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# Transforming Women's Work: POLICIES FOR AN INCLUSIVE ECONOMIC AGENDA



**AFL-CIO**

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## **Acknowledgments**

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# Introduction

IN THE PAST 30 YEARS, important gains have been made in gender equality and poverty reduction, yet significant barriers to the full realization of women's economic, social and cultural rights remain. This is particularly true in the realm of work, both paid and unpaid, one of the most important interfaces between women's economic empowerment, economic justice and sustainable development.

To secure women's rights and economic empowerment, women's participation in labor markets must be transformed. Economic policy is a critical tool that can create or remove structural barriers to the realization of women's rights, including addressing inequities in caring duties in the home, and promote or hinder broadly shared growth. Labor and community organizing can shift power relationships, change

working conditions, and address barriers to full and equal participation in the labor market.

Policy makers, women's rights advocates, employers and the workers who fuel economic systems all have a critical role to play in ensuring that women's rights, gender equality and access to decent work become fundamental goals of economic policy making. To grapple with how to shift policy priorities, create an enabling environment for social organizing and ensure an inclusive, responsive process, the AFL-CIO, the Rutgers University Center for Women's Global Leadership and the Solidarity Center convened a group of experts to discuss women's economic empowerment, with a focus on macroeconomic policy and labor rights. This briefing paper is informed by the rich exchange among advocates and economists who participated.<sup>1</sup>



Teacher in Palestine. *Solidarity Center/Alaa Salih*

# I. Gendered Effects of the Current Economic Policy Framework

ECONOMIC POLICY too often adheres to a vision of development that assumes maximizing economic performance through free-market capitalism automatically will result in equitable growth. That model ignores the structural barriers women face, and often works at cross-purposes with gender equality and other human rights.

## Macroeconomic Policy

Macroeconomic policies affect the operation of the economy as a whole, shaping the availability and distribution of resources. These policies both reflect and determine key economic, political and social considerations. This includes the level of demand, growth trajectories, key prices such as exchange and interest rates, foreign exchange reserves, reserves in the banking sector and the regulation of the financial sector. Monetary policy also impacts the level of employment and the utilization of productive resources.

Nominally gender-neutral macroeconomic policies implemented under the neoliberal development paradigm reflect and reinforce gender biases. Contractionary monetary policy, which prioritizes the reduction of inflation to extremely low levels over supporting employment creation or addressing structural socioeconomic barriers, disproportionately affects women and other marginalized groups.<sup>2</sup> Women are particularly hard hit by austerity policies, implemented in many countries in times of economic crisis, often at the prompting by international financial institutions.<sup>3</sup> Austerity policies cut public employment in areas like health care and education, where women are often a majority of workers,<sup>4</sup> and cut social services and infrastructure like child care and health care

that women rely on.<sup>5</sup> A 2010 study that surveyed 56 developing countries found that a full two-thirds were responding to the 2008 economic crisis by cutting areas of the budget that had significant effects on gender equality, including education, health care and subsidies on food, fuel and basic items.<sup>6</sup> In Mexico and Honduras, women workers accounted for more than 70% of layoffs resulting from the 2008 crisis.<sup>7</sup>

Macroeconomic policy making must identify and eliminate gender biases. Gender-responsive budgeting embeds a critical analysis of the gendered impacts of resource allocation, which not only reduces unintended consequences, but prevents governments from silently deprioritizing women's rights.<sup>8</sup> While all states face budget constraints and competing priorities, research demonstrates that public investments in physical and social infrastructure designed to alleviate gender inequality and poverty can result in greater productive capacity and stimulate growth.<sup>9</sup> Expansionary fiscal policy is sustainable when it is focused on holistic economic investment.<sup>10</sup>

## Trade Policy

Traditional approaches to trade policy have focused on promoting pro-business regulatory schemes, incentivizing foreign investment and enhancing low-wage, low-skill export sectors. This has been a global driver of precarious, unsafe employment for women, rather than jobs with fair pay or good working conditions. In many countries, trade and trade policy has not produced the promised benefits for women workers as a route out of poverty. For example, a recent analysis of major apparel-exporting countries found that wages for garment workers fell in real terms between 2001 and 2011.<sup>11</sup>

