

Women's Economic Empowerment Working Group (WEE WG)

Online meeting 26 March 2026

Minutes

Participants

- | | |
|----------------|---|
| 1. IDRC, Chair | 10. FCDO |
| 2. ITC | 11. IDRC |
| 3. FAO | 12. GAC |
| 4. IFC | 13. SDC |
| 5. ILO | 14. Gates Foundation |
| 6. Sida | |
| 7. UNIDO | Ella Duffy; Melina Heinrich-Fernandes (DCED |
| 8. GIZ | Secretariat) |
| 9. World Bank | |

Apologies: GAC

Agenda Items

1. Welcome, objectives and introductions
2. Updates on active workstreams
3. Member agency updates
4. Work plan
5. Future WG meeting plans
6. Any other business

1. Welcome, objectives and introductions

Colleen Duggan (IDRC, Chair) opened the meeting and welcomed new members through a full round of introductions.

2. Updates on active workstreams

Task Team leads updated the group on the two active workstreams and re-iterated that **any WG member is welcome to join any workstream by emailing Ella/Colleen:**

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1. **Care work and climate change** – Martha Melesse (IDRC) provided an update. Kore Global were commissioned to produce research on good practices to address care work and climate change simultaneously, looking both at solutions for women-led SMEs and care systems/investment. Kore Global are now finalising the research and writing the report. Initial findings from the research were presented at a sensemaking workshop on 5 February 2026, and the task team are happy with how the work is progressing.
2. **Gender lens investing** – no further update since last WG meeting.

3. Member agency updates – more information available in [slide deck](#) circulated to members over email

Sida – Sida's reform agenda involves a reprioritisation of approaches and innovative instruments. The number of active countries has gone down to 36, reflecting a shift from global programmes on land to more context-specific results in a smaller number of countries. Ukraine has become a major priority, now accounting for 15-20% of Sweden's development envelope, and there is a strong push to mobilise private capital. Global programmes are increasingly built around targeted interventions in areas like women's economic empowerment, favouring thematic strategies over country strategies, though land remains a focus in some interventions such as land ownership; learnings from global reports are being fed into these more specific interventions. Multilateral support through UN Women remains strong. On gender expertise, the HQ gender policy advisors team numbers 4, supported by a network of around 60 across programmes who drive gender mainstreaming; the Swedish government maintains a strong general commitment to gender equality, including SRHR. There is significant effort going into innovative financing instruments and guarantees, with around 55 currently ongoing and 22 of these including gender components. Within this, there is considerable interest in gender lens investing, with a formalised taskforce at Sida now working on planning and developing standards in this area. A gender bonds seminar brought together UN Women, IFAD, IFC and Swedish capital market actors to explore building a Swedish coalition on gender bonds. Support for care is also rising up the agenda, including through innovative instruments to support care.

FCDO is in the middle of a restructure at the moment, so priorities are not yet fully clear. Recent signals from the director point to women's economic empowerment as a top priority under women and girls, one of three headline areas. UN Women and We-Fi's care call is being funded.

GAC is also going through a reform process, transitioning towards new priorities that are not yet clear. Emerging themes include economic corridors, growth, trade and development. At the recent CSW, GAC's goal was to address the backsliding of gender equality, and it is trying to promote the care economy within the new priorities around economic growth.

World Bank Group – The World Bank Group's strategy, issued a few years ago, still has strong support, with several corporate aims on women's economic empowerment continuing to receive backing, including around digital access and social protection. There is public-facing work on gender-based violence, including a meeting organised at CSW on this theme, and agribusiness is also emerging as a focus area. IFC's work is centring on financial abuse connected to legal and e-banking issues around women's access to finance, with recent initiatives and reports set out in the slides. The WE-Finance Code is growing, with 3 new countries recently joining; it is a forum bringing together different parts of the World Bank Group to support countries in this area. The Gender Data Portal has new data, including on childcare. IFC is also investing in the world's first digital gender bond, a \$100 million investment using blockchain.

BMZ/GIZ - BMZ's new reform plan that was presented last meeting is now also available in [English](#).

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FAO have a number of recent WEE-related initiatives outlined and linked from their presentation slide. For example, they are running a campaign this year for International Year of the Women Farmer, and have published 4 recent related publications.

IDRC is going through a reform process with the organisation moving from 5 divisions to 4, with the governance team now being combined with the sustainable inclusive economies team. This is expected to be good for women's economic empowerment, bringing law and governance work more closely together. At the 39th African Union Summit in Addis Ababa in February 2026, there was a common African definition on care work and a care forum convened. Care is increasingly being treated less as private infrastructure and more as an economic building block, fundamental to growth. **IDRC was quite active at CSW, follow up for more details on this. They will also be at Women Deliver 2026 in Melbourne**, and work on care and transport systems is coming up. A few new publications are also available, see slides.

