

The Care Contradiction:

THE IMF, GENDER AND AUSTERITY



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COVER PHOTO: Nurses carry multiple burdens of care: Nurse in Agba Amaeta health centre, Nigeria.
PHOTO: ACTIONAID

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Doubling up: paid and unpaid work in Rwanda
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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Women, who do the vast majority of both unpaid care work in households and low-paid care work in public services, bear the brunt of austerity measures,¹ especially public sector funding cuts. When public services are underfunded there is a triple disadvantage for women, who disproportionately lose access to services, lose opportunities for decent work and take on the rising burden of unpaid care work.

The world faces multiple crises – inequality, climate, health, education, conflict and debt – which have been exacerbated by COVID-19. Although neoliberalism is seen to be a root cause of these converging crises,² it is the same neoliberal worldview that is shaping the response, particularly from the International Monetary Fund (IMF). The IMF is the apex body in the international financial architecture,³ and the chief advocate of austerity policies that have been imposed around the world for four decades – and which are being ramped up post-COVID with massive cuts in public spending.⁴ The effect is to pass the costs of these multiple crises on to those who are least able to pay. Women, in particular, have become the shock absorbers of austerity and crises.

Feminists have long challenged the IMF and the World Bank “to create a gender equal, transparent and accountable financial architecture”,⁵ critiquing the current neoliberal economic system as patriarchal and neo-colonial, serving to both exploit and exacerbate women’s relative position of economic, social and political subordination. In this context, what are we to make of the new Gender Mainstreaming Strategy of the IMF?⁶

In this new report, we provide a summary of the latest evidence on the gendered impacts of IMF policy advice on austerity in general, and on public sector wage bill constraints in particular. We review the new IMF Gender Strategy in the light of this, highlighting key areas where it falls short. We then provide a vision of a more transformative agenda on care that ought to guide the IMF and others who are committed to action on gender injustice.

The IMF Gender Strategy falls short in many areas:

- Talking about ‘gender gaps’ but not substantive gender equality.
- Failing to recognise the impact of cutting public spending on women’s unpaid care work and on women’s opportunities for decent work.
- Recognising its own lack of expertise on gender but failing to commit to working with women’s movements and feminist economists who could help to fill the gap.
- Avoiding the use of gendered impact assessments in practice.
- Ignoring the impact of its own core austerity policies and practices on undermining women’s rights, denying its own power and impact.
- Talking about disaggregated data but not talking about a systematic intersectional approach to data collection and analysis.
- Focusing on mitigation measures and compensatory programmes, such as targeted social protection for some women (which have a bad track record),⁷ whilst leaving the core system unchanged.
- Proposing gender conditionality that ignores the inherently problematic and neo-colonial nature of any IMF conditionalities.

Based on this analysis, we have joined others in writing to the IMF’s Managing Director to reject its present gender strategy. Gender-transformative change requires a definitive move away from the cult of austerity. It is not enough for the IMF or ministries of finance to take a few compensatory actions to redress unjust outcomes that arise from their own core interventions - and it is not enough to engage women more systematically within the existing economic system, which itself is unjust.

We need a bigger vision of a feminist, just alternative and an agenda that builds economies and societies based on care. This means moving beyond growth in gross domestic product (GDP) to put human rights and care at the centre of economic objectives and indicators. We need a feminist approach to fiscal and [tax justice](#), and we need full recognition of the links between unpaid care work and the financing of public services. Fundamentally, we need new international institutions that can shape and frame a fairer global economy.

It may be that the IMF will never be able to advance such a transformative agenda because it would contradict the very foundations and power structures of the institution. Those who are genuinely committed to gender mainstreaming should more systematically engage with heterodox thinking and feminist economists, putting care at the centre, and doing more to grapple honestly with the contradictions between austerity and care. At the very least, the IMF and ministries of finance should commit to ensure they do not harm women and do not undermine gender equality through any of their interventions.



Women in Bangladesh developing their own gender strategy.
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1. INTRODUCTION

After three years of a global pandemic, the United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres shared a clear and urgent appeal at the 2022 annual high-level forum on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs):

“Looking ahead, we need a new global deal so that developing countries have a fair shot at building their own futures (...). The global financial system is failing the developing world. Although, since it was not designed to protect developing countries, perhaps it’s more accurate to say: the system is working as intended. And so we need reform. We need a system that works for the vulnerable, not just the powerful.”⁸

The world faces multiple crises – inequality, climate, health, education, conflict and debt – which have been exacerbated by COVID-19 (see box). A root cause of these converging crises is the *“underlying neoliberal rationale of aggressive search for profits that puts human and social needs at the service of capital benefits.”⁹* The globalised economic system creates one crisis after the next and continues to be ‘organized with greed and profit-seeking at its core’, while under- and unpaid care work is made invisible and the planet’s resource limits are ignored.¹⁰ International financial institutions – and rich countries who constitute their dominant shareholders – have failed to respond adequately to these crises. Debt suspension has been too limited in scope and timeframe,¹¹ the OECD-led corporate tax ‘deal of the rich’ is positioned to benefit only large economies,¹² and other interventions such as the issuing of Special Drawing Rights were based on skewed and unfair allocations towards rich countries.¹³ Only a small fraction of COVID-related response resources went to those countries in most need.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated these current overlapping crises, further undermining gender equality, disproportionately increasing women's unpaid care work, and leading to an increase in gender-based violence and losses of both livelihoods in the informal economy and jobs in the public sector (where women are often in the lowest paid roles with insecure and precarious conditions). *ActionAid's rapid assessment of the impacts of the Covid pandemic on young women* in 14 urban areas in India, Ghana, Kenya and South Africa, found that 71 per cent of women reported an increase in their household work during the lockdown period, 65 per cent reported that the cost of food and other consumables increased during the lockdown period, while 35 per cent were unable to continue engaging in their regular paid work, meaning that their incomes reduced or disappeared completely.¹⁴

1.1: GHANA: THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON YOUNG WOMEN

Akurugo Mavis Apaasimen is a 21 year-old girl from Dapoore, Ghana, a student and member of the young urban women's movement. Asked about the impact of COVID she observed: *"Our schools have resorted to using internet as the new norm for studying since we cannot have face to face studies. Due to poor internet connection, I am not able to access internet for my online studies. Unpaid care and domestic work has increased, works like fetching of water, cooking and taking care of younger siblings because of the closure of schools. I thought the lockdown and staying at home would give me some opportunity to rest, I never saw the lots of house chores coming".*

Source: ActionAid Ghana, Young Urban Women project

The IMF holds 'a central role within the international financial architecture',¹⁵ setting macroeconomic policy and financial sector issues globally.¹⁶ It is the chief advocate of austerity policies that continue to be imposed around the world, and which are being ramped up post-COVID, leading to massive cuts in public spending.¹⁷ Neoliberal economists in the IMF and many ministries of finance suggest that such public budget cuts are necessary to make debt sustainable. But by depressing economic activity they often make debt less sustainable, creating a vicious circle that undermines the capacity of States to respond to crises, delegitimising *"arguments for public spending, framing policies that improve conditions for ordinary people as unrealistic and wasteful."*¹⁸ The effect is to pass the costs of these multiple crises on to those who are least able to pay.

Women, who are the most acutely affected, literally become the shock absorbers of austerity and crises, disguising from the public eye the full human cost.¹⁹ Women's work and contributions are actively obscured.²⁰ Women and girls, do an estimated 76 per cent of care and domestic work globally.²¹ And that rises significantly when public services are underfunded. Women and girls are also the first to lose access when public services are cut or fees are charged, and the first to lose their jobs and opportunities for decent work as they are more likely to work on short-term contracts in frontline roles in the public sector (90 per cent of nurses are women, for example).²² It is the accumulative impact of austerity measures on women's rights and gender equality that is especially devastating.²³

Feminists have long challenged the IMF and the World Bank 'to create a gender equal, transparent and accountable financial architecture',²⁴ critiquing the current neoliberal economic system as patriarchal and neo-colonial, serving to both exploit and exacerbate women's relative position of economic, social and political subordination. The structures and systems of extraction and exploitation of labour, human lives and natural resources, from global South to North, were established during colonial times and continue to this day with countries in the Global North dominating the decision-making power of the IMF and other international financial institutions.²⁵

In this context, what are we to make of the new Gender Mainstreaming Strategy of the IMF?²⁶ Is it an effective response to decades of advocacy by women’s rights organisations and civil society organisations (CSOs)? Will it lead to a transformation in core IMF policies or will it just tinker with the negative gendered impacts of those policies? In short, will the gender strategy have the teeth and reach to prevent the IMF from pursuing the austerity policies that we know have a negative gender impact?

There are clear alternatives that could and should be pursued by the IMF and national governments. There needs to be a rebalancing of the overall share of income going to labour (compared to capital ownership), which has fallen dramatically since the 1970s.²⁷ Feminists, women’s rights organisations, trade unions and social justice movements have raised the need to place public investments in social infrastructure and frontline public sector workers at the heart of the post-COVID recovery and the transformative responses needed to reverse the climate crisis - to ensure a more caring, feminist and just future.²⁸

This briefing aims to pull together lessons from work on gender-responsive public services and women’s unpaid care and domestic work, with research on the distributional impacts of IMF-advised policies, especially fiscal consolidation and public sector wage bill cuts.

- In the next section we offer some definitions of care and other key concepts. In the third section we provide a summary of the latest evidence on the gendered impact of IMF policy advice.
- In the fourth section we look in detail at the impact of public sector wage bill constraints on women and girls.
- We then look in the fifth section at the new IMF gender strategy, outlining what it says, how it could be used (in some cases as a foot in the door), but also the various ways in which it falls short of the wider systemic change that is needed.
- The final section provides a positive vision of alternative policies States and the IMF ought to pursue if it truly wants to have a gender transformative impact, and we conclude with some key recommendations for the future.



Since Covid, teachers like Aida Lukman in Indonesia have had to taken on extra responsibilities to care for their students.
CREDIT: ACTIONAID

2. THE SOCIAL ORGANISATION OF CARE

1.2: DEFINING CARE

Care are all the activities and relations needed for the existence and well-being of societies, and people within those societies. This includes all paid and unpaid activities that make it possible to fulfil the needs of all people and to reproduce the workforce for the labour market. Care systems include health care, education, domestic work and social care.²⁹ As part of a shift away from the current economy, this would also entail caring for the planet to stave off environmental and climate disaster, and engaging in social relations based on reciprocity, cooperation and mutuality.

Unpaid care and domestic work can include activities such as meal preparation, house cleaning, laundry, water and firewood fetching, and care of children, the sick and elderly.³⁰

Time poverty means the lack of discretionary time available to engage in activities for social well-being after partaking in unpaid and paid work and necessary activities. When *“household income falls, the scale of unpaid labour increases sharply, turning into a ‘double burden’ of paid and unpaid work”*.³¹ Consequently, if paid work has low pay, on top of loss of leisure time, time poverty *“adds to the material deprivation of the household because of the loss of consumption that would have been enabled by the unpaid labour there is no time for”*.³² This highlights *“the macroeconomic role of unpaid care and domestic work, in that it effectively subsidises not only the valued and measured market economy but also the state’s provisioning of goods and especially services through which social and economic rights should be fulfilled”*.³³

Social reproduction is all *“activities and institutions that are required for making life, maintaining life, and generationally replacing life”*.³⁴ This involves care work defined as a *“non-market economy of social provisioning, supplying services directly concerned with the daily and intergenerational reproduction of people as human beings, especially through their care, socialization and education”*.³⁵ Patriarchal gender norms govern women’s autonomy and bodies from the household to the economy, shape and reinforce the *“relational inequalities that structure social reproduction and the sexual division of labour”*.³⁶

The **‘5R’s’** which outline demands to **rebuild the social organisation of care** and fix the care crisis are:

- **Recognise** the social and economic value of care work (paid or unpaid) and the human right to care.
- **Reward, remunerate and represent** care work and care workers with professionalised work, equal pay for work of equal value, adequate pensions, comprehensive social protection, healthy and safe working conditions, strong representation, unionisation, and collective bargaining and social dialogue in line with the ILO Decent Work Agenda.
- **Reduce** the burden of unpaid care work on women.
- **Redistribute** care work within households, among all workers, eliminating the sexual division of labour, and between households and State.
- **Reclaim** the public nature of care services and restore the duty and the primary responsibility of the State to provide public care services and develop care systems that transform gender relations and women’s lives – including by financing States’ capacity to invest through fair and progressive taxation and ensuring internationally equal taxing rights of nation States.

