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JUBILEE DEBT CAMPAIGN

Realising women's rights

The role of public debt in Africa

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Public debt and its servicing are a particular problem for the African continent, undermining the ability of governments to meet their commitments on gender equality and the promotion of women's rights. The costs of servicing this debt are disproportionately borne by women, while the funds borrowed are rarely spent in ways that prioritise women's rights. If borrowed and spent wisely, public borrowing could have a role to play in maximising the resources available to governments to promote gender equality. Part of the problem is that, despite the importance of decisions around public debt and its gendered impact, women's collective voices are not included in the decision-making processes on public debt.

The answer lies partially in reform of the global financial system, ending the dominance of lenders in setting the rules—and leading to a reduction in the level of debt servicing demanded and the creation of favourable terms for borrowing and debt relief. In addition, efforts should be made to ensure that new debt is spent in ways that support commitments on gender equality and women's rights, and with the costs of servicing these loans shared more evenly. Such reforms are more likely to succeed with the democratisation of decision-making processes at all levels.

1. Introduction

Mobilising resources for gender equality and women's rights

The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with a standalone goal on gender equality and women's empowerment and the mainstreaming of gender-related targets throughout the framework, gives hope for renewed energy and efforts towards eradication of poverty and achieving gender equality. In Africa, the African Union has adopted various progressive instruments on gender equality such as the

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Maputo Protocol. Yet these commitments to a great extent remain unimplemented, not least due to lack of resources. The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights highlights that states have the duty to mobilise the maximum available resources to implement public policies for the progressive realisation of human rights, including the human rights of women and girls.[1] However, at the 58th Commission on the Status of Women in 2014, governments recognised insufficient investment and low prioritisation of gender equality as key problems facing the realisation of the human rights of women and girls.[2] The process of developing the 2030 Agenda also made it clear that each country is responsible for its own development and must raise the necessary resources to achieve its development goals. That process included the Third Conference on Financing for Development, which culminated in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda emphasising the need for domestic resource mobilisation.

In assessing progress on implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action, UN Women concluded that,

> *"Insufficient resources for targeted spending on gender equality, such as the implementation of laws, policies, national gender equality mechanisms and national action plans, as well as low levels of resources allocated to sectors such as social protection, health, education and water and sanitation represent a major challenge to the full implementation of the Platform for Action."*[3]

Borrowing is one way for governments to increase their resources, and so potentially make more available for gender equality and women's rights, but in practice debt service payments on unfavourable terms have meant reduced funds available for public expenditure. Meanwhile the borrowed money has usually not been used to promote gender equality or women's rights. The benefits of public debt to women's rights will thus depend in part on whether the debt was acquired to invest in areas with potential to advance gender equality and women's rights such as education, health including sexual and reproductive health and rights, social protection, or addressing violence against women and girls (VAWG), as well as whether women pay a disproportionate cost of its servicing.

The African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) hosted the first African Feminist Macroeconomic Academy in 2017 to provide capacity-building support to some of the women's rights organisations that make up its membership.[4] Participants at the workshop were particularly shocked to learn that developing countries pay higher interest rates on their debts to commercial lenders than developed countries do. While the USA has growing levels of debt, it has lower debt servicing costs. The workshop participants considered this a clear indication of how global inequalities are sustained, where impoverished countries have to operate on unfavourable terms which further reduce the resources available to them to eradicate poverty. GADN asked Dinah Musindarwezo, former Executive Director of FEMNET, what macroeconomic topic she felt it was important to cover from a women's rights perspective and she proposed public debt, in part because it is a development issue with a disproportionate impact on women and yet few women's rights organisations (WROs) in Africa are engaging around and contributing to shaping policies on public debt.

There is a lot of literature on implications of debt and its conditions; however, there is not much research and analysis on the gendered implications of public debt. This paper will therefore focus on exploring the impact of debt on women and girls in Africa and on the advancement of gender equality and women's rights. It will draw from the author's experience, as well as that of FEMNET, in women's rights, gender and macroeconomic policies. The paper will give specific recommendations for policymakers drawn from various policy spaces, building on solutions proposed by women's rights advocates in Africa and globally.

