

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

Volume 4: Building the conditions for feminist economic alternatives to flourish



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 and activists and 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, 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 4) delves deeper into the myriad of stories and examples of FEAs grouped under the theme of building the conditions for FEAs to flourish. 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 organizing and seeking to implement alternatives towards building the conditions for FEAs to flourish, followed by six examples of FEAs in action that were not included in Volume 1. The example of reclaiming access to Brazil’s babassu forests and the global initiatives to: protect Women Human Rights Defenders; rally feminist demands towards a UN binding treaty on business & human rights; as well as shaping a feminist solidarity-based economic multilateralism showcased in pages 30 to 40 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.

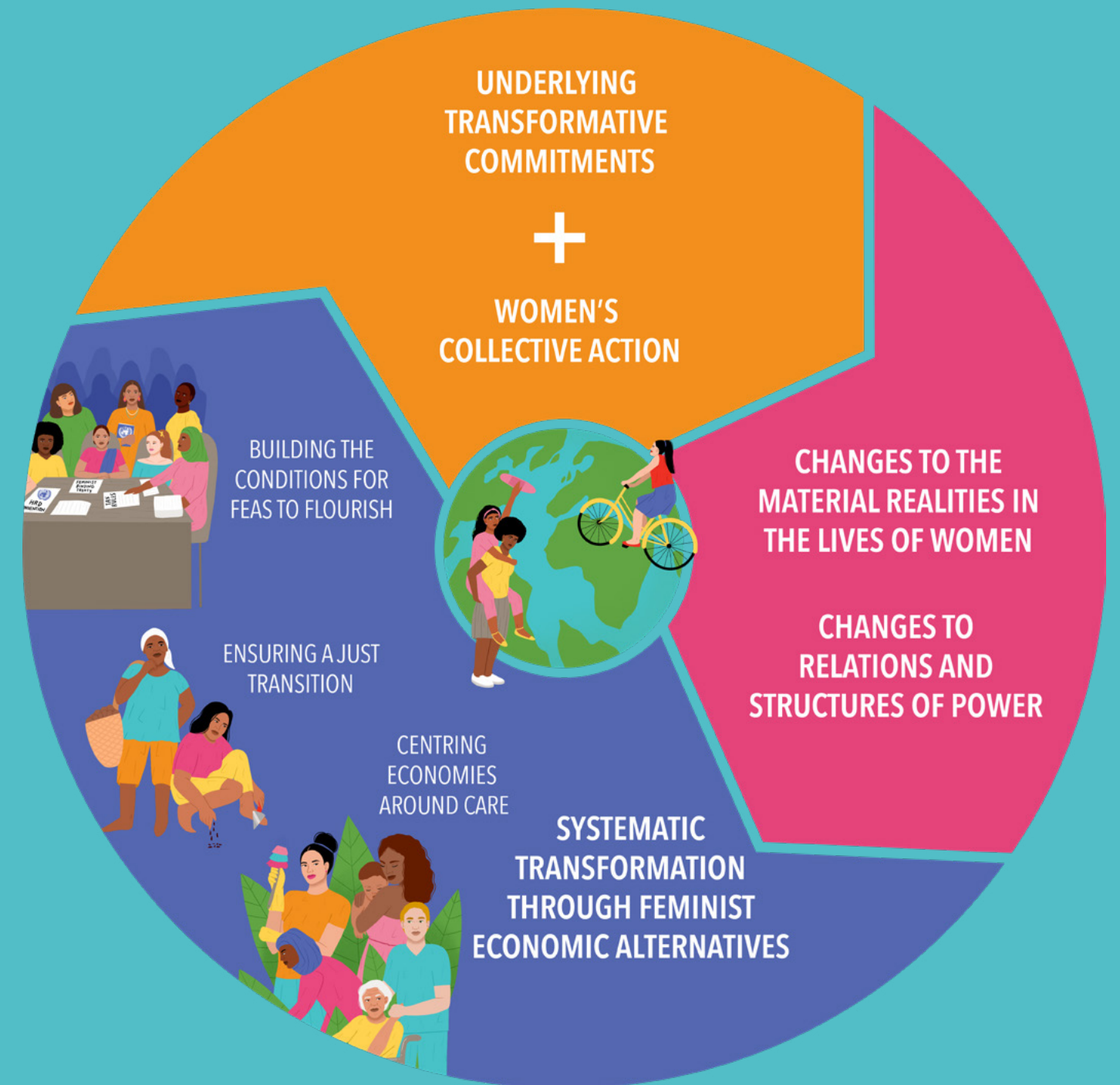
While the aim of feminist economic transformation is urgent systemic change, the sheer scale of the task

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 macro 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 building the conditions for feminist economic alternatives to flourish

The feminist economic alternatives for systemic transformation are not enacted within a vacuum. DAWN's "Remaking of Social Contracts: Feminists in a Fierce New World" describes the overall dynamics that shape the contexts for FEAs. The period from 1945 to 1980 saw post-war economic growth; the unravelling of colonial empires; belief in the possibility of a New International Economic Order; challenges to the idea of limitless growth; the rise of global social movements including women's movements; expansive policies of the welfare and developmental states; and greater monitoring of the activities of transnational corporations. Then the period from 1980 to 2008 saw the breaking of these beliefs and related institutions, and the emergence of more conservative social contracts and the start of an era of financial globalisation driven by the pressure to remove all barriers to free flows of money and capital, as well as the shrinking of the state, which was caricatured as inevitably bloated and corrupt.⁵ During this second period, social contracts⁶ between governments and their people, especially in the Global South became fractured.