A basic definition of public services includes any essential services, such as healthcare, education, water and sanitation, and electricity delivered by a government to all those within its jurisdiction. Public services are essential to the progressive realisation of human rights and redressing gender and other intersecting inequalities. To be effective, public services should also be gender responsive, publicly financed, publicly delivered and universal, gender equitable and inclusive (see ActionAid's [Gender Responsive Public Services Framework](#) and also a new collective manifesto on public services [Global manifesto for public services - Future is Public](#)).

For women and girls in countries with under-resourced infrastructure and public services - for example, where there is limited or no access to piped water, affordable child or elder care - engaging in **unpaid care and domestic work can represent a major drain on their time**, their physical and mental energy and their work and life opportunities, from an early age. As the UN Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty observed: *"Heavy and unequal burdens of unpaid care work have been recognised as major obstacles to women [and girls] enjoying their human rights, including their rights to political participation, health, work and education."*³⁷ The countries where gender disparities in unpaid care work are greatest are those most likely to lack an adequate care infrastructure, including childcare and long-term care and support.³⁸ A 2017 ActionAid brief found that: *"The usual working day of an African rural woman lasts up to 16 hours, or even longer in some cases, in which they perform many tasks (often simultaneously). Women typically work 12 hours more per week than men. In Ghana, ActionAid's research found that rural women spend at least six hours per day on unpaid care work, which is almost ten times more than men. In Rwanda, rural women typically spend at least five hours per day on unpaid care work, while men spend only 1.5 hours."*³⁹

There is a clear global dimension to the provision of care and the lack of quality gender-responsive public provision. As the [Care Manifesto: Rebuilding the social organisation of care](#) states: the current social organisation of care considers how care needs are met, *"the interrelation of unpaid care work, (under) paid care work, public provisioning, private provisioning and community-based care arrangements."* The current reality 'is fundamentally unbalanced, unequal and ultimately unsustainable.' **The global care chain means that under-investment in wealthier countries extracts workers from the Global South to fill the gaps.** *"At home and within communities, through global care chains where women living in poverty, black and brown women from the global South fill in the care gap while being underpaid and in precarious work conditions through services, both public and private. This injustice is doubled and tripled in the case of women who experience multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination because of their class, race, sexual orientation/ identification, disability, age or migrant status, amongst other dimensions."*⁴⁰

2.1: SIERRA LEONE: ORGANISING TO CHANGE THE STATUS OF DOMESTIC WORKERS

Madam Fatmata Jabaty is 49 years old and a domestic worker from Freetown, Sierra Leone. She has been in low-paid care work for many years, since the death of her husband, looking after other people's homes, cooking food for their families and caring for their children. Her working life was transformed when she connected with the Informal Workers Organization (IWO) in 2019.

"I was terminated from one job without notice or any valid reason because I attended to my mother's burial. I was overburdened with work from morning till evening – no work schedule, late payment of salary by almost all the employers I have worked for over the last ten years. Since I started working with the IWO and partners in 2019, I have gained a lot. In 2019 for example I was trained by IWO on Labour laws and my rights and responsibilities as a domestic worker which has helped me to properly engage with my employers. IWO and partners have built my capacity by training me in child protection, group management, general housekeeping and the proper use and handling of modern household equipment."

When Fatmata started working, she was paid a very minimal amount of 70,000 Leones, but since connecting with IWO over the past four years, this has risen tenfold to 700,000, because she can now sit and negotiate with her employers on the conditions of her employment. But challenges still remain: *"Now, I am concerned about my retirement without Social Security Scheme or benefits."*

Source: ActionAid Sierra Leone

Too many female teachers are underpaid and overworked. Naima Afoyorwoth in Uganda.
CREDIT: ACTIONAID





Dulali Begum in Bangladesh takes on multiple paid and unpaid roles, including poultry farming, running a tea shop, sewing and caring for her family.
CREDIT: ACTIONAID

3. THE GENDERED IMPACT OF IMF ADVICE ON ECONOMIC GROWTH, DEBT AND AUSTERITY

Introducing the IMF

The IMF conducts routine economic surveillance of almost all countries through its Article IV consultations, often offering policy advice which may be ignored by wealthier countries but is quite coercive on the policy direction of lower income countries. When countries are in debt crisis and need bail out loans from the IMF (the lender of last resort), the IMF offers even more coercive policy advice and conditions. The shape of IMF advice has remained fundamentally unaltered over the past forty years, since the introduction of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), though the advice is packaged, labelled and marketed in new ways.

The mainstream IMF model has been grounded for decades in the ideology of neoliberalism which advocates a set of policies, including austerity, liberalisation, deregulation of capital and exchange controls, privatisation of public services and public-owned enterprises, reduction of direct tax rates with a simultaneous dependence on indiscriminate consumption taxes in the name of economic 'development'. The interpretation of 'development' in itself is narrowly conceived by the IMF as economic growth, despite such policies consistently being challenged for undermining human rights and livelihoods and also for routinely failing to achieve the higher growth rates that are promised. The big economic growth success stories have tended not to pursue these policies.

The problems with GDP growth

The neoliberal extractive development model sees economic growth (measured in gross domestic product, or GDP) as both the means and ultimate goal of development, and benefits those with wealth, resources and capital. Within the IMF, and most ministries of finance who have internalised the same ideology, the focus on GDP growth persists, despite evidence that growth alone does not necessarily lead to social justice for all. In fact, the pursuit of unfettered growth has resulted in extensive environmental and ecological degradation, as well as soaring levels of inequality. Within this system, production, exchange and consumption are *“oblivious to the recovery cycles of the environment, as well as to social reproduction (as evidenced by the underlying assumptions of infinite elasticity of social reproduction).”*⁴¹

This extractivist system, itself forged through unequal power relations between global North and South rooted in slavery, racism, colonialism and patriarchy, shapes our societies and laws, deregulates labour rights, commodifies and privatises natural resources and essential services, liberalises trade, investment and financial flows, facilitating the extraction of wealth and resources in the form of corporate profit from people and the planet. The surge in the financialization of the real economy in past decades is subjugating the political and economic apparatus to a role of servicing the needs of international capital owners and the endless pursuit of GDP growth, ignoring the planet’s resource limits.⁴²

The dominant economic measure - GDP growth – does not account for wider societal well-being, and contributes to the downplaying of the crucial role of long-term public sector investment in advancing development, human rights and gender equality. Since the 1940s, when GDP growth was first proposed, the measure has been critiqued for making social reproduction, not least the unpaid care and domestic work of women, invisible.⁴³ Since the 1990s, the ecofeminist movement has exposed how it ignores the need for recovery cycles of the environment as well as planetary and natural resource boundaries.⁴⁴ The value of human beings cannot be reduced to their contribution to GDP, while ignoring all the other ways that people live and sustain each other in communities, societies and ecosystems.

But this inadequate indicator still drives much economic policy and leads to harmful policy decisions. As recognised in the [Declaration on the Right to Development](#), which states that ‘development’ is a *“comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process, which aims at the constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population and of all individuals on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and in fair distribution of benefits resulting therefrom.”* To achieve this vision of development it would be necessary to move away from, or at least minimise, GDP as the central construct of development economics and employ instead Human Development Indicators that prioritise health and education, well-being and ecosystems: that is, resilience.

In reality, we are witnessing soaring levels of inequality within and between many countries, allowing multinational corporations to register record profits, and billionaires’ wealth to soar (see [Oxfam’s State of Inequality report 2022](#)), at a time when the majority of the world is reeling from the impacts of COVID-19, debt distress, conflict, cost of living crises and climate catastrophe. The complicit role of the IMF in some of this is now recognised by some of its own researchers, who have identified growing inequality as an obstacle to growth, and who have argued that the [neoliberalism has been oversold](#) by the IMF.⁴⁵

3.1: COUNTING UNPAID CARE WORK

The IMF needs to work towards truly recognising and accounting for women’s disproportionate unpaid care and domestic work, and acknowledge and commit to address how IMF policy advice increases this burden, and thereby increases gender inequality, when public services and social protection are cut. As the Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR) stated in 2017: *“Policymakers have largely ignored these hugely gendered economic and social costs, because care work is so often taken for granted and made invisible in mainstream economic assessments and data. Yet, their models and policies for fiscal adjustment would be politically and economically unviable were these gendered costs accounted for.”*⁴⁶ As stated in the 2019 IMF paper, Reducing and Redistributing Unpaid Work: Stronger Policies to Support Gender Equality: *“[r]educing and redistributing unpaid work is a macro-critical issue,”* in as far as it prevents women from participating in the labour market, thereby limiting economic growth.

However, this harmful instrumentalist approach fails to recognise the enormous care policy gap, as estimated by the International Labour Organization (ILO), and that women already work more (paid or not, and counted in GDP or not), than men: women make up 76 per cent of the 2 billion unpaid fulltime workers.⁴⁷ Until this un- and underpaid work is counted, recognised, reduced and redistributed through investments in gender-responsive public services, and greater attention is given to the need for decent work (as defined by the ILO), including living wages, paid parental leave and the right to engage in collective bargaining, the multiplier effects for women’s labour force participation and economic stability will not be achieved, and efforts to achieve gender equality will be constrained. On top of that, the current austerity drive is pushing women to take up the gaps in care provision by cut public services, or ‘own-use provision’ of services.

For some helpful resources see: Guiding principles and minimum standards on unpaid care and domestic work

Austerity all around

The IMF model of fiscal consolidation (which is really just the latest term for austerity) has been around since the Structural Adjustment Programmes of the 1980s and 90s (called ‘pernicious and arguably un-necessary’⁴⁸). Despite being re-branded, this model has never really gone away, but was in fact boosted during the financial crisis in 1996 in Asia and Latin America, and the 2008 response to the financial crash. Whilst there has been some change of rhetoric in the headquarters, it is troubling that at country level, IMF policy continues to push for a restrictive fiscal policy space – even when countries are still reeling from the effects of the pandemic, or are battling the impact of the climate crisis. IMF policy conditions today still focus on the achievement of narrowly specified objectives of debt and fiscal sustainability, and end up serving the interests of very powerful private sector financial institutions. Indeed, we are now facing a new era of the most widespread austerity, post-COVID, partly pushed by the IMF, falling on 85 percent of the planet’s population in 2022, with the gendered impact of this largely hidden.⁴⁹



Dr. Bader Al-Khouli, a specialist in Al-Shifa’s hospital in Gaza, laments “We require an additional number of nurses and health workers”. But perhaps most of all “We need the escalation to be stopped”.

CREDIT: ACTIONAID

3.2: WHAT IS AUSTERITY?

Austerity policies typically involve a mix of: public budget cuts; freezes to public sector wage bills; public worker dismissals; regressive consumption taxation increases along with the lowering of progressive taxes on income, wealth and inheritance; pension and social security reforms; labour market reforms or 'flexibilization' (reductions in labour rights, including the right to unionise and to collective bargaining); reducing or eliminating subsidies; and the privatisation of public assets, including through strengthening public-private partnerships (PPPs),⁵⁰ as well as through disinvesting from or selling State-owned enterprises, with the **express aim of decreasing public deficits and debts**. Cuts to spending are always prioritised over efforts to raise more revenue, and in respect to tax policy the advice tends to be regressive, focusing on value-added tax (VAT), and avoiding increases in direct taxes on incomes, profits, dividends, wealth etc. There are usually compensatory efforts to help the poorest, through narrowly-targeted social protection schemes, but these rarely reach the majority of those who need them. (See [The Public Versus Austerity](#))

Many people assume that the State has been 'rolled back' since the implementation of neoliberal economic policies in the 1970s, but in fact **the State has been effectively redeployed**. Rather than provide services for its citizens, the State has been re-designed to serve and facilitate the market economy - through the development of institutions and universal rules, policy norms and legal protections. In practice, neoliberal policymaking has constructed societies around the private actors that make up 'the market', ensuring that **institutions facilitate wealth extraction and accumulation**. The neoliberal State is disciplined by international financial institutions, including the IMF, World Bank and WTO - to adhere to and normalise policy frameworks that allow for the marketisation or commodification of key sectors of the economy, profit from public goods and a reduction in accountable decision-making.

