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WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT PRINCIPLES: BENEFITS AND SUCCESS STORIES

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Abstract: Women empowerment (WEP) refers to the process of providing women with the necessary resources and opportunities to exercise their rights, participate in decision-making processes, and have control over their lives. Empowering women has become a significant issue globally, with many organizations and governments recognizing the importance of gender equality in sustainable development.

The purpose of this research is to provide an overview of the concept of women's empowerment principles, its evolution, and its importance in achieving sustainable development goals.

The WEPs provide companies with a holistic road map to address the challenges women face in the workplace and to promote gender equality across their value chains, in their community engagement.

Launched in 2010 by UN Women and UN Global Compact, the WEPs are informed by international labour and human rights standards and grounded in the recognition that businesses have a stake in, and a responsibility for, gender equality and women's empowerment. The seven Principles constitute a primary vehicle for corporate delivery on gender equality dimensions of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development.

The investigative object consists in analysis of usage of WEPs by different companies globally, the benefits obtained by women in the work place and best practices to be applied by other companies. Drawing inspiration from successful companies worldwide that have implemented the WEPs can provide valuable examples for businesses in Moldova to become signatories of WEPs as well. These companies serve as role models, showcasing the positive impact that can be achieved through the adoption of WEPs in diverse contexts.

By examining the importance of WEPs and its applicability, this research aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the principles that can empower women economically and concludes with a reflection on the potential benefits of implementing these principles and their significant contribution to creating a more equitable society.

Keywords: Gender equality, WEPs, Business, Companies, Transparency

JEL Classification: A13, I38, J16, J88

Introduction

Gender inequality is one of the largest economic and social costs to society. Women earn only one tenth of global income while they contribute two thirds of all working hours. Achieving gender

equality is a key factor in fostering economic growth, competitiveness and capacity of economies and businesses worldwide.

It has been estimated that if full gender equality were achieved now, it would increase growth in the global economy by US\$12 trillion by 2025. Yet according to the World Economic Forum in 2020, at the current rate of progress the gender gap in economic participation will take 267.7 years to close.

Women’s empowerment and gender equality are one of the core objectives also of the Republic of Moldova under the international commitments. Moldova has ratified or otherwise acceded to numerous international and regional treaties/agreements supporting the assurance of gender equality. Therefore, besides the national initiatives on developing and promoting women empowerment, Moldova shall develop and adjust its legal framework to create the grounding for assuring that women are not only not discriminated against but entitled and benefit of equal treatments and economic growth opportunities.

The strategic framework on ensuring gender equality and women empowerment in the Republic of Moldova has been made in a few stages, via legal framework (laws) and non-normative documents (policy documents). As regards the legal framework, the following stages were noticed as essential in reforming the women’s economic empowerment in Moldova:

Gender equality is reflected in other relevant laws and in numerous policies, strategies and action plans. However, challenges remain in implementation, including in areas related to women’s economic empowerment. Women spend 45 hours a week on homemaking– the equivalent of working a full-time job, with regular overtime.

The equal treatment of women and men, as well as women economic empowerment shall be properly implemented by all the stakeholders, including legal entities, irrespective whether public or private, and natural persons. The international studies show that the closing of economic gender gaps might be efficiently closed via the symbiosis of public policies/laws and business actions, as there is evidenced positive contribution of women’s empowerment and participation in the workforce, as for the company’s performance, as well as for the national economy.

WEPs as innovation for gender equality

One of the instruments that contribute positively to the engagement of the private sector in the promotion of gender equality and women’s empowerment are Women Empowerment Principles (WEPs). WEPs are a set of principles offering guidance to businesses on how to promote gender equality and women’s empowerment in the workplace, marketplace, and community.

Established by UN Women and UN Global Compact, the WEPs are informed by international labour and human rights standards and grounded in the recognition that businesses have a stake in, and a responsibility for, gender equality and women’s empowerment. WEPs are a primary vehicle for corporate delivery on gender equality dimensions of the 2030 agenda and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (weps.org). By joining the WEPs community, the CEO signals commitment to this agenda at the highest levels of the company and to work collaboratively in multistakeholder networks to foster business practices that empower women. These include equal pay for work of equal value, gender-responsive supply chain practices and zero tolerance against sexual harassment in the workplace, to assist all private sector employers and businesses to realize the business potential from improved gender equality. Currently, 8,498 business companies globally have committed to the WEPs community, according to official web site weps.org.