In fact, as can be seen throughout the report, many FEAs are born from, and are themselves, acts of resistance due to the oppressive external environment and the erosion of the social contract. Increasing restrictions on civil society space, exploitative trade policies, privatisation of and cuts to public services, unbridled corporate power, rising authoritarianism, the erosion of democratic accountability, along with violence and threats against women human rights defenders are posing serious risks to any fragile gains and women's ability to collectively advocate for and implement feminist economic alternatives. Indeed, the context for feminist economic alternatives, premised as they are on women's autonomy, collective action, and state responsiveness and accountability, is becoming increasingly restrictive and disabling. Nonetheless, as this report series shows, women continue to develop creative strategies for surviving, thriving and resisting in often extremely challenging contexts. And there are numerous encouraging examples of states and municipalities implementing progressive policy frameworks that serve to support women's rights.

Central to this is the reversion of the power imbalance of the Global North and South and the restoration of sovereignty and self-determination of Global South governments. The struggle for the reclamation of the social contract between people and their governments in the Global South cannot happen without this power reversion (see pages 37 to 40 of Volume 1).

Post-independence, developmental states in the Global South made alternative policy, embarked on economy-restructuring as well as made geopolitical choices (South-South cooperation/solidarity/collective negotiations in intergovernmental spaces). While they were largely patriarchal in nature they were the contexts women lived in and have lost. These alternative political choices have been systematically dismantled through the weakening of multilateralism and the promotion instead of elite club governance through the G8, G7 and the G20. As well as of course the imposition of Washington Consensus-style structural adjustment programmes and wider neoliberal policies across the Global South. These include poorly designed trade policies, tax evasion and avoidance schemes that break the social contract and a system of rules that privilege the interests of wealthy countries and corporates over women's rights and which exacerbate and exploit women's historical position of social and economic disadvantage. Feminist struggle is taking place within the context of extreme power differentials between the North and the South.

Therefore, in addition to our principal call for states to institute gender transformative policies and frameworks rooted in feminist principles, states can support FEAs by creating the conditions for them to flourish. These conditions are constructed through economic policies, financing, reining in corporate power and respecting and expanding civic space. Emphasising an conducive conditions is not to suggest that the burden of ensuring their rights are fulfilled and redressing the wrongs of the economic system should continue to rest with women, or that states do not need to urgently step up to finance and provide quality gender responsive public services, social protection and decent work opportunities for women. Rather, in addition to this and as part of the shift towards a more progressive economic system, states need to recognise and support women-led initiatives and women's autonomous organising that fall outside of current mainstream economic discourse and approaches.

There are four types of FEA within this theme: firstly, essential initiatives to centring care in our economies are those that reclaim public goods and services from privatisation. Specifically the reclaiming of access by women to Brazil's Babassu forests. Next are initiatives for protection and collective healing to sustain women's leadership and movements. Followed by initiatives to ensure corporate accountability globally and maximising public financing through shaping feminist solidarity-based economic multilateralism.

3.1 Reclaiming public goods and services from privatisation

Reclaiming public goods and services from privatisation is essential to ensuring the centring of care in our economies. Public care services in particular are a way in which states acknowledge and ensure the redistribution of social reproductive work and women's care work as integral to our economies.⁷ Good quality, gender-responsive public services (GRPS)⁸ are key to redressing the historical gendered division of labour that places the burden of unpaid care predominantly on women and girls as well the intersectional nature of discrimination. GRPS are vital to ensuring the progressive realisation of women's economic and wider human rights, as well as to tackling social exclusion based on other intersecting aspects of women's identities.

To ensure their universality of access, quality and coverage, along with accountability of the State as principal rights duty-bearer, public services should be publicly financed and publicly delivered. However, since the 1980s, waves of commercialisation (where for instance user fees were introduced) leading to a wave of privatisation often linked to IMF and World Bank loan conditionalities, have taken things in the opposite direction. According to the IMF, as of 2019, privatisation of public assets and services is being considered by 59 governments in 39 developing and 20 high-income countries. Meanwhile, 60 IMF country reports suggested strengthening public-private-partnerships (PPPs), representing 50 developing countries and 10 high-income countries,⁹ as a way to finance social services and infrastructure projects. Right now, with the negotiation of the 'Trade in Services Agreement' (TiSA) by some 50 members of the WTO – although talks have been on hold since 2016 – public services are at risk of being further used as bargaining chips and privatised as key export products.¹⁰

The Covid-19 pandemic has, however, exposed the consequences of decades of privatisation strategies that have undermined public health systems and stifled progress on universal social protection.¹¹ Numerous privatisation failures, such as poor quality and fragmentation of services, escalating fees, job losses, wage cuts, displacement and loss of livelihoods, the emergence of private monopolies,¹² not to mention the breakdown of democratic accountability and transparency, are prompting numerous municipalities as well as women's movements and wider civil society to reclaim public goods and services from privatisation, and to seek justice from its negative fall-outs.¹³ Such movements are unfolding in both the Global North and South, often focusing on land, energy and water,¹⁴ as well as at the global and regional level, as seen in FEMNET's work challenging the promotion of PPPs by donors,¹⁵ IFIs and even within the SDGs.¹⁶