As Bhumika Muchhala of Third World Network points out, "structural adjustment underscores 'fiscal fundamentalism' over economic and social equality and fulfilment of human rights."⁵¹ Governments aim to reduce their fiscal deficits as a first-order priority. Much of the criticism of IMF policy advice flows from this orthodox macroeconomic view, promoting a small government budget for services, and prioritising fiscal prudence at the cost of other considerations including social, economic and gender equality.⁵² 'Economic stability' is promoted as an inherent value that is best arbitrated by financial markets and their views on 'debt sustainability' and 'fiscal space'. Meanwhile there is a **pursuit of endless aggregate growth measured in GDP that does not take into account unpaid care and domestic work or planetary boundaries**.

The myth at the centre of this approach is the idea that cutting public budgets can stimulate economic growth: 'expansionary austerity'. Bhumika Muchhala also observes that "*Under current fiscal discipline rules, many countries are assumed to lack sufficient fiscal space to undertake public investment. **The degree of fiscal space is effectively circumscribed by limits placed on a country's public debt relative to GDP.***" This very short-term approach means that debt ceilings are defining fiscal sustainability for the short-term, ignoring the interaction between fiscal policy and growth over the longer term. Muchhala continues, "*current guidelines for assessing fiscal space and sustainability ignore what the fiscal space is used for. Most budgets classify current and capital budgets separately, but this distinction is not made when evaluating fiscal deficits. The result is restrictive fiscal targets, which have led to a **decline in public-investment-to-GDP ratios** in many countries.*"⁵³

3.3: ZAMBIA: THE LEOPARD DOESN'T CHANGE ITS SPOTS

In September 2022, the Government of Zambia was forced to agree a new loan deal with the IMF. Despite the aspirations of the Government to invest in education and health, ActionAid Zambia's Country Director, Nalucha Nganga Ziba observed:

"This programme is based on the traditional IMF austerity package. In just 38 months Zambia is being pushed to move from a 6 per cent deficit to a 3.2 per cent surplus – and this is to be achieved by significant cuts in some crucial areas of spending and some increases in taxes that pass the burden onto the poor majority rather than onto the richest individuals and companies."

"Earlier this year the government of President Hakainde Hichilema made bold commitments to make education free from early childhood through to upper secondary and it has recruited 30,000 new teachers to address serious shortages. But with the squeeze now placed on public sector pay and school enrolments likely to rise dramatically at every level of education, class sizes will rise everywhere, and come 2025 the shortage of teachers will be more acute than ever."

"There are serious concerns about the abrupt removal of fuel and electricity subsidies, leaving Zambian citizens completely exposed to the wild volatility of fuel prices on the international market following the Ukraine war. It is important over time to phase out taxpayer support to the fossil fuel industry but there is still a case for supporting renewable solutions. Whilst many other countries are exploring the introduction of price controls and subsidies in response to the present fuel price surges, Zambia will be forced in the opposite direction."

"In summary, this IMF programme fails to pass the burden onto those who are most able to pay. It does not have an equity lens, least of all a gender equity lens."

While IMF loans are routinely conditional on 'fiscal consolidation' (austerity), the conditions are often unrealistic and thus not met, and the debt increases lead to a new round of loans and further budget restrictions.⁵⁴ Austerity policies rarely solve the debt sustainability problem, and instead exacerbate inequalities. Indeed, austerity has been shown to inhibit economic activity (as measured in GDP), increase unemployment and shrink tax revenues, leading to higher deficit levels, further restricting fiscal space. This means that countries that already spend significantly more on debt repayments than social spending need to continue borrowing just to service their debt.⁵⁵

Ecuador's case shows constant constraints in the health sector budget since 2018, as the debt service budget increases.⁵⁶ There is actually an inverse relation (increasing debt servicing correlates with decreases in the health sector budget), and this was maintained even during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. In this year, the budget expended on the health sector was 8.63 per cent of the general State budget, while debt took 14.83 per cent of it.

In countries in the global South, fiscal space is constrained by long-standing debt, which came to a head during the COVID-19 pandemic. Public debt rose from an average of 40.2 to 62.3 per cent of GDP between 2010 and 2020.⁵⁷ Munevar observes that, in 2020, **funding allocated to external public debt service was larger than healthcare and education expenditure in at least 62 and 36 countries**, respectively. 25 of the countries

spending more on debt than health are located in sub-Saharan Africa.⁵⁸ While cash-strapped governments seek to curb spending in order to pay back debt, the situation for women’s health in many countries is likely to get worse.⁵⁹ Debt sustainability problems cannot be solved on a country-by-country basis when the problems are so widespread, and yet there have been no significant new international debt processes since the temporary Debt Service Suspension Initiative during the height of COVID-19. Debt campaigners are calling for **new debt workout mechanisms** that will not drive indebted countries into the hands of the IMF – and for more comprehensive debt cancellation mechanisms.

Table 1: External public debt service ratios* - Country average per region (2016-2020)

	# of countries	Debt service as a share of government revenues		Ratio of debt service to			
		2016	2020	Healthcare		Education	
		2016	2020	2016	2020	2016	2020
Europe & Central Asia	20	7.6	14.1	0.8	1.4	0.6	1.0
Latin America & Caribbean	23	10.9	14.2	0.8	1.0	0.6	0.7
Sub-Saharan Africa	41	8.1	14.6	1.1	2.1	0.4	0.8
East Asia & Pacific	16	5.6	14.7	0.8	1.5	0.5	0.9
South Asia	8	7.7	27.1	1.0	2.6	0.4	1.2
Middle East & North Africa	10	13.1	42.3	1.0	1.5	1.2	1.6

*Using the latest country level data available on public health care and education expenditure
Source: Eurodad calculations based on Roefiniv.

As the evidence shows again and again, and as argued by many feminist economists, trade unionists and civil society activists, in reality, *“overly restrictive macro-economic targets to reduce public expenditure (...) cause recessions and have real economic, political, [labour] and human rights costs, disproportionately shouldered by women”*.⁶⁰ This contravenes States’ human rights obligations, and the human rights principles of non-retrogression and non-discrimination.

These austerity policies, or ‘fiscal consolidation’, can affect women’s rights in various ways. However, it is their cumulative impact that is particularly devastating. As [CESR](#) pointed out in 2017, the withdrawal of public childcare services in countries compounds increases in consumption taxes and decreased enforcement of anti-discrimination labour standards, to the detriment of women’s access to equal wages and decent work.⁶¹ Cuts to frontline public sector jobs where women are in the majority, such as healthcare and education, are felt acutely. [CESR](#) points out that *“undermining labour protections often leads to more precarious work, higher wage gaps, and increased unpaid care burdens amongst women”*,⁶² who fill the gaps in care and other public services when income and access to quality public goods decrease.⁶³ Yet unpaid care work *“tends to have no place in macroeconomic models and analysis”*,⁶⁴ see for example the narrow focus of the responses of the IMF and governments to the COVID-19 pandemic on ‘the productive sector’, with an emphasis on formal business and the private sector.⁶⁵ This obscures the gender-differentiated impact of crises and the additional burden placed on women.

To head off criticism, the IMF champions limited and ‘targeted’ social safety nets and gender programmes, but these are inadequate to alleviate the systemic impact of their wider policies. It is of critical importance to

strengthen social protection systems based on the principle of universality prior to phasing out of subsidies.⁶⁶ The occasional progressive IMF rhetoric and co-option of some social justice and gender equality concepts cannot hide the reality of their coercive policy advice and the conditions attached to their loans that systematically undermine investments in public services - and the multiple impacts this has on women.

IMF country advice lags behind research

Several IMF research and discussion pieces challenge this neoliberal orthodoxy and have shown quite convincingly the institution's mistakes, showing how economically misguided 'pro-cyclical consolidation measures' have been for countries in crisis.⁶⁷ This accepts that paying down debt is not always the best answer to every fiscal deficit⁶⁸ and can be counter-productive.⁶⁹ There is also compelling evidence of the serious distributional effects of austerity,⁷⁰ debunking the 'expansionary austerity' myth.

On the other hand, progressive action on tax can be critical to prevent a downward spiral,⁷¹ and IMF research shows that more robust and progressive taxation is not detrimental, but critical to public financing in times of economic stress.⁷² This research argues that countries should carefully balance social spending cuts with revenue increases. In its main assessment on financing the SDGs, the IMF fiscal affairs department advised that most low-income countries could reasonably increase their tax-to-GDP ratios by five percentage points (from 16 to 21 per cent on average), which would allow a doubling of spending on education, social care and health in most countries. But none of this finds its way into standard policy advice at country level. IMF country teams are not paying sufficient attention to the evidence produced by the IMF's own researchers, meaning that this clear alternative to austerity, which would particularly benefit women and girls' rights, is not evident in country-level practice or formal agreements.

In 2020, IMF research looked at 'gender-responsive fiscal policy interventions', stating it "*is imperative to analyse the macroeconomic and distributional impacts of gender-responsive fiscal policies so that policymakers can adopt the most effective and sustainable measures to support gender equality while boosting economic growth and reducing income inequality and poverty.*"⁷³ It goes on to say "*fiscal policy is a powerful tool to close gender gaps,*" while acknowledging that "*most of these measures take time to bear fruit.*"⁷⁴ This has been pointed out for a long time by UN Women and women's rights organisations, and has been acknowledged by States in the agreed 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.⁷⁵ The counterfactual of gender-responsive fiscal policies is that any other fiscal policies are at least maintaining gender inequalities, and at worst reinforcing gender inequalities and undermining progress on closing 'gender disparities', as the IMF calls it in its newly Board approved Strategy towards Gender Mainstreaming (see section 5). Again, the IMF appears to recognise how policies like the one it prescribes often directly undermine women's rights, including how they exacerbate their unpaid care and domestic work burdens, hampering access to quality public services and forcing them into precarious low paid work. But once again, these do not change the core policy or practice at country level.



Community child care centres like this one in Bardiya, Nepal can significantly reduce the time spent by women on unpaid care work.

CREDIT: ACTIONAID

4. GENDERED IMPACTS OF IMF AUSTERITY ADVICE ON PUBLIC SECTOR WAGE BILL CONSTRAINTS

Whilst there are many ways in which the IMF austerity policies have clear gendered impacts, it is worth looking in detail at public sector wage bill constraints as this lays bare the impact of IMF policy advice on women’s human rights. Freezing or cutting public sector wage bills has been a centrepiece of austerity advice for decades, and the cumulative effect of these over 40 years is alarming, undermining the ability of governments to deliver quality gender-responsive public services. September 2022 research by Isabel Ortiz and Matthew Cummings found that, “Adjustments to the public sector wage bill are widespread across the globe, under consideration by 91 governments in 27 high-income and 64 developing countries”.⁷⁶

Public sector wage bill constraints implemented as part of fiscal consolidation policies directly and disproportionately impact women’s unpaid care work burden and access to decent work in negative ways.⁷⁷ Women are more likely to work in the public sector (where there is some evidence that gender pay gaps are smaller).⁷⁸ For example 90 per cent of nurses globally and over 70 per cent of healthcare staff are women.⁷⁹ Research by ActionAid, Public Services International and Education International found that IMF austerity cuts in just 15 countries between 2016 and 2021 have blocked the recruitment of over 3 million nurses, teachers and other essential public sector workers.⁸⁰ In just those 15 countries, the recommended IMF cuts add up to nearly US\$ 10 billion. This means that when the IMF advises wage bill constraints, especially in contexts where there are documented shortages of key staff, it directly undermines its own avowed commitment to increase women’s participation in the labour-force.⁸¹

This [joint research](#) showed how cutting the budgets used to pay public sector workers **undermines progress on health, education and gender equality, while blocking climate action** in some of the world's poorest countries. Despite IMF claims that wage bill containment is a temporary measure, all the 15 countries studied were advised to cut or freeze public sector wage bills for three or more years. Even where the IMF claims to protect health and education workers, in practice this is impossible because these are the largest group on the public sector wage bill, so overall cuts cannot be achieved without at least freezing spending on teachers and nurses.