The WEPs encompasses seven principles, as follows:

- Principle 1: High-level corporate leadership;
- Principle 2: Fair treatment of all women and men at work without discrimination;
- Principle 3: Employee health, well-being, and safety;
- Principle 4: Education and training for career advancement;
- Principle 5: Enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices;
- Principle 6: Community initiatives and advocacy;
- Principle 7: Measurement and reporting.

Businesses can contribute to gender equality and women’s empowerment in multiple ways. Beyond the basic responsibilities of respecting human rights, companies can choose from a menu of options to advance women’s empowerment within their workplaces, marketplaces, and communities. Once a company becomes a WEPs signatory, an action plan based on a gender gap analysis of the company is developed to ensure the gradual implementation of the seven principles that are the core of WEPs work. Companies have no legal obligation to implement the principles, and their work is fully voluntary. As a result, accomplishment of the WEPs is different for each organization.

In the Republic of Moldova this initiative started with the support of UN Women in partnership with ODA (former ODIMM) in 2015 through a large information campaign involving more than 250 local companies. A series of actions followed that were integrated into the government programs intended for the economic empowerment of women, such as the National Platform for Women in Moldova, PARE 1 + 1, Women in Business, Start Up for Young People.

According to the “Baseline Study on the Impact of the Women’s Empowerment Principles (WEPs) and gender equality and women empowerment for Businesses in Moldova”, realised in 2023 within a survey questionnaire completed by **141 companies**, less than 20% of the respondent companies had information about the WEPs. Most of the survey participants (96 %) are non-WEPs signatory companies. According to the companies’ responses, 60% of respondents work on gender equality and women empowerment initiatives. The respondent companies have certain motivation to join the WEPs. As maintained by their responses, Table 1 provides the most and least important motivators for the respondent companies to embrace WEPs:

Table 1 Companies by motivation to join the WEPs

Our contribution to SDGs	31%
A stronger corporate reputation	31%
An increase in the recruitment of and better retention of talented individuals	30%
Contributing to women’s empowerment will also help the economy	30%
Improved competitiveness on the market	29%
Our female employees are motivated and more productive	28%
An increase in interested investors who have substantial confidence in the company	27%
An improvement in internal communication, better commitment from colleagues and a promotion of a culture of shared values	26%
Attracting more female customers/clients	26%
Company’s increased access to capital/financing	24%
There is better retention of female staff	23%
Less violence and reducing company costs by addressing violence	23%

Source: “Baseline Study on the Impact of the Women’s Empowerment Principles (WEPs) and gender equality and women empowerment for Businesses in Moldova”, UN Women Moldova (2023)

The strongest motivators for the companies to join the WEPs were attributed to their contribution to SDGs (31%), a stronger corporate reputation (31%), an increase in the recruitment and better retention of talented individuals (30 %) and contributing to women’s empowerment will also help the national economy (30%).

The same study was realised in Georgia, in 2021, with the participation of 40 signatory companies, and according to the survey results the strongest motivator for the respondents to join the WEPs was attributed to the idea that “contributing to women’s empowerment will also help the economy”. The same criterion was named as the second largest benefit that companies gained from the WEPs. The largest benefit that 58% of companies received from the WEPs was related to “a stronger corporate reputation”. The positive effect that the WEPs work has had on female employee productivity was among the top three main motivators (63%) and actual benefits (48 %) indicated by the respondent companies (UN Women Georgia, 2021).

During the period 2018-2020, about 7,000 women employees from Georgia, received WEPs-related support, according to the respondent companies, as follows in the Table 2:

Table 2 Number of women/employees who received WEPs-related support by different activities per year

Women/employees	Number of companies	2018	2019	2020	Total
Women employees received professional development	13	15	1,191	1,089	2,295
Employees trained on gender equality issues	10	102	557	519	1,178
Women employees benefited from your company's other WEPs activities implemented	7	1	45	725	771
Employees completed the online course on the prevention of sexual harassment	11	184	184	281	649
Women employees engaged in workplace mentorship programme	9	4	386	214	604
Employees completed the online course "I Know Gender"	9	156	171	249	576
Women entrepreneurs/representatives of women's associations trained by your company	7	0	132	263	395
Women/girls received scholarships from the company	6	0	52	150	202
Women/girls received internships at the company	6	3	41	60	104
Women outside the company who benefited from your company's other WEPs activities implemented	5	0	30	43	73
Women/girls received grants from the company	4	0	0	70	70
External women mentees of your company	4	0	21	36	57
Total		465	2,810	3,699	6,974

Source: Baseline study on the impact of the women’s empowerment principles (weps) on businesses in Georgia, UN Women Georgia (2021)

Georgia has a similar historical context with Moldova, but has managed to achieve greater success in terms of women's economic empowerment. Businesses’ increased understanding of the importance of gender equality was evidenced by the increased number of WEPs companies in Georgia, growing

from 25 to 44 in 2019 and reaching almost 80 companies by October 2020, compared to Moldova, which currently has only 17 signatory companies, according to weps.org. The private sector has the potential to become a champion of the WEPs in Georgia. Those companies that understand the benefits of the WEPs demonstrate a full commitment to the implementation and further advancement of these principles.

