

Changing the world
with **women and girls**
act:onaid

Volume 2: Centring economies around care



Another World is Possible:

Advancing feminist economic alternatives to secure rights, justice
and autonomy for women and a fair, green, gender equal world.

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Glossary

Agroecology is a sustainable approach to farming to produce healthy food and preserve natural resources, applying social, biological and agricultural sciences and integrating these with traditional, indigenous and farmers’ knowledge and cultures.

Austerity refers to government policies that are implemented to reduce gaps between money coming into the government (revenue) and money going out (spending). Austerity policies typically cut government spending and increase taxes.

Ecofeminism is both a philosophy and a movement that sees a connection between the exploitation of and degradation of the natural world and the subordination and oppression of women through patriarchal structures.

Extractivism describes an economic and political model based on the exploitation and commodification of nature by removing large amounts of a nation’s natural commons for sale on the world market.

Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems.

Gender based violence (GBV) is violence that is directed at an individual based on their biological sex or gender identity. It includes physical, sexual, verbal, emotional, and psychological abuse, threats, coercion, and economic or educational deprivation, whether in public or private life.

Gender Responsive Public Services (GRPS) describes essential, rights-based services such as education, health, transport, water and sanitation, childcare, agricultural extension and street lighting which are publicly funded, universal, and publicly (not privately) delivered, gender equitable and inclusive, focused on quality, and in line with human rights frameworks.

Global North refers to the societies of Europe and North America, which are largely characterised by wealth, technological advancement, relative political stability, aging population, zero population growth and dominance of world trade and politics. Not strictly geographical, the definition can also broadly include Australia, New Zealand, Japan and South Korea.

Global South refers broadly to the regions of Latin America, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. It is one of a family of terms, including “Third World” and “Periphery,” that denote regions outside Europe and North America, mostly (though not all) low-income and often politically or culturally marginalised.

Heteronormativity is the belief that heterosexuality is the default, preferred, or “normal” mode of sexual orientation. It is predicated on use of the gender binary, classifying gender into two distinct, opposite forms of male and female, masculine and feminine, and assumes sexual and marital relations are most fitting between opposite sexes. It aligns biological sex, sexuality, gender identity and gender roles.

Just Transition is a framework of principles, processes and practices that build economic and political power in order to shift economies from exploitative and extractive paradigms towards sustainable production. The term is used by the trade union movement to secure workers’ rights and livelihoods, and by climate justice advocates to combat climate change and protect biodiversity.

Fiscal Justice is people having the space, voice and agency to exercise their rights and using this to influence and monitor fiscal systems (tax, budget cycles and public spending) to mobilize greater revenue and increase spending for quality public services.

Instrumentalism describes a conceptual approach that sees and adopts women’s rights and empowerment primarily through the lens of contributions to wider societal and economic outcomes such as GDP growth. It is sometimes referred to as the “business case” for women’s rights.

International Financial Institutions (IFIs) are financial institutions that have been established or chartered by more than one country to provide loans and other forms of financial support to countries. They include the Bretton Woods institutions – the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the International Finance Corporation (IFC) – as well as multilateral and regional development banks.

Intersectionality is the concept that different forms of structural oppression overlap. Gender is one of the bases of discrimination. Others include class, caste, race, age, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, work, health, HIV status, educational levels, physical abilities and so on. None of these oppressions operate independently of the other, they are interlinked.

Low Income Country (LIC) describes countries with a Gross National Income (GNI) per capita of \$1,035 or less (World Bank calculation for 2019).

Macro-economics the economy as a whole on a national or international level.

Multinational Corporations (MNCs) are large companies producing or selling goods and services in several countries across the world. Also known as transnational corporate organisations, they are characterised by large budgets and centralised control in a parent country.

Patriarchy is a system of power influencing everything that we do. It encourages a dominant form of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ which affects how men and women are expected to behave and offers advantages to all things ‘male,’ creating societies characterised by unequal hierarchical power. Within this universal system, men dominate women. Patriarchy plays out in the economy, society, government, community, and family, and gives rise to accepted discriminatory behaviours, attitudes, and practices (‘patriarchal norms’).

Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) are (often) long-term contracts between a private party and a government agency for providing a public service or asset.

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) means the right for everyone, regardless of age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, HIV status or other aspects, to make informed choices regarding their own sexuality and reproduction and have access to quality, accessible healthcare including to materialise their choices.

Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) is a values-based approach to economic development with explicit social (and often environmental) objectives. It envisions facilitation of the economy through various solidarity relations such as cooperatives, mutual associations, and the protection of commons.

Time poverty is when an individual does not have enough time for rest, personal development and leisure after taking into account the time spent working, both on paid labour (both formal and informal), and on unpaid care & domestic work (including activities such as fetching wood and water).

Unpaid Care & Domestic Work is non-remunerated work carried out to sustain the well-being, health and maintenance of other individuals in a household or the community, including domestic work (meal preparation, cleaning, washing clothes, water and fuel collection) and direct care of persons (including children, older persons and persons with disabilities, as well as able-bodied adults) carried out in homes and communities.

Violence against women and girls (VAWG) refers to any act of violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, mental or economic harm to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.

Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH) often refers to policies and programmes aimed at providing universal access to safe drinking water, sanitation and adequate hygiene services that are essential to a population’s health, welfare, and development.

Womxn is an alternative spelling of “woman/women” that attempts to move away from patriarchal language (the suffix “man/men”), inviting greater inclusivity especially of transgender people, nonbinary people and other marginalized people identifying as women.

1 Introduction

It has long been argued that the prevailing economic system serves to both exploit and exacerbate women’s relative position of economic, social and political exclusion. The time for a complete overhaul of thinking and approach to economic development as well as our understanding of the economy and its role to society and nature has never been more urgent. As the world emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic it is crucial that human rights, climate and social justice drive social reform. This must redress gender inequalities at the national level as well as power imbalances between the Global North and Global South, which intensify gender inequalities.

Feminist economists, activists, women’s rights organisations (WROs) and movements have for decades been imagining, developing, advocating for and implementing economic models, frameworks, strategies and approaches as ways of organising economies and engaging in economic activity as alternatives to mainstream, orthodox approaches. Although extremely varied and context-specific, these feminist economic alternatives (FEAs) all tend in some way to address women’s position of structural disadvantage, resist mainstream economic norms, and seek to challenge and transform gendered and other oppressive power relations and the systems and structures in which they manifest themselves. FEAs are rooted variously in principles and values of care for all life forms, the promotion of women’s autonomy and leadership, cooperation and solidarity, democracy and pluralism, valuing of local knowledge and freedom from gender-based violence. They offer principles as well as concrete policy frameworks, ways of decision-making, distribution and allocation of resources, strategies and approaches – from local to global level – that can support the re-forging of our economic system to one that serves and sustains people and planet.

These FEAs need to be recognised, supported and taken-up by decision-makers as part of an urgent change agenda, even more so in the context of responding to Covid-19, grounded in an understanding that the economy, economic policies and the ways these are experienced by women and men are deeply gendered as well as shaped by colonialism and its inescapable legacies like racism and other identity and location-based power differentials.¹ Their uptake is essential if commitments under the Beijing Agenda and Platform for Action, the Sustainable Development Goals, the Convention on All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESR), the Right to Development and other regional and global commitments to women’s rights are to be met and a

climate crisis averted. The horrifying lessons from the Covid-19 crisis must be heeded.

This report is part of a compendium of case studies seeking to shine a light on just some of the vast multitude of feminist economic alternatives that exist, demonstrating their huge value and providing inspiration and practical examples for policy-makers. The compendium is spread across four volumes. Volume 1 collates and examines an important pool of feminist economic alternatives. It shows how they secure rights, justice and autonomy for women and girls, while working for a fairer, gender-equal and green future, and gives selected examples from existing policies, systems and initiatives around the globe that demonstrate another world is possible. The main volume of the series, Volume 1 offers recommendations for governments, donors, International Finance Institutions (IFIs), civil society and companies to work towards transformative change through feminist economic alternatives. Volumes 2, 3 and 4 showcase further examples of FEAs around the world organised by one of the following themes: centring economies around care; ensuring a just transition; building the conditions for FEAs to flourish.

This volume (Volume 2) delves deeper into the myriad of stories and examples of FEAs grouped under the theme of centring economies around care. Section 2 summarises what feminist economic alternatives are and lists their main components. In section 3, readers will find the reintroduction of the three main subthemes around which feminists and WROs have been organising and seeking to implement alternatives towards care-centred economies. This will be followed in section 4 by three examples of FEAs in action at the local level that were not included in Volume 1. The examples from Uruguay and the ILO Convention 190 showcased in pages 19 and 20 of Volume 1 for this theme will not be repeated here.