The [research](#) also found that **no consistent advice was given by the IMF to countries about alternatives to wage bill cuts**, such as how to increase fiscal space by raising tax revenues through progressive reforms. The consequence is that supposedly temporary public sector wage cuts often become close to permanent. On the other hand, a one-point rise in the percentage of GDP spent on the public sector wage bill in these 15 countries would allow for the recruitment of 8 million nurses, teachers and other workers. If done globally, this could address the global care gap calculated by the ILO, with women especially benefiting from the jobs created through investments in social care infrastructure. This gives a sense of the scale of the impact of the present constraints and their cumulative effect over time. In fact, many countries could reasonably increase the percentage of GDP spent on wage bills by significantly more than 1 per cent, which could have a transformative effect on all public services.

ActionAid's in-depth research into public sector wage bill cuts found that they triply disadvantaged women and people with intersecting discriminations, through: (1) loss of decent work in the public sector; (2) loss of access to services; and (3) increased unpaid care and domestic work burden when public services fail. Below we look into each type of impact in more detail, with examples and evidence from selected countries.

ACCESS TO DECENT WORK – WOMEN'S INCOME AND ECONOMIC SECURITY AS PUBLIC SECTOR WORKERS

For women, the public sector tends to be a major source of employment.⁸² **The pressure to cut public sector wage bills has exacerbated shortages of nurses, care workers, doctors and teachers in many countries, undermining health and education outcomes, especially in the global South.** As well as blocking new recruitments that have invested time, energy and resources in training, limits on the overall public sector wage bill lead to cuts and freezes to the salaries of the existing workforce, even where these are already low. Salaries for frontline public sector workers in more junior roles are particularly impacted, and this affects women disproportionately as they are concentrated in frontline roles (e.g. nurses, teachers, social workers), lower-level administrative positions, and temporary and part-time positions – which are often on more precarious, irregular or no contracts and lower pay.⁸³ This is due to **discriminatory social norms and occupational segregation, and cuts to these services push many women into under- and unemployment, precarious work or into the informal economy**, with long-lasting damage to women's economic security, income and assets, and in some cases widening the gender pay gap.⁸⁴ This approach to public sector wage bill cuts is at odds with the IMF focus on women's labour force participation.

4.1: NEPAL: PUBLIC SECTOR WAGE BILL CUTS UNDERMINING EDUCATION AND ITS WORKERS

According to research by ActionAid Nepal, the country currently needs to employ 67,000 permanent teachers to meet government plans, while there are 40,000 teachers on temporary contracts - either hired by local government with comparatively low pay, or relief teachers on temporary contracts paid by the community.⁸⁵ Due to COVID-related school closures, many temporary teachers in private schools have been dismissed, leading to concerns for both their welfare and the impact on schools when life returns to normal.

Our review of IMF documents shows that Nepal has been under pressure to cut and freeze the public sector wage bill, even though this is already incredibly low. With just 11 per cent of the national budget going to education, this creates a dire situation for the sector. **There is a strong gender dimension to this, as the majority of low paid contract teachers are women, mirroring overall trends in Nepal where women are paid 30 per cent less than men.**⁸⁶

This is leading to **women shouldering the burden from wage bill constraints**, a burden which the current cost of living crisis is augmenting even further. These constraints compound the gender wage gap and wider economic inequality that plays out across women's lives, including in relation to pension contributions and economic insecurity in later life. The commitment to expanding early education, for instance, has been undermined by the fact that, at present, the workforce depends on women⁸⁷ working on poverty wages (US\$ 70-130 monthly⁸⁸). There is an ongoing struggle to improve this, but currently it is restricted by wage bill constraints. Expanding into new areas is difficult when public sector salaries are already squeezed to the limit.⁸⁹

TESTIMONY FROM FRONTLINE WORKERS IN NEPAL

Tulsi Neupane:

"I am an English teacher and headmaster of Lalit Bikas Adharvud School. I am a member of Nepal Teacher Association. Our salaries have remained stagnant for the last four years. After COVID, I met many public school teachers who did not receive salaries and/or lost their jobs. I think it is a loss to education system that so many experienced teachers may now never return and in their place, we have to recruit unexperienced and untrained teachers."

Mr. Prakash Thapa:

"I am an English teacher in Shramjit Kishor Secondary School for the last 22 years. I have been teaching for 37 years. The wage cut is not a recent phenomenon. I used to get allowances for being a class teacher, for invigilating exams and for checking students' exam papers etc. Over the past 10 years I have lost all those allowances. Our earnings have gradually eroded."

Testimony collected by Education International

UNESCO estimates that 69 million more teachers are needed over the next ten years to achieve the SDG goal of universal access to primary and secondary education by 2030. The World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates that there is a global shortage of 5.9 million nurses, with almost 90 per cent of those in low- and middle-income countries. Filling these shortages requires new recruitment, and addressing low pay across the nursing profession.⁹⁰ The care crisis in many countries will likely mean that even more frontline workers are needed in future. This will be unachievable whilst the IMF pursues the use of blunt public sector wage bill constraints that leave ministries of finance no space to move.

4.2: BANGLADESH: THE IMPACT OF COVID ON WOMEN'S PAID AND UNPAID WORK

91.8 per cent of the total employment of women in Bangladesh is in the informal sector. Domestic workers, owners and workers in small businesses, daily labourers, street vendors, cleaners, sex workers including transgender persons, and other informal workers rapidly lost their means to earn an income owing to COVID-19. Thousands of migrant workers, including women returnee migrant workers, lost their jobs, with little hope for reinstatement. Even in the formal sector, massive job losses of women workers in the ready-made garment sector were reported, although some garment factories have started opening up. In such cases, the safety of workers, including women workers, remains a concern.

The Bangladeshi health system is dominated by women, where more than 94 per cent of nurses, and more than 90 per cent of community health workers are women. They are the most vulnerable to infections and risk their lives. During COVID a large number of women health workers needed support to balance the increase in workload and family obligations, e.g. child support, safety nets, mental health support, but received very little.

Women also bore the brunt of increases in unpaid care work. In Bangladesh, pre-COVID, women performed on average 3.43 times more unpaid domestic care work than men. The closure of schools and the entire family staying at home further exacerbated the burden of unpaid care work on women, who absorbed the additional burden of constant family care duties. Where healthcare systems were overstretched by efforts to contain the pandemic, women spent more time on unpaid adult care work activities like providing emotional care and administrative support for adults, in addition to cooking, cleaning and making repairs.

Source: ActionAid Bangladesh

4.3: GHANA: NURSES LEFT WITHOUT JOB DUE TO PUBLIC SECTOR WAGE BILL CUTS⁹¹

Ghana is negotiating its 17th programme with the IMF, and a gender and distributional impact assessment for this programme's main policies would be key. Women have been disproportionately impacted, as they comprise more than 75 per cent of the civil service.

In Ghana, 41,000 nurses, the majority of whom are women, are unemployed and have formed a union for unemployed nurses, while at the same time there is a shortage of healthcare staff. An ActionAid Ghana study found a vacancy rate of 41 per cent, or 47,758 vacancies in the health services. Meanwhile, on average the country has one doctor to every 8,132 people, far exceeding the WHO global threshold of one doctor to every 1,000 people.

In spite of such chronic shortages, health spending has been in sharp decline, falling from 9.6 per cent of the budget in 2016 to 5 per cent in 2020. The share of the public sector wage bill in total expenditure has been declining in recent years, as a surge in debt servicing has further eroded government budgets. This has become increasingly unsustainable, with the percentage of government revenue spent on debt rising above 40 per cent between 2016-2019, and over 55 per cent in 2020. This is four times the IMF sustainable threshold of 12 per cent.

For context, between 2016 and 2020, the Ghanaian Government has spent twice the amount on debt servicing as it has on all public sector employees in the education and health sector combined. Wage increases in education have fallen consistently below the inflation rate since 2016, and teacher shortages go unaddressed. Ghana needs to recruit about 15 per cent more primary school teachers each year between now and 2030, close to impossible while wage bill constraints persist.

Source: ActionAid Ghana, *Trends in Public Sector Wage Bill (Education and Health) and the Forces Behind Wage Freezes*.

Many unions have reported that public education salaries are far below the basic levels for breadbasket, food poverty basket or basic income baskets.

- An [ActionAid Zimbabwe report](#) found that teachers, nurses and doctors are bearing the brunt of aggressive cuts to the country's public sector wage bill. This has led to frontline essential workers struggling to cope on poverty wages. Wage levels took a massive hit in 2019 in particular, when the average earnings for teachers and health workers did not even meet the food basket poverty line - the ability for wages to feed an average family of five.⁹² As inflation wreaks havoc on teachers' wages, many are leaving the sector.⁹³
- **ActionAid Sierra Leone** reported that while, at first glance, the education sector wage bill appears to be increasing (in nominal terms by 65 per cent since 2017), in real terms it has decreased by 5 per cent. Moreover, as school enrolments have swelled as a result of the new free education commitment, the pupil-teacher ratio has grown from 60:1 in 2017 to 75:1 in 2021, and analysis shows that the teacher gap has grown from 51,524 to 69,074. The additional teachers required to reduce this to the internationally recommended level of 40:1 will increase the current teacher wage bill by 20 per cent.⁹⁴

Despite IMF claims that education and health are 'protected' or exempt from wage bill cuts, we found no evidence of this in two-thirds of the countries we studied.⁹⁵ Even where there are exemptions to protect teachers and nurses, the effect may be to freeze their pay, which over time constitutes a pay cut in real terms. A gender and distributional analysis of this policy, as suggested in the gender strategy, would demonstrate this. But would the finding from such analysis have sufficient weight to reverse the IMF use of wage bill cuts in future? Or would it just lead to a small compensatory and targeted programme for some women?

Compounded impacts with 'targeted' social protection cuts

It is the combination of austerity measures that particularly impacts women, their income security and access to health. It is no surprise that **reducing women's wages and access to vital public goods, services and resources deepens inequality**, threatening the human rights of women to "housing, food, social security and an adequate standard of living."⁹⁶ Often, governments have imposed **sweeping cuts to social protection measures, such as unemployment insurance, housing benefit, child benefits, disability benefits or fuel subsidies**,⁹⁷ meaning that women do not just lose their job or encounter a decline in their wages in real terms in the public sector, but potentially other sources of economic security as well.

The IMF often advises narrow means-tested 'targeting' of social protection programmes. This type of restricted access to social protection is "notoriously difficult and often fails to reach the poorest people,"⁹⁸ due to large exclusion errors making such programmes is not very accurate.⁹⁹ This is witnessed in Tunisia, where there are "leakages to non-poor of nearly 60 percent of the existing cash transfer."¹⁰⁰ The IMF even advises 'targeted safety nets' in countries where poverty is very widespread and deep-rooted.¹⁰¹ Accessing such programmes can be more difficult for women. For example, in Jordan, "just 1.27 per cent of women-headed households receive assistance from the National Aid Fund, compared with 5.93 per cent of households headed by men."¹⁰²

Conditional cash transfers based on the school attendance of children have been part of IMF recommended targeted social protection programmes in Tunisia, Jordan and Egypt, overburdening women with increased (paid and unpaid) care and domestic work. **These programmes rely on women’s invisible work, while reinforcing the sexual division of labour by discouraging men from caregiving.**¹⁰³ The Bretton Woods Project notes that: *“These programs are an important source of income for many people but especially for women, because of the enduring gender pay gap and other factors which concentrate women more heavily in lower income deciles.”*¹⁰⁴

Women are also generally left out of many social protection schemes because they work more in the informal sector, without formal protections.¹⁰⁵ During the COVID-19 pandemic there has been a demonstrable lack of gender and needs assessment in government response packages, impacting women’s equal access to social protection. For example, in **South Africa**, blunt targeting meant that over 7 million women - mostly low-income Black African women - were denied access to the country’s distress grants. Their *“ineligibility stemmed directly from existing patriarchal social norms’ assigning responsibilities of childcare to women”* and *“left these women ineligible to receive the relief that millions of poor Black African men have been receiving.”* Documented by the People’s Recovery Tracker, this exclusion illustrates how recovery funds exacerbated existing differences.¹⁰⁶

Table 2: Wage ratios women to men in 2019 per region

	Private sector	Health
Global	Women earn 75% of men’s earnings	Women earn 88% of men’s earnings
Africa	Women earn 69% of men’s earnings	Women earn 91% of men’s earnings
South Asia	Women earn 58% of men’s earnings	Women earn 86% of men’s earnings
LAC	Women earn 85% of men’s earnings	Women earn 96% of men’s earnings

Source: World Bank: Worldwide Bureaucracy Indicators Dashboard

Equal wages for equal work

IMF policy papers consistently suggest that it is a problem for public sector wages to be higher than the private sector.¹⁰⁷ The so-called ‘public wage premium’ is said to ‘distort’ the labour market, and in Article IV reports, the IMF regularly advises countries to undertake comparisons between public and private sector wages. The effect is often to justify effective pay cuts – or below inflation pay rises – for public sector workers.

