

Creation of a new GADN working group on 'Women's Economic Justice'

Staff from a small group of agencies (ActionAid UK, Oxfam UK, Womankind and Christian Aid) have met together to discuss the formation of a new working group. The group felt that 'women's economic empowerment' was not a particularly helpful term, encompassing too many different approaches and forms of analysis. The group is not intended to be the place where all those working on 'economic empowerment' come together.

This is a group that shares a specific analysis of the problem, starting with an understanding that the neoliberal¹ model is unlikely to achieve gender equality and that the private sector cannot replace the functions of the state. Starting from these assumptions, the group will then work towards the objectives outlined below.

Women's economic justice working group - description

1. Aims and objectives

The aim of the group is to develop and promote policy recommendations towards the achievement of women's economic rights and justice.

The objectives of the group include:

- Building understanding and consensus among INGOs and decision makers on the structural nature of women's economic inequality
- Promoting alternatives, in the context of current UK and global development policies and programmes, based for example on work done by feminist economists and organizations such as Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) and the International Association of Feminist Economists (IAFFE).
- Providing a forum for GADN members and other like-minded organisations to build alliances for women's economic rights and justice
- Influencing the UK Government's relevant development and international policies.

2. Analysis and Focus

Our work will draw heavily on that of other feminist economists. The work of the group will be based on a shared understanding that prevailing reliance on the neoliberal economic model undermines women's economic rights by relying on, and exacerbating, existing gender inequalities, which are based on entrenched discriminatory social norms. Such inequalities include:

- Women's primary responsibility for reproductive and care work

¹ **Neoliberalism** entails support to [economic liberalizations](#), [free trade](#) and [open markets](#), [privatization](#), [deregulation](#), and enhancing the role of the [private sector](#) in economic, social and political life, usually in the context of unequal bargaining power among countries.

- Occupational segregation, the gender pay gap and the concentration of women in informal and vulnerable employment
- The exclusion of women and girls from economic and wider societal decision-making at all levels.

We see these inequalities as closely linked to the exacerbation of income inequality, violence against women and girls, sexual and reproductive health and rights, and environmental degradation - on which the model also depends.

Substantial work has been done on the way that the core elements of the neoliberal economic model impact on, and undermine women's rights and increase economic inequality. Although development policies have evolved in the past three decades, the underlying approach remains the same. Moreover a number of studies have shown that the impact of economic shocks and austerity measures hit women harder. At the risk of over simplifying, we have identified four broad areas of concern.

- 1) The equation of development with economic growth, and faith placed in the private sector to drive this, with a lack of targeted measures to achieve equality
- 2) A reduction in tax revenue leading to cuts in public services (where women are both users and workers) and in the provision of social protection
- 3) Privatisation of services (reducing their accessibility for marginalised women), and the deregulation of corporations and the labour market (reducing employment protection).
- 4) Liberalisation of trade in goods and services.

The group believes that the achievement of gender equality and women's rights will require socio-economic policies firmly rooted in the international human rights standards and obligations with a greater, positive, role for the state. While the private sector has a role to play, it is not a substitute for the essential role of governments to ensure sustainable and equitable development. Although we see the need for donors to provide economic assets to individual women and girls, we argue that the success of this approach is undermined if current macro-economic policies remain unchanged and the underlying structural causes of gender discrimination remain unchallenged.

The focus of the group is therefore on proposing and advocating for the changes to socio-economic policies, resource allocations, and underlying social norms necessary to achieve gender equality and women's rights.

3. Steps towards achieving women's economic justice

Achieving women's economic justice and rights means that women have access to and control over economic resources, have control over their time, enjoy decent work opportunities, and fully participate in and have influence over economic decision making at all levels. This requires: socio-economic policies geared towards the full realization of all women's human rights, that redress structural inequalities of power wealth and resources; transformation of discriminatory social norms; and substantive financing for gender equality.

While priorities change across contexts, we suggest four major changes that need to be achieved for women's economic justice.

a) Increasing women's choices over unpaid care

Recognition, reduction and redistribution of women's unpaid care work is critical to the achievement of women's economic empowerment and rights. This requires a change in social norms so that unpaid care is valued, recognised as a public good and more equally shared within households and communities, and between households and the state.

b) Increasing women's economic decision making power

Women's decision making power and influence over economic decisions in the household, community, and local, national and global institutions should be increased. This requires a change in social norms, exercising women's rights to participation in public and political life, and the democratisation of economic decision making at all levels, reducing the role of unelected bodies including private enterprises, and supporting enabling environment for women's right movements and organizations. It also requires an increase in women's economic assets to boost their bargaining power.

c) Increasing women's access to decent work²

Access to work and decent standard of living is a human right enshrined in the international human rights obligations and essential to women's economic rights. Women workers should enjoy decent work opportunities including a living wage, equal pay for work of equal value, security of employment, parental rights, safe working conditions and freedom from violence, universal social protection, and the right to organise and to collective bargaining. These measures should be extended to regulate operations of transnational corporations and their supply chains, Also necessary is a challenge to discriminatory social norms that currently support occupational segregation with women predominately in the informal economy and underpaid sectors, leave them vulnerable to dismissal and insecure contracts, and limited representation in labour movements.

d) Increasing women's income, and control of income and assets

Substantial improvements are needed in the type and volume of social protection provision to achieve universal social protection provision. It is also crucial that women have control over their own income within households. Women's access to local markets and infrastructure and to inputs, credit, collectives, and relevant skills training including financial literacy also needs to be addressed. Meanwhile legislation is needed to protect women's inheritance rights and to stop the privatisation of communally owned land.

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² Drawing on the ILO definition, we consider 'decent work' to include 4 pillars: 1) Creating Jobs –2) Guaranteeing rights at work 3) Extending social protection ; and 4) Promoting social dialogue