

**Towards feminist advocacy on macro-level economics**

**Report of a GADN-FEMNET workshop, July 2018**

**Introduction**

Macro-level economic decisions\* made by governments and international institutions have a profound impact on the way that society operates and how wealth and power are distributed. GADN, FEMNET and many of our colleagues have written extensively on the particular impact that these decisions can have on gender equality and women's rights—how they shape livelihoods, opportunities and access to rights for women and girls around the world. As in all advocacy work, however, there is a danger that we, as women's rights advocates, might focus too narrowly on our immediate objectives, losing sight of how they support our vision for a more just society. When it comes to macro-level economics, that risk is especially great given the distance between where we want to be and where we are now, and the way that we have to shape and constrain our language and arguments to be heard by the mainstream.

In that spirit, GADN and FEMNET created a space, in July 2018, where feminist advocates, primarily from the global North, could step back and consider how our work is contributing to longer-term goals—and whether it is truly transformative. Along the way, questions emerged about what makes our work feminist, how it is different from work that is not feminist, and how we could make it more feminist. To achieve the kind of change we really want to see, we also need to learn to work together better, reinforcing our shared messages and making space for, and amplifying, the voices of marginalised women. We work in different ways, on different issues, and from different perspectives and power bases, making *how* we work—and especially how we work with women's rights organisations (WROs)—an area of critical concern. We need to cultivate the kind of collaborations that support real change, amplify women's expertise and reject the extractive relations that so often characterise North-South partnerships. That is, with so much talk of really listening to WROs, are we really listening when it comes to what to campaign on and how, or just making our own campaigns more eye-catching or more fundable?

At a workshop called *A space for critical reflection: challenging and refining our asks on macro-level economic policy*, GADN's secretariat, members and allies were joined by Crystal Simeoni of FEMNET to ask tough questions about the way forward for feminist advocacy on macroeconomics. The event brought together a range of allies, partners and members to share their experiences and consider alternative macroeconomic futures, including a mix of academics, trade unionists, economic justice campaigners, and colleagues from global networks including AWID and the Global Alliance for Tax Justice.

**Macro-level thinking, learning and working: FEMNET's experience**

When the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) began its work on economic justice, it quickly became clear that women's lives were overwhelmingly relegated to the *micro* level: the household, the marketplace or the factory floor. As a network of 650 members in 46 countries across Africa, FEMNET works in pan-African and global policy spaces to amplify the voices African women and girls and filter information back to them in a continuous loop.<sup>1</sup> As such, FEMNET resolved to focus specifically on *macroeconomics* and gender inequality, an area that was (and remains) understudied. Macroeconomics is a field where the most fundamental questions are asked—about the relationship between the state and its citizens, about what the economy is for and who it should serve, about how we value work and social protection. Nonetheless, major gaps persist in our knowledge of what can be done to

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\* "Macro-level economic decisions" is a term coined by feminist economist Stephanie Seguino to encompass decent work and other macro-level policies beyond the traditionally narrower definition of macroeconomics.

change the status quo. More troubling still, there remains quite limited space for feminist voices in the discussion.

For FEMNET, it is clear that our neoliberal model of capitalism depends on inequality and subsidy from certain parts of society, as well as on the extractive relationships that create that inequality: imperialist and colonialist dynamics between the Global South and North on one hand, and the patriarchal structures that mobilise women's unpaid labour and care work on the other.<sup>2</sup> In Africa, the burden of inequality lies most heavily on women and girls, but—critically—even feminist advocates do not yet have the blueprints for viable alternative models. With the aim to challenge current frameworks and models and recreate models that are responsive and transformative in nature, FEMNET's own work revolves around four key areas:

- **Building the capacity of WROs and activists to articulate macro-level arguments:** FEMNET founded the African Feminist Macroeconomics Academy in 2017. Its mission is to build the capacity of African WROs to have a pan-African feminist analysis of macro-level economic policies.
- **Cross-sectional movement building:** It is important to ensure different movements intersect at a point. There is always more scope for feminist economists and the women's rights movement to speak to each other and FEMNET is doing work to ensure there are convenings and work that bring the two together.
- **Gendered knowledge production:** Information and knowledge to drive policy shifts regarding the intersection of women's rights and macro-level economics are largely lacking. FEMNET is advancing advocacy for governments to ensure certain data, such as time-use surveys, is resourced and produced, which in turn can inform advocacy asks. It is important to note that data that tells a story about women's lives is not just sex-disaggregated—it is also qualitative, asking who they are and what their experiences tell us. FEMNET wants women's rights advocates to reconsider their data collection frameworks and the purposes that data serves.
- **Presence in advocacy:** For FEMNET, doing feminist work on macroeconomics means straddling two policymaking worlds—mainstream financial spaces like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) as well as the African Finance Ministers Meetings, and (women's) rights-focused spaces like the Commission on the Status of Women and the High-Level Political Forum. It is important to bring a feminist analysis of macro-level economic narratives into these spaces.

As more and more actors—from grassroots women's groups to the UK Department for International Development (DFID) and the IMF—wade into gender equality and macroeconomics, the key challenge will be halting the instrumentalisation of economic justice for other goals. Talking about how women could create economic growth, given greater access to employment, may get us through the door in spaces like the IMF, but we lose meaning in our struggle for gender equality. We cannot let our point on the horizon stray toward profit and economic growth, losing sight of gender equality and women's rights as our ultimate ambitions.

Going forward, FEMNET is clear: feminists must be brave enough to reimagine goals and leave behind the desire for inclusion in a system known to be flawed. This will mean recognising that not all gender equality work is created equal, or is equally feminist, and that WROs are uniquely placed to offer a critical perspective and insights for a more transformative, sustainable model—if we can imagine it. Funding, as ever, is both fundamental and sorely lacking. Talk of women's rights may be everywhere, with Canada and Sweden declaring their foreign and development policies to be feminist, but Africa's WROs are not seeing the benefits. Rather, larger international non-governmental organisations (INGOs) are accessing the resources to mainstream gender into their broader development work. Financing the women's movement is more important than ever so that we can work together from the grassroots, hold each other to account, and ensure that our asks are driven by the demands and priorities of WROs.

### **The road ahead: challenges and trade-offs**

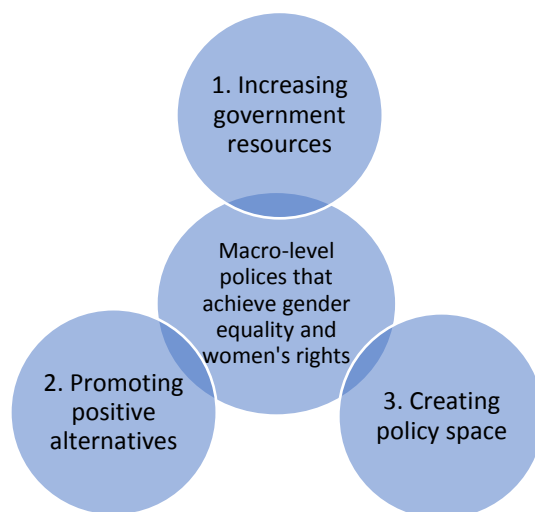
Feminists face multiple obstacles working at the macro level in terms of funding, data and sticking to our principles. Leveraging resources is an ever-present problem for gender equality and women's rights work, and this takes a particular toll on smaller WROs in terms of capacity to apply for resources and report to funders. It also speaks directly to the substance of macro-level economic justice work, as available funds for gender equality and other progressive social goals are restricted by illicit financial flows, austerity policies and low taxation models.<sup>3</sup> While we often feel we are fighting over crumbs in terms of resourcing, there is undoubtedly more that we can do in terms of understanding and politicising the macroeconomic policies and decision-making that make this situation possible.