One interesting dimension of this is that the public wage premium is often higher for women and low-skilled jobs than for men and high-skilled jobs.¹⁰⁸ This means that women are more likely to secure decent work and pay in the public sector, whereas the private sector seems to exploit women, and low-skilled workers in particular. Indeed, the gender pay gap is ten percentage points lower in the public sector than in the formal private sector.¹⁰⁹ The privatised and outsourced care sector in the global North is a perfect example of how privatised sectors exploit women workers. This exacerbates the wider problem that roles that are associated with caring and that are perceived to be gendered, generally attract lower pay. The effect of the IMF making these public-private comparisons is thus inevitably felt most acutely by women working in frontline roles in the public sector, who tend to be the first to suffer pay cuts.

4.4: TESTIMONY FROM THE FRONTLINE IN NEPAL: SUMAN GIRI SHRESTHA, NURSING OFFICER

"I studied nursing on my own and I tried to be happy with my profession. But when I hear about the IMF, it makes me frustrated. Reducing budget in the health sector is just like cooking food without adding salt. A reduction in government funding in the health sector impacts the salaries of health workers, as well as their skills and the services they provide. It's wrong to take this out of the budget. I want the IMF to put the health sector at the heart of public services and stop pressuring the Government to reduce funding in this sector."

Testimony collected by Public Services International (PSI)

RECEDING PUBLIC EXPENDITURE RESTRICTS ACCESS TO ESSENTIAL SERVICES

The public wage bill makes up a large part of public expenditure and of the cost of providing some public services such as education and health. This is because they are labour intensive, so **cuts to wages and restricted staff numbers often requires changes to how services are provided, what services are provided and who is eligible to use them.** Ultimately, cuts reduce the availability, accessibility and quality of public services. Some of the most harmful effects of public budget cuts to public services,¹¹⁰ *"stem from the way they exacerbate the barriers women often face in accessing quality public services"* and have *"long-term and disproportionate impacts."*¹¹¹

In some cases, **budget cuts have been made directly to programmes and services which primarily benefit women,**¹¹² such as childcare, education, sexual and reproductive health and rights and maternal health. When public education budgets are cut, schools often pass the costs on to parents. Poor households, unable to pay for all of their children to attend school, invariably prioritise boys, as they are seen to be a better economic investment. When health budgets are cut and the costs of medical care rise, patriarchal gender norms mean that households often choose to pay hospital fees and the costs of medicine for men and boys before they pay for women and girls.

Early childcare can transform life opportunities for both women and for young girls. Kozhilakudi village in Kerala, India.

CREDIT: ACTIONAID



4.5: EFFECTS OF SPENDING CUTS ON ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES IN NIGERIA AND ACCESS TO WATER IN GHANA

Abigail is a mother of two, and one of two midwives working in a comprehensive healthcare centre in **Nigeria**. She explains what spending cuts mean to the chaotic conditions at the frontline: *“By the WHO standard, a nurse is expected to handle four patients but if you go inside here, you will see the crowd. There are up to 150 women on antenatal today, and there are only two nurses on duty”*. For Abigail, the fact that they are paid so little at the end of the month makes things worse: *“We cannot afford the school fees for our kids, we had to withdraw some of them. So when things get better, as we are believing and hoping, they will start again.”*

Source: All names have been changed in these real-life testimonies, collected by Public Services International (PSI)

Ghana: The cost of accessing water becomes a double burden on young women who have to juggle finding money to buy water and providing services relating to unpaid care work. *“Government has a lot to do in terms of providing water for the communities because, even with the privatization aspects going on, people are spending a lot of money to get water and demand is also very high...so they should factor that in their budgeting area...and be gender-sensitive so that women will spend less amount of time in fetching water and have time for other important tasks... when we talk about being gender responsive, [it's not only] for women but everybody...in our school, hospitals etc. It is hard to go to a hospital and go and ask for a washroom...even though they have, they will just designate it as staff only.”*¹³

Source: ActionAid Ghana, Briefing Paper Gender Responsive Public Services and Macro-Economic Policy in Ghana

Despite this evidence, the IMF (and World Bank) often recommends introducing and increasing user fees. For example, in **Vietnam**, which has faced six years of public sector wage bill cuts and/or freezes, the 2016 Article IV noted: *“the authorities... hope to restrain social spending by increasing fees for public healthcare and education to incentivize greater use of private services’ and ‘the authorities... noted plans to increase participation by non-state actors in education and healthcare to reduce costs to the budget.”* This was then celebrated in the 2018 Article IV report which observed that *“higher fees in health and education kept current spending in check.”* There is some recognition of potential risks involved: *“reforms to raise cost recovery and introduce private education and healthcare must be carefully designed to ensure access to all and protect the poor while raising service quality.”* However, this does not acknowledge the gendered impacts, and does not really reflect evidence that **privatisation almost always increases inequalities and substantially damages access for those experiencing social and economic marginalisation** based on income, and on multiple intersecting oppressions such as race, caste, religion, sexual orientation or gender identity. Nor does it explain why people ought to be paying twice for access to public services: firstly, through their taxes and secondly through access fees (the most regressive form of tax).

In some cases, particular groups are explicitly denied services which were available to them previously, for example when migrant women are no longer able to access free reproductive healthcare. CESR found in 2015 that in Spain, *“as a result of Royal Decree 16/2012, migrant women with irregular status were no longer able to access non-maternity related sexual and reproductive healthcare.”*¹⁴

BUDGET AUSTERITY INCREASES UNPAID CARE WORK AND TIME POVERTY

The ways in which public sector wage bill cuts and wider austerity measures increase women’s unpaid care work and time poverty are of huge significance. Care and domestic work are a foundation of sustainable development, essential for day-to-day living, for people’s social reproduction and for the survival of the whole

society.¹¹⁵ A survey conducted by UN Women in 2021 in Ecuador reflects that, because of cuts in the health sector, layoffs in the public sector and a wage-freeze, 7 out of 10 women are time poor, and 48 per cent reported unpaid care work as their main activity.¹¹⁶ ActionAid Bangladesh conducted a time use survey which found that women spent, on average, eight hours a day on unpaid care work. Men spend around an hour and a half daily. On the other hand, women spend around an hour a day in paid work while men spend five hours in work they are paid for.¹¹⁷

All austerity measures tend to *"intensify women's burden of unpaid work and their time poverty."*¹¹⁸ For example, cuts to (or continued under-investment in) water and transport infrastructure in poorer countries mean women may have to spend long hours collecting water and travelling to jobs, clinics and government offices, often on foot. When cuts are made to public services such as health, elder, palliative and child care, the need for care does not disappear, the responsibility is simply transferred from the public to the private sphere, to unpaid caregivers in the home who, because of entrenched social norms, are usually women.¹¹⁹

4.6: SIERRA LEONE: PUBLIC SECTOR WAGE BILL CUTS RESTRICTS RECOVERY OF HEALTH SERVICES

The Sierra Leone civil war, which ended in 2002, left the country with dilapidated public services, chronic staff shortages, and some of the worst health and education outcomes in the world. Since then, a number of ambitious initiatives have been introduced. In 2010, the Free Health Care Initiative was announced, with the aim of reducing out-of-pocket payments for pregnant and lactating mothers and the parents of children under five.

In spite of these ambitious targets (and many challenges), between 2016 and 2021, Sierra Leone has been given a consistent budget steer in IMF Article IV and Extended Credit Facility loan documents to cut the public sector wage bill to a target of 6 per cent of GDP. Our national report in Sierra Leone found that, while the wage bill for health workers increased in nominal terms from 2017 to 2021, in real terms it decreased by 15 per cent.

This is a massive challenge in a country still reeling from Ebola when COVID-19 hit. The Government has tried to expand and rebuild the health workforce after Ebola (which claimed the lives of 257 health workers). In 2020, with the COVID-19 crisis impacting on the country, the Government increased the number of health workers by 5,000 and announced a 30 per cent increase in their salaries, with the aim of giving a small boost to a decimated and overstretched workforce. Given the ongoing restraints on the wage bill, this is likely to cause deeper cuts elsewhere.

Source: ActionAid Sierra Leone, Public versus austerity report on trends in public sector wage bill for the health and education sectors in Sierra Leone

This so-called 'super exploitation' of women by policymakers in governments and the IMF means that *"it is not just that expenditure cuts inadvertently increase women's unpaid care work. Rather, such cuts are made based on the implicit or explicit assumption that women will fill the gaps created,"* in the provision of services the State had the responsibility to provide, creating an *"illusion of efficiency."*¹²⁰ These policies are proposed with the assumption that households will take on *"work formerly provided or subsidised by the State,"*¹²¹ effectively transferring this labour back to 'own-use provision of services', as the ILO has defined unpaid care and domestic work.¹²² **Austerity policies turn women into 'involuntary shock absorbers' and 'de facto care providers.'**¹²³ Especially, women at the intersections of marginalisation are assumed to *"compensate for the lack of services through carrying out bodily labour on behalf of the state."*¹²⁴ Bhumika and Guillem conclude: *"The inability or unwillingness of the state to provide services and goods to secure economic and social rights of marginalised women creates chronic insecurity and vulnerability."* In essence, this is facilitating a regression of women's rights and *"to the detriment of women's earning capacity, education, health and leisure time."*¹²⁵

4.7: VIETNAM: POWERFUL EVIDENCE FROM TIME-USE DIARIES*

Since 2015, ActionAid Vietnam has been undertaking a long-term research and advocacy programme focusing on unpaid care work and the impact that unequal distribution of care has on women, men, society and the economy. This programme operates in nine rural areas and includes a time-diary survey, community behaviour-change initiatives, policy analysis and advocacy. Some of the headline findings were:

- **5 hours per day:** the average amount of time women spent on unpaid care work in ActionAid's first time diary surveys.
- **54 working days per year:** the amount of time each woman in one district could save if they had improved access to water and sanitation.
- **50 hours per month:** the average amount of time women with children under six spend on childcare.
- **5 million hours per month:** the amount of time women could save if an extra 100,000 early childcare places were made available.
- **US\$47 million:** the contribution those women would make to the economy each year if they invested their time in paid work in the care economy, rather than unpaid care work. This would also raise their household incomes by \$40.
- **57 minutes per day:** the average reduction of women's time on unpaid care work by the end of the two year research and advocacy project. This is equivalent to 29 hours per month.
- **8 hours per week:** the amount of extra time women in the research contributed to paid work by the end of the study.

*From *Who Cares for the Future*, ActionAid, p6

4.8: OBSERVATIONS FROM THE UNITED NATIONS INDEPENDENT EXPERT ON DEBT

In the 2018 report on [the Impact of economic reforms and austerity measures on women's human rights](#), the United Nations Independent Expert on the effects of foreign debt acknowledged that, *"economic and regulatory issues should aim at addressing asymmetric power relations between men and women that are at the core of gender inequality."* They concluded that *"to expose such policy biases ... a gender-sensitive human rights impact assessment of economic reform policies is essential,"* and stressed that these assessments *"can guide policymakers in devising alternative solutions that are inclusive and advance gender equality and human rights,"* in line with existing state duties under international human rights frameworks, as well as commitments to the SDGs.