2 Defining feminist economic alternatives and their transformative power

Not all the approaches and strategies described in what follows are the result of explicitly feminist perspectives. ActionAid also recognises that feminist economic alternatives typically emerge in response to particular contexts and forms of oppression experienced by specific groups of women. There are obvious questions around scalability or adaptability, which is why the initiatives featured in this report are highlighted as examples to learn from and not necessarily as one-size-fits-all models.² We also note that the term ‘alternatives’ could imply we see FEAs as secondary options to current approaches, and as therefore somehow lesser. We do not mean to suggest this with our use of the term and fully acknowledge that many aspects of FEAs are based in pre-colonial, centuries-old forms of economic organising that were replaced by neoliberal policies as countries were forced to engage with the international financial architecture – e.g. when accessing loans from the IMF or trading under WTO rules. We do not mean to imply that there is a one definitive feminist economic alternative. Rather, we argue squarely that the idea of ‘one economic system’ must be challenged and that feminist economic alternatives should be pursued as an urgent priority. This report builds on the work of many feminist economists and activists and women’s rights organisations and groups. Our modest contribution to this area of work is to help shine a light on the diversity of economic approaches and strategies, as a way to challenge the perpetual undervaluing and denial of this thinking, practice and evidence by decision-makers at the national and global level.

Women’s collective action is central in pushing the transformation of the prevailing economic system. Although incredibly diverse and often context-specific, feminist economic alternatives recognise and reckon with the biases in the prevailing economic system, while demanding and putting into practice steps towards the *systemic transformation* of the rules of the economy. Systemic transformation entails calling out and dismantling unequal power relations that are rooted in systems of oppression (patriarchy, racism, neo-colonialism, extractivism, ableism, cis-heteronormativity etc.) and a reconstruction of the economic systems, structures, policies and institutions that both perpetuate and benefit from them, so that economic systems are instead focused on ensuring the democratic and accountable attainment of human rights for all and environmental preservation.

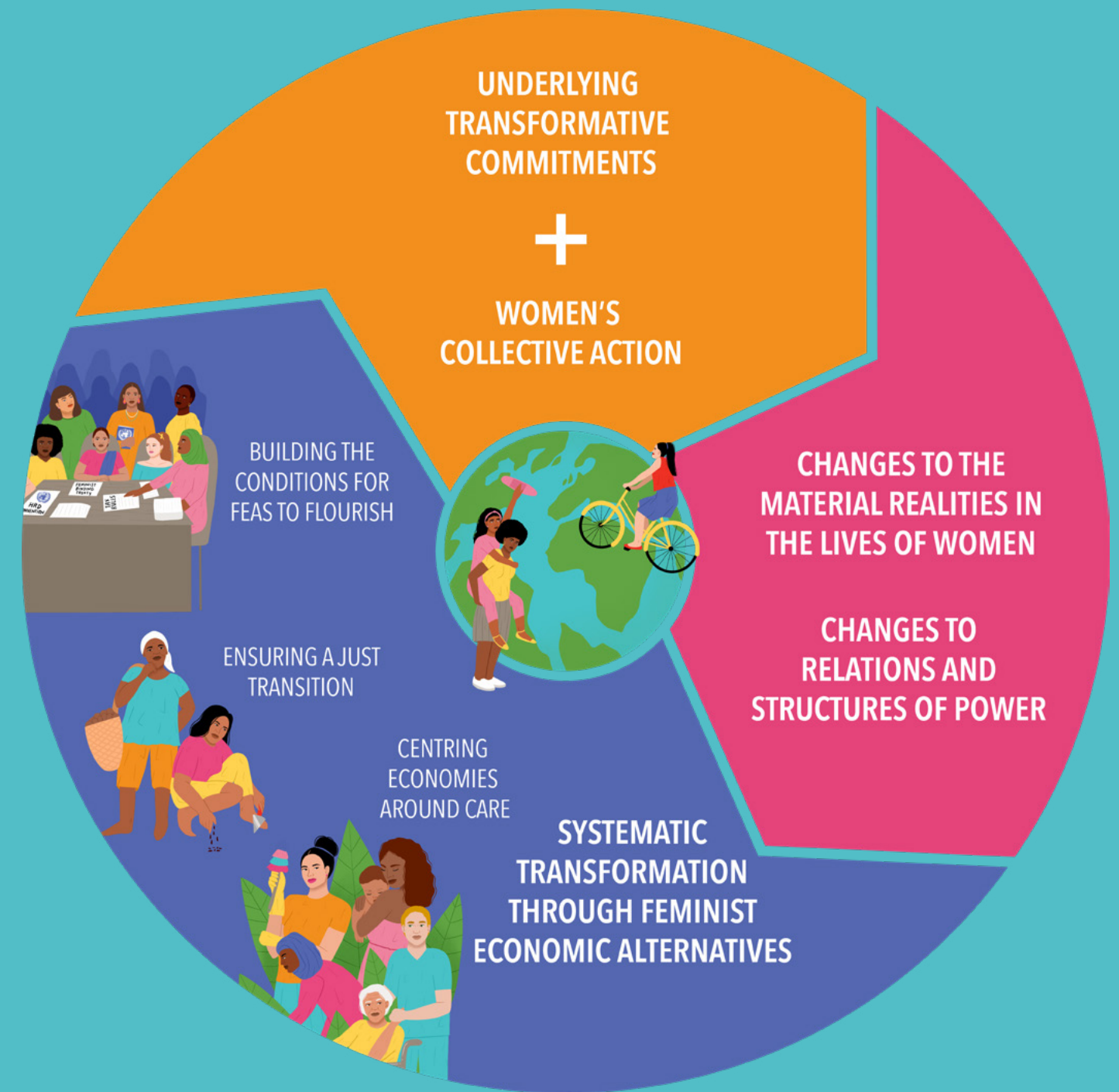
While the aim of feminist economic transformation is urgent systemic change, the sheer scale of the

