

ITUC contribution to public consultation on the impact of economic policy reforms on women's human rights¹

“Closing gender gaps in the world of work is a powerful way to respect, protect, and fulfil women’s human rights.” – UN Women

While substantial progress has been made in women’s rights and gender equality, this progress has not been matched by improvements in women’s economic independence overall, impeding the full realization of women’s human rights and fundamental freedoms. Women continue to be segregated in low-paying jobs, involuntary part-time work, precarious and informal employment including at the bottom of global supply chains. Women’s reproductive roles, their disproportionate share of unpaid care responsibilities as well as persisting gendered perceptions and norms regarding women’s roles in society contribute to occupational segregation and the undervaluing of women’s work.

Economic policies can create or remove structural socioeconomic barriers to the full realization of women’s rights. Evidence² shows that economic reform policies implemented in recent years, rather than addressing such barriers, have contributed to widening existing gender gaps in labour markets, such as the gender pay, employment and pension gaps; pregnancy discrimination; occupational segregation; and insecure or informal working conditions.

Public spending cuts on services and social benefits, including the privatization and outsourcing of public services, have hit women the hardest³. Cuts in public employment have led to large scale job losses, reductions in pay and worsening terms and conditions of work in a sector where women are often the majority of workers. Cuts in public funding of social services and infrastructure like healthcare, childcare and elderly care - that women tend to rely on more than men - have shifted the responsibility and costs of those services from the public sector to private households. Consequently, women are filling the gaps in care deficits by taking up more unpaid care work at home or low-paid care work, for instance by working as domestic workers. Cuts in statutory paid maternity, paternity and parental leave entitlements that prevent men from taking their share of care have further compromised women’s participation in paid work. Pension reforms strengthening the link between contributions and benefits have disproportionately penalised women, who tend to earn less than men and who have more breaks in their career due to care. Such reforms, as well as cuts to survivors’ benefits, have exacerbated women’s already higher risk of poverty in old age. Austerity measures have also resulted in job losses and reductions in pay in female dominated sectors – such as in public, service, retail, hospitality and education sectors - where increasingly low wage, casualised and informal work is becoming the norm.

¹ Please also refer to ITUC’s contribution to the public consultation on human rights impact assessments for economic reforms https://www.ituc-csi.org/IMG/pdf/ituc_contribution_to_consultation_human_rights_impact_assessments.pdf

² See for instance TUC (2015) *The impact on Women of recession and austerity* <https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/WomenRecession.pdf>; TUC (2014) *Austerity Uncovered* https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/TUC%20Final%20Report%20Dec%2714_2.pdf; European Women’s Lobby (2012) *The Price of Austerity: The Impact on Women’s Rights and Gender Equality in Europe* (<http://www.womenlobby.org/spip.php?article4235>); LSE Commission on Gender, Inequality and Power and Department of Economics Public Lecture (2015) *Inequality Matters: austerity policies, gender and race* www.lse.ac.uk/publicEvents/pdf/2015-ST/2015-Stephanie-Seguino-PPT-FINAL.pdf; ILO (2016) *Women at Work trends 2016* http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/---publ/documents/publication/wcms_457317.pdf

³ See for instance, European Network of Experts on Gender Equality (2012) *The impact of the economic crisis on the situation of women and men and on gender equality policies* or European Women’s Lobby (2012) *the Price of Austerity*

As economic reform policies continue to ignore impacts on gender equality and women's rights, the undervaluation of women's work both within or outside the care sectors continues, perpetuating disadvantages women face in the world of work. Women experiencing multiple and intersecting forms of discrimination based on not only gender but also class, race, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation and identity, disability, HIV status, indigenous and migration status are particularly affected by such policies.

Recognising the economic value of care – Investing in the Care Economy

Evidence shows that women's unpaid care work can contribute from 20 to 60 per cent of National Domestic Product⁴ but governments and international institutions do not still recognize or value unpaid care and domestic work in the development of economic and social policies.

There is a growing body of supporting evidence which shows that at times of low growth, high unemployment and pervasive underemployment, public investment in physical and/or social infrastructure and the right mix of gender equality policies can drive inclusive economic growth and women's economic empowerment⁵. Research commissioned by the ITUC⁶ shows that public investment in social infrastructure (childcare and elderly care) can contribute to gender equality and inclusive economic growth. Such investment will have a direct effect through the creation of millions of jobs for women in the care sectors where the investment takes place. But there will also be multiplier or knock-on effects of that investment, such as the creation of jobs in the industries that supply the necessary raw materials and services for the initial investment; expansion in household income as a result of the expansion in employment; savings in public expenditure from the reduction in unemployment and social security payments and additional tax revenue from the newly employed workforce. Overall, such investment would help tackle some of the central economic and social problems confronting contemporary societies: low productivity, the care deficit, demographic changes and continuing gender inequality in paid and unpaid work.