Increasing debt levels across sub-Saharan Africa

One of the ways countries raise necessary resources is to borrow both domestically and externally to cover their national budget deficits or to overcome emergency situations such as conflicts or natural disasters. Although all countries borrow, African countries are more at risk of debt crises than countries in other regions. For example, during the 1990s, most African countries were frozen out of the global financial system due to a protracted debt crisis. In 2005, when the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank launched the Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative for heavily indebted poor countries (HIPCs), 30 out of 36 countries under the HIPCs category were African.[5] Fears are emerging of a new wave of debt crisis on the continent. An IMF report published in March 2018 expressed concern about increasing debt burdens for low income countries, due in part to falling commodity prices making it harder to service debts. Debt levels have increased fastest in sub-Saharan Africa, with the region accounting for nine of the 12 countries that moved from "low/moderate risk" to "high risk/in debt distress".[6] Illicit financial flows and unfavourable debt terms and conditions have exacerbated the problem.[7]

Governments across Africa have traditionally borrowed from the so-called "official sector"—bilaterally from other governments and multilaterally through international financial institutions (IFIs) like the World Bank and IMF, often at reduced interest rates. Today, governments are increasingly borrowing from private companies or banks, based either overseas or domestically, with less favourable rates.[8] As debts grow, so too does the debt service that must be paid, including both principal repayment and interest. Debt servicing is a particular problem for low-income countries because of the high proportion of government revenue that it can absorb, leaving less for other public expenditure on much-needed services and programmes. According to analysis by the Jubilee Debt Campaign, average external debt servicing across the global South, as a proportion of government revenue, increased from 6.7 per cent to 10.7 per cent between 2014 and 2017.[9]

Debt also has implications for broader government policymaking. Various studies have shown that public debts as currently structured have worked against the development of heavily indebted countries, mainly due to the conditions attached to loans from the IFIs.[10] For example the IMF has called on governments to reduce fiscal deficits—usually by cutting public expenditure—and to borrow only for those projects that can be shown to have strong financial returns, traditionally meaning investment in physical infrastructure rather than social spending.[11] Lack of transparency by both lenders and creditors also undermines credibility, accountability and the potential of public debt to deliver for improved wellbeing and status of citizens, especially those that are already marginalised and discriminated against including women, girls, trans people and intersex people.

Box 1: Debt definitions

Debt relief tends to mean a change in the terms of a loan, which happens when a debtor is unable to repay. In the past, debt relief has been provided to governments by increasing the time in which they have to pay, reducing the rate of interest owed or reducing altogether the amount that has to be repaid (also termed **debt cancellation**).

Debt service is the amount of money needed to make repayments on both the principal (initial amount borrowed) and any interest payments.

Conditionality describes the process whereby lenders attach policy changes as conditions on loans, particularly if they are given with low interest payments. The IMF has been particularly criticised for forcing governments to implement policy measures such as structural adjustment or austerity that hurt the poorest and most marginalised people, in order to restore economies to debt sustainability.

Public debt is debt owed by governments and public authorities, or guaranteed by a central government. It can be owed to other governments, international institutions, companies and banks, or private individuals.

2. Does public borrowing benefit women?

In analysing the impact of debt on women and their rights, it is key to understand what countries borrow *for*. A quick review of external debt acquired by African countries from the World Bank is indicative of wider lending patterns and shows that the dominant sectors for which African countries borrow are physical infrastructure (especially roads), agriculture and natural resources. A few countries also borrow for social protection, education, health and addressing violence against women and girls (VAWG).[12]

The section below provides a gender analysis for two of these sectors—agriculture and physical infrastructure—as well as an examination of a project directly addressing VAWG. Investment in both agriculture and physical infrastructure could potentially promote women's rights; however, existing structural inequalities mitigate against this and need to be addressed within the design of funded projects.

Borrowing for agriculture

African countries such as Mozambique, Ghana, Angola, Malawi and Kenya have borrowed for projects and programmes to enhance their agriculture sectors. These loans mainly focus on commercialising agriculture, increasing productivity and building capacities of public and private agricultural service providers.[13] Although agriculture as a sector has the potential to empower women in terms of both improving food security and boosting their income, discrimination against women in agriculture has undermined this potential. According to the African Development Bank, women make up more than 50 per cent of the agricultural labour force in sub-Saharan Africa, producing 80 per cent of Africa's food.[14] Yet, women only own between 1 and 5 per cent of the land they farm, thus lacking control and ownership of a crucial resource they need to sustain their livelihoods and those of their families. Commercialisation and increased productivity focus do not necessarily lead to women's increased incomes, and if their incomes increase, women may still lack control over those earnings relative to their fathers, brothers or husbands in the household due to existing gender discrimination and power imbalances between men and women.[15]