task means that many strategies seek to achieve this through incremental steps. These changes take place at different levels – from the very local to the global – and take different forms. To make what this means more tangible we describe two levels at which change can take place towards systematic transformation, namely: changes to the material realities in the lives of women, and changes to relations and structures of power. FEAs exist from the grassroots to the global levels and in most cases these steps are pursued simultaneously. The examples discussed in section 4 of this volume are from the national and local levels.

Many of the propositions and frameworks for feminist economic alternatives featured as examples in this report series contribute to systemic transformation. They all share a number of key underlying transformative commitments that lead to incremental change (summarized in the infographic on page 7, a full description is available on page 9 of Volume 1 of this series).

In researching and compiling examples of FEAs for the purposes of this report series we found that they have a number of crosscutting demands³ and a number of unmet demands⁴ which can be grouped under the following three key interrelated themes that make up the goals of FEAs:

1. Centring economies around care;
2. Ensuring a just transition;
3. Building the conditions for FEAs to flourish.



3 The importance of centring economies around care

As Tithi Bhattacharya, from Purdue University explains: “The best way to define social reproduction is the activities and institutions that are required for making life, maintaining life, and generationally replacing life. I call it “life-making” activities.”⁵ Social reproduction systems, or the creation of people, workers, societies and maintenance of social bonds,⁶ as well as social reproduction institutions, such as public education, health, care, water, transport, housing etc., are essential to societies and critical to sustaining the prevailing capitalist model. Yet they are taken for granted as mostly free and infinitely available provisions. But they are not. They are gendered, carried out predominantly by women and girls and whose physical and emotional labour is finite. For instance, women’s unpaid labour is assumed to fill the gaps when state provision of public services are lacking or poor quality due to financing shortfalls and austerity, resulting in many women facing time poverty (not to mention physical and emotional exhaustion) as they try to balance the demands of paid and unpaid work and reducing the quality of such provision.⁷ When care work is paid, it remains undervalued and poorly remunerated, as is the case with domestic workers, care workers, cleaners, social workers, teachers and nurses – the majority of whom are women. Women and girls are also largely seen as virtuous environmental carers. While men make decisions on and design infrastructure, women and girls are often expected to manage farms, homes and resources like water as part of their broader unpaid care burden. When environmental shocks and stressors occur, it is women and girls who clean up and get their homes and communities back on track, often dropping out of school or paid work to do so.⁸

Feminist economic alternatives place a huge emphasis on valuing women’s work, both paid and unpaid, and on recognising that care and well-being⁹ are critical to sustaining societies and economies. As such, they should be equally or more important than economic growth.