According to the Independent Expert, having exposed the negative impact of current economic policies, the IMF needs to meaningfully [address these macroeconomic drivers](#) of gender inequality with alternative policies. This would mean resourcing gender-transformative economic policies and designing them in ways that reduce and redistribute women's unpaid labour burdens and enhance their access to decent, rather than precarious, forms of work. Economic policies that bolster women's rights through economic and social multipliers include progressive tax systems, publicly funded universal gender-responsive public services and social protection, and measures to guarantee access to decent work.

4.9: UNITED NATIONS PRINCIPLES ON HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACT ASSESSMENT

According to the United Nations guiding principles on human rights impact assessment of economic reforms “States are obliged to manage their fiscal affairs and to adopt economic policies to ensure that they respect, protect and fulfil human rights.” This goes on to state that the “burden of proof and obligation to conduct human rights impact assessments,” means that, “States and other creditors, including international financial institutions should demonstrate that their proposed economic reform measures will realize, and not undermine, States’ human rights obligations. This implies a duty to carry out human rights impact assessments to evaluate and address any foreseeable effects of their economic policies on human rights.” This also makes it very clear that: “Consulting on, and making public in adequate formats the results of, human rights impact assessments are important components of complying with this obligation.”¹²⁶



Activists against gender-based violence in Nyamahumba, Nyanga District, Zimbabwe
CREDIT: ACTIONAID

5. THE IMF GENDER STRATEGY: SOME INITIAL REFLECTIONS

For most of its history, the IMF has been gender-blind, regarding social issues in general as outside of its core area of responsibility. Gender was not considered to be of significance for the macro-economy, or worth looking at in terms of the impact of macro-economic policies. In other words, gender equality was not considered to be ‘macro-critical’ to the IMF.¹²⁷

This has slowly changed since 2013, though civil society was not impressed by early ad hoc commentaries which refused to recognise the centrality of gender in macro-economic policies, ignored work around unpaid care and the informal economy, and avoiding any engagement with feminist economists and women’s organisations in countries where gendered policy advice had been issued. The IMF was accused in 2019 of *“using women and gender equality as instruments for economic growth rather than pursuing an economic model that works for women and society at large.”*¹²⁸

It is only recently that the IMF has identified gender inequality as a ‘macro-critical’ issue,¹²⁹ in other words an issue that affects the overall macro-economy and that thus falls within the IMF mandate. This should place the gendered impacts of fiscal consolidation higher up the institution’s agenda. The IMF appointed a new senior gender adviser, and in July 2022 published its first ever [Strategy towards Gender Mainstreaming](#).¹³⁰ This was approved by the IMF Board, which is made up of Executive Directors from member countries (where voting power is based on financial contributions thereby privileging the interests of wealthy countries).¹³¹

This strategy gives a mandate for a central ‘gender and inclusion unit’ to be established and to ‘integrate gender’ across IMF core functions of surveillance, lending and capacity development (or technical assistance). The strategy also states that it will evaluate *“the gender-differentiated impact of shocks and policies, and providing granular and tailored macroeconomic and financial policy advice.”* This kind of assessment of gender-differentiated impacts of shock and policies is something that women’s rights organisations, feminist economists and others have called for, as the current gender-blind approach has led time and again to harmful gendered impacts. However, it is not clear that these will be systematically applied. Moreover, there are some very **worrying aspects** in the new strategy, such as references to gender conditionality within programme lending and a narrowly-targeted approach to the mitigation of identified harms, as explained below.

Figure 1: IMF plans to mainstream gender strategy

<i>Where are we?</i>		<i>Where do we want to go?</i>
<p>Surveillance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Not yet systematic approach to country selection • Standalone box/paragraph/SIP • Limited follow-up 	➔	<p>Surveillance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evenhanded and consistent approach based on macro-criticality • Granular and country-specific advice • Integrated in core policy discussions • Follow-up in subsequent consultations • Build centralised data hub • In-house toolkits and internal training of staff through structured curriculum
<p>Lending</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limitations in the selection criteria, policy coverage, and follow-up on program conditionality • 6 countries over 4 years 	➔	<p>Lending</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ownership by authorities; follow-up • Tailored and targeted; assess criticality
<p>Capacity development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Mainly trainings and workshops with a fiscal focus, amid rising demand for tailored CD 	➔	<p>Capacity development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrated with surveillance and lending • Provide more country-specific CD/training • Add gender disaggregated analysis to existing CD products (e.g. FSSR).
<p>Ad-hoc collaboration with other IFIs</p>	➔	<p>Strengthen collaboration with other IFIs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build networks, systematically seek input

Source: Figure from IMF gender strategy

5.1: THE CORE VISION AND STRATEGY OF THE IMF GENDER STRATEGY

“The vision of the IMF Gender Strategy will rely on three main principles:

- 1. Adhere to the IMF mandate by focusing on closing gender gaps that are (i) macro-critical in surveillance; (ii) critical for Fund-supported program implementation and monitoring; and (iii) within the IMF’s areas of expertise for capacity development.*
- 2. Provide thought leadership globally and granular and tailored macroeconomic policy advice to member countries.*
- 3. Focus on maximizing impact on the ground, including through collaboration with partner institutions and engagement with other stakeholders.”*

The **strategy** as a whole is built around **four key pillars**:

- 1. Sex-disaggregated data** collection and development of modelling tools to enable staff to conduct policy analysis;
- 2. A robust governance framework** for an even-handed approach across members based on the macro-criticality of gender. The Board Directors asked for *“articulating clear criteria for assessing the macro-criticality of gender issues and operationalizing this assessment;”*
- 3. Strengthening collaboration with external partners** to benefit from knowledge sharing and peer learning, leverage complementarities, and maximize the impact on the ground; and
- 4. The efficient use of resources** allocated to gender by putting in place a central unit for realizing scale economies and supporting country teams.

Source: IMF gender strategy

Below we identify some key language and concepts from the IMF gender strategy, and in each case make some observations and critical reflections about issues arising:

The IMF gender strategy says	Observations / Reflections
Gender gaps or substantive gender equality?	
<p>The IMF will support its “<i>member countries [to] foster resilient and inclusive economies by supporting them in addressing gender gaps and improving women’s economic empowerment.</i>”</p> <p>The IMF conceptualises three ways in which gender disparities influence economic growth and macro-financial stability: through gender gaps in opportunities, outcomes, and decision-making roles.</p>	<p>How does the IMF define ‘gender gaps’ and how does it compare to human rights standards? Human rights frameworks set out guidance to States on how to fulfil their obligations on women’s rights – with well-established international, regional and national legal frameworks on women’s human rights and gender equality that most member States have ratified, such as the 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action,¹³² the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) with its concept of substantive gender equality,¹³³ and the 1966 International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights,¹³⁴ which established principles of non-discrimination, but also non-retrogression and mobilising the maximum available resources for rights along with commitments to realise minimum core obligations. There are also many regional instruments and national constitutional provisions or gender equality laws and policies. By ignoring these human rights frameworks, the IMF lacks credible reference points for understanding or taking action on substantive gender gaps.</p> <p>Substantive gender equality, as defined in CEDAW, stresses that “<i>formal equality may not be sufficient to ensure that women enjoy the same rights as men.</i>” There are problems with a framing based on expecting women to ‘catch up to men’ and be judged by male standards. Substantive equality, as opposed to ‘gender gaps’, means taking into account the ways in which women are different from men, and compensating for or tailoring to difference, disparity or disadvantage. Any initiatives or policies need to ensure “<i>that these differences are acknowledged and responded to by State measures and interventions toward achieving equality,</i>” points out International Women’s Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific: “<i>An ostensibly gender-neutral policy, while not excluding women per se, may result in a de facto discrimination against women.</i>”¹³⁵ The Strategy seems to reference this as equality in ‘outcome’, and mentions women’s labour force participation and wage inequalities as examples, but equality does not necessarily equal the fulfilment of rights.</p>
Unpaid care work	
<p>The IMF refers to: ‘drivers of gender gaps’, stating that they “<i>reflect and lead to further unequal opportunities and outcomes: unequal access to education, health services, infrastructure, assets, and technology; unequal legal rights; violence against women; unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work between men and women; and cultural factors.</i>”</p>	<p>Whilst the acknowledgement of women’s disproportionate unpaid care and domestic work is important, this needs to be applied much more systematically, so that the impact of austerity policies such as wage bill cuts on that unequal burden of unpaid care are fully recognised and addressed. The IMF has not yet accepted that “<i>it is precisely unpaid care work that compensates for the failure of public delivery. In this sense, women embody social provisioning, and the state could be viewed as owing a debt to the labour of women in producing the services for which it is responsible.</i>”¹³⁶</p> <p>Unfortunately, unpaid care work is not given sufficient attention elsewhere in the main strategy document, which is shocking given its significance to women’s rights. And while the IMF is increasingly saying that it understands the importance of economic and gender inequality, making the link to the impact of its own policy advice still seems to be avoided. Most worryingly, even if the IMF accepted the compelling evidence that its austerity policies undermine women’s rights and add to the burden of unpaid care, it is not clear that this would be sufficient to reverse the core policy advice on austerity. At present, austerity feels like an out-of-control juggernaut, and the IMF Gender Strategy will do little to stop it.</p>

Surveillance and macro-criticality

In its surveillance work or Article IV consultations¹³⁷ the IMF states that it will move “from coverage of gender as a mostly standalone topic and often with limited follow-up, to a more systematic approach based on a consistent and even-handed treatment of member countries, based on the macro-criticality of gender gaps, and provision of granular and tailored advice that is integrated in core policy discussions.”

Macro-critical gender issues can also be raised by countries themselves – but the IMF will not advise where it does not have expertise.

The IMF is not a gender expert, it should not be advising countries on gender equality instead, it should be assessing how its economic policies impact and undermine gender equality. It does suggest that it will work in partnership with others (see below), but it should more explicitly recognise and draw on the expertise of feminist economists and organisations that do have expertise. The vague macro-criticality standard means there will not be a systematic assessment of harmful gendered impacts of standard IMF policy.

Gender disparities and economic growth

The IMF says: “mainstreaming gender at the IMF starts with the recognition that reducing gender disparities goes hand-in-hand with higher economic growth, greater economic stability and resilience, and lower income inequality.”

The reduction of gender disparities does not always or automatically go hand-in-hand with higher economic growth. Indeed, persistent gender disparities and the exploitation of women’s paid and unpaid labour often underpin economic growth. It depends on the type of gender disparity and the type of economic growth, and it is vital to have a more nuanced approach.

This also begs the question of whether the IMF will (continue to) pursue economic growth policies even where they are identified as being harmful to women.¹³⁸ More broadly, there are many feminist critiques of growth itself and how it is measured (GDP – see section 3). The strategy does nothing to question the pursuit of growth, which is increasingly problematic in the face of a climate crisis which might require an active commitment to de-growth and the adoption of more sustainable care-based goals and measures of development.

The IMF’s own impact

The IMF Gender Strategy states that: “economic and financial policies can exacerbate or narrow gender disparities.”

Considering the influential role the IMF plays in setting the macro-economic agenda, and determining monetary, financial, tax and spending policies, this is close to a recognition that the IMF’s own economic and financial policies can worsen gender inequality. BUT this is not a consistent position held through the gender strategy documents, which at no point explicitly acknowledges the IMF’s role in setting policies that might exacerbate gender disparities.

Unequal power and accountability

The IMF states that its ‘convening power’ gives it the ability “to raise the profile of macro-critical gender issues with its direct counterparts—Ministers of Finance and Central Bank Governors—who make and implement national macroeconomic and financial policies.” In this ‘catalytic or convening role’ IMF staff will bring ‘together relevant stakeholders’, including domestic stakeholders, such as various line ministries (e.g., finance, economy, gender, labour, health, education, and social development), civil society organizations and private sector representatives’ to discuss “how macroeconomic and financial sector policies could be viewed through a gender lens.”