As with other feminist economic alternatives, there is no singular solution or approach that should be pursued with respect to gender-responsive (re)municipalisation. Rather, similar to what is argued by energy democracy advocates, a range of collective and collaborative alternatives to privatisation are needed, including autonomous citizen associations, worker cooperatives, (re)municipalisation and nationalisation, as well as national-level public planning.¹⁷ As well as frameworks such as the Abidjan Principles on the obligations of States to finance public education, developed in 2019 with human rights experts to resist privatisation in education.¹⁸ Within these, women's collective voice and agency should play a lead role in determining how public services are managed, designed and delivered, recognising that women are not a homogenous group and have distinct needs and priorities based on the particular intersecting forms of identity-based oppression they may face.

3.2 Women's leadership

It is the principal duty of states to protect and progressively realise human rights. However, despite this they are often complicit in or even the worst perpetrators of abuse. Many human rights defenders (HRDs) are working within a system where the rule of law is weak and are particularly vulnerable as the opposition they face from governmental and private entities act without fear of punishment. HRDs who work specifically to counter corporate abuse and impunity and promote the rule of law are often subject to aggressive threats and reprisals from those who benefit most from the status quo.¹⁹ Women human rights defenders (WHRDs) face many of the same challenges and threats in addition to obstacles, threats and impacts on account of their gender. Women human rights defenders suffer threats, stigma, social rejection, gender based and sexual violence, not only because they are promoting and defending the rights of others, but also because they are women doing that work.²⁰ The UN Special Rapporteur on HRDs has a mandate to integrate a gender perspective and pay particular attention to women human rights defenders. In his 2019 annual report to the Human Rights Council in Geneva he explains how "[i]n the current political climate, in which there is a backlash against human rights, women who defend and promote rights are often the first to come under attack." The report shows how the rise in misogynistic, sexist and homophobic speech by political leaders in recent years has normalised violence against women human rights defenders.²¹ A survey conducted by the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders (IM Defenders) amongst 55 women human rights defenders in the region, uncovered that 55% of all attacks are perpetrated by state actors; 35% are perpetrated by de facto powers, such as private companies, paramilitary and religious groups; and 15% are committed by other private actors, such as the spouses or ex-partners of women who are victims

or survivors of violence.²² The UN Special Rapporteur therefore recommends that “States and international organisations must recognise the specific challenges and risks women defenders face. They must ensure that such defenders are recognised, supported and enabled to participate equally, meaningfully and powerfully in the promotion and protection of human rights.”²³ As can be seen throughout this report, it is often from women’s resistance that FEAs are born and through women’s collective action that FEAs are realised. It is essential to supporting FEAs that states recognise and counter the additional gendered threats and obstacles WHRDs face so that women can continue seeking strategies to withstand and protect themselves from the most egregious, often systematic violence perpetrated by state and corporate actors in the interests of advancing a particular version of economic growth and development. Moreover, the formal policy commitments and frameworks of states with regards HRDs, notably the UN Declaration on Human Rights Defenders, are in need of being further developed and implemented from a women’s rights perspective.²⁴

The Covid-19 pandemic has triggered an outpouring of feminist propositions for alternatives in relation to the financing of health systems and public services, decent work for women in supply chains and in the informal economy, and women’s unpaid care and domestic work. Here are a number, although this is not an exhaustive list:

- The #AllWomenWork campaign²⁵ coordinated an open letter demanding investment in the care economy for a just, green, feminist Covid-19 response and recovery.²⁶
- A global collective of feminists has developed six principles for a feminist response to Covid-19 and are tracking responses by country and category (e.g. childcare, disability and education).²⁷
- A constellation of African Feminists released an African feminist post-Covid-19 economic recovery statement highlighting the need for localised food systems, conservation and sustainable use of the environment, and the decommodification and universalisation of land, water, healthcare and other basic rights.²⁸
- The Hawai’i State Commission on the Status of Women set forth a feminist post-Covid-19 recovery plan, paying particular attention to the needs of native Hawaiian and immigrant women’s experiences.²⁹ See also WIDE+ list of similar initiatives.³⁰
- The UK Women’s Budget Group and Women’s Equality Network are set to release a feminist Green New Deal policy paper for the UK in response to Covid-19 in late 2020.³¹

3.3 Corporate accountability

According to the UN, financial outflows from developing countries largely to the Global North in the form of interest payments on foreign debt, capital flight and foreign investments amounted to approximately US\$970.7 billion in 2014 alone, far more than they received in aid and investment.³² The Global South currently loses somewhere between US\$100 billion and US\$200 billion a year in lost tax revenue every year to corporate tax avoidance.³³ Most of these multinational corporations (MNCs) are based in the Global North and many utilise European and US tax havens, deriving their profits and wealth from the ‘cheap’ labour and unpaid care work of women in the countries where they produce, enabled by global tax rules and norms set by the OECD – a Northern-based agenda setter. In 2018, 69 of the richest 100 entities globally are corporations, not governments.³⁴