Neoliberal trade policies often simultaneously tout weakening labor regulations and lowering or eliminating tariffs to drive export-led growth. Income from tariffs traditionally has been a major source of revenue in developing countries, and the gains from increased exports have not offset losses, particularly as more countries compete with one another in low-wage, low-skill sectors. In many countries, overproduction increased unemployment, and growth stagnated as public budgets shrank.<sup>12</sup> Further, modern trade and investment agreements often narrow how governments legislate in the public interest and empower transnational corporations and wealthy investors to challenge policies that limit profits.<sup>13</sup> As economists Radhika Balakrishnan and Diane Elson have concluded, “[f]ailing to meaningfully regulate the private sector has resulted in increased inequality, precarious work, tax avoidance and evasion, systemic financial risk, environmental degradation, and failure to realize human rights.”<sup>14</sup>

Other economic policies also impact gender equality, including tax policies that reduce corporate obligations, which weaken a government’s ability to provide public services and affects women who are disproportionately reliant on these programs.<sup>15</sup> In Britain, changes to direct taxes and social security introduced by the government since 2010 has raised 26 billion pounds, 85% of which was taken from women.<sup>16</sup> Further, macroeconomic, trade and other policies that ignore gender also

generally ignore the structural barriers and social discrimination that affect other vulnerable groups, including racial, ethnic, sexual or religious minorities. Women who also belong to these other marginalized groups may be particularly affected by policies that ignore or exacerbate social disadvantages.

Economic policies that create and reinforce disparity between men and women persist, even though gender inequality is linked to overall economic inequality and reduced, less sustainable growth over time.<sup>17</sup> Yet it is also true that in the short term, certain forms of gender inequality, such as wage gaps between men and women, can create higher growth, by reducing the cost of women’s paid labor.<sup>18</sup> Since the operation of many economies remains biased in favor of short-term profits over long-term sustainability, it carries an inherent gender bias that perpetuates unequal economic and social systems. Both men and women suffer when rigid hierarchies block paths to human achievement and long-term, sustainable development.

There is a direct link between growing income inequality and declining unionization,<sup>19</sup> and the equalizing benefits of union membership are often larger for women than for men. For example, union women in the UK earn on average 30% more than nonunion women and have more paid leave, while union men make only 7% more than nonunion men.<sup>20</sup> In Canada, trade union women earn just more than \$6.65 per hour more than nonunion women.<sup>21</sup> Economic policies that empower corporations and weaken the fundamental right to form labor unions impact women’s ability to negotiate a fair and equitable distribution of economic growth.

Traditional macroeconomic and trade policies ignore structural barriers that impact women’s ability to enter and compete fairly in the labor market, reinforcing unequal outcomes.<sup>22</sup> These include the ways in which discrimination and other social norms converge with an employer’s economic power to lower women’s pay both absolutely and relative to men, and funnel and segregate women into low-wage and low-status labor markets; the growth of precarious work in the modern economy; and the heavy, hidden and disproportionate burden of unpaid labor on women’s income, opportunities and well being, discussed further in Sections II and III.



Crane operator in Georgia. *Solidarity Center/Lela Mepharishvili*

# II. Labor Force Participation, the Gender Pay Gap, Occupational Segregation and Unpaid Work

WOMEN'S WORK is a complex web of activity that encompasses both paid and unpaid work, in the home and outside it. It is essential for the survival and advancement of individual women, and their families and communities.

## Labor Force Participation

Women's labor force participation is an important measure of social and economic well-being. With the right conditions—fair wages, safe working conditions, opportunities for training and advancement, the right

to organize and bargain collectively—paid employment helps women achieve economic independence and enhances their agency and social mobility.

Only about 50% of women are in the paid, formal labor force, compared with almost three-fourths of men, and the overall increase in women's labor force participation has stagnated.<sup>23</sup> In 128 economies, clear legal barriers to women's entry remain, from restrictions on certain forms of employment or the right to own property to requiring male relatives' consent for women to work.<sup>24</sup>



Nurse in the United States. *National Nurses United*

## Gender Wage Gap

The gender wage gap prevails across the world, reflecting both pay discrimination in specific jobs, and occupational segregation into higher-paid, male-dominated jobs and lower-paid, female-dominated jobs. An International Labor Organization (ILO) study of 83 countries found that, on average, women earn between 10% and 30% less than men through paid employment.<sup>25</sup> This inequality is connected to both structural barriers and discrimination.