What is more, commercialisation and increased productivity often mean expanding the triple burden of unpaid care work, predominantly done by women, who must grow food for consumption and cook for their families as well as grow cash crops for sale. Borrowing for agriculture is therefore not beneficial to women in its current state, even though they are the main actors in the agriculture sector, because the projects funded by borrowing fail to consider and prioritise issues affecting women or to carry a gender analysis of the agriculture sector. Although agriculture is critical to Africa's development, this development cannot be considered sustainable for all due to systematic and structural issues like gender-discriminatory norms and power imbalances that deny women the right to own and control land. In addition, the projects do not address the unpaid care work that comes with farming.[16] Borrowing for agriculture has also failed to yield the promised poverty reduction because it ignores international structural inequalities in the global food production value chain where African countries continue to sell raw produce at low prices.[17] If this continues, this will mean that borrowing will not support African countries to commit the maximum available resources to achieving the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including Goal 5 on gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls.

Borrowing for physical infrastructure

Infrastructure-focused borrowing tends to centre on physical infrastructure projects like improving transport, especially through road construction. Improved road systems have the potential to improve women's wellbeing and livelihoods if they lead to easier access to facilities most used by women such as hospitals and health care centres or local markets; however, this is frequently not the case.[18] For example, Kenya borrowed from the World Bank to fund its construction of the Northern Corridor and the Tanzania–Kenya–Sudan road corridor, whose main purpose is to link factories to the markets of the capital cities—thus primarily serving the needs of factory owners not local women producers.[19] The physical infrastructure sector primarily employs men as a result of socially determined gender roles. The few women employed on road construction projects are more likely to do the lowest paying jobs, such as sweeping and cleaning roads.[20]

Borrowing to address violence against women and girls

Uganda is among few countries that have borrowed for projects to address VAWG. Almost all African countries have some sort of national law or policy to address VAWG.[21] Yet these issues are often under-funded or funded from external grants thereby delaying needed progress. UN Women statistics show that one in every three women globally has experienced physical or sexual violence in their life time. In Uganda, VAWG is even more entrenched with more than half of all women at 56 per cent having experienced violence at least once since the age of 15, mostly by a current or former intimate partner.[22]

The funds borrowed for Uganda's VAWG project focused on prevention through changing social norms, strengthening referral systems, strengthening national coordination mechanisms and developing a curriculum for training police officers on confronting VAWG. This is a crucial project that addresses issues affecting Ugandan women, like the lack of gender-sensitive knowledge and understanding by police to handle VAWG—a problem we see not just in Uganda but across various countries on the African continent.

By borrowing to implement a programme on reducing VAWG, Uganda provides a good example of how public debt can be used to promote gender equality and women's rights. This is a step in the right direction, but its success will depend on employing a feminist analysis and collaborating with women's rights organisations, networks and movements with diverse experience and knowledge working on similar issues. Any VAWG-focused project must pay attention to power imbalances and oppressive patriarchal structures that perpetuate VAWG in the first place in order to address root causes and enact meaningful change.

Investment in social infrastructure

Government spending in education, health and care services is a valuable way of promoting gender equality—it increases the supply of decent jobs for women, improves services and reduces women's disproportionate unpaid care burden. However, many governments and lenders like the IMF still think that it is preferable to incur debt to invest in physical infrastructure like roads, in the belief that this better supports economic growth in the long term. New research however shows that investing in *social* infrastructure like care, health and education will also benefit growth by creating and maintaining a productive workforce.[23] A recent report by the International Trade Union Confederation also showed that investment in social infrastructure in emerging economies, including South Africa, would increase jobs for women and reduce their unpaid care burden. At the same time, it will also increase the tax governments could collect and thus make it more feasible for them to repay their debts.[24]

In sum, the potentially positive impact of public debt on women and girls has been severely limited by the nature of borrowing and lending. As it stands, borrowing fails to address structural issues affecting African countries and the majority of their citizens, especially women and girls. There is a clear need to engage women and their organisations in the process of negotiating loans and designing the projects that are funded. Gender equality and women's rights issues remain low or missing on the priority list and, when they do feature, they lack a feminist analysis that would ensure that they truly achieve objectives of realising gender equality and women's rights.

3. The cost of public debt

The pressure of debt servicing, and associated loan conditions, reduces resources for public services, undermines indebted countries' policy environment and often leads to regressive tax policies. This section will discuss how these three components impact on gender equality and women's and girls' rights.

