**[The game changers](https://www.dawn.com/news/1629624/the-game-changers)**

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WOMEN’S economic empowerment is not just a buzzword, it’s a game-changing concept. Women’s economic participation, financial inclusion, and labour force contributions have a direct influence on socioeconomic outcomes, prosperity and growth, and democratic resilience of nations. Financial autonomy empowers women to claim their agency in the private and public spheres of their lives. As women with financial autonomy, we can vouch that this is true. SDG 5 and Pakistan’s principal planning document Vision 2025 emphasise enabling women’s economic empowerment. The logic and arguments are clear.

The human development, economic, and business gains from empowering women are substantial — it is the right and smart thing to do since it has been proven to benefit everyone. When more women are economically empowered, economies grow, and nations are better placed to reap positive developmental outcomes. Take the example of Razia Sultana. “With my husband’s salary as a factory worker, we were barely able to make ends meet. I started stitching footballs to raise my five children. Today, I run what is becoming an international business of producing sports uniform/wear now. My clients include football and basketball teams in the US, and rugby clubs in Australia. From 25 to 30 pieces a month initially, I now make 350 a month, turning a handsome profit of $1,000. I did not allow the empowerment I gained to stay within the confines of my home. I have trained more than 200 other local women.”

With increased access to economic resour­ces, Razia was able to access better schooling for her children, go beyond earning a daily livelihood, and through her skills and learning, work towards breaking the vicious cycle of poverty and opening her own business.

One woman’s story has set the momentum of social change in the lives of other women and the community.

Razia’s story is typical for many women-owned businesses in Pakistan. They tend to be smaller in size, falling within the category of micro, small, and medium enterprises. For many women, entrepreneurship offers a path to economic empowerment, and it is incumbent upon the global community, including corporations, banks and governments, to help create the conditions that permit this. Public procurement spending ranges between 15 per cent and 30pc of the GDP of countries and corporate procurements are on average 64pc of the enterprise spending.

In my (Sharmeela Rassool) role as country representative of UN Women Pakistan, I very much look forward to engaging with multiple interlocutors to explore how we can together make our procurements more gender responsive.

To realise women’s economic empowerm­e­­nt, efforts must go beyond increasing female labour force participation or giving more quota-based participation opportunities to women, eg in parliament. It must include providing women control over their time through the distribution of domestic care and family care duties, control over resources including inheritance and property rights, equal value for equal work — reducing the gender wage gap. A gradual change in women’s employment trends is a positive wave slowly taking over Pakistan. Women are now working in banking, journalism, tourism, hospitality, IT, etc. and this is visible in job markets, particularly in urban centres and on online job portals. In the EU-Erasmus scholarship programme for Pakistan where candidates are selected purely on merit there were equal numbers of men and women being selected even though there were three times more men applying, indicating the high success rate of the women candidates.

As a female diplomat heading the Deleg­ation of the European Union to Pakistan, I (Androulla Kami­nara) believe that Covid-19 has exposed structural inequalities in every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection and this has disproportionately and negatively affected women. Hard-fought gains for women’s rights and empowerment are being reversed. At the EU, responding to the pandemic is not just about narrowing long-standing inequalities, but also about building a resilient world with women at the centre of the economic recovery. So, through our collaborative efforts with the government and civil society, we are focusing on rebuilding livelihoods and uplifting vulnerable communities, especially women and youth. Our upcoming seven-year work plan also puts women and girls at the centre of our programming as this has been proven to produce the fastest development growth for all. I believe that growth is best when it is inclusive and sustainable.

Women’s economic empowerment is indeed the way forward. Women’s empowerment should be the centre of the agenda of the government and development partners as the development case is clear: When women are empowered, nations become more prosperous, the region more stable and the world a better place to live in.

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