Adequate data on the gender wage gap does not even exist for many countries, suggesting a need to prioritize collecting and analyzing this data, particularly across much of Africa and South America. Official estimates vary from 37.5% in the Republic of Korea, to 24.8% in India, to 17.8% in the United States.<sup>26</sup> The average gender wage gap in Organization and Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries is currently calculated at 15%.<sup>27</sup> The lowest recorded gap is 3.5% in Slovenia.<sup>28</sup>

Critically, estimates for many countries may be artificially low, because they often fail to account for workers in the informal sector (see box). Informal workers generally make less than formal workers, and women, many of them migrants, usually make up a significantly higher proportion of informal workers.<sup>29</sup> There is evidence the gender earnings gap persists even in the informal economy, with men earning more than women.<sup>30</sup> To accurately assess the gender wage gap, statistics on informal workers must be gathered and analyzed.

**Defining the informal economy can be difficult.<sup>31</sup> The NGO Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) defines the informal economy as “the diversified set of economic activities, enterprises, jobs, and workers that are not regulated or protected by the state.”<sup>32</sup> This includes workers without the formal social protections or status associated with employment, and companies that are not registered or otherwise licensed or recognized.**

Worker organizing is an important tool for addressing the gender pay gap, particularly for discriminatory treatment within workplaces. Collective bargaining

provides a transparent process for comparing wages for similar positions, giving women critical information to fight against discrimination. Many countries do not keep adequate data to assess the union effect on gender equality, but U.S. statistics indicate that the wage gap for union women is 40% smaller than for nonunion women.<sup>33</sup> Policies that require wage transparency within organizations also can help to address gender pay disparity at the firm level.

## Occupational Segregation

Gendered occupational segregation is a consistent feature of labor markets globally. It reflects continuing societal barriers to equal opportunity in the labor market, and is one of the largest contributing factors to the gender wage gap, as women generally are concentrated in areas with lower pay, less prestige and fewer benefits.

Women particularly are underrepresented in the industrial sector, which accounts for more than a quarter of all male employment worldwide, but only 16% of female employment.<sup>34</sup> This sector tends to pay higher wages and benefits, and the male-female gap actually appears to be widening.<sup>35</sup> Meanwhile, the service sector, which tends to pay lower wages and offer fewer benefits, accounts for almost half of female wage employment globally. Within the OECD, the service sector constitutes 80% of women’s employment, compared with 60% of men’s.<sup>36</sup> Agriculture, one of the most dangerous industries, has more women workers than men, and women make up approximately 70% of the informal agricultural workforce.<sup>37</sup>

When an occupation is over-represented by women workers, it is “feminized.” Sometimes these occupations are associated with stereotypical gender roles, such as women’s preponderance in paid care work or nursing,<sup>38</sup> while in other cases it reflects qualities ascribed to women workers, such as docility, manual dexterity or a willingness to work for low wages. From an economic standpoint, such segregation is inefficient, as women miss out on positions where they would be better matched and more productive.<sup>39</sup>

Occupational segregation has trapped millions of women workers in precarious, poorly paid and often dangerous work. Women tend to be crowded into the lowest levels of the global value chains, in sectors such as garment

production, electronic assembly and agriculture. Often, supervisors and managers in these same industries are overwhelmingly male.<sup>40</sup> When industries are upgraded along the supply chain into higher technology or higher-skilled work, these jobs often become “defeminized,” regardless of the skill and education level of women workers.<sup>41</sup> In essence, when previously feminized jobs in the supply chain become better jobs, they are defeminized, reflecting market power and discriminatory gender norms rather than skills.

## Women’s Unpaid Work

**Unpaid work—labor that is done without direct form of compensation—includes child and elder care and household tasks, anything from cleaning and cooking to gathering basic resources like firewood and water.**

Globally, women and girls do more unpaid work than men, which creates a tremendous amount of value for the economy. The heavy and disproportionate burden of unpaid work inhibits women’s literal and figurative mobility, forecloses opportunities and reflects a deeply entrenched structural advantage enjoyed by men that transcends cultures. When women spend more hours on unpaid work, they necessarily have less time and flexibility available for market work, education or leisure activities. Care duties often necessitate finding employment within or in close proximity to the home, or work that fits with school or hospital schedules. Societal pressures can steer women toward jobs that are not perceived to suffer skill loss if there is a break in employment. Employers make choices about hiring, firing and promotions that reflect stereotypes and assumptions about women as primary caregivers and secondary earners. This results in gendered employment structures that are shaped by and reinforce women’s unpaid care duties, with women more likely to work part time, on call, in their own homes or in paid caring labor.