The impact of debt servicing on public service provision

Since debt servicing is deducted from public resources, it means that high cost of debt servicing takes away badly needed resources for African countries to cover public services such as health (including sexual and reproductive health services), education, social protection and care services. Following advocacy from civil society organisations, African governments have recognised the importance of increased expenditure on public social services and made policy commitments to increase expenditure in the health and education sectors—under the Abuja Declaration, African governments committed to spend 15 per cent of GDP on health, and the Dakar Commitment saw them devote at least 9 per cent of GDP to education—however, these commitments have largely not been met.[25]

Failure to provide these services has a disproportionate impact on women and girls, particularly those living in poverty who cannot afford private services.[26] As a result, sub-Saharan Africa still has the widest gap between girls' and boys' education rates in both primary and secondary education.[27] For example, in 2012, sub-Saharan Africa had over half of the world's out-of-school children at 33 million, of whom 56 per cent were girls.[28] Africa also presents the lowest coverage of antenatal care services, where only 43 per cent of individuals are able to access the four recommended medical visits and less than half of the births are attended by skilled personnel.[29] Half of deliveries in sub-Saharan Africa took place without appropriate medical care in 2012.[30]

A concrete example of the high cost of debt servicing on countries' ability to provide public services—and therefore their failure to fulfil human rights obligations—is Chad, where debt payment absorbed 85 per cent of its oil revenues in 2014, thus drastically reducing the amount spent on health and education. The resulting debt crisis has left schools and hospitals non-functional, giving rise to workers' strikes against such austerity policies in 2018.[31] The gendered implications of this situation are many, including the fact that when the health sector is too weak to care for and treat the sick, it is the women who substitute for these services and provide care for free. This care, however, is not free for the women concerned—they pay by losing time they would have used for paid work, education or leisure, with detrimental effects on their wellbeing, status and livelihoods.

The problem is clear. As the UN Secretary General's 20-year review of the Beijing Platform for Action concluded,

> *"There continues to be chronic underinvestment in gender equality, a persistent problem that has been exacerbated as a result of austerity measures adopted in many countries in the post-crisis context".*[32]

The impact of loan conditions on the policy environment

Both debt acquisition and debt relief can come with conditionalities from lenders, by which developing countries must abide—and that undermine their ability to make development policy decisions in favour of their citizens. This was the case especially for countries under the HIPC initiative. Conditionalities included forced privatisation and reduction in public expenditures in crucial sectors such as education, health and social protection, all of which have a disproportionate impact on women as demonstrated above.

Donors and lenders, especially multilateral institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, continue to attach conditions to their loans; in fact, evidence shows that there has been little respite in the number and severity of IMF conditions in particular.[33] Moreover, this myriad of IMF conditions still constrains governments' ability to promote gender equality.[34] Civil society organisations around the world have protested against these conditions.[35] In Jordan recently, one such protest led the government to drop a controversial tax bill promoted by the IMF.[36]

Regressive tax policy

In an effort to raise revenues, in part to service their debts, countries frequently resort to regressive tax collection methods such as value-added tax (VAT), which has a disproportionate impact on women.[37] That is, socially determined gender roles dictate that women use the majority of the income in their control to pay for consumable products such as food (like rice, sugar, milk and salt), school supplies, medicines, children's clothes and sanitary pads for girls.[38]

Debt servicing, debt relief conditionalities and global inequalities in global financial infrastructure thus profoundly affected African countries' ability to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by the target date of 2015.[39] If these obstacles are not rectified, the terms of debt will also affect countries' ability to achieve the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, including the gender-specific goals and targets.

4. Civil society engagement

Women as citizens have a right to hold their leaders accountable on any actions that will affect them or future generations. In assessing progress on the Beijing Platform for Action, UN Women reports that,

> *"Women's participation is of critical importance, both as an issue of justice and equality and because the active presence of women can put gender-specific concerns on the agenda and monitor the implementation of policies and programmes."*[40]

As seen above, issues of debt have a significant impact on women and girls and on the realisation of gender equality and women's rights. Women and girls, along with their organisations, must therefore actively engage on issues of debt from the stage of debt negotiation to project design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation. However, FEMNET has found that few African women's rights organisations work on public debt or wider macroeconomic issues.