Similarly, women's rights advocates face constant challenges in terms of data—that is, generating the kind of disaggregated data that exposes inequalities and supports gender-transformative work, but also avoiding the technocratic fallacy of needing the right kind of data to “prove” our case for gender justice. Workshop attendees noted that we need to rethink data frameworks, making sure we stay focused on what we actually want to change and asking questions about who is collecting data—and to what end. What we need is data that tells a story, allowing us to challenge the quantitative focus of macroeconomics with a focus on women's lives in their diversity.

Finally, it is clear from collective experience that working in macro-level spaces means accepting compromises—or, conversely, choosing not to engage in those spaces at all. This can mean learning to speak the language of institutions like the IMF or multinational corporations, in order to gain entry and a seat at the table where key decisions are made, but the risks include losing sight of core principles and co-optation of our language and objectives. To that end, doing gender equality work at the macro level means balancing complex and sometimes contradictory tasks: negotiating entry to new spaces, even where we are not expressly invited or welcome; disrupting those spaces with our own narratives and data; and pushing back against instrumentalisation and the separation of empowerment from rights.

### **Mapping feminist macroeconomic work**

Advocates of gender equality through macro-level economics may be small in number, but our work covers a broad range of topics and areas. In our mapping of this work, three interlocking areas emerged. Much of our work is designed to increase the resources available to governments for work on gender equality and the promotion of women's rights, but to make this effective governments need to be clear how to spend this money in promoting alternative policies, and even if they are willing – they also need to be free of the constraints that restrict the promotion of such policies.



## **1. Increasing resources**

*Much of our advocacy is aimed at enabling governments in the Global South to maximise their available resources for gender equality and women's rights. We do this on a number of topics, with a number of objectives:*

- Debt: reduce the cost of debt servicing through debt relief and debt cancellation.<sup>4</sup>
- Illicit financial flows: require financial transparency from governments and transnational companies (TNCs) through the automatic exchange of tax information between jurisdictions, the provision of public registries of the “real” owners of companies, and country-by-country reporting of TNC accounts to reveal where they make their profit.
- International tax justice: support the establishment of a convention to set minimum standards for “neighbourly” tax and transparency behaviour.
- Progressive domestic fiscal policy: support the maximisation of available resources by governments for the promotion of women's rights, for example by using tax policies that do not undermine gender equality.
- Infrastructural mega-projects: ask who they serve and if funds could be better used to benefit more (and more marginalised) people.
- Private investment: take a more evidence based and critical approach to the increased partnerships between governments and corporations, and challenge the expansion of the role of private entities in influencing development policy.

## **2. Promoting alternatives**

*Even if governments have the resources, they do not always use these to promote gender equality and women's rights. There are a number of policy areas and practical ways they can do this, including:*

- Decent work: promote and protect labour regulations like collective bargaining and freedom of association, ratify International Labour Organisation (ILO) conventions, ensure social and legal protection covers workers in the informal economy, and support an ILO convention on gender-based violence in the workplace.<sup>5</sup>

- Unpaid care: recognise, reduce and redistribute unpaid care and domestic work, primarily through greater provision of publicly funded care services.<sup>6</sup>
- Investment in social infrastructure: increase the quality and quantity of jobs available to women in the public sector through investment in social infrastructure, thereby also reducing unpaid care burdens and increasing the quality of care provided.
- Gender-responsive budgeting: implement gender-responsive budgeting across all government policy areas including revenue and expenditure.
- Maintaining public spending: question the need for austerity, and make sure the brunt of cuts is not disproportionately borne by women.
- Working sustainably: take environmental destruction, climate change and the depletion of natural resources into account.
- Universal social protection: ensure that everyone has access to a minimum standard of living.
- Role of the state: reinforce the state as the principal duty-bearer for the rights and wellbeing of its people. Resist the narrative that we must rely on the private sector for development financing or voluntary standards and codes of conduct.
- Movement building: support WROs and forge alliances with trade unions and other progressive movements that share our goals.
- Access to markets: support women where they are to achieve economic justice.
- Land rights and asset ownership: ensure women have equal access to and control over the assets in their households, families, communities and businesses.
- Question the goals of economic activity: ask what ends the economy exists to serve—rights and justice, or growth and profit—and for whom? These questions underpin all of our work.

