact of the global recession on women**

Previous economic downturns were felt as having a terrible impact on men and their families of the loss of men's jobs. Communities and entire regions were left scarred by the impact of closures of whole industries.

It is to avoid the immediate and painful effect on individuals and families, and the longer term effects on whole communities, that the Government is taking action to

support the economy as it is hit by the global economic downturn.

And in supporting the economy we look at the economy as it is today – very different to what it was in the last recession. And we look too to the prospects for growth for the future.

In this global economic downturn we must protect the jobs of women as well as men and we must look to the role that women as well as men will play in contributing to recovery and growth in the future.

To do that, the Government has

- Disaggregated job loss information by region and by gender and discovered that in a rapidly changing picture there are some regions where female employment has fallen more than male employment and other regions where the reverse is the case. It is important not to make assumptions, to look at data rather than rely on conventional wisdom that men are being more affected than women. For example, in

April 2009 compared to three months earlier, women's employment fell faster than men's in the North West and in Scotland.

- We have conducted research into the difference in attitude of women and men to the downturn. This showed that even where men are more likely to be losing their job, it is women who are most worried about the recession; worried about their own job, worried about their husband's job, worried about the prospects for their children and worried that a loss of income will put the family home at risk. We have found that the expectation that men worry about the economy and women worry about other things is not borne out.
- We have promoted the discussion about government action to tackle the downturn beyond the usual channels for such discussions. So we have promoted debate on women's internet chat rooms – such as “Mumsnet” and in women's magazines.

- We have brought together women ministers, MPs, business organisations, trade unions and women's NGO's to discuss the impact of the recession on women and the response that is needed from government. No 11 Downing Street was the venue for this meeting a week before the London G20 summit in April 2009. The meeting particularly highlighted concern for the vulnerability of the childcare sector. In the UK, 80% of childcare places are in the Private, Voluntary and Independent sector. We have been working to improve the sustainability and quality of early years care. It is important that we protect the childcare sector from a set back during the economic downturn as childcare is needed now and in the future not only for children to experience good early years provision but also as part of the economic infrastructure which enables their mothers to go out to work.

Government needs to engender understanding of, and confidence in, our response to the economic downturn. And that means engaging on this with that half of the population that are women.

### **International co-operation to take action to tackle the downturn**

Our economies are more than ever before interconnected. We need all the economies of the world to get back on to the path of growth in order for world trade to provide the momentum for greater prosperity in the developing world and to allow the developing world to escape from poverty.

There has been unprecedented co-operation through the G20. First in London in April and now looking towards Pittsburgh.

We have, now, in both the developed and in the developing world, women who are in senior positions and who are able to play a role in the task of tackling the

downturn and working for global growth. In the UK we have a new Government Office for Equality – of which I am the Secretary of State, we have a woman Secretary of State leading the department for Work and Pensions and women ministers in all the key economic departments notably the Treasury and the Department of Business. 20% of our House of Commons is women. The US has a woman heading the State Department, Hillary Clinton, and a woman, Hilda Solis as Secretary for Labour. For the first time, the House of Representatives has a woman speaker – Nancy Pelosi. Germany has its first woman Chancellor – Angela Merkel - and half the Spanish Cabinet are women. In the developing world, women also hold some senior positions; in Mozambique, Luísa Dias Diogo became the first female Prime Minister, in the Philippines, Gloria Macapagal- Arroyo became the country's second female President and in Liberia, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf became the first elected female president.

Across the world as a whole, 18.4% of MPs in National Parliaments are now women. 33.3% of UK MEPs are women and across the EU as a whole, 34.9% of MEPs are women. The “First Vice-President of the European Commission” is a woman - Margot Wallström.

But there is, as yet, no “international architecture” which serves effectively to bring together women who are working for progress along the same lines in each of our own countries.

We need to look afresh at how this could be done. The G20 brings leaders together but while there are many more women in governments, most of the leaders are still men.

The UN plays an important role in championing the rights of women, setting global standards and delivering programmes. At its 50<sup>th</sup> session in 2006, the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) agreed on action to enhance the participation of women in

development. But the international fora have, I would say, done more to identify the problems of underdevelopment rather than bringing women leaders together to work together to provide the solutions.

There is an opportunity, alongside the Pittsburgh G20 in September to have a “Gender 20”. Where we bring women together to put firmly on the agenda the action needed to protect women in the economic downturn and ensure that women are able to play the part our economies need to take us out of recession and forward to economic growth.

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