As discussed in the Rutgers Center for Women’s Global Leadership’s report, “The Integration of Gender and Human Rights Into the Post-2015 Development Framework,” unpaid work needs to be recognized, in terms of statistics, analysis and policy implications;



Garment workers in Burma. *Solidarity Center/Jeanne Hallacy*

reduced, in terms of public investment in appropriate infrastructure and services; and redistributed, in terms of measures that promote equal sharing of remaining unpaid work.<sup>42</sup>

Recognizing unpaid work requires accurate information. Many countries do not conduct time-use surveys or otherwise collect any data on how much time women and men spend on unpaid work. Unpaid work virtually is never accounted for in macroeconomic statistics, such as gross domestic product. In the United States, unpaid child care services alone account for an estimated \$3.2 trillion, roughly 20% of the total value of GDP.<sup>43</sup> In Mexico, unpaid care and domestic work accounts for an estimated 21% of the national GDP, while in Tanzania it makes up approximately 35% of GDP.<sup>44</sup>

Reducing unpaid work requires infrastructure investment. States have a fundamental duty to ensure access to the basic necessities required for human life. When this responsibility is not honored, women often bear the burden of ensuring survival for themselves and their families. For example, in rural Sub-Saharan Africa, women and girls collect water for nearly three-quarters of all households.<sup>45</sup> This burden would be greatly reduced or even eliminated by adequate public provision of water. Likewise, public provision of energy would address the time women spend gathering fuel

sources. Sanitation services and adequate health care would reduce illnesses in the household requiring care.<sup>46</sup> Investments in physical and social infrastructure have been shown not only to reduce unpaid work, but to enhance gender equality in terms of health, education and income outcomes.<sup>47</sup>

Redistributing women's unpaid work requires both targeted policies and changing social norms regarding gendered responsibilities. Investments in child care, early education, paid leave, social security and other programs shift some responsibility for these critical activities from women to society as a whole, while driving economic gains from increased employment. It is estimated that if 2% of GDP were invested in the care economy in OECD countries, employment would increase between 2.4% and 6.1%. That would translate into almost 13 million jobs in the United States and 3.5 million in Japan.<sup>48</sup>

There is still a role for targeted policies to address prevailing attitudes about unpaid work, and ensure that responsibilities and burdens shift within households. For example, in Norway parental leave policies include a total of nine months paid leave—three that can be taken by both parents together, and three for each parent—that are nontransferable, thus incentivizing greater paternal responsibility for early child care.<sup>49</sup>

# III. The Changing Nature of Work

STRUCTURAL CHANGES in the global economy geared to enhancing corporate profit and limiting employer responsibilities have led to the growth of precarious work arrangements.<sup>50</sup> Precarious forms of employment exist in both formal and informal work, and involve many different employment models, including part-time, short-term or temporary contracts, on-call schedules, and layers of subcontracting or franchising in addition to work outside any structured employment relationship. These workers have less job security and less power relative to their employers, with little opportunity to bargain for higher wages and better working conditions. Women are particularly concentrated in insecure forms of employment.

The labor market used to be described by two types of employment—traditional wage employment, where workers had relatively high stability, but relatively low autonomy, and entrepreneurial self-employment, where workers had high autonomy but less stability. The International Classification of Status in Employment system defines work along this axis of risk and control,<sup>51</sup> but the modern labor market has realigned to place increasing amounts of risk on the worker, while employers often retain high levels of control.<sup>52</sup> This has disempowered many workers, particularly women, and led to economic vulnerability.

This shift toward precarious work, while the result of intentional business strategies to minimize responsibilities to workers and cut costs, is also tied directly to the failure of governments to regulate labor markets in a way that ensures fundamental labor rights and social protections for all workers.

## Precarious Hiring Arrangements

Corporate strategies for minimizing responsibilities to workers and liability for labor rights violations take on an array of forms depending on the legal and cultural context. Companies may use contingent arrangements, complex chains of subcontracting or arrangements like franchising. In the United States, employers regularly attempt to classify workers as independent contractors, or hire contracting firms to avoid domestic legal obligations to pay benefits required for workers designated as “employees.”<sup>53</sup> In Colombia, the vast majority of workers in many industries are hired on short-term, renewable contracts, which allows the employer to avoid paying into social security, workers’ compensation and other public programs, and to thwart unionization efforts by simply canceling contracts with labor agitators.<sup>54</sup>

Women workers are particularly impacted by the growth of precarious work. They often are concentrated in sectors that utilize precarious hiring, from export-oriented agriculture and low-skill manufacturing to part-time or on-demand work.<sup>55</sup> They make up a majority of temporary and short-term contract workers.<sup>56</sup> Women generally have greater care duties and longer lifespans than men, and are particularly hard hit by the evasion of social protections that are attached to employment, from parental and sick leave to pensions.