WEPs implementation per principle: benefits and success stories

Principle 1: Establish high-level corporate leadership for gender equality

First principle aims to establish high-level corporate leadership for gender equality and provides the basis for the successful implementation of all seven principles. As per the WEPs: “Corporate leadership is a key and integral part of making gender equality and women’s empowerment a top strategic priority. It publicly signals the CEO’s and the executive team’s goals and targets for implementing the WEPs and how the seven Principles will become part of the corporate sustainability strategy, day-to-day operations, and organisational culture.

A good case implementation of this principle represents the georgian company **m2 Real Estate**, which joined the WEPs in 2016. Following the development of the company’s first WEPs Action Plan, the company increasingly started promoting women in male-dominated occupations as part of their strategy to fully utilize internal talent and contribute to the sustainability of the business. The change has been remarkable. While in 2016 only 20 per cent of site managers were women, as of December 2018, women constitute the absolute majority of site managers in residential complexes – a position that previously was considered a “job for a man”. In 2018, the company developed its second WEPs Action Plan for the period from 2018 to 2020 and celebrated achieving gender balance among its top management. The proportion of women in senior management increased from 20 per cent in 2016 to 50 per cent in 2018. (UN Women, 2021) Now, of the 10 top managerial positions, five are occupied by women. As a result of several internal changes in the company’s human resources policy and practices, more women have been promoted to other managerial positions as well.

Principle 2: Treat all women and men fairly at work – respect and support human rights and non-discrimination

Principle 2 targets the treatment of all women and men fairly at work, as well as respect and support for human rights and non-discrimination. It commits businesses to treat all employees fairly, regardless of gender, and to respect and support human rights and non-discrimination. Signatories are encouraged to stand firmly against inequality, racism and discrimination and to ensure that the perspectives, skills and talents of women from diverse backgrounds with different abilities and identities are represented and valued in company initiatives, programmes and decision-making.

One of the case study for this principle is **Sandic Honey Group**, a moldovan company founded in 2019, which became WEPs signatory company in May 2022. Being a small, agricultural company, **Sandic Honey Group** makes great efforts for women empowerment and gender equality. Their main motivation of becoming a WEPs signatory is to show that women can also become successful, even in the management teams of the company, and that women can share the same positions as men. In this regard, the company has shared the responsibilities of both women and men equally, on every level of positions. Since the implementation of WEPs, the main priority is to ensure the balance

between professional and personal life for women, by providing flexible work arrangements when women with small children need it, paid sick leaves and days off on weekends, fully respecting the national legislation in force. One of the most successful policy implementations at Sandic Honey Group is equal pay for equal work (UN Women, 2023).

In Georgia, on the other hand, according to the survey realised in 40 Georgian companies, the vast majority of the companies offer both maternity leave (90%) and paternity leave (80%). In 95% of the companies, maternity leave is paid, while paternity leave is paid in 72 per cent. Other arrangements are utilized by fewer companies. For example, 16 per cent of respondents enable their female employees to take longer periods of leave or offer flexible working arrangements, while 14 per cent of companies give several days of paternity leave to their employees. These aspects reinforce the stereotypical role of women as the primary caregiver.

Principle 3: Ensure the health, safety and well-being of all women and men workers

This principle aims to ensure the health, safety and well-being of all women and men workers. As per the WEPs: “Employers play a key role in preserving and promoting the physical and emotional health, safety and wellbeing of their women and men employees. Sexual harassment and violence signify high costs to women in terms of lost earnings, missed promotions and overall wellbeing. Companies are impacted in the form of employee absenteeism and productivity losses.

Crunchyroll SRL, an American company that has also a representation in Moldova (crunchyroll.com), is not a WEPs signatory company but it is one of the companies that implements most of the gender equality policies and women’s empowerment work. Being an ICT company and applying group rules regarding their internal policies, Crunchyroll is constantly working on women’s equal rights and opportunities at their workplace. The most attractive policies that Crunchyroll applies, are the following:

- Trainings twice a year on sexual harassment, with the main focus for 2023 on organising trainings on many different topics for the wellbeing of their employees.
- Organising minimum 5 job interviews with women to achieve an equal participation.
- Competitive bonuses when mothers return to work and the social and medical insurance payments are covered by the company at a rate of 60% per year.
- All employees who have children up to 18 years old, benefit from additional medical assurance for their children.