Noting that women's collective voice is particularly absent in economic decision-making, another UN Women paper proposes that,

> *"Measures that promote democratization include improving the transparency and accountability of institutions that develop and implement macroeconomic policy; ensuring that information regarding budgets, tax policy, monetary policy, and macro policy is readily available and accessible; and strengthening the capacity of civil society and women's organizations to engage with*

macroeconomic policy through initiatives such as informal economy budgeting and gender-responsive budgeting."[41]

Research carried out by the African Forum and Network on Debt and Development, or AFRODAD, on domestic debt covering Kenya, Zambia, Malawi, Senegal and Ghana indicated that, although civil society organisations in all the researched countries were actively engaged in budget making and monitoring processes, their contribution to discussions on public debt was almost non-existent.[42] The report shows that public debt was the preserve of ministries of finance and national central banks. Reasons given for the lack of civil society participation included a scarcity of timely information on the issues and limited capacity among organisations to meaningfully engage in these debates. Another important component linked to women's rights organisations' meaningful engagement is limited civic space, related both to political environments and the lack of resources for their operations and policy influencing work.

For similar reasons, FEMNET found it crucial to start working on gender and macroeconomic policies with the aim of increasing interest and capacity of women's rights organisations to contribute meaningfully, with an anticipated result of women's rights organisations advocating for alternative macroeconomic policies that put women's human rights at the centre, including public debt and its impact on women and girls.

5. Recommendations

The high cost of debt servicing clearly stands in the way of existing government efforts to promote gender equality and women's rights, with the threat of yet another debt crisis for the African continent on the horizon. If well targeted, government borrowing could be part of a suite of options to maximise resources for gender equality, but too often borrowing plans fail to prioritise women's rights or provide for transparency and accountability. There is a need to address systemic global financial issues and power imbalances between the Global North and the Global South, including the way governments and financial institutions continue to perpetuate inequalities and reduce resources for the promotion of gender equality and women's rights. Below are recommendations for ensuring public debt is used as a tool to support governments in raising the needed resources and realising women's rights and gender equality, as enshrined in various policy commitments at all levels—national, regional and international.

1. **Reduce the cost of Africa's public debt and support African governments in mobilising domestic resources by improving the international legal framework for the prevention and resolution of debt crises.**

   Possible measures include:

   - The establishment of a multilateral legal framework for restructuring countries' debt burdens, with an institution independent of creditors and debtors to facilitate restructuring and assess the legitimacy of debt claims.
   - Finance and restructuring decisions by IFIs and national authorities should be guided by assessments of the sustainability of a country's debt stock that systematically consider countries' international human rights obligations and development commitments, including those on gender equality and women's rights.
   - The promotion of responsible sovereign lending and borrowing by all governments, in line with UNCTAD principles and codified into national legislation.[43]
   - The exposing and curbing of illicit financial flows through promotion of the 'ABC' of tax reform: automatic exchange of tax information, beneficial ownership transparency, and country-by-country reporting.[44]
   - The adoption of a legally binding UN treaty that holds multinational corporations accountable for their activities' impacts around the world.[45]
   - Nationally, the maximisation of available resources by governments for the promotion of women's rights through sustainable use of natural resources and progressive tax and fair trade policy.

2. **Ensure that new borrowing is invested in areas that promote women's rights.**

   Possible measures include:

   - Prioritisation of the financing and implementation of regional and international commitments on gender equality and women's rights as part of public borrowing strategies.
   - Gender analysis of all newly funded projects to ensure that gender-specific needs and interests are addressed in programme design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation.
   - Assessment of the potential benefits of new loans, based not only on the goal of economic growth but also on social and human development, equality and justice for all.

3. **Ensure the burden of debt servicing and loan conditionality does not fall disproportionately on marginalised women.**

   Possible measures include:

- Systematic inclusion by IFIs and national governments of human rights impact assessments—including a specific focus on the impact on the rights of women and girls—in the assessment of a country's debt sustainability and design of loan conditionality.
- Review of any cuts in public expenditure, or increases in tax revenue, as a result of debt servicing to ensure the burden does not fall disproportionately on women.

4. **Democratise decision-making on public debt, ensuring the participation of women's rights organisations**.

Possible measures include:

- National policies guiding borrowing and debt management that are developed with transparency and accountability, in consultation with all stakeholders specifically including women's rights organisations.
- Appropriate donor support to women's rights organisations so they can actively engage on issues of public debt and hold their governments to account.
- Parliamentary scrutiny and public disclosure of all government lending and borrowing.

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The Gender & Development Network (GADN) brings together expert NGOs, consultants, academics and individuals committed to working on gender, development and women's rights issues. Our vision is of a world where social justice and gender equality prevail and where all women and girls are able to realise their rights free from discrimination. Our goal is to ensure that international development policy and practice promotes gender equality and women's and girls' rights.

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