It is good to see some acknowledgement of the IMF’s power, as it generally downplays its own power over shaping policies and claims that national governments are always in the driving seat and have full ownership. Yet the agreements reached, and policies pursued, are remarkably similar across countries - and the one actor consistently at the table across countries is the IMF. In practice this shows that the IMF has more than just ‘convening power’.

Feminists have consistently and critically questioned the legitimacy of the IMF to influence or shape what should be national policy decisions and should be democratically made. The behind-closed-doors nature of most consultations, and the limited actors (often only compliant CSOs) invited into the room, in practice undermines national sovereignty and the accountability of governments to their own people. The thought that the IMF might be the actor now bringing gender issues coercively to the table is uncomfortable. There are many other actors, including women’s rights organisations, who would be better placed to do this, but cannot until the overall decision-making process is made more transparent and inclusive. The IMF ought to use its recognised convening power to ensure a much higher level of transparency and inclusion.

External collaboration and partnerships

The IMF says that it is not a gender equality or women's human rights expert so it will work with UN Women and other external partners to draw on their expertise.

It is not clear whether these external experts will be invited into all the spaces where policies that have gendered impacts might be discussed, or whether they will only be engaged in specific sessions narrowly focused on gender issues with no opportunity to comment on the more strategic policies. There is a danger that UN Women will be used to implicitly rubber stamp conservative economic policies, whilst being able to contribute only to compensatory gender interventions. UN Women itself has come under criticism for some of its recent multi-stakeholder engagements (e.g. with Blackrock, also one of the private creditors to the Zambian government refusing to restructure debt), and will need to be wary of being used to legitimise overall economic frameworks that are problematic.

It would be good to commit also to engaging United Nations experts on women's human rights and other agencies like WHO and UNESCO, who can help to show the gendered impact of IMF advice on health and education. The external collaborations highlighted tend to be narrowly focused on the World Bank Group, who themselves have a problematic track record with the gendered impact of their interventions.¹³⁹ The World Bank's own gender strategy certainly needs to be analysed from a critical lens.¹⁴⁰

Civil society and women's rights organisations

The IMF strategy mentions civil society sparingly, including for the central unit to serve as a "focal point for internal and external collaboration... help connect country teams to relevant organisations, think tanks and CSOs", and noting that "early engagement with country authorities and other stakeholders will be critical."

The commitment to engage with civil society must go further. Although there is a reference to 'external advisory networks on gender', there is no significant reference to engaging with women's rights or feminist organisations or labour unions representing women working in key sectors that may be affected by IMF policies. Broad and inclusive civil society engagement needs to be systematic, at all stages of the process, and organisations should have access to all key documentation and a meaningful voice to articulate the impact of policies on women's human rights. Invitations cannot be hand-picked by the IMF but should be representative and include critical voices, to avoid limited 'consultations' leading to a pink-washing of the IMF's most harmful policies. The power disparity between the IMF and any local experts who are 'consulted' needs to be more honestly assessed, with conscious efforts to prevent any consultation from being a de-facto rubber stamp exercise.

Mitigating measures and targeted programmes

The IMF strategy recognises that mainstreaming gender: "entails a shift in the mindset on how to conduct IMF core activities while remaining consistent with the institution's mandate... This approach envisages integrating gender issues that are relevant for macroeconomic outcomes in exchange rate, monetary, fiscal, financial, and structural policy discussions with member countries. At the same time, staff policy advice must prioritize domestic and external stability. **If recommended or implemented measures** (for example, eliminating fuel subsidies, cutting other public expenditure, introducing a value-added tax) **widen gender disparities or lead to other adverse distributional effects, a comprehensive policy package should include an assessment of the gender and distributional impacts of these policies and mitigating measures** (such as social spending) targeting the most vulnerable." [stress added]

Firstly, this makes it very clear that the IMF view of 'stability' overrides its interest in gender.

Secondly, whilst it talks of a 'comprehensive policy package' it also makes very clear that this must be 'targeted' at the most vulnerable. This is a step backwards from the recommendation of the 2018 IMF How-to-note on operationalizing gender equality in the Fund's work for an "alternative policy mix to prevent these negative externalities."¹⁴¹

Rather than prevent negative gendered impacts by following alternative policies, the focus is now squarely on compensatory measures. Targeted social protection schemes are in contradiction to the commitments to social protection floors made by countries, the United Nations and in the SDGs.¹⁴² It is important to note that targeted mitigating measures are often highly problematic, tend to have large exclusion errors, and are often expensive to administer.

The IMF is basically saying it will not stop doing things that are damaging for women's rights, but it will patch up some of the worst effects for some women - through programmes that have been proven to not work effectively.

Sex-disaggregated data

The IMF says it will strengthen data through a gender-disaggregated data hub to make 'gender gaps' visible.

Key here is what data is included and what 'counts'. This is not made clear enough.

- Will it include data that is not just sex-disaggregated but intersectional?
- Will the data allow for analysis that connects macro-economic policy making with unpaid care work, time poverty and women's labour force participation?
- Will time-use surveys be drawn on to inform macro-economic policymaking?
- Will there be more support for governments to collect such data in line with their commitments under SDG 5.4?
- How will the IMF deal with the challenges that data always lags behind the reality on the ground, is not always comprehensive, can make certain groups, such as informal workers, migrants, refugees, displaced persons, indigenous people and others invisible, and can often hide the compounding impacts of intersecting discriminations?

Gendered impact assessments

The IMF has committed, since 2018, to track the gendered impact of its programmes and it is envisaged that the gender strategy will take this further through gender and distributional impact assessments.

Three years after this guidance, in 2021, ActionAid, PSI and Education International [research](#) found no evidence of any analysis by the IMF of the gendered impact of public sector wage bill constraints in its Article IV and loan documents across 15 countries.¹⁴³ (Or indeed of the IMF seeking alternative policies or proposing mitigating measures). The IMF and most ministries of finance do not know how their policies are impacting women and men differently, because they are not looking.

In the absence of assessments of the impact of its policy advice on public sector wage bills, there is no way for the IMF to be sure that its advice does no harm in the short or long term, as pointed out by 47 women's rights organisations and their allies in a collective letter in March 2022.

Lending programmes and gender conditionality

The IMF strategy centres the use of gender conditionality in IMF lending.

This is alarming given the problematic nature and history of IMF conditionalities, which see a powerful global North-dominated institution infringing on the sovereign policy space of countries in the global South. The IMF itself recognises it is not a gender equality expert, so how can it credibly impose gender-conditionality? It would be better to critically examine how past IMF conditions have worsened gender inequalities and make a definitive move away from such conditionalities in the future. It does not make sense to use the same instrument of conditionality, which has such a problematic track record, to try to advance a gender agenda. The big challenge for the IMF is to fully confront the extent to which its standard package of fiscal consolidation conditions undermines gender equality, and to commit to pursue alternative policies informed by the work of progressive feminist economists.

In summary, there are some elements in the new IMF gender strategy that could open doors that in the past have been resoundingly shut. But there are serious concerns about whether this strategy does enough to fully recognise and address the scale of the gendered impact of the core standard IMF advice, in particular when it comes to austerity. It will make no sense if the IMF continues as it has for decades, and just introduces a few special programmes to compensate some women through narrowly targeted social security programmes. For this reason, ActionAid joined others in a collective letter to the IMF's Managing Director, to reject the IMF Strategy Towards Mainstreaming Gender.

This should be a moment for the IMF to talk about bolder action, to ask harder questions about its own track record and ongoing practice. It is not an innocent bystander alerting governments to the gendered impacts of certain policies. It is the architect of those policies, and it should already know from the extensive available evidence (including the IMF's own evidence) that these policies negatively impact on women. It is clear that the IMF does not *really* want to look at itself, or propose the changes that are clearly needed to the design of its core austerity policies.



Feminist farmers in Minas Gerais, Brazil where farming makes up 67% of rural employment and women's active leadership on agroecology is crucial. CREDIT: ACTIONAID

6. A BOLDER ALTERNATIVE: RECOMMENDATIONS TOWARDS A FEMINIST JUST TRANSITION

As the previous section shows, to deliver gender-transformative change, the IMF and ministries of finance need to make a definitive move away from the cult of austerity. Taking a few compensatory actions to redress unjust outcomes that arise from their own core interventions, or engaging women more systematically within the existing unjust economic system, will never be enough. What is missing is a bigger vision of a feminist, just and green alternative and an agenda that builds economies and societies based on care. It may be that the IMF will never be able to advance such a transformative agenda because it would contradict the very foundations and power structures of the institution. But it is helpful to be clear about some of the fundamental elements of this agenda which could be pursued by progressive governments, enlightened ministries of finance, CSOs and movements.

A BOLDER VISION

Beyond GDP to human rights and care

Whilst economies are driven obsessively by the single-minded pursuit of GDP growth they will continue to trample on the rights of women and the natural world. Governments need to value and put the fulfilment of human rights and the sustainability of the environment at the centre of their concerns. This means setting different indicators and targets for ministries of finance, and tracking different data to determine whether the economy is succeeding. It means laying out a clear agenda around feminist economic alternatives that value investments in public health, education and the care of those who are most vulnerable in our societies.

Care at the centre

Care and well-being are critical to sustaining societies and economies, as well as the environment, and need to be valued and redistributed. We need to fundamentally rebuild the social organisation of care, revaluing women's paid and unpaid work, organising a fair redistribution of care work across countries, genders and generations, and providing decent work and 'green jobs' for all in the digital era. Crucially, care includes the work of caring for the environment and ecosystems, on which women and indigenous people are often more reliant and, in many contexts, the key guardians, placing them in direct confrontation with the capitalist economy, and at the frontline of the climate and humanitarian crises.¹⁴⁴

Rebuilding the social organisation of care will be an exit from a neo-colonial, fossil fuel dependent, high-emission, extractive economy, riddled with humanitarian crises. It allows for profound transformations in our food, energy and economic systems that would radically cut greenhouse gas emissions, promote agroecology, and ensure food sovereignty, energy access and resilient livelihoods. Care at the centre of our economy, politics and society would also mean the reinstatement of the social contract between international institutions, States and people, followed by a massive scale-up in investment in public services including health, education, child and elder care, food, transport, sanitation, gender-based violence services, housing, and safe and green public spaces.

Now is the moment to revisit and reclaim the essential **redistributive role** of States, supporting 'the many' and preventing them from being further captured to service the interests of 'the few'. Central to this must be a fundamental **reimagining of public services** – publicly financed, publicly delivered, aligned to human rights, democratically controlled, universal and gender-responsive.¹⁴⁵ We need to move away from extractive, unsustainable economies based on the myth of unlimited boundaries and **perpetual growth**, and dependent on the invisible (in terms of GDP) unpaid care and domestic work borne mostly by women. We have an opportunity to build more caring and more equal societies and economies, economies that can truly care for people and the planet.

Investment in public services and the public sector workforce are at the heart of every progressive vision of a feminist and just transition, of building back (or forward) better.¹⁴⁶ There is compelling evidence that investment in public services actively contributes to growth as well as to development, but this is a truth that has been largely ignored in recent decades.¹⁴⁷

Feminist tax and fiscal justice

A clear alternative to the dominant neoliberal approach to taxation is articulated in the recent Global Alliance for Tax justice resource, [Framing Feminist Taxation](#). We need more ambitious reforms to tax that replace regressive taxes with progressive, gender-responsive and rights-respecting alternatives. This means recommending and promoting progressive tax reforms, such as taxes on wealth and the excess profits of large corporations, meaningfully combatting tax evasion, avoidance and illicit financial flows. It also means that a just, democratic, effective and rights-oriented global tax infrastructure is critical, to ensure that countries have the policy space to implement progressive, gender-transformative and just tax measures domestically. This means moving the power to set global tax rules away from the club of rich nations (the OECD), and establishing a [United Nations tax convention](#) that could hold countries to legally binding, equitable standards on corporate tax, financial transparency and tax justice.