Crunchyroll makes efforts to identify employees’ needs by regular feedback sessions, anonymous chat groups, separate groups for girls and annual reviews. The company also works on women’s empowerment by emphasising self-confidence and inclusion.

Principle 4: Promote education, training, and professional development for women

Providing education, training and professional development opportunities is not only important for the personal development of employees but also critical in empowering companies. Principle 4 calls on companies and organisations to invest in workplace policies and programmes that open avenues for women’s advancement at all levels and across all business areas. WEPs signatories are also encouraged to conduct training about the company’s gender equality policy and action plan, as well

as awareness- raising on sexual harassment, unconscious bias and other training that could help foster an inclusive workplace. Companies and organisations are urged to ensure women’s equal access to all company- supported education and training programmes, formal and informal networking and mentoring programmes. Businesses that offer better learning and skills development opportunities can enhance their competitiveness and attract talent.

The hotels **Mercure** and **ibis Styles Tbilisi Center** signed on to the WEPs in 2018. The company is committed to corporate values of equality between men and women, diversity in the workplace and sharing knowledge on solidarity and combating stereotypes. The company launched the internal project “RiiSE”, where the double “i” symbolizes men and women. In addition to gender equality, the RiiSE diversity concept also aims at encouraging the emergence of mixed teams in terms of generations and cultures. Other projects implemented by **Mercure** include the following: strategic leaders’ development training; implementation of Inclusion and Diversity Week; and the deployment of People Policy, an internal document based on principles of equality and diversity. Since March 2019, every employee has been introduced to and signed on to the policy. Recently, the company signed a Memorandum of Understanding with Atipfund Georgia (Agency for State Care and Assistance for the (Statutory) Victims of Human Trafficking) to arrange certified internships for women residing in shelters, aligned with Principle 4 of WEPs (UN Women Georgia, 2021).

Principle 5: Implement enterprise development, supply chain and marketing practices that empower women

Companies have a great opportunity to promote gender equality through their relationships with their suppliers, as well as through the values they promote in their marketing campaigns. Principle 5 calls on companies and organisations to require business partners, contractors, and suppliers to adopt the WEPs and to establish supplier diversity programmes that actively seek to expand business relationships with women owned enterprises. Signatories implementing Principle 5 should seek gender-sensitive solutions to women’s barriers to access financial products and services and systematically source their goods and services from other enterprises that align with the WEPs. Doing so does not mean that quality, efficiency, cost savings or value for money would be compromised.

Increasing women’s access to financial services remains a strong business opportunity. Globally, women are less likely than men to have access to financial institutions or have a bank account. While 65 per cent of men report having an account at a formal financial institution, only 58 per cent of women report the same. Not only does a lack of access limit these women’s economic potential, but it hampers the well-being of their families and communities as well. Research shows that small and medium-sized enterprises run by women are better at reinvesting profits in the business, investing in their families’ health and education, and strengthening local communities. **JSC MFO Crystal**, a financial inclusion organization, was one of the first companies that joined the WEPs movement in Georgia in 2016. It has been taking several steps to promote gender equality ever since. “There is more than enough evidence that promoting gender equality and women’s empowerment is not just the right thing to do, but it is also a smart business decision, and at **Crystal** we deeply believe in it,” notes CEO Ilia Revia (crystal.ge). Aligned with the implementation of Principle 5 and to support women’s access to finance, the company announced the issuance of Women’s Corporate Bonds worth GEL 15 million (more than USD 5 million) for the economic development of thousands of female customers, providing them with financial products and equal access to capital in order to grow their small businesses. So far, that meant developing special proposals for female entrepreneurs and reducing their credit service fees by 5 per cent. As a result, more than 2,300 women received loans

that amounted to a total of GEL 4.7 million (more than USD 1.5 million). **Crystal** has raised the bar on getting the best value from financial donations to women’s communities and achieving greater social impact. Through a partnership with the TASO Foundation, Crystal implemented three community projects: potable water was provided to 25 households in Tsageri Municipality; a medical ambulatory was opened in the village of Guliani in Lanchkhuti, Guria; and a public library in the village of Pipileti in Oni, Racha saw the light of day.

Principle 6: Promote equality through community initiatives and advocacy

Principle 6 encourages the promotion of equality through community initiatives and advocacy. As per the WEPs: “Companies are increasingly investing in community development programmes to make valuable, effective, and responsible contributions to gender equality and women’s empowerment. They are encouraged to actively engage and consult with women and girls on their views, needs and aspirations, and to ensure that their voices are heard.”⁶⁴ Companies have several opportunities to lead by example and contribute to women’s empowerment within the wider community.