So-called “flexible” employment policies, which involve deliberate deregulation to allow for greater precarious work, have unfortunately been promoted as a means of economic development. The International Monetary Fund and other financial institutions have championed weakening labor protections and deregulating employers to drive growth and attract investment.<sup>57</sup> However, any short-term gains from driving down worker bargaining power and wages are offset by the long-

term destabilizing effects of increasing poverty. These policies have an outsized impact on vulnerable groups, including women, and racial and ethnic minorities. Workers with less pay decrease consumer demand and the tax base for social services, just as reliance on these programs often increases. Reduced employer contributions on the workers' behalf further shrink the public coffers. Workers are less able to organize and demand a fair share of economic wealth, increasing inequality and the intergenerational transition of poverty, particularly for women and minorities.

Once again, there is a need for adequate data to fully capture the impact of precarious work, and its particular effects on women. Governments should analyze the use of precarious hiring arrangements, and ensure policies limit their use and extend equal rights and social protections to all workers.<sup>58</sup>

### Trade and Global Supply Chains

There is an inherent tension between sustainable development, which focuses on long-term, shared prosperity, and the neoliberal development model, which prioritizes economic growth and simply presumes human rights will follow. International financial institutions and foreign investors encourage countries to focus on export-led growth and public-private partnerships.

Women, in particular, are concentrated at the bottom of global supply chains shaped by this model. Special economic zones, where women workers typically account for 60% to 90% of the labor force, reduce or outright eliminate worker protections as a means to attract foreign investment and create employment. Lax enforcement of existing laws may be a short-term market advantage for employers, but these policies result in poorly paid, often dangerous jobs that are highly unstable and subject to the whims of international demand. Technological advances have made it easier to fragment production, pitting workers and firms against one another in a highly feminized global labor pool, which puts downward pressure on women's wages and labor standards. Communities are treated as interchangeable, with no long-term investment in skills or infrastructure. Women are regarded as a cheap, flexible and ultimately expendable workforce.

The fragmented structure of global supply chains means that lead companies almost never directly hire the workers who actually make products, and usually are not held liable for labor practices in the production process, despite having a huge amount of influence on pricing and conditions.<sup>59</sup> This separation makes enforcing labor rights particularly challenging. The relentless demand for lower-cost production fuels



Mine worker in Mexico. *Solidarity Center/Roberto Armocida*

abusive practices, as it often simply is impossible to produce at the prices demanded from powerful firms while providing a living wage.

The lack of accountability has unique, gendered impacts on the female workforce. In addition to wage theft and hazardous working conditions, gender-based violence, particularly sexual harassment, is common in global supply chains. Research involving women in Kenya's export processing centers, and tea and coffee sectors, revealed that more than 90% had experienced or observed sexual abuse within their workplace, and that 95% of all women who had suffered workplace sexual abuse were afraid to report the problem, for fear of losing their jobs. The vast majority noted that promotions were related to some form of sexual relationship with a supervisor.<sup>60</sup> A study of female farmworkers in California found that nearly 40% experienced sexual harassment, ranging from verbal advances to rape on the job, and 24% said they had experienced sexual coercion by a supervisor.<sup>61</sup> The attenuated chain of responsibility creates a climate of impunity with respect to harassment and abuse.

International framework agreements with global corporations are one mechanism to help address gender-based violence and other forms of abuse that specifically impact women in supply chains. The global trade unions IUF and IndustriAll recently negotiated an agreement with the multinational brand Unilever to ensure there are clear, established procedures that allow employees, including those working for contractors, to safely report abuse, and the agreement specifies processes for addressing complaints.<sup>62</sup>

### **The Impact of Technology**

New technology platforms present both opportunities and challenges to labor markets and gender equality. New technologies can offer opportunities to grow economies, and promote opportunities and autonomy for women. However, the on-demand or gig economy, while often characterized as new or innovative, reflects antiquated, often exploitative employment models.<sup>63</sup>

Fundamental rights at work apply regardless of the structure of that work. However, too often, employment created in the gig economy is precarious jobs, where workers are not provided with a living wage or benefits, but remain totally dependent on the company to obtain work. Modern technology lets firms compartmentalize work into smaller tasks. When combined with high levels of unemployment or underemployment, businesses have access to a vulnerable workforce and little incentive to “hoard” skills. Employers such as Uber can structure employment relationships to shift virtually all risk—for wages, insurance and social protections—onto workers.