UNIDO is generally doing well among other UN agencies, with its impact evaluated recently; further detail is in the slides. A current focus is the International Day of Women in Industry, spotlighting why greater women's leadership and participation in industry matters. Alternative finance instruments are becoming more important to UNIDO's work, including Islamic finance mechanisms, which they are trying to mobilise from Arab countries to unlock capital for women-owned SMEs in Africa and Arab states, alongside derisking and guarantees. Women's MSMEs are a particular focus, and **UNIDO welcomes further contact to discuss this bilaterally in more detail.**

The Gates Foundation has shifted its WEE strategy, moving away from a standalone WEE strategy towards working out how to integrate WEE across other foundation investments, such as digital public infrastructure, inclusive financial systems and agribusiness. This is essentially a move towards mainstreaming, with an economic opportunity lens now used to look at WEE. **The Foundation will have a large delegation at Women Deliver and is holding a partner reception on 28th April – please connect bilaterally for more details and to organise a meeting.**

ITC held a high-level panel in Yaoundé in line with the ministerial content there, as part of wider SheTrades initiatives presented in previous WG meetings.

4. Work item planning

Colleen Duggan (IDRC, Chair) opened with an update on the budget available for working groups this year. Ella added a note on timeline constraints, proposing that this meeting be used for an initial broad brainstorm, with ideas narrowed down afterwards and work items submitted to the DCED work plan by the end of April.

Melina gave background on the mutual benefits item already happening in the PSE WG this financial year and invited anyone interested to join the cross-WG task team working on it, noting that three other working groups are also considering trade-related items for next financial year. Colleen shared new research on trade with an inclusion lens in the context of the African free trade agreement, and **will follow up with Melina on this.**

Digitalisation and AI came up as a topic of interest, though Sida cautioned that "AI" is too broad and would need to be narrowed and clearly linked to WEE to be useful. She noted a clear link to SRHR, which Sida would like to see reflected more in programmes, and raised the idea of a mapping survey on how agencies are integrating SRHR and GBV into digital banking type programmes. IFC felt this would need to be narrow and practical to avoid duplication with existing work.

IFC suggested a mapping of how agencies are approaching WEE work as the aid landscape changes, linking it to different themes to keep it relevant. GAC mentioned a recent presentation from WIEGO and the need for a more holistic approach to WEE, particularly given the reprioritisation many agencies are currently going through. She raised the resilience of supply chains as a growing area of importance for GAC, especially engaging the private sector on stable supply chains in the fashion industry, and clarified this was about looking at what donors are doing to stabilise supply chains and connect them to WEE, for example through childcare supply. IDRC suggested this could have a circular economy component.

The World Bank raised gender lens investing, innovative gender bonds and sustainability-linked finance as an area with continued momentum, tied closely to the changing aid landscape. UNIDO added that while women as recipients of capital and SME development is well covered, there may be a gap around women as investors or alternative finance providers, in specific industries or locations. Sida gave some background on the GLI item's focus over the past 6 years and suggested there may be something new in how donors can be more active in measuring and defining impact. IDRC shared a link to the UNESCAP Feminist Finance Forum and suggested a refresh on GLI could be scheduled for the June meeting.

SDC emphasised the importance of integrating with what other working groups are doing, and asked what the big topics from other groups are where a WEE lens could add value. Melina responded that three working groups are interested in trade corridors, including looking at corridors more systemically and holistically through the MSD working group, alongside broader interest in the mutual benefits angle and Global Gateway in the PSE WG, the finance agenda more generally in the SME Finance and Market Creation WG, and some interest in value for money discussions and evidence overall.

Sida noted that gender norms and bias affect both women's economic opportunities and finance flows. IDRC raised informal workers as a potential focus, noting that many people will never meet the requirements of blended finance initiatives, and suggested looking at women in rural economies and base of the pyramid issues; UNIDO agreed, noting that financial products often fail to reach these women because they lack basic requirements such as ID, and that some don't want to be formalised in the first place. Sida linked this to their experience with orange bonds through IIX, where the tension is always between impact and financial returns: investors are derisked to reach underserved markets, but the smallest and most underserved segments, particularly in agriculture, remain largely missed because ticket sizes are still too big. She questioned whether it is time to revisit smaller financiers and cooperatives, and what genuinely localised finance would look like, especially as bilateral aid shifts toward prioritising domestic benefits, raising the question of who gets left behind.

Ella agreed to set up a Miro board to capture and populate these ideas so people can comment and add further suggestions.

5. Future WG meeting planning

It was decided that a follow-up meeting will be held in mid-April, with consultation carried out via the Miro board, structured into two areas: one for work items and one for ideas for the June meeting agenda.

On the June meeting agenda, IDRC raised the question of how to position these studies and move them into action, specifically how to get the care-climate piece into climate circles, and suggested the group come together with ideas on this socialisation. Ella gave more details on the in-person meetings planned for June, and Melina added information on signing up. **IFC offered to recommend speakers from their Nairobi office and will connect with the group on this,** and also asked who else from IFC had signed up.

6. Any other business

Colleen Duggan (IDRC, Chair) thanked everyone for their participation.

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