Starnet Digital City, an IT consulting company, became a WEPs signatory company on 13 September 2022. For Starnet, it is extremely valuable to support such initiatives as WEPs implementation in Moldova, as they contribute to social development, especially since Starnet is also responsible for the companies that are Tracom’s residents (which is an industrial park that provides infrastructure development capabilities), Starnet having the status of a platform for the resident companies (starnet.md).

For Starnet, out of all WEPs, the easiest to implement was principle number 6 (Community initiatives and advocacy), because a specific feature for the company is to support other companies, especially those who are residents of Tracom, by organising trainings, meetings, where Starnet also involves and invites employees to express themselves regarding their needs, ideas and demands (UN Women Moldova, 2023).

Principle 7: Measure and publicly report on progress to achieve gender equality

Women’s Empowerment Principle 7 calls on companies to measure and publicly report on progress to achieve gender equality. This principle requests the companies to publish company policies, practices and progress for promoting gender equality, and to plan, measure and report annually on progress, both internally and externally, using gender disaggregated data. WEPs signatories are also encouraged to take the WEPs Gender Gap Analysis Tool to assess their company’s strategic approach to gender equality, identify gaps and opportunities for continuous improvement, benchmark against peers and industry standards, and set goals and targets.

Mtavari Channel is the first broadcaster in Georgia that has decided, with the help of the WEPs, to empower and sensitize both men and women producers, content developers and journalists on gender equality. The aim is to make quality programmes that systematically take gender into account (mtavari.ge).

Since joining the WEPs, the company has been very enthusiastic about revealing gender inequalities in the professional practice of staff both during production and in programming, with respect to the choice of content and people interviewed. Often, broadcasts are designed based on the premise that

the intended audience is uniform. But as audiences are diverse, programmes should therefore be responsive to their varying expectations. UN Women supported the company by advising on its internal policy documents, establishing preventive measures against sexual harassment and training staff in gender equality and women’s empowerment. During the COVID-19 lockdown in early 2020, the company wanted to contribute by addressing the increased threat of family-based violence. **Mtavari** produced and showed during primetime a PSA on violence against women, which included contact information for various support services available. After hiring women on operator and driver positions, **Mtavari** also initiated a campaign to promote gender equality by printing T-shirts featuring boys as journalists and girls as camera operators to break the stereotypes associated with the jobs appropriate for men and women. A new broadcast, “Her Story”, was also made to familiarize the audience with feminism and promote positive messages on women’s empowerment. Also, a major part of the broadcast “Other Nanuka” is devoted to women’s stories. **Mtavari Channel** dedicated its social network and morning broadcast to the new project “Toloba”, which was launched by three women, Sopho Liluashvili, Tamta Muradashvili and Teona Chemia. (UN Women Georgia, 2021). The aim of the project is to present strong women to the audience and to raise issues such as feminism, gender equality and women’s empowerment for public discussion.

Conclusions

Any company, irrespective of size, can be successful in implementing the WEPs. There are no clear differentiating criteria regarding company engagement that are based on size. Success is very individual to each company and very much depends on company leadership (including the personalities of the leaders), overall intent and specific motivations. Taking an individual approach to companies, their structure and their motivating factors is important to ensure the full engagement of signatory companies

There are various benefits that the private sector gains by undertaking WEPs work. The top three benefits are: (1) a stronger corporate reputation; (2) a contribution to women’s empowerment that will also help the national economy; and (3) the positive effect that WEPs work has on female employee productivity.

Understanding an individual company’s level of knowledge regarding the WEPs is crucial at the initial stage. There are various reasons companies join the WEPs. Some companies fully understand the benefits of gender equality in their companies, while others join for publicity. Those companies that understand the benefits of the WEPs demonstrate a full commitment to the implementation and further advancement of these principles.

Over the past decade, the business case for gender equality has expanded and deepened. Genderdiverse workforces also help to attract talent and reduce turnover and can contribute to building trust with clients and consumers. On a macro level, achieving gender equality could add upwards of USD 12 trillion to the world’s economy. At the same time, we have seen increasing evidence highlighting the deeply entrenched and systemic barriers that women face in workplaces around the world, from violence and harassment to the unequal share of unpaid care and domestic work. In Moldova and Georgia, while corporate support for gender equality is strong, businesses have yet to introduce specific policies, measurable targets and robust accountability mechanisms to ensure WEPs progress and their continuity.

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