Troublingly, gig economy jobs sometimes are discussed as particularly suited to women under the assumption that flexible, ad hoc schedules present a solution to managing the work-life balance. This automatically assigns women a higher burden of unpaid care work, and assumes that the preferential way to address this issue is flexible schedules, not better pay, better access to child care and other support services, or rethinking social stereotypes. While these “on-demand” jobs are marketed to female workers, the direct hires at technology companies creating these new platforms are most often male.<sup>64</sup> Some workers may have a legitimate desire for greater flexibility in scheduling, but many work part-time or temporary gigs not out of choice, but because there are not better jobs available, or adequate social services.

Governments must ensure that all businesses, regardless of their structure or novelty, respect fundamental labor rights, and recognize the economic reality of employment relationships. While attempts to twist legal definitions or characterize employment laws as antiquated are not limited to emerging sectors of the economy, the effort to evade government regulations has been particularly pronounced. In some instances, new regulations may be necessary to address technologies or services, but sometimes it is simply a matter of rigorously and creatively applying existing laws.



Palm worker in Peru. *Solidarity Center/Oscar Durand*

## Informal Work

Informal work has increased globally over the past several decades, and constitutes the majority of employment for women in many countries. Informal work covers job classifications from own-account workers to employers who own and manage informal sector enterprises, to “informalized” jobs in the formal sector (see box, page 7). Marginalized individuals or groups may face structural barriers or social constraints to accessing jobs in the formal sector. Further, employers hoping to pay lower wages or avoid the legal obligations that come with formal employment often seek out informal arrangements.<sup>65</sup>

For millions of women workers, transitioning into the formal economy could mean job security, employer contributions into social protection programs and membership in a trade union. However, the structural factors that drive many women into informal work have to be meaningfully addressed.

In 2015, the International Labor Organization adopted an international labor standard to provide a rights-conscious framework for transitioning millions of informal workers and businesses into the formal economy.<sup>66</sup> This transition must be accomplished in a fair, measured and sustainable way, which often requires intermediary steps of extending increased access to legal protections, and financial resources including credit and property and business rights. Governments must ensure informal workers have access to core labor protections, including the rights to freely associate, engage in collective bargaining and be free from discrimination, and have access to social protections, including education and health care. Access to social services particularly is critical for women to address the unpaid care work that often drives them into informality.

Governments must ensure workers have access to social protections, regardless of the nature of the work they do or the form their hiring takes. States, taking into account their own unique circumstances, must ensure all citizens have their most basic needs met through the

development of social protection floors (see box). Some governments have tackled gaps to specifically include informal workers; for example, Uruguay made changes to its national health care system in 2011 to allow “*empresas unipersonales*” (one-person businesses) to receive health care.<sup>67</sup> These efforts need to be more widely adopted and scaled up to ensure full, equal access to all basic social protections.

## SOCIAL PROTECTION FLOORS

The United Nations has defined four basic social services that governments must provide to all citizens: quality, accessible health care, including maternal care; basic income security for children, including access to nutrition and education; basic income security for working-age people to earn sufficient income, particularly in cases of sickness, unemployment, maternity and disability; and basic minimum income security for the elderly.<sup>68</sup>

Labor protections can and should be extended deliberately into informal workplaces. States must enact minimum wage floors for all workers regardless of the nature or employment structure of their work. Minimum wage laws particularly impact women, as they are concentrated at the lowest end of regional and national pay scales.<sup>69</sup> Specific initiatives should address home-based, own-account, piece rate and other workers to ensure their income also meets this wage floor. A widely cited successful example is an initiative in Pakistan to extend minimum wage laws to bidi cigarette rollers who work out of their homes by extending minimum piece rate guarantees, which not only enhanced workers’ income but gave them greater negotiating power with employers.<sup>70</sup> To ensure these initiatives are successful, states must further ensure accountability for business and buyer abuses.