Corporate wealth and power is being further consolidated and state policy space constrained by the growing number of public private partnerships (PPPs) replacing publicly owned and delivered public services, growing multi-stakeholderism which is shrinking multilateralism³⁵ and the increasing use of investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) clauses in trade and investment deals. ISDS clauses allow multinationals to sue states for millions of dollars in private corporate courts if they feel an investment is jeopardised, even where a state is implementing legitimate policy measures aimed at promoting equity or addressing climate change.³⁶ Analysis by the Corporate Europe Observatory and Transnational Institute (TNI) reveals how, even as the global death toll during the Covid-19 pandemic exceeds a million, corporations and their lawyers could soon launch lawsuits against governments that took steps to address the pandemic. These include State measures to ensure that people can afford clean water for hand-washing, taking control of private hospitals and hotels to treat coronavirus patients, acting to secure affordable medicines, vaccines and tests, and preventing water, gas and electricity cuts due to lack of payment.³⁷ Not only do these cases cost governments millions of dollars in court fees and possible pay-outs, just the perceived threat of being sued could discourage governments from introducing policies that are beneficial to citizens but challenging to investors’ interests.

Power inequalities, patriarchal systems and entrenched discrimination mean that human rights abuses as a result of business activities are not gender neutral and have a disproportionately adverse impact on women and their economic rights: their access to land, their right to decent work, their unpaid care and domestic work.³⁸ States are obliged to prevent and address human rights violations resulting from corporate practices under international human rights law. While

national and international actors increasingly promote a business case for gender equality, through increasing women’s labour force participation as a tool for higher economic growth, the structural causes of women’s economic inequality and human rights violations in the unjust global economy remain unaddressed.³⁹ While resisting corporate power and demanding accountability is very much an act within the current economic structures, the following outlined initiatives demonstrate how from this resistance frequently alternatives are born that can both create changes to the material realities as well as relations and structures of power. These are strategies for change, rather than end goals.

3.4 Maximising public financing

“The global reform of tax systems is the low hanging fruit for radical change.”

Jayati Ghosh - Professor of Economics, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

Current rigged global economic structures and taxation systems allow corporates to dodge taxes, shifting income to tax havens and contributing significantly to the vast levels of illicit financial flows (IFFs) leaving the Global South. This system facilitates private appropriation of public resources and illicit financial flows allows multinational corporations and wealthy individuals to avoid paying their fair share of taxes.⁴⁰ This denies the Global South between US\$100 billion and US\$200 billion each year⁴¹ and estimations in the report by the High Level Panel on Illicit Financial Flows from Africa led by the president of South Africa Thabo Mbeki are that the African continent loses up to US\$50 billion annually as a result of IFFs. This is double the amount that the continent receives in form of Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) making Africa a net creditor to the world.⁴² Tax justice and ending IFFs represents one of the strongest areas of feminist advocacy for alternative economic policy approaches. Networks such as the ‘Global Alliance for Tax Justice (GATJ) Tax and Gender Working Group’ are providing space for advocates leading the charge to combine forces in demonstrating tax as a feminist issue.

Taxation is widely recognised as the most reliable, sustainable and democratic way of funding the state budget and public services. Taxation is one of the principal means through which the collective responsibility to finance public goods and services is realised. It is vital to the preservation of the social contract between citizens and the state (as discussed above on page 9). Therefore, taxation also strongly determines the potential resources states may have available to remunicipalise public goods and services

from private providers. A progressive approach to tax ideally entails higher tax rates appropriately set for those with more wealth, based on the ability to pay with governments then spending/investing the revenue according to need. This is the redistributive power of progressive tax systems. There is not a one-size-fits-all answer for how much tax a country should collect, but most developing countries should be aiming to increase their tax revenue. Right now, there are huge gaps in the provisioning of quality public services, as education, childcare, healthcare, WASH and transportation. ActionAid’s “Who Cares for the Future” report demonstrates how international benchmarks on spending on education and early childcare; health and SRHR; and water and sanitation compared to GDP are currently far from being met, especially in low income countries.⁴³ And according to the UN, a bare minimum of at least 20% tax-to-GDP ratio is needed to deliver on the Sustainable Development Goals and to provide quality public services that are gender-responsive.⁴⁴ Worryingly, the estimated financing gaps for achieving the SDGs are now being used as an excuse for bringing in corporate actors and PPPs, instead of more progressive taxation measures.⁴⁵ Moreover, while overseas aid and loans from IFIs might provide temporary, partial support to gaps in financing, they are not a sustainable solution and often come with conditions set by lenders that create challenges and new restrictions on policy autonomy.⁴⁶ The obligation of states to use the maximum available resources and mobilise for the progressive realisation of rights is prescribed in Article 2 of the International Covenant on Economic and Social and Cultural Rights.⁴⁷ World leaders have also committed to maximizing domestic resources, including on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Addis Ababa Agenda for Action.⁴⁸