Diane Elson coined the now-famous ‘Recognise, Reduce and Redistribute’ (RRR) framework for how this should be achieved.¹⁰ By calling for the recognition of unpaid care work, (some) feminist economists are not necessarily advocating for it to be counted as part of GDP,¹¹ but for economic systems to be founded on care’s inherent value and the valuing of all those who undertake such work, whether unpaid or paid.¹² Reduction does not only imply lower amounts of unpaid care or domestic work, but also a reduction

in its drudgery, such as the 40 billion hours women and girls in Africa spend each year walking to collect water.¹³ Finally, redistribution of unpaid care work means not only a shift from women to men within the household, but also redistribution from households and communities to the state in the form of universal, well-financed and high-quality gender responsive public services and infrastructure (see page 30 in Volume 1 on reclaiming public services).¹⁴ Centring economies around care also require that both paid and unpaid work, within and outside of the care sector, are decent and free from violence. Towards this purpose, two more elements were recently added to Elson’s RRR framework by the UN High-Level Panel on Women’s Economic Empowerment (UNHLP): Reward, referring to the need for adequate wages and proper working conditions for paid care workers, and Representation, to ensure that such women workers are included at decision making tables.¹⁵

Reducing and redistributing women’s unpaid care and domestic work should not be done with the sole purpose of forcing women into the labour market so they can contribute to economic growth as narrowly measured by GDP. Instead, the objective should be to protect and advance women’s rights, including by ensuring women and men have the option to earn a living through decent work opportunities and equally the right to education, to participate in community decision-making, as well as to rest and leisure. If they choose to be full time carers, appropriate public provisions for pensions and other types of funding ought to be part of economic and social policy planning.

Alternative measures of progress and development – no suitable solution yet

Mainstream economic principles determine that progress and development ought to be measured purely in terms of economic growth through GDP. Feministeconomic alternatives almost unanimously agree that this is a narrow approach which fails to acknowledge and address inequalities and perpetuates the invisibility and undervaluing of women’s reproductive role. Whilst some feminist economists have called for unpaid care work to be counted in GDP, others have argued for a fundamental shift away from its use, pointing out that it is a patriarchal construct in the way it discounts unpaid care work as well as externalises and renders invisible the exploitation and environmental destruction necessary for its achievement.¹⁶ Moreover, GDP is focused on economic growth and is no measure for well-being, gender equality or how growth is being (re)distributed across a population. In recognition of GDP’s detachment from well-being, an increasing number of countries are now measuring well-being.

Bhutan has been measuring ‘Gross National Happiness’ (GNH) as an alternative to GDP as far back as 1972. Its Gross National Happiness Index¹⁷ covers a range of issues, including living standards, health and education, as well as time-use and psychological wellbeing, all of which can be scrutinised according to gender and geographical region.¹⁸ However, although the gendered differences uncovered by the GNH index have led to some positive policy measures, the transformative impacts of these remains contested.¹⁹

In 2019, under the leadership of Jacinda Ardern, New Zealand designed its entire budget based on well-being priorities, wherein its ministries are mandated to design policies to improve well-being.²⁰ Budget priorities include addressing child poverty, mental health, a green transition and domestic violence.²¹ The budget is not without its criticism, however. Its lack of explicit reference to gender (in)equality has caused some experts to push for Ardern, who has globally become an icon of good women’s leadership, to take many more systemic changes.²²

Under women-led administrations, Scotland²³ and Iceland²⁴ have also developed well-being policy alternatives to a pure focus on GDP, which aim to redress gender and other inequalities by promoting family-friendly policies and tackling

wider social inequities. Other countries and entities now monitoring well-being include the UK²⁵ and EU,²⁶ and even the global auditing company KPMG has developed an Africa Goodlife Index. Some of these, such as the EU and KPMG examples, are still rooted in the primacy of economic growth and perhaps even instrumentalise well-being as a way to increase GDP. Others may not explicitly address issues from a gendered perspective or recognise other forms of systematic exclusion that impacts negatively upon the well-being of marginalised and excluded groups. Certainly, the growing uptake of such approaches reflects the feminist concern with well-being and an increasing recognition that a focus on economic growth alone is not a measure of human progress. However, so far, there is no single measure of progress and development that is widely accepted across feminist macroeconomic alternatives or that guarantees a holistic, intersectional understanding of societal relations and therefore that does not perpetuate power imbalances.

We have grouped FEAs looking to centre economies around care under two subthemes: those focused on investments in the care economy and those ensuring decent jobs. We discuss them below.

3.1 Investing in the care economy

Many feminist economists have shown how investing in the care sectors redistributes women’s unpaid care load, but also yields returns to the economy and society well into the future in the form of a better educated, healthier and better cared for population.²⁷ As such, allocating scarce public resources in this way should be seen as an investment in social infrastructure, rather than as ‘expenditure’ or ‘consumption,’ as is currently seen around the world.

