

CSO reflections on WBG's draft 2024-30 Gender Strategy

All requests that we hope to see addressed from the 30th of November and beyond are highlighted in red.

Private Sector Push

While the draft strategy includes some promising new human rights language, overall, it remains rooted in the logic of a private sector-led approach to development. The strategy's use of private-sector logic remains prevalent, describing women in terms of 'human capital' – language that centers profit-driven motives as the Bank's primary justification for investing in gender issues. Nowhere in the document is the public sector or public spending mentioned without reference to the private sector, an approach unlikely to change under new President Ajay Banga's private finance push.

The Bank itself has experience of how private provision of public services (IFC funding privatised [healthcare](#) and [education](#) in Kenya, and DFI-funded [healthcare](#) in India, Nigeria and Kenya, among many other countries in the Global South) is unregulated, expensive, and of lower quality than sufficiently funded public services. Furthermore, there is **low incentive for private providers to invest in less profitable areas and services types (e.g rural, illnesses that require more resources) and to maintain a high standard of service, instead favoring profit-making.**

Macroeconomics: Structural/Power Analysis

Unlike the existing strategy, the new draft discusses gender in terms of "power dynamics" and "structural limitations", which is welcome. Yet, it refers only to the fiscal affairs of "client countries", failing to extend this analysis to the Bank's own role in promoting neoliberal policy conditionality.

The draft states, of 'client countries', "Integrating gender analysis in fiscal policy, budget management, and procurement systems can enhance allocation of public resources and address structural barriers to gender equality." **This analysis should be extended to the Bank's own policies.**

Despite [research](#) showing that some 85 percent of the world's population live under austerity measures in 2023, often on explicit advice of the Bank and Fund, **fiscal consolidation impacts are only referred to as an inevitability.** While it is encouraging to see newly added language promising that the strategy will "ensure that spending in support of gender equality is protected during times of fiscal constraint", **such efforts will unfortunately be undone if public services and other aspects of austerity measures that are not overtly gendered continue to be scaled back under fiscal consolidation.** This will undoubtedly spark concern for many, given that the strategy claims to "respond to the global context." Such conditions will erode key social protection systems, cut or cap the wages and number of teachers and public healthcare workers, eliminate vital subsidies, privatise public services, and reduce workers' rights as countries aim

to “B-ready” for a ‘business enabling environment’. Women will once again be the shock absorbers of such policies. **The Bank specifically continues to support austerity through prior actions in its development policy finance instrument**, which have a particularly negative impact on women and girls, as evidenced in a January report by US-based organisation Gender Action.

On power relations, the draft states: “The nature of the social contract binding citizens and the state (e.g., respective rights and responsibilities, grievance and redress mechanisms, strength of legitimacy accorded to dominant parties by nondominant parties and vice versa); how the public and private sectors interact (especially the legal, political, and financial resources available to them); and the role and influence of external groups and multilateral agencies. Progress toward gender equality (e.g., in asset ownership or decision-making) may reallocate the distribution of de facto power between actors, and thus alter how policies are determined, implemented, and assessed.” **The World Bank is an actor in this ‘social contract’ yet does not analyse its own role in upholding (harmful) macroeconomic structures and power relations. This is crucial.**

Also, with reference to “calls for changes spanning country laws and policies, public and private sector activities, and personal lives”: **what about changes spanning global structures - i.e the international financial architecture, and its governance, including through the BWIs?** We need to see a greater level of accountability that takes into account more macro-level analysis of systems and structures.

Human Rights Language

Pleasingly, the draft notes that gender equality and women’s empowerment are enshrined in Sustainable Development Goal 5 and in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. The extensive focus on tackling GBV throughout is framed through human rights language. “Gender equality is a human right at the core of development. Gender equality and women’s empowerment are enshrined as Sustainable Development Goal 5 and in the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women”. However, it would be more meaningful if the human rights framework was integrated across all issues discussed, beyond just GBV. Using the United Nations [Guiding Principles](#) on Human Rights Impact Assessments of Macroeconomic Reforms to assess prior actions is one key example of how existing frameworks could be applied to Bank practices.

Gender Based Violence (GBV)

“Comprehensive programs address GBV as a social problem. They focus on the transformation of patriarchal norms and social systems that enable power dynamics detrimental to women and girls. Prevention education and community-based programs with a gender equality and life-cycle approach combat the root causes of GBV”. Attention must be given to addressing **structural inequalities and barriers** faced by women, particularly by creating increased opportunities for women in both FCV and post-conflict contexts. **Consider compounded vulnerabilities that increase the risk of individuals to**

experience GBV. It is not just about societal attitudes to women, but about the patriarchal political and economic structures within which the Bank itself exists.