Feminist analysis has shown how, at present, tax policies do not work for women.⁴⁹ Current revenue raising systems are often regressive and have a disproportionate impact on women from the poorest and most marginalised communities.⁵⁰ For instance, value added tax (VAT) and other consumption taxes almost invariably lead to women being disproportionately taxed, because the tax rate is the same no matter an individual’s income and women spend more of their limited revenue on household or basic goods and services. This has a further regressive and gender-discriminatory impact.⁵¹ Despite this, corporation taxes have been reduced by half while consumption taxes including VAT have doubled over the past 20 years or so.⁵² IMF tax policy advice, contained in surveillance and loan programmes, continues to regularly encourage governments to introduce, expand or raise rates of VAT or sales taxes. As of 2018, 166 of the world’s approximately 193 countries employ a VAT. In sub-Saharan Africa, about 25% of tax revenue comes from VAT, compared to 6.8% in OECD countries.⁵³ Moreover, of critical importance to increasing Southern



countries’ ability to maximise public financing for gender equality is the fair taxation of multinational corporations. The Independent Commission for the Reform of International Corporate Taxation (ICRICT) and UNCTAD, among others have been calling for unitary taxation – an agreed minimum rate of 25% which is determined by the current corporate average tax rate in G7 countries – to prevent tax dodging and a competition among countries to offer the lowest possible tax rates to MNCs in order to secure investment and therefore perpetuating a race to the bottom.⁵⁴

In table 1 we offer a further overview of why different tax features matter for gender equality.

The way in which tax is spent matters strongly to gender equality and the power of tax lies in the way that taxation policies can contribute to strengthening democratic accountability for effective exercise of the social contract.⁵⁵ Due to loan and tax conditionalities countries are being pushed to implement austerity measures (which are more or less unchanged since the discredited and now more commonly known as ‘structural adjustment’ or ‘fiscal consolidation’ policies from the 1980s) by the IMF.⁵⁶ This means spending on public services, including public sector

wage bills, is held down or cut, further disadvantaging women for whom quality provision of health, education, child care or other services can significantly reduce and redistribute unpaid care and domestic work responsibilities and address the wider poverty they may face. Moreover, through the heavy burden of debt repayment to the IMF, the public funds available to governments are further limited. Over the past decade, developing countries have faced a growing debt burden, entailing that they are now paying 85% more on debt repayment than at the start of the decade. In Kenya for instance, over 36% of the budget goes to debt repayment, this is more than expenditure on education and healthcare combined.⁵⁷ Western governments that dominate the leadership of the IMF need to embark on transforming their institutions and change their policy prescriptions for the developing world that are ultimately extractive and maintain their neo-colonial power. Governments in the Global South need to, as much as possible within this unbalanced power dynamic between North and South, resist IMF advice on austerity and regressive tax reforms⁵⁸ and adopt more progressive approaches to taxation.⁵⁹ Governments in the Global North have a role to play to ensure business pay their fair share, also via mandatory due diligence and a UN binding treaty on business and human rights.⁶⁰

Table 1 demonstrating gender bias in tax policies.⁶¹

Examples of why tax is a feminist issue	
Tax system feature	Why does it matter?
Overreliance on VAT and other consumption taxes	Women are a larger share of the global poor and tend to spend a larger share of their income on buying basic products goods and services. So, unless there are exemptions for basic goods, women feel the brunt of VAT.
Property and wealth taxes	Women have much less ownership and control over assets and wealth, which means that underuse of these kinds of taxes and subsidies might disproportionately benefits men.
Personal Income Taxes	Most countries today have very flat income taxes so the highest earners (who tend to be men) do not pay much more than the lowest earners (who tend to be women). In the past higher rates of persona income tax attracted 80% or 90% rates of tax which would be more gender-just.
Informal sector taxes (e.g. market tax)	Women are over-represented in the informal sector and within the informal sector they are concentrated in the lowest-paid and most vulnerable types of work. Research suggests informal workers and businesses are often taxed quite heavily through numerous types of fees, charges and licensing costs, which may be levied locally, nationally or both ⁶² – with informal market traders often being charged multiple times, whether formally or informally.

According to Caroline Othim of GATJ and Roosje Saalbrink of Womankind Worldwide co-coordinators of the Tax and Gender Working Group, a feminist taxation system is one that generates sufficient public revenue, while ensuring that this revenue is fairly redistributed and focused on rebalancing economic and gender inequalities. “Women’s voices go largely unheard in the policy debates dominated by global capital. While States accommodate corporate demands for tax incentives, the needs of women and demands to tax corporations fairly are neglected.”⁶³ A heterogeneous group of women needs to be part of shaping the taxation policy process and decisions around tax policies. As Misun Woo, from the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) summarises: “Redistributive policies such as progressive taxes, retention of state resources including land and universal

public health are able to redirect the capital flow from the rich to the poor. These policies will be most beneficial to women since women are more likely to rely on state public services, more likely to be minimum wage earners and because they are most likely to be working in the informal sector and be excluded from privatised system or private income related benefits (e.g. wage linked pensions, health care, income safety nets).”⁶⁴ Sweeping reforms are necessary to make the way tax is raised and spent accountable, more progressive⁶⁵ and in line with human rights obligations.