## Collective Action to Address Changing Work

Greater access to discriminatory labor markets is not sufficient to ensure economic security, autonomy or equality. Women must have access to decent work, where they have rights on the job, including access to safe working conditions, fair pay and freedom from discrimination. This requires both top-down government strategies to address precarious work

and protect fundamental labor rights, and bottom-up worker and community organizing to identify abuse and define solutions.

Gender equality requires an enabling environment in which worker and social movements flourish. Women workers and their communities are in the best position to monitor labor conditions, report problems and articulate needs and solutions. Governments have a fundamental duty to protect the rights to association and assembly, and ensure activists are not subject to threats and reprisals. Unfortunately, too often women trade unionists and other human rights defenders are subjected to violence, threats and harassment. Many governments have exacerbated this situation by allowing impunity for such retaliatory acts, or by narrowing the space for civil society participation in public debate and policy making.<sup>71</sup>

Women organizing in workplaces and communities are indispensable to uphold fundamental labor rights, change power dynamics and define policy priorities. For example, women textile workers have led efforts to unionize in Honduras. In a country with rampant labor rights violations, and low wages and unionization rates, women leaders have been able to negotiate collective agreements in six factories that not only raise wages, but also include specific provisions around child care and maternity leave.

## DEFINING DECENT WORK

As defined by the International Labour Organization,<sup>72</sup> decent work programs direct public and private resources toward creating meaningful opportunities and social mobility, guaranteeing rights and respect on the job, promoting social dialogue through strong worker organizations and extending social protections, including safe working conditions, access to health care and family leave, sufficient workers’ compensation, and allowance for adequate leisure time and rest.

Organizing can address exclusions from labor protections, which often reflect stereotypes that view traditional women’s work as beyond the purview of economic accounting and legal protections. Domestic workers, who were often not covered by

labor laws, organized to demand changes. Mobilization across borders resulted in a new international labor standard, and many national legislative initiatives that gave domestic workers the right to form unions, regulated hours and paid benefits, and increased penalties for sexual harassment.<sup>73</sup> In 2010, Kenya guaranteed domestic workers the rights to minimum wages and to form unions,<sup>74</sup> while in Brazil, the first collective bargaining agreement covering domestic work went into effect in 2013.<sup>75</sup> Organizing changed policies and norms, and enhanced rights-consciousness among domestic workers themselves.

Trade unions and worker organizations increasingly are organizing in the informal economy, playing a crucial role in the transition from informal to formal and gaining greater rights and recognition.<sup>76</sup> The Brazilian National Movement of Collectors of Recyclable Materials (MNCR)<sup>77</sup> was instrumental in pushing for a national solid waste policy, enacted in 2010, which formalized and prioritized relationships with waste pickers' cooperatives,<sup>78</sup> and aimed to reduce child labor by enrolling families in the *Bolsa Familia*, a program that provides direct cash payments to send children to school.<sup>79</sup>

Governments, employers, unions and civil society organizations should all encourage more women in leadership positions, to ensure policy making and priority-setting reflects diverse, representative viewpoints. Globally, only 22% of national parliamentarians are women,<sup>80</sup> and only 2% of employers had policies designed to actively recruit more women.<sup>81</sup> The labor movement, as well as other social organizations, also must ensure leadership is representative.

## PROMOTING WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE LABOR MOVEMENT

Trade unions must intentionally create an inclusive, representative movement. This requires both top-down approaches to promote women in leadership positions and shape gender-conscious agendas and advocacy, and bottom-up strategies to support women workers engaged in grassroots organizing and local women's committees, forums and other mechanisms to identify priorities. Currently, in the United States, women are 44% of union members, but they occupy only 20% of top leadership positions.<sup>82</sup>

Unions should identify and implement ways to support women workers. This includes incorporating gender-focused priorities into collective bargaining, such as demanding information on pay and promotion during negotiations with employers and including contract provisions that explicitly remedy discrimination; providing equal training and career opportunities to women; enhancing accommodations and flexibility for family care; and addressing gender-based violence at work. The labor movement must advocate for public policies that address occupational segregation and create equal opportunities in education, training and recruitment.

# IV. Looking to the Future

**ACHIEVING WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT** and rights-based sustainable development will require a transformation of women's interaction with labor markets. Government policies must be reoriented toward an explicit focus on gender equality and women's economic and social rights, with a commitment to creating decent work for all.