Gender & Climate Change

Thank you for agreeing to remove language upholding women's roles on corporate fossil fuel and extractive boards.

Labour Force Participation

The Strategy's continued focus on "advancing women's participation, decision-making and leadership" promotes the **neoliberal idea that women are responsible for their own circumstances, while ignoring structural conditions that are often at the core of gender inequality. The strategy seems determined that equality of opportunity to participate in economic activity is the solution to gender inequality. Yet, it is well documented that 'meritocracy' does not account for intersections of class, race, age and gender, a concern given the new Strategy's focus on intersectionality.**

Moreover, the assumption that women are not already working is inaccurate, and the focus on economic growth as a macroeconomic solution to gender inequality is misguided. This has been demonstrated by recent evidence highlighting that gross domestic product (GDP) is a blunt instrument for measuring whether an economy delivers positive net benefits for women and girls. An August report by Oxfam found that 65 percent of women's weekly working hours globally are unpaid and excluded from GDP calculations. Women routinely perform unpaid, underpaid or insecure work in the informal and care economies, as well as at the bottom of global supply chains. It is therefore crucial that the strategy align legislation with the ILO and other multilateral institutions, and support implementation of international labor standards all the way to the project level.

Furthermore, the strategy must not ignore the public sector as a key source of decent work for women, especially in education and healthcare services. Increased investments in the public sector has a double impact on gender equality as it increases access to enabling social services and promotes decent work for women.

Accountability & Assessment

Country Partnership Frameworks (CPFs) will elevate gender outcomes: "The recent introduction of High-Level Outcomes (HLO) in CPFs created an opportunity to prioritize and elevate gender outcomes in country engagement." Gender outcomes in project implementation and country engagement: outcome-oriented results framework building on current corporate commitments and WBG Evolution Roadmap. **This must be expanded to all Bank operations. Relying heavily on micro-level analyses and approaches to tackle structural barriers, and advance gender equality is not a sustainable approach,**

given the World Bank's macroeconomic impact. We understand the gender team is very limited in its scope to influence the wider Bank. **The gender team must utilise this strategy to encourage other departments of the Bank to scale up and mainstream its analysis of gender equality, until a structural gender analysis applies to all Bank operations.**

On Development Policy Outcomes (DPOs): "Where the policy environment is conducive, there is scope to expand gender-specific policy actions in DPOs". **We must clarify what specific policy actions the Bank anticipates mandating. It is not that more conditionalities should be added to DPOs, but that existing ones are mandated to a 'do no harm' policy on gender (and human rights).** For example, fiscal consolidation must be assessed, including ex-ante and post-hoc, to ensure it does not worsen gender inequality through austerity measures.

Other Critiques & CSO Asks

The Bank should commit to gender and human rights impact assessments of its macroeconomic approach, learning lessons from **research** that demonstrates the trade-offs, inequality impacts and historical failures of the Bank's market-led policy paradigm. This could be framed as a wider Bank commitment to the gendered challenges raised in this strategy. **This should include analysis of the gendered impacts of public-private partnerships and blended finance as a financing mechanism for public services.** This should include a retrospective impact assessment of the gendered effects of its macroeconomic policies over the past decades, utilising resources beyond those of the limited gender team which has limited scope in its mandate. After all, the Bank **considers** mainstreaming gender issues to be a "shared commitment across the institution."

The Bank should **clarify the forthcoming concrete plans of the World Bank Gender Strategy 2024-2030 for implementation:** will the strategy be mandated, and if so, for whom? Is there an accountability framework, in order to track the impact of implementation? **This must be shared publicly, and for comment.**

The strategy should include reference to aligning legislation with ILO labor standards (e.g. decent work) and place more emphasis on the issue of women's overrepresentation in the informal sector.

The nexus of gender, conflict and environment and climate crises needs to be strengthened. Incorporating climate justice and resilience into the strategy is essential because climate-related challenges exacerbate fragility, which in turn may exacerbate gender inequalities and GBV... it should strongly connect with the Strategy on Fragility, Conflict, Violence (FCV), or the UN's Women, Peace, and Security Agenda.

Is there potential to expand Impact Evaluations? "A growing number of impact evaluations, including those supported by the Umbrella Facility for Gender Equality and other partnerships, have increased knowledge of what works."

On the importance of building up the public sector: “The 2016-2023 WBG Gender Strategy spurred investments to examine the root causes and implications of gender inequality and to find solutions. Recent evidence reveals how infrastructure and services, discrimination, weak formal institutions, and deeply held gender norms and mindsets contribute to gender inequality.” **So as not to undermine this, the Bank needs to stop undercutting public sectors, especially in essential services such as education, health and care. Otherwise, this claim is not consistent.**

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