Increasing tax revenue through progressive reforms after Covid-19

Especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, fair taxation matters.⁶⁶ There is huge potential for countries to increase their tax revenue dramatically without generating further inequality. ActionAid’s research into the revenue potential from just six progressive tax reforms in Malawi, Mozambique and Nigeria demonstrated that there is considerable space for a significant revenue increase. The proposed reforms, focusing on personal income tax (PIT), corporate tax Personal Income Tax, Corporate Tax incentives, property taxes and luxury goods, could translate into an increase in the tax-to-GDP ratio of 1% in Nigeria (an additional US\$2,027,731,649 revenue), 2% in Malawi (an additional US\$135,131,775 in revenue) and a staggering 6% in Mozambique (an additional US\$701,197,676 in revenue). Out of the proposed measures, in all three countries revising corporate tax incentives has by far the largest revenue potential, contributing to more than half of the revenue increases.⁶⁷ For example, ending harmful tax incentives could transform financing for education with just 20% of the additional revenue being able to pay for a place in a primary school for the 5,612,000 out-of-school children, an additional 100,000 qualified teachers, as well as free school meals for one year for 1,796,632 children.⁶⁸ Improving property taxation and increasing taxes on luxury items can also provide significant gains, while the potential in improving compliance among “High Net Worth Individuals” and increasing PIT rate on the top earners depends very much on the country context.⁶⁹



Human rights and environmental activists from Zambia and Guatemala stand outside the Dutch Parliament to hand over a letter to the Minister for Trade & Development Cooperation, demanding action for a feminist UN binding treaty business & human rights and national gender due diligence law.

4 Stories of feminist economic alternatives in practice

4.1 Feminisation of politics as a path to democratisation of public services - Spain

“A feminist approach would enable deeper levels of democratisation where public services are run from the bottom up. This requires new mechanisms through which marginalised groups, including indigenous communities, have the decision-making power to ensure that a public service is prioritising the needs of the many instead of the elite few.”

Satoko Kishimoto, Lavinia Steinfort & Olivier Petitjean (TNI) ⁷⁰

New research by the Transnational Institute and its international partners shows that, between 2000 and 2019, there have been over 1,400 new cases of “municipalisation” or “remunicipalisation” – the creation of new public enterprises run by the local governments or the return of privatised enterprises to municipal hands. This trend has taken place across 2,400 locales in 58 countries.⁷¹ This includes cases of (re)municipalisation of water in South Africa, Mexico, Mozambique, Uganda and Indonesia, and in the health and social care sectors in the Philippines, Chile, Nepal and India, to name but a few.⁷² Although remunicipalisation movements do not consistently include women’s movements, there are many examples of remunicipalisation campaigns where feminist organising has played an important role.

An example of a feminist re-municipalisation movement can be seen with Barcelona En Comú:⁷³ a new citizen-led governance platform being implemented in Barcelona, Spain, since 2015. Led by the feminist housing activist and mayor of Barcelona, Ada Colau, Barcelona En Comú aims to democratise local government and de-privatise public services through a strategy that entails the ‘feminisation of politics’. The feminisation of politics includes, but goes beyond, a concern for increasing women’s participation in

decision-making and policy-making to promote gender equality, to also achieve changes in how politics is done.⁷⁴ This concept implies guaranteeing women’s participation in political activity and organisations, challenging the patriarchal dynamics that exist in political organisations and integrating a feminist approach into the political agenda, so that it serves the needs of all women and focuses on the more marginalised communities. The political agenda of feminist transformation looks at reducing the gender inequalities both within the political realm and, more generally, in the city.⁷⁵ Key points for realising a feminist approach within the political organising according to Barcelona En Comú are for instance: gender parity in electoral lists; internal and spokesperson positions; the fostering of collaborative leadership; creating spaces for childcare and schemes to foster a political work-life balance; and joining the feminist movement in mobilisations. Such integration of feminism into politics is seen as key to altering the underlying dynamics of the current economic system and constructing “emancipatory alternatives.”⁷⁶ Their aim is to promote structural changes that will achieve a fair, feminist, ecologically balanced, inclusive and democratic society.

Through this approach, Barcelona En Comú is aiming to transform the local state into a vehicle for grassroots democracy and participation and to undo privatisation through forms of municipal ownership that maximise citizen control over public services.⁷⁷ Achievements have included the re-municipalisation of gender-based violence prevention services and five nurseries, as well as measures to curb gentrification and evictions, and the establishment of new municipal entities for dental services, funeral services and electricity retailing.⁷⁸ The municipalisation of violence-related services allowed for a substantial improvement in staff working conditions, a doubling of staff numbers and the recognition of these services as an essential element of local services. This also improved the quality of the service. In addition to municipalisation, the number of nursery centres was increased and a social pricing policy was introduced. This reform reinforced the inclusionary character of the local education network.⁷⁹ The remunicipalisation of water services was also sought under Barcelona En Comú’s efforts, but having reached a deadlock, it has been the subject of critiques⁸⁰

The ‘feminisation of politics’ has also faced challenges. Some of the main challenges have been that the ‘fast pace’ of politics make it very difficult to build spaces of participation that are really inclusive. Regarding the municipal institutions, there were a number of

departments that resisted the introduction of the feminist approach. Externally, a feminist agenda that challenges the consequences of the prevailing economic model has been difficult to accept by the economic elites. The forming of alliances with other social movements and political organisations has been key to overcoming this resistance.⁸¹