### **3. Creating policy space**

*Even with the resources and knowledge of policy alternatives, governments do not always make the right choices. At present, there is substantial external pressure on governments to make macro-level decisions that can undermine gender equality. If governments are to use their resources wisely more positive pressure is needed, while reducing the negative international constraints on government policy space:*

- International commitments: pressure governments to make policy decisions in line with their commitments to the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women, the Sustainable Development Goals and other international agreements on gender equality and women's rights.<sup>7</sup>
- Women's collective voice in decision making: expand, protect and promote the role of WROs in consultations and policymaking, including giving them sufficient and appropriate funds to participate meaningfully.
- Debt: promote responsible borrowing and lending, including gender impact assessments for all new loans taken by governments.
- Conditionality: remove conditions by international financial institutions (IFIs) that are tied to official development assistance and debt relief, including those that constrain governments' ability to generate tax revenue.
- Corporate influence: support the United Nations' binding treaty on transnational corporations and human rights, and call for an end to investor-state dispute settlement mechanisms.<sup>8</sup>
- Trade agreements: conduct ex ante and ex post gender impact assessments, and ensure sufficient policy space is maintained for policies that protect and promote women's rights.<sup>9</sup>
- Backlash: resist the closing down of policy space and the rise of regressive political movements that seek to roll back gains in gender equality and women's rights.

- Political economy analysis: analyse how economic decision-making is governed, how to increase democratic accountability and respect for the social contract, and how funds are allocated—and diverted.<sup>10</sup>

These three areas are intertwined and mutually supporting: no one of them can work properly without attention to the other two. That is, raising government resources will be meaningless if governments then make poor choices on spending; likewise, efforts to persuade governments to spend wisely on gender equality will be thwarted if international rules and power imbalances constrain them from following their choices through. Without resources, even the best-intentioned governments are limited in what they are able to achieve. Working across these three areas, and joining forces with allies working in each, can only strengthen the impact of our work. Interestingly, our survey of the field shows that much of the work done on macro-level economics by feminists to date focuses on increasing resources (through tax, debt or trade campaigns) —without necessarily linking that goal to the other two of promoting alternatives or creating policy space.

### **How can we ensure our advocacy achieves transformative change?**

Before asking how to achieve the change we want, participants called for an intersectional understanding of what is meant by “transformative” that considers women both individually and collectively; accounts for diversity in terms of age, race, disability, geographic location and class, amongst other things; and examines how power works in our economic system, up to and including how our societies have been structured to fit economic models. Without this kind of vision of who women are and what their diverse needs are, “transformative” change will remain elusive.

For many of us, creating real change means managing the tensions of working within the system that we have, which can even include our own organisations and institutions. In our work with IFIs and other explicitly economic spaces, gender equality advocates face constant trade-offs in the name of keeping the doors open to mainstream spaces, even while we challenge their instrumental approach to gender. Participants highlighted that their most troubling questions deal with deciding when and where to draw the line—that is, when does engagement with IFIs turn into complicity in harmful processes? Another dilemma faced by many in the Global North particularly, is when is it better to step aside so that better-equipped or more affected people can speak instead? When are we perpetuating power imbalances between the Global South and the North (or even a broken development model) in our own organisations and across the sector—and how can we put an end to it?

Attendees also expressed frustration at the lack of feminist arguments in macro-level spaces. This is partly a problem of framing: economics is so often understood as technocratic and gender-neutral, making areas like taxation, trade agreements and monetary policy appear distant from issues like unpaid care or funding for WROs. Gender equality advocates know, however, that the connections are clear and demonstrable and we need to demonstrate the links. Another pertinent issue is that gender justice must be a thorough-going project, not a box-ticking exercise. It is also a problem of funding structures, which privilege project-based and short-term models over incremental, complex work that is politically smart over the long term.

Ultimately, these concerns raise important questions for our ways of working—within our own organisations, across the sector and around the world. As gender equality and women’s rights advocates, we must be willing to ask ourselves:

- **Which spaces are worth engaging in?** When do we participate, when do we opt out and when do we create a new space? This is a question of *if* to engage but also *how*: should we speak the IFIs’ language to be taken seriously, or would it be more effective to challenge their position from the beginning?