This requires a comprehensive and coordinated approach that puts in place a pro-worker and equality-enhancing enabling environment, to include macroeconomic policies designed on the basis of valuing women's unpaid work and social reproduction; policy and legislative changes to address structural barriers and inequalities, including discrimination, low wages, access to care services and occupational segregation; and workplace practices and policies so that employers, in dialogue with labor unions, are addressing pay discrepancy, career progression and overall conditions of work. It requires a robust labor union movement acting in full support of women's labor rights. It also requires changing societal stereotypes about the nature and value of women's work, promoting new norms where, for example, men take on an equal share of care work.

The recommendations below are not intended to be a comprehensive list of all policies, but to highlight some key areas for greater action. This far-reaching and comprehensive agenda is not a task for policy makers alone. Governments, employers, labor unions and social justice organizations all must engage to ensure the full realization of women's rights in the "private" sphere of the home and family, as well as the "public" sphere of politics and the market.

## **Fully implement international frameworks regarding gender and economic and social rights, including:**

- UN Women's recommendations regarding economic empowerment from the 2015 Progress of the World's Women Report;
- United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;
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- The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women;
- The United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights; and
- The International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights.

## **Design macroeconomic policy to mobilize the maximum possible level of resources to realize women's economic rights and to reduce gender inequality:**

- collect data on unpaid and informal work;
- integrate unpaid work, social reproduction and informal work into the formulation and evaluation of macroeconomic policies;
- implement gender-responsive budgeting to evaluate current and future impacts on women's rights and well being;
- craft integrated policies that promote and support women's employment; and
- develop ongoing engagement between policy makers, trade unions and women's rights organizations to ensure policies are grounded in the reality of women workers.

**Invest in physical and social infrastructure, particularly women’s human capital:**

- provide full and equal access to education, and skills and employment training programs, and address gender-specific barriers to inclusion;
- provide quality health care throughout women’s lifecycles, parental leave, sick leave and other measures to reduce the burden of unpaid care and household work on women and households; and
- build physical infrastructure that specifically supports social infrastructure, including schools, hospitals, sanitation centers, water and energy provision, and transportation systems.

**Reform trade and development policy to emphasize long-term growth and accountable business practices:**

- conduct research into the gendered impacts of trade policies, and specific trade and investment agreements;
- ensure adequate policy space to adopt sensible economic and social policies that protect and promote women’s economic and social rights, with

particular attention to labor, without being subject to legal challenges from corporations;

- adequately regulate business activities to respect women’s rights and meaningful, long-term community investments that promote decent work for women; and
- ensure that the sustainable development goals are not undermined by trade policies.

**Address structural barriers to decent work and equal participation in the labor market:**

- ensure access to basic social protections for all women, without regard to employment or migration status;
- create a living-wage floor for all workers, in both the formal and informal market, regardless of the nature or structure of the work;
- implement a social protection floor for all workers, regardless of gender, race or nationality;
- create a robust and gender-inclusive labor rights inspection, monitoring and adjudication system capable of identifying and addressing gender-specific labor rights violations, particularly gender-based violence and discrimination;



Garment workers in Bangladesh. *Solidarity Center/Balmi Chisim*

- collect accurate information on wages and occupational segregation, including informal work arrangements by gender and other social factors, and use it to track progress toward women’s economic empowerment;
  - recognize, reduce and redistribute care work by collecting accurate information, investing in physical infrastructure and the public provision of child care, education and elder care, and equalizing distribution in the household of the provision of care;
  - regulate business to ensure workplace policies address barriers to women’s participation, including rigorous policies on discrimination, hiring and promotion, training and accommodation for reproductive roles, including lactation, paid leave and child care;
  - address precarious work by vigorously enforcing existing labor laws, particularly in emerging sectors and enterprises in which women workers predominate, and crafting new mechanisms to ensure the companies respect fundamental labor rights, including nondiscrimination;
  - address precarious hiring structures by restricting temporary and contract work to cases of genuine need, require long-term temporary jobs be converted to permanent jobs, and adopt measures to address the concentration of women in precarious jobs; and
  - in both domestic and transnational supply chains, lead firms should be required to undertake rigorous due diligence to identify and address human rights abuses, particularly discrimination and gender-based violence at work, and be held accountable in the event of failure to adequately investigate or remedy exploitation of women in supply chains.
- Protect worker and community organizing:**
- protect the right to freedom of association, assembly and speech to allow women activists to organize unions and other civil society organizations and engage with policy debates;
  - protect labor activists and other human rights defenders from retaliation; and
  - promote labor laws that improve the bargaining power and position of women.

## Endnotes

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