A recent UN Women study found that investing in care sectors is worthwhile. “Although the total annual cost of such investment can go up to 3 to 4% of GDP, the net cost can be halved thanks to significant fiscal returns stemming from increased employment and earnings, without changing the tax structure itself (rates and bands).”²⁸ The study looked at the costs of providing free universal early quality childcare and education in South Africa, Turkey and Uruguay. It found that, whilst the initial costs for all children from 0-6 years old may be 3-4% of GDP, the employment-generating effects – especially for women, who form the large majority of early education professionals – and the long term fiscal return on the investment would outstrip all costs due to mothers closing their lifetime employment and earnings gaps following such a comprehensive



Photo: Fabeha Monir/ActionAid

Nasima Akhter, manages Kalyanpur Café, Safety and Rights Society in Dhaka, which supports garment workers, mainly women, to understand labour law and their rights. The cafés, supported by ActionAid Bangladesh, provide advice, training and support on a range of issues, such as being paid the minimum wage, unfair dismissal and sexual violence and harassment. She says she hears about incidents of sexual violence and harassment about once or twice a month. “I would assume there are more such incidents, but women are not talking about it,” she says. “I have spoken with around 600 workers, mostly women. I would say I have heard stories of violence from around 150.”

childcare offer, and therefore contributing more through taxes.²⁹ For example, in South Africa, a modest gross annual investment of 1.8% of GDP into early childhood care would create more than 1.2 million new jobs, and assuming that most of these jobs would go to women, an increase of 5.3 percentage points in the female employment rate. These jobs would generate more than US \$2 million in new tax and social security revenue.³⁰ UN Women also show that state provision of a package of family-friendly policies that includes income support across the life-course and healthcare is affordable for most countries. A quarter of countries (41 out of 155 studied) could implement these policies for less than 3% of GDP, and just over half (79 countries) could do so for less than 5% of GDP. For one fifth of countries (35) included in their study, these policies would cost more than 10% of GDP, which would require additional external support to achieve, including Official Development Assistance (ODA), as well as renewed efforts to eliminate tax evasion and avoidance; tax havens are estimated to cost low-income countries up to \$200 billion every year.^{31 32}

Research by the ILO in 2018 found that a doubling of investment in the care economy could lead to a total of

475 million jobs by 2030, meaning 269 million new jobs globally.³³ Research by the UK Women’s Budget Group for the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) in 2016 showed that investing public funds in childcare and elder care services is more effective in reducing public deficits and debt than austerity policies.³⁴ A follow up study from June 2020 showed that post-Covid-19, in the UK, investing in both child and adult social care would create 2.7 times as many jobs as the same investment in construction, resulting in 6.3 times as many jobs for women and 10% more jobs for men. Two million jobs would be created by increasing the number of care workers to 10% of the employed population.³⁵

3.2 Ensuring decent jobs

The four pillars of decent work, as defined by the International Labour Organisation, encompass opportunities for work and job creation; protection and promotion of rights at work; access to social protection; and freedom of association and social dialogue, with gender equality as a cross-cutting issue.³⁶ Feminist advocacy on decent work overlaps with the labour movement and in some contexts includes collaborations

with trade union and worker organisations. Demands and strategies promoting feminist economic alternatives to advance decent work put forth by groups such as Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD), The African Women’s Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), Womankind, Public Services International (PSI) and ITUC include the redistribution of women’s unpaid care work;³⁷ full implementation of relevant ILO Conventions and labour standards, including for women working in the informal economy and those working in the care economy; ambitious gender-transformative industrial strategies that foster decent jobs for women; no trade-offs between job creation and job quality, including with respect to trade deals and expansion of global value chains; robust social protection systems; and effective regulation of the corporate sector to end rights violations and ensure accountability.³⁸

Feminist analysis also shows us how patriarchal and racist norms mean that women’s work – especially the work of women of colour, working class and migrant women – is fundamentally undervalued, unrecognised and unsupported. As such, as highlighted on page 9, women’s rights organisations, feminist economists and trade unions have argued for investing in social care as a key strategy to both foster decent jobs for women whilst redistributing the care workload to the State.