- **How do we identify the enablers and the multipliers?** Can we ensure that we put our effort into influencing those factors that act as catalysts and foment change through knock-on effects, rather than focusing on short term gains or quick wins that are not ultimately gender transformative?
- **How do those of us in the North ensure that WROs in the Global South are heard?** Can we ensure that this happens in a non-extractive, non-instrumentalist way? One way to start is to ask ourselves, in five years' time, how will we have invested in our partners? We should focus on rethinking priorities, opening doors for partners in a co-creative way and sharing stories of women's experiences to disrupt the focus on data. Part of our package of advocacy work as INGOs should always be to support the capacity of WROs.
- **What new partnerships can we forge?** Programming staff can give us better links to WROs on the ground. Feminist and heterodox economists can help ground our work in research and, in turn, we can translate their data for policy audiences. Spaces like academic conferences and communities of practice can give rise to less confrontational, more productive conversations with governments and institutions by getting them out of their closed spaces. We can also work across disciplines within civil society, collaborating amongst human rights, economic justice, development, humanitarian work and peacebuilding, as well as working together with trade unions and workers' rights movements.
- **How can the development community be bolder?** How can we introduce better power analysis, including an assessment of colonialism in terms of borders and migration, relations between the Global North and South, and white saviour complexes? How can we hold ourselves to account in terms of our own hiring practices, partnerships and funding?
- **How can we keep hope alive?** Documenting and celebrating small wins, finding champions within institutions, building networks and relationships, and supporting WROs in global advocacy spaces are all key here.

### **Carving out space for alternatives**

Doing feminist macro-level economic advocacy means taking the time to do it right—avoiding planting the seeds for co-optation, choosing the right narratives and framings of issues, providing sustained core funding and pursuing locally-owned approaches. FEMNET is concerned with *stirring the African pot*, or building an understanding of critical issues through an African lens that has regional legitimacy and comes from the day-to-day experiences and needs of FEMNET's members and their constituencies. To play a supportive role, development actors should focus on bringing WROs up to speed on capacity and, importantly, reject the impetus to move ahead without them if they do not yet have the knowledge or facility.

The three-pronged approach detailed here (increasing resources, promoting alternatives and creating policy space) points to co-creative processes and flattened structures that foreground listening, solidarity and upholding each other in keeping with true feminist principles. Moving forward, what we really need is hope—and the confidence that we *are* bringing changes, slowly but surely, to our organisations, our sector and our macroeconomic model.

**Learn more**

- [Why macroeconomic policy matters for gender equality](#), UN Women policy brief no. 4, 2015
- [Gender equality and macro-level economics: recommendations for action](#), GADN briefing, 2018
- [Stepping up: How governments can contribute to women's economic empowerment](#), GADN briefing, 2017
- [Pan-African Women's Conference on 2030 Agenda and Africa Agenda 2063](#), FEMNET, 2017
- [Informal is the new normal: improving the lives of workers at risk of being left behind](#), Overseas Development Institute working paper 530, 2018
- [The Bogota Declaration on Tax Justice for Women's Rights 2017](#), Global Alliance for Tax Justice, 2017
- [Wrong prescription: the impact of austerity measures on the right to health in Spain](#), Amnesty International, 2018
- [Investing in care in emerging economies—jobs and inclusive growth](#), International Trade Union Confederation, 2017
- [Campaign toolkit: stop gender-based violence at work—support an ILO convention](#), International Trade Union Confederation, 2018
- [No time to rest: women's lived experiences of balancing paid work and unpaid care work](#), Deeptha Chopra and Elena Zambelli, Institute of Development Studies, 2017
- [Gender-just macroeconomics: engaging the IMF and World Bank](#), Bretton Woods Project, 2016
- [Unpaid care: why and how to invest](#), Oxfam GB, 2018
- [Illicit financial flows: why we should claim these resources for gender, economic and social justice](#), Association for Women's Rights in Development, 2017
- [Ending gender inequality in older age: guidance for EU development policy](#), HelpAge International, 2015
- [Not just lip service: advancing women's economic justice in industrialisation](#), ActionAid UK, 2018
- [Tax Justice Focus 10.1 \(The Gender Issue\)](#), 2015
- [Rights and realities: a briefing on women and the economy](#), Womankind Worldwide, 2017
- [Infrastructure: a game-changer for women's economic empowerment](#), ICED submission to UN High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment working groups, 2017
- [Debt and women](#), ActionAid UK 'Debt and...' briefing 07, 2007
- [The centrality of sexual and reproductive health and rights to achieving women's economic empowerment](#), International Planned Parenthood Federation, 2017
- [The organising challenges presented by the increased casualisation of women's work](#), Trades Union Congress, 2016
- [Taxing men and women: why gender is crucial for a fair tax system](#), Christian Aid, 2014