Recognising care as a collective responsibility and the benefits of investing in the care economy in economic and social policies can ensure that these policies work for both women and men. The UN High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment highlighted⁷ that investing in care is an important driver for women's economic empowerment and an essential building block for inclusive economic growth.

Gender-responsive macroeconomic policies

The UN Commission on the Status of Women in its 61st session urged⁸ governments and other stakeholders to adopt, implement and monitor gender-sensitive macroeconomic and social policies for women's economic empowerment. The first report⁹ of the High-Level Panel also states that

⁴ See for instance Rania Antonopoulos (2009) *The unpaid care work – paid work connection* http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---integration/documents/publication/wcms_119142.pdf

⁵ See for instance Antonopoulos, Rania and Kijong Kim (2011) *Public-Job Creation Programs. The Economic Benefits of Investing in Social Care. Case Studies in the US and South Africa* http://www.levyinstitute.org/pubs/wp_671.pdf; Ipek Ilkharacan, Kijong Kim, and Tolga Kaya (2015) *The Impact of Public Investment in Social Care Services on Employment, Gender Equality and Poverty - The Turkish Case*. http://www.levyinstitute.org/pubs/rpr_8_15.pdf; and AK Europe Brussels (2013), *Social Investment - Growth, Employment and Financial Sustainability - Economic and Fiscal Effects of Improving Childcare in Austria* http://www.akeuropa.eu/_includes/mods/akeu/docs/main_report_en_304.pdf

⁶ See ITUC (2016) *Investing in the Care Economy – A gender analysis of employment stimulus in seven OECD countries* and ITUC (2017) *Investing in the Care Economy - Simulating employment effects by gender in countries in emerging economies* <https://www.ituc-csi.org/investing-in-the-care-economy>

⁷ See final report <http://hlp-wee.unwomen.org/-/media/hlp%20wee/attachments/reports-toolkits/hlp-wee-report-2017-03-taking-action-en.pdf?la=en>

⁸ See agreed conclusions of the 61st session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (2017): <http://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/csw/61/csw-conclusions-61-web.pdf?la=en&vs=5452>

⁹ See first report of the UN High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment <http://hlp-wee.unwomen.org/-/media/hlp%20wee/attachments/reports-toolkits/hlp-wee-report-2016-09-call-to-action-en.pdf?la=en>

governments “must adopt macroeconomic policies to boost short-term and long-term inclusive economic growth”.

This requires policies that promote women’s economic empowerment, recognise and prioritise the creation of productive and decent jobs and support existing livelihoods in agriculture and the informal economy. It requires adequate, universal social protection over the life cycle, public investments in social and rural infrastructure, reductions in the amount of unpaid care and domestic work borne by women, and maximising and optimising fiscal space through tax regimes that redress inequality and provide sufficient public resources. Such policies must go hand in hand with policies to challenge and change social norms; policy and legislative measures to address structural barriers, including discrimination based on gender, race, age, disability, immigration status, etc.¹⁰; active labour market policies that strengthen labour market institutions and tackle occupational segregation and gender pay gaps¹¹; as well as family-friendly workplace policies¹² that enable workers to balance work with family responsibilities.

A discussion paper¹³ prepared by UN Women, in collaboration with GADN, WIEGO, Oxfam, Actionaid the ILO, and the ITUC, makes several key recommendations for gender-responsive macroeconomic policy:

- Redefine the goals of macroeconomic policy to include the achievement of women’s economic empowerment.
- Recognize the importance of unpaid care and domestic work, as well as informal employment in macroeconomic policymaking.
- Use macroeconomic policy to increase the amount of decent work available to women, especially those at the bottom of the economic pyramid.
- Maximize fiscal space for investing in women’s economic empowerment.
- Build economic resilience and promote the income security of women workers.
- Enable a greater collective voice for women in economic policy decision-making.

In addition to these recommendations, the ITUC has repeatedly stressed that economic reforms must be subject to through ex-ante impact assessments to examine their potential effects on social and labour rights, including women’s rights. Such impact assessments need to be evidence-based, transparent and subject to review by experts, social partners and other stakeholders. An ex-post evaluation of the reform should also be undertaken, to identify negative unintended consequences on gender equality and women’s economic empowerment.

¹⁰ See ILO Convention 111

¹¹ See ILO Convention 100

¹² See ILO Convention 183 and 156

¹³ UN Women, Gender and Development Network, ILO, ITUC, Oxfam, ActionAid, WIEGO (2017) *Macroeconomic policies and women’s economic Empowerment* - Discussion paper
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/536c4ee8e4b0b60bc6ca7c74/t/59a7e96f15d5db4b826ac8ce/1504176498496/MacroEconomic-DiscussionPaper-WEB-single.pdf>