4.2 Women ensuring their water rights in the face of state failure – Philippines

The Community Water Service Cooperative of Bagong Silang (CWSC-BS), also known as Bagong Silang Cooperative, in the city of Caloocan in the Philippines was set up by the women of Bagong Silang, a poor urban community, with the help of a national NGO, the Institute of Popular Democracy.⁸² The area is serviced by a private water company, Maynilad Water Services, Inc. However, water costs were too high for many households and others are not directly connected to the pipe system. This left them no choice but to buy often poor-quality water at inflated prices from unregulated water vendors, sometimes having to walk up to a kilometre to reach them. In 2008, the local government also started delivering water to the community twice a week at a much cheaper price. But there were a number who could still not afford it, whilst the water delivery schedules were unpredictable.⁸³ Through the co-op, members of the community installed a range of alternative water sources, including water tanks, rainwater harvesting, and the establishment of a communal faucet system. The community also pushed for a bulk water supply arrangement with Maynilad, whereby they collectively purchase water for a reduced price, and supply this to the cooperative members.⁸⁴

The co-op is led by women, with control over and access to water managed democratically by them. Its membership has been expanding and they have begun an incremental system for pipe-laying within the community. Any surplus revenue generated by the co-op goes back to the members either as dividends, thereby creating an important additional source of income, or is channelled into additional key services, such as early childcare. As of January 2019, the cooperative is serving some 742 households.⁸⁵

Some NGOs in the Philippines see this model as controversial because it operates within a privatised set up. However, it still can be seen as an example of a feminist economic alternative, whereby women have reclaimed democratic control of their water from a privatised system from which they and their communities were not benefitting, whilst using surplus revenue to bolster incomes and help finance other important services in the absence of quality state provision.⁸⁶

4.3 Resisting water privatisation – Indonesia

Collecting water for household needs is a hugely time-consuming task that falls disproportionately on women. In rural and urban areas alike, women and girls from poor communities spend significant amounts of time every day walking to and from water sources or queuing at standpipes. As such, resisting water privatisation and finding cooperative ways to manage water resources as a common good are key feminist concerns.

In Indonesia, in 2013, a coalition of activists, including feminist organisation Solidaritas Perempuan, trade unions and Jakarta residents filed a class-action lawsuit against Jakarta’s public water contract partner, PAM Jaya and its private foreign partners, Palyja (part of French company, Suez Lyonnaise des Eaux) and Aetra (part of Thames Water from the United Kingdom) seeking to annul a 1997 agreement with two foreign companies. The Coalition of Jakarta Residents Opposing Water Privatisation (KMMSAJ), claimed that the companies – who were awarded the contracts during a World Bank-backed privatisation push during the Suharto military dictatorship – failed to guarantee the right to clean water in Jakarta. Residents were paying the highest prices in Southeast Asia,⁸⁷ making water unaffordable to poorer households whilst the companies involved in this public-private partnership reaped a considerable profit.⁸⁸

Solidaritas Perempuan spoke to women across Jakarta’s five districts, who reported that the water provided by the companies was so contaminated it was causing skin diseases and affecting their reproductive health.⁸⁹ Arieska Kurniawaty, Solidaritas Perempuan’s Programme Officer, reported that these negative experiences galvanised women residents to get involved in the struggle.

“Apart from being exposed to diseases, women had said the low water supply made them spend extra time and energy to provide water for their households. Often women in North Jakarta’s Penjarangan subdistrict have to wake up well before dawn to collect water because usually in the morning the water fails to flow. They started to create a water calendar to record the water discharge and its quality. They also collected receipts of water payment. They also held discussions about the right to water until they were finally involved in the coalition and filed a lawsuit.”⁹⁰

In 2015, the Central Jakarta District Court approved the KMMSAJ lawsuit, stating in its verdict: “The defendants have been negligent in fulfilling the human right to water for Jakarta.”⁹¹ Although the companies won an appeal in 2016 at the Jakarta High Court, in 2017 the Supreme Court overturned it, returning to the District Court decision and acknowledging that the “agreement has had a real and extraordinary impact on society.”⁹² The Supreme Court demanded the government reverse privatisation of water in the capital, emphasising that water is a human right enshrined in the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, ratified by Indonesia.⁹³

4.4 Feminist Judgment Project

Feminist Judgment Projects exist all around the world bringing together feminist academics, activists and legal practitioners to draft and disseminate alternative judgments for important cases on a range of legal issues. Feminist judgments include in their considerations the material conditions of women’s lives, such as their caring responsibilities and financial means, which are often excluded from legal analysis, looking at both individual contexts and the law. “There is the idea that feminist tools would not ‘gel well’ with formal procedures – but the Feminist Judgment Project demonstrates that alternate and representative readings and outcomes are possible while maintaining fidelity to formal legal rules.”⁹⁴ The projects draw on law professor Robin West’s bringing together of care and justice.⁹⁵ Tax and corporate law are among the many areas that alternative judgments are written for. The African Feminist Judgment Project for example reviewed a case on access to medicines and the role of the South African government in the HIV response.⁹⁶ The British Feminist Judgment Project reviewed a case where major retailer Marks and Spencer allegedly breached their contract within their supply chain and a case on whether private care homes are performing public functions for the purposes of the Human Rights Act. The Australian project reviewed cases on environmental impacts by mining companies, while the Feminist Judgment Project in India challenged a patent law case where the judgment was based on colonial Victorian morality. While feminist judgment-writing projects do not necessarily change the outcomes of the original court cases, the collective process of drafting a judgment and developing the final decision (for which the same timeframe, information and laws are used as for the original decision) demonstrate how changing the mindset of a judge to a feminist one, can both alter the obiter comments that shape the law’s direction as well as the judgment itself. “There is the feeling that many judges don’t feel accountable to the people they make judgments for, but part of the feminist ethics is accountability.”⁹⁷