When governments face a squeeze on fiscal space, they have a fundamental choice – to either cut public spending or expand national revenues. For this reason, progressive and ambitious policies on tax are a key foundation for fairer fiscal policy. But clearly, more is needed, including bold action to address unjust debts, including those that are the legacy of colonialism or of neo-colonial dictatorships. There is a clear need for bold international action to resolve the present debt crisis, as existing mechanisms fall short, and there needs to be a move away from simply deferring debt interest payments to the renegotiation and cancellation of

some debts. But in the longer-term, **there also needs to be a new independent debt workout mechanism so that indebted countries are not forced to turn to the IMF as the lender of last resort.** More broadly, any fiscal policy reform should be negotiated transparently with input from a range of stakeholders (including civil society) through **national social dialogue** – and any fiscal policy reform that is pursued should systematically assess the potential impacts on gender and economic inequality, with a commitment to reject those that are projected to have negative social impacts.

Unpaid care work and public services

Unpaid care and domestic work needs to be recognised for its social and economic value, reduced and redistributed, through gender-responsive public services which can take the strain, and/or men doing more. Paid care work and care workers need to be rewarded with equal pay and decent work.

Almost all public services can serve to reduce women’s unpaid care and domestic work, whether through improved water supply and sanitation reducing hours walking to collect supplies, improved electricity reducing fuel collection and cooking time, improved public transport making it safe for women to be mobile, improved health reducing the time caring for sick children and elders, improved childcare and early education enabling women to work.

There is a strong employment case¹⁴⁸ for progressively achieving universal access to childcare and other long-term care services, such as care for elders and those living with disabilities, which could create almost 300 million jobs by 2035. The ILO estimates that 78 per cent of these new jobs would be held by women, and 84 per cent would be in formal employment.

The [Care Manifesto: Rebuilding the social organisation of care](#), produced in 2021, articulates a clear connection between action to redress the injustice of unpaid care work and action **to reclaim the public nature of care services.** It critiques the current social organisation of care based on the exploitation of unpaid and low-paid women, and argues for restoring the State’s duty and primary responsibility to provide public care services and develop care systems that transform gender relations and women’s lives. This manifesto sees an organic connection between this and financing the State’s capacity to invest through fair and progressive taxation and ensuring internationally equal taxing rights of Nation States.

In the light of the multiple crises this report has touched on, there is clearly a compelling economic as well as social case for a radical revisiting of the role of public services in building a caring society and economy. In the light of the climate crisis, the learning from COVID-19 and rising inequality, governments should rebuild the national social contract with sustainably financed and good quality public services as a core element. This will mean pushing back from decades of chronic underfunding and from the ideological push for privatisation and Public Private Partnerships. Governments need to reclaim democratic sovereignty and put their citizens first, refusing to accept loans or grants from any source that contributes to the privatisation of public services. Renewing the vision of gender-responsive public services that are truly accountable to people locally and nationally will help to build fairer, more caring societies. A progressive vision for the future of public services is captured in [Global manifesto for public services - Our Future is Public](#).

International institutions (including the IMF)

At the international level, a feminist, just transition, with a decolonial lens, will transform global governance rules, systems and institutions, to rebalance the historical and ongoing unequal power relations between the global North and global South. A feminist, just transition will also strengthen the State, to protect not only its citizens but all migrants, internally displaced people and refugees, reviving the notion of public goods and quality free public services. There needs to be a reassertion of the central role of the State as an accountable and redistributive actor.¹⁴⁹ This is hard to achieve whilst international institutions are pushing in the opposite

direction, so unless much more fundamental reform is achieved, there will be continuing pressure for the abolition of the IMF – as called by the 50 Years is Enough campaign in 1994 and those who reiterated the message that 75 years is enough in 2019.

6.1: SYSTEMATIC GENDERED HUMAN RIGHTS IMPACT ASSESSMENT OF PUBLIC SECTOR WAGE BILL CONSTRAINTS

As evidenced above, and in the past by many feminist economists, UN Women and others, gender-blind economic policies undermine women's rights and equality. It is therefore key that the IMF undertakes **systematic ex ante and ex post assessments of the gendered impacts** of the IMF's economic policy advice and loan conditionalities, including in relation to public sector wage bill constraints. They would need to consider:

- **How public sector wage bill constraints affect women disproportionately, as women are more likely to work in the public sector, and are more likely to be on lower pay and precarious short-term contracts.** For example, overall public sector wage bill constraints enforced over many years have almost certainly meant that women who have entered the teaching profession are unlikely to have been recruited as 'civil service teachers' (part of the permanent profession) and more likely to have been given casual or short term contracts. This means they are more likely to be fired when cuts are imposed.¹⁵⁰
- **How public sector wage bill constraints affect the decent work available to women** (using ILO indicators),¹⁵¹ exploring women's participation in the labour market overall (which is supposed to be an IMF priority), and women's participation in public life, including in political decision-making from community to national level.
- **How constraining the public sector and supporting the private sector impacts negatively on the gender pay gap.** This may be imperfect in the public sector, but it is much worse in the private sector (see Table 1). The World Bank comments: *"This greater wage equality for women likely reflects the more limited scope for wage discrimination in the public sector, given that public-sector wages are often highly regulated."*¹⁵²
- **How squeezing the public sector and supporting privatisation and fee charging affects access to quality, gender-responsive public services for women and girls, relative to men and boys.** There is compelling evidence that when you have to pay for access to health or education, women and girls are the first to be excluded.¹⁵³
- **How limiting public services leads to increases in the already unfair burden of unpaid care** and domestic work borne by women because of their socially assigned roles as carers.

In addition, the IMF, governments and ministries of finance could and should **document the impact of their policies** on the SDGs. Ideally, they would look at all of the goals and their associated targets and indicators, but especially SDG 1 (on poverty), SDG 3 (on health), SDG 4 (on education), SDG 5 (on gender equality and women's empowerment), SDG 8 (on decent work), SDG 10 (on inequality) and SDG 13 (on climate action). The impact of wage bill freezes on progress towards these goals should be projected (in advance) and analysed (in retrospect). To systematically ask the question would be a starting point, and in the light of the new IMF Gender Strategy, the global consensus to prioritise the SDGs, and the obligation to advance women's human rights, there ought to be a requirement to systematically answer this question.



When schools closed owing to Covid, 14 year old Duongdav in Cambodia did not have a good enough connection for online learning, so took on a large burden of unpaid care work in her home and community.

CREDIT: ACTIONAID

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE IMF AND MINISTRIES OF FINANCE ON GENDER

The IMF may not be ready to pursue a holistically different vision that would challenge some of its foundations and contradict the present distorted power dynamics that frame the institution, but there are still things that could be done to make a gender mainstreaming strategy more credible – and these recommendations would also be relevant for ministries of finance.

- Engage more systematically with heterodox thinking and feminist economists.
- Look beyond GDP as a measure of development, including putting care and wellbeing at the centre of development strategies and economic policies and do more to grapple honestly with the contradictions between austerity and care.
- At the very least, they could commit to ensure that they do not harm women and undermine gender equality through any of their interventions.

Compensatory actions, like targeting social protection at some women after the damage is done by austerity policies, are not enough when the IMF and ministries of finance have the power to prevent the harm being done in the first place.

On the basis of the analysis in this report, we join others in rejecting the present IMF Gender Strategy. We do however still have some key recommendations for what the IMF and ministries of finance ought to do on gender, in line with States human rights obligations (see boxes 4.8 and 4.9) include:

- **Committing to do no harm as an absolute minimum, and recognising the harms caused by standard policy advice and loan conditionalities to countries to implement fiscal consolidation**, austerity and regressive taxation measures.
- **Critically assessing the gendered and inequality impact of their bread-and-butter policies**, through the systematic undertaking of *ex ante* and *ex post* gender and inequality impact assessments of all its surveillance, programmes and policy advice.
- **Recommending an alternative policy mix** when negative impacts on women's rights and gender equality are identified or projected, including supporting feminist economic alternatives.
- **Consulting consistently with diverse civil society groups**, especially national and regional women's rights organisations, feminist economists and movements in the global South.
- **Exploring all possible avenues to enhance tax progressivity and gender-responsiveness**, including consistently pushing for greater taxation of wealth, multilateral corporations and the incomes of the richest in society.
- **Recognising the negative impact of public wage bill constraints** on public service provision and women's labour force participation, and committing to support countries to expand the percentage of GDP spent on wage bills wherever essential services are struggling through staff shortages.
- **Considering the impact of removing energy or food subsidies** on the poorest and most vulnerable, including consideration of governments' binding international obligations to meet the core needs of their people.
- **Supporting the universal and public delivery of social protection**, rather than narrowly targeted schemes.
- **Evaluating the gender and economic inequality impacts** of public private partnerships.
- **Considering the impact of labour market reforms on workers' rights** under international labour standards, economic inequality, incomes, labour-share, non-discrimination and employment.
- **Moving away from subsidies to the fossil fuel industry** both directly and indirectly (e.g. through the IMF optimism bias in growth forecasts that are linked to fossil fuel development), and supporting clean energy transition processes that protect jobs.

6.2: FURTHER RESOURCES

- [The Public Versus Austerity: Why public sector wage bill constraints must end](#), Oct 2021, David Archer and Roos Saalbrink, ActionAid International
- [Who Cares for the Future: finance gender responsive public services!](#), April 2020, Soren Ambrose and David Archer, ActionAid International
- ["Black girl resists": fighting for decent work](#), April 2021, Megha Kashyap, ActionAid UK
- [Guiding principles and minimum standards on unpaid care and domestic work](#), 2020, ActionAid
- [Framework: Gender-responsive public services](#), July 2018, ActionAid
- [Linking the local to the global: How the International Monetary Fund impacts public services and young women's rights and what to do about it: six steps for creating change](#). Feb 2021, Asha Herten-Crabb & Rachel Noble, ActionAid UK
- [Another World is Possible: Advancing feminist economic alternatives to secure rights, justice and autonomy for women and a fair, green, gender equal world](#). Nov 2020, Rachel Noble, Rachel Walker, Lila Caballero and Asha Herten, ActionAid UK
- [The IMF and Gender Equality: A Compendium of Feminist Macroeconomic Critiques](#), Oct 2017, Bretton Woods Project
- [Keeping the IMF accountable to women's rights and gender equality at the national level](#), November 2019, Bretton Woods Project
- [Gender-Just Macroeconomics; Engaging the IMF and World Bank](#), October 2016, Bretton Woods Project
- [Gender Equality & Macroeconomics project resources](#), coordinated by the Bretton Woods Project and carried out in partnership with the [Gender and Development Network](#), [International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific](#) and the [Latin American Network for Economic and Social Justice](#).
- [Feminist Taxation Framework, with examples from Uganda](#), March 2021, Global Alliance for Tax Justice (GATJ), Womankind Worldwide and Akina Mama wa Afrika
- [Gendered austerity and embodied debt in Ecuador: channels through which women absorb and resist the shocks of public budget cuts](#), 2022, Bhumika Muchhala & Andrea Guillem in *Gender & Development* (paywall)
- [Care Manifesto: Rebuilding the social organisation of care](#), March 2022, Public Services International
- [Centring care in Covid-19 economic recovery: a five-point care package](#), March 2022, Jessica Woodroffe, Gender and Development Network
- [The impact of economic reforms and austerity measures on women's human rights](#), April 2019, The Center for Women's Global Leadership
- [Guiding Principles on Human Rights Impact Assessment of Economic Reforms](#), March 2019, United Nations
- [Adding Fuel to Fire: How IMF demands for austerity will drive up inequality worldwide](#), Aug 2021, Oxfam International
- [The gendered impact of IMF policies in MENA: The case of Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia](#), October 2019, Nabil Abdo, Oxfam International
- [The Social Organisation of Care: A Global Snapshot of the Main Challenges and Potential Alternatives for a Feminist Trade Union Agenda](#), October 2021, Corina Rodríguez Enríquez and Cecilia Fraga, Public Services International
- [End Austerity: A Global Report on Budget Cuts and Harmful Social Reforms in 2022-25](#), Sept 2022, By Isabel Ortiz, Matthew Cummings
- [Recovery at a Crossroads: How countries spent Covid-19 funds in the Global South](#), Sept 2022, Financial Transparency Coalition

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ActionAid is a global movement of people working together to achieve greater human rights for all and defeat poverty. We believe people in poverty have the power within them to create change for themselves, their families and communities. ActionAid is a catalyst for that change.

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