As discussed at length in Volume 1 of this series, women around the world, particularly in countries in the Global South, face barriers with respect to every one of the decent work pillars. Violence and harassment of women in their homes, on the streets and in the places where they work is also a major barrier to decent work. For example, research by Care International in 2017 found that 28.6% of women garment workers in Cambodia have or experienced sexual violence and harassment at work.³⁹ Without collective bargaining, freedom of association and the widespread knowledge among workers of their rights, prevention and redress of violence and harassment in the world of work cannot be possible.

Cooperatives as an important tool

Women and their wider communities in many countries and regions have long been organising themselves into cooperatives. These are enterprises controlled by and run for the benefit of their members, where profits are used to develop the business or are returned to the members. They are typically based on principles of self-help, self-responsibility, democracy, equality, equity, solidarity⁴⁰ and engaging in forms of solidarity-based exchange and mutual support to promote sustainable livelihoods and access to decent work.⁴¹

In this report series we showcase three examples of cooperatives around the world as feminist economic alternatives – these are included in the following section 4 of this volume. Women’s cooperatives can help create

and preserve employment in traditional sectors and promote decent work by providing quality and stable jobs, facilitating women’s entry into the labour force, building solidarity and collective voice, integrating disadvantaged workers and helping the transition from informal to formal employment.⁴² As highlighted by WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organising) and the ILO, care cooperatives set up and run by workers in the informal economy promote the labour rights of care workers, by ensuring, for instance, that they are paid a decent wage, have access to training and enjoy good working conditions.⁴³ As such, they are hailed as helping to address gender gaps in employment and in women’s leadership,⁴⁴ including through their frequent provision of childcare and other public services that shift women’s burden of unpaid care work and promote access to finance and credit.

Care cooperatives can additionally be a space to raise awareness about care needs and through which to collectively negotiate with government at different levels for public provision of care services.⁴⁵ Highlighting the benefits of care cooperatives is not to say that the burden of providing care services should rest with women self-organising in the absence of the State. However, lessons can be learned from these cooperative for State provisioning of public services.

For women engaged in domestic work, which includes many migrant women, being part of a cooperative can help tackle the isolation and exploitation of working in the sector, where their workplace is someone else’s home and therefore their struggles can easily be hidden from view.⁴⁶ According to the ILO, as well as being a way for workers to access a broader pool of jobs, membership of such worker collectives can support women in negotiating contracts, working hours, wages and other terms of work, as well as opportunities for gaining new skills and knowledge and access to services which members need but are typically unable to access. These include financial services, social services, legal support, advice and counselling. Domestic worker cooperatives can also be a way to circumvent the charges and fees levied by commercial employment agencies.⁴⁷

However, cooperatives face challenges that put their viability and sustainability at risk, including a lack of knowledge of cooperative management and legal systems, and limited access to funds, particularly for new and developing cooperatives. These challenges can be overcome through information sharing, training programmes and developing networks and alliances across the cooperative movement.⁴⁸

4 Stories of feminist economic alternatives in practice

4.1 Cooperative approaches to childcare – Self Employed Women’s Association, India

The Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) is a trade union representing 1.8 million women workers in the informal economy across 18 states in India. More than 94% of women engaged in the labour force in India are in the informal economy.⁴⁹ SEWA members have self-organised to establish numerous social and financial support systems for informal sector women workers, including savings and credit schemes, insurance, legal aid and social protection such as healthcare and childcare.⁵⁰

In response to their members’ demands, in 1986 SEWA established the Sangini Child Care Workers Cooperative in the city of Ahmedabad in the state of Gujarat.⁵¹ Today the Sangini Child Care Workers Cooperative runs 13 childcare centres in Ahmedabad. SEWA also runs 20 centres in the rural areas. The centres are open from 9am – 5pm, whereas many of the government’s Integrated Child Development Scheme (ICDS) centres are only open for two to four hours a day.⁵² As a result, 64% of women who use the SEWA centres said that they could increase the number of days they work. They also reported an increase in their monthly incomes ranging from Rs. 500-1,000 (US\$8-16) up to to Rs. 2,000 (US\$32) per month.⁵³ 94% of women also reported experiencing reduced levels of stress after sending their children to the centres.⁵⁴

The Sangini Child Care Workers Cooperative provides an integrated approach to childcare, ensuring children’s education, nutritional, and health needs. Children are accepted from birth to five years old. Each centre can care for a maximum of 30 children⁵⁵ and there are two childcare workers in each centre. The cooperative is made up of the childcare workers and the mothers who send their children to the centres. A board comprised of childcare workers and parents is democratically elected by the shareholders every five years, which is key to ensuring the quality of the services provided.⁵⁶