4.5 Re-conceptualising taxation and macroeconomic policy

The prevailing dominant methodology for evaluating macroeconomic policies, such as is applied in the IMF’s Annual Surveillance Reviews of countries’ economies, is deeply flawed. This methodology is drawn from neoclassical economics and is concerned, first and foremost, with questions of efficiency and market competition. But this framework through its focus on economic growth and full employment is severely limited when it comes to understanding the role of the economy and the effects of economic inequality on social wellbeing. Rutger’s University Centre for Women’s Leadership has proposed an alternative approach, based on human rights, for an evaluative and ethical framework through which to conduct audits of key economic policies and outcomes, covering the following key areas: government spending; taxation; budget deficits and debt; monetary policy; and financial regulation.⁹⁸ A human rights perspective shows that taxation is a critical part of complying with the principle of making use of maximum available resources.⁹⁹ The approach has been designed to create a framework and space that requires governments to defend their expenditure policy decisions as part of advocacy processes. This also challenges the idea that expenditure policy is a technical matter best left to public finance experts. For example, the enforcement of austerity, assessed according to the human rights framework, can almost always be interpreted as a violation of the principle of ‘non-retrogression.’ Feminist initiatives such as the work of the Centre for Women’s Global Leadership helps recast advocacy for fair taxes as the politics of human rights and women’s rights, and point to the obligations that governments have to raise revenue for realising these.¹⁰⁰ A tool which can be further helpful to assess economic policy in times of crisis is the UN Guiding Principles on Human Rights Impact Assessment of Economic Reforms, which incorporated gender dimensions and feminist perspectives.¹⁰¹

4.6 Budget tracking and gender budgeting – Zambia, Uganda

Featured here are strong examples demonstrating people taking control of the budgeting process and creating accountability for use of public funds. Gender budgeting can be carried out by women’s rights organisations and CSO’s at the local level, or be undertaken by governments at national or sub-national level. For example, the WBG conducts a gendered analysis of the UK’s budget every year, often looking at how black and working-class women are particularly

impacted. Mexico, Finland, India and Uganda were four of 17 countries that had prominent gender budgets in 2015.¹⁰² The effectiveness of these gender budgets is, however, not guaranteed. India’s gender budget is criticised as ‘pink washing’ the Union Budget, which was actually gender blind.¹⁰³ By no means are these gender budgets always used in transformative or feminist ways by governments, but they may offer opportunities and policy processes or structures that can be built upon with women’s direct participation.

In Zambia, a People’s Budget campaign led by women, demands a budget that works for women. This campaign comes from a need for a radically different approach. With levels of inequality, both in terms of the gap between the rich and poor, as well as between women and men, being extremely high and growing in Zambia. The Fight Inequality Alliance Zambia, part of the global Fight Inequality Alliance coalition, is a growing group of youth activists, women’s rights groups, NGOs and other civil society organisations coming together to fight the root causes of inequality in the country. They conduct trainings on the budget cycle, mainly in rural parts of Zambia, working with grassroots activists on how and when they to get involved in the budget process and how they can make a submission. Most importantly people learn how they can track budget implementation in their own areas to ensure that the allocation they get is used for the right reasons and they are able to hold their leaders accountable. This understanding of the budget cycle and tracking of budget implementation has built people’s collective power to make change in their own lives and influence policy. Over 50% of the people taking part in this campaign were rural women, and 60% felt priority in the budget should be given to education and agriculture. This will reduce the burden on most women who carry out the majority of unpaid care work. Their demands were taken down in a budget submissions book, forming an alternative budget that was called “The People’s Budget.”¹⁰⁴

In addition to budget tracking at national level, women’s rights organisations are leading efforts to track budgets and create accountability through budget related advocacy at community level too. Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE) a women’s rights organisation based in Uganda, promote gender accountability in Uganda through Grassroots Village Budget Clubs. The clubs work to ensure that their issues are included and spending according to these issues is prioritised in local government plans and budgets. Communities through Village Budget Clubs monitor the expenditure of public resources to check corruption among public officials and ensure the delivery of quality public services. Village Budget Clubs are modelled to be non-partisan, with each composed of 20 members of whom 12 are women and eight men. Some of the Village Budget Club members are community opinion

leaders and others hold positions of responsibility, as for example leaders of faith-based organisations. The clubs advocate for gender responsive budgets, enabling women and men get equal consideration in budgets and development plans. Members of the community are accountable and responsible for each other’s wellbeing. In schools, for example, parents are responsible for ensuring that teachers are punctual and present at schools. The parents advocate for teachers’ welfare even if it means their direct support such as contributing towards staff house construction.¹⁰⁵

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