*This workshop report was compiled by Megan Daigle.*

<sup>1</sup> FEMNET. 2018a. "Get serious about fighting corruption" FEMNET tells the African Union'. 22 June.

<http://femnet.org/2018/06/21/get-serious-about-fighting-corruption-femnet-tells-the-african-union/>; FEMNET. 2018b. 'AU CSW62 Africa ministerial outcome document'. <http://femnet.org/2018/03/02/au-csw62-africa-ministerial-outcome-document/>

<sup>2</sup> GADN. 2017a. 'Sharing the load: unpaid care work and women's economic empowerment'. London: GADN.

<http://gadnetwork.org/gadn-resources/2017/2/7/sharing-the-load-unpaid-care-work-and-womens-economic-empowerment>

<sup>3</sup> FEMNET. 2018c. Fight corruption: finance gender equality. Nairobi: FEMNET. <http://femnet.org/2018/06/21/policy-brief-fight-corruption-finance-gender-equality/>; FEMNET. 2017a. *What are the gender dimensions of IFFs? Strengthening African women's engagement and contribution*. Nairobi: FEMNET. <http://femnet.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/07/FEMNET.-Full-Research-paper-on-Gender-Dimensions-of-IFFs-21.7.2017.pdf>; GADN. 2018a. 'The impact of economic reforms and austerity measures on women's



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human rights: GADN submission'. London: GADN. <http://gadnetwork.org/gadn-resources/2018/4/4/the-impact-of-economic-reforms-and-austerity-measures-on-womens-human-rights-gadn-submission>

<sup>4</sup> GADN and FEMNET. 2018. 'Realising women's rights: the role of public debt in Africa'. London: GADN.

<http://gadnetwork.org/gadn-resources/2018/8/9/realising-womens-rights-the-role-of-public-debt-in-africa>

<sup>5</sup> FEMNET. 2018d. 'STOP violence at work. Full stop'. 24 May. <http://femnet.org/2018/05/24/stop-violence-at-work-fullstop/>

<sup>6</sup> GADN 2017a.

<sup>7</sup> GADN. 2017b. 'Stepping up: how governments can contribute to women's economic empowerment'. London: GADN.

<http://gadnetwork.org/gadn-resources/2017/2/7/stepping-up-how-governments-can-contribute-to-womens-economic-empowerment>

<sup>8</sup> GADN and AWID. 2017. 'Corporate power and women's economic justice—results from a joint webinar and recommendations for CSW61'. London: GADN. <http://gadnetwork.org/gadn-resources/2017/3/8/corporate-power-and-womens-economic-justice-results-from-a-joint-webinar-and-recommendations-for-csw61>

<sup>9</sup> GADN. 2017c. 'Making trade work for gender equality-1'. London: GADN. <http://gadnetwork.org/gadn-resources/2017/7/4/making-trade-work-for-gender-equality-1>

<sup>10</sup> GADN. 2018a. 'Putting gender into political economy analysis: why it matters and how to do it'. London: GADN.

<http://gadnetwork.org/gadn-resources/2018/5/9/putting-gender-in-political-economy-analysis-why-it-matters-and-how-to-do-it>