Parents pay Rs. 300 (US\$42) per month, which covers 10-15% of the running costs of the childcare centre. The remaining costs are covered by government

funding, other SEWA ventures and private donations. However, major funding gaps remain. Childcare workers are only paid the minimum wage,⁵⁷ whilst state funding has decreased in recent years. Nonetheless, although limited in scale, SEWA childcare cooperatives provide an important complement to the existing State ICDS childcare services. SEWA also monitors the services of the ICDS centres, working with the local ICDS officials to improve the services they offer, as well as educating SEWA members about services available under the ICDS.⁵⁸

The SEWA cooperatives are linked to the national Forum for Creches and Child Care (FORCES).⁵⁹ SEWA was a founder of FORCES which grew out of the recommendation on childcare in a landmark report on informal women workers in 1988 led by Ela Bhatt, founder of the SEWA movement. FORCES bring together over 500 children’s rights, women’s rights and workers’ rights organisations all calling for quality public childcare services. Such a platform promotes the care cooperative model while calling for broader state support along with improvements to the ICDS model. SEWA and FORCES are also leading a national campaign and are part of a global campaign supported by WIEGO on quality public childcare for all workers, including informal economy workers, with the aim of supporting these different alliances and raising the visibility of women workers’ childcare needs.⁶⁰

4.2 Women’s cooperatives as enablers of decent work – Jamaican Household Workers Association, Jamaica

There is a close and important overlap between domestic worker cooperatives with trade unions and other worker organisations. In Jamaica, where 16% of women in the labour force are engaged in domestic work, the Jamaican Household Workers Association (JHWA)⁶¹ was formed in 1991 as a membership-based organisation. It provides skills training to its members in household management, negotiation and conflict resolution, as well as advocating for fair and just working conditions and wages for household workers. It formally registered as a trade union in 2013 and now has more than 1,600 members.⁶² JHWA is also a member of the

International Domestic Workers Federation, a global union which played a pivotal role in securing the landmark ILO Convention 189.⁶³ This Convention not only recognises the major contribution of domestic work to the global economy, but commits states to introduce urgently needed measures to protect and promote their rights. Amongst other things, these include laws and policies to ensure freedom from violence and harassment, freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, the elimination of forced and compulsory labour, payment of at least the minimum wage, minimum hours of rest, as well as protections for women migrating internationally to engage in domestic work who can be prone to particular forms of exploitation.⁶⁴

4.3 Platform cooperatives and the future of work – the P2P/SEWA app, India

Feminist calls for decent work for women as an alternative to the current reality are increasingly situated within discussions around ‘the future of work.’ This considers the impacts of the Fourth Industrial Revolution – entailing the rapid expansion of technology, automation and digitization, including the emergence of platform and gig economies.⁶⁵ As well as the gendered ‘digital divide’ (referring to the significant gaps between women’s access to information, communication and technology compared to men’s, further widened due to other crosscutting factors of discrimination, notably geographical location), these trends are leading to job losses for women,⁶⁶ the increased de-standardisation and informalisation of work, whilst creating new forms of precarity and exploitation.⁶⁷

Alternative strategies for addressing some of these challenges include the establishment of platform cooperatives. Like traditional platform apps, these are businesses that use a website, mobile app or an accessible system to sell goods or services. However, platform co-ops differ from platforms owned by big tech firms, such as Uber, in that they rely on democratic decision-making and shared ownership of the platform by workers and users. According to the Platform Cooperativism Consortium, around the world “new platform co-ops are emerging every day, organising in diverse sectors such as childcare, data entry, urban recycling and home services.”⁶⁸ For example, the P2P Foundation is collaborating with SEWA to co-develop a platform app for SEWA members providing beautician services.⁶⁹ The app will allow users to request a platform co-op worker-owner to come to their home. In developing the

app, the young women have been able to emphasise their concerns about safety when traveling to clients and working in their homes. They have asked for a panic button for workers to be integrated into the app which would allow them to quickly alert friends and the police in case of an emergency. Other strategies SEWA members suggested for protecting themselves from assault and harassment include the app not having individual worker profiles available to customers and not giving them a choice over who to provide a service, as well as a GPS feature that would allow a co-op manager to know their whereabouts. In contrast to the 30% of the revenue extracted from workers on traditional platforms, SEWA only plans to take 15% to cover administrative and educational expenses.⁷⁰

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