

Comments on the World Bank Draft Gender Strategy (2024-2030)

International Trade Union Confederation/ Global Unions Washington Office

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In its fifth global Congress last year the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) formally reaffirmed its commitment to gender equality at work and in society and to a “feminist and inclusive trade union movement” fighting to end the gender pay gap, discrimination, and gender-based violence and harassment in the world of work. We strongly believe that building strong labor institutions and promoting and implementing labor rights are essential in making women’s work visible and secure and in ensuring that workers in all their diversity can enjoy a life with dignity and prosperity.

In light of this commitment, we believe the World Bank’s proposed Gender Strategy misses an opportunity. We are disappointed by the lack of a thorough examination of the ways women’s unequal share of caring responsibilities, their overrepresentation in the informal economy, and their concentration at the bottom of global supply chains can shape their effective participation in the world of work. Rather than charting a new course to meet the challenges of the moment including by emphasizing the promise of the public sector in providing decent work and social services for women and stigmatized gender identities, we find that the draft strategy exacerbates some of the blind spots in the Bank’s Evolution Roadmap insofar as it seeks to expand the role of the private sector in responding to global and existential challenges.

We appreciate the strategy’s recognition of the importance of intersectionality and its attention to issues of gender-based violence and the economic well-being of women and stigmatized gender identities. We also strongly support the Bank’s focus on collective action as a key driver for gender equality. Nevertheless, while the strategy’s framework acknowledges that gender outcomes are mediated and shaped by power relations, it fails to address those very power relations by focusing on gendered stereotypes and norms without investigating the material conditions underlying these trends and without proposing a proper rebalancing of power to achieve gender equality. To be effective, the World Bank’s gender approach cannot be confined to regulating societal gendered norms and behaviors and must instead extend to the ways the overall economic environment, in particular macroeconomic policies, can address structural barriers to women’s full and equal economic participation and gender equality. Macroeconomic policies often build on, and reinforce, labour market and gender inequalities such as occupational segregation, gender pay gaps, and the expansion of informal employment. For instance, many governments pursue macroeconomic policies that promote a growth strategy that relies in part on gender wage gaps to boost competitiveness as women are disproportionately employed in labour-intensive, export-oriented activities. This type of a growth strategy reinforces gender hierarchies in employment and does little to combat perceptions and norms that regard women as less skilled secondary workers.¹

Female Labour Force Participation: A Narrow Focus

We are concerned about the gender strategy’s narrow focus on shoring up the private sector to increase female labour force participation. Female labour force participation is a limited metric for women’s economic well-being because it erases the many ways women do participate in the labour market,

¹ “Macroeconomic Policy and Women’s Economic Empowerment,” UN Women Discussion Draft, September 2017 <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/536c4ee8e4b0b60bc6ca7c74/t/59a7e96f15d5db4b826ac8ce/1504176498496/MacroEconomic-DiscussionPaper-WEB-single.pdf>

including in the informal and care economies where they often perform underpaid, unpaid, or insecure work. The goal should be to ensure that women and stigmatized gender identities can effectively participate in the labour market on an equal footing with access to decent work. This requires designing and implementing worker-led policies that seek to valorize the work of women and LGBTQIA+ people. To that end, the ILO provides a robust normative framework and a set of standards that the World Bank should explicitly include in its strategy and guidance to staff.²

The Bank relies on private companies to unilaterally enact policies that promote gender equality without providing the necessary legal and regulatory framework, such as strong labour institutions, robust enforcement of international labour standards, and an adequate macroeconomic context. It is not enough to count on the goodwill of private employers to abide by international standards when supply chains are global and are built on the exploitation of women workers. Freedom of association and collective bargaining are essential and effective tools to address gender gaps and inequalities in the world of work including the gender pay gap, the undervaluing of women's work, gendered occupational segregation and the scourge of gender-based violence and harassment at work. These enabling rights allow workers to speak out about inequity and discrimination without fear of retaliation and negotiate gender-responsive workplace policies and measures and must be part of any effort to enhance gender equity at work.

The Public Sector: A Force for Equality

The gender strategy limits the role of the public sector to enabling women's effective participation in the labor market, ignoring that the public sector is a major source of decent work for women. While this year's Annual Meetings highlighted the difficulty of achieving gender equity at work in the MENA region, they also underscored how public sector cuts have deeply undermined the Bank's stated goals in Morocco, Tunisia, and other countries throughout the region. Despite continuous structural reforms since 1993, Morocco's female labour force participation has steadily decreased from 28% in 2000 to about 20% in 2022. Affiliates decry a lack of investment in public and social infrastructure as well as cuts to the public wage bill as key drivers in pushing women away from the formal labour market. Between 2012 and 2020 the Moroccan government suppressed more than 200,000 jobs, 62% of which were in public and higher education. Women are both providers and beneficiaries of social services as they tend to be overrepresented in the education and healthcare workforces. Therefore, increasing governments' capacity to provide services will have a positive effect on gender equality at work. Inversely, disinvestment in the public sector doubly imperils women's ability to join the workforce by eliminating a key source of employment while cutting crucial services. Beyond providing the legal and regulatory framework for gender equality, governments must lead by example as equal employers, effectively creating a floor on decent work—but the Bank must allow them to do so.

We welcome the World Bank's ambition to protect "gendered specific spending" to ensure "spending in support of gender equality is protected during times of fiscal constraints." However, this framing betrays an insufficient analysis of the gendered impacts of fiscal austerity. There is no such thing as gender neutral fiscal policies. To the extent that gender-focused fiscal management becomes a targeting tool to

² These include among others the 5R framework for decent care work which reads "Recognize, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care work, and reward and represent paid care work by promoting decent work for care workers and guaranteeing their representation, social dialogue and collective bargaining," C111 on Discrimination, C100 on Equal Remuneration, C183 on Maternity Protection, C156 on Workers with Family Responsibilities, , and C190 on Violence and Harassment.

allocate public resources to a subset of the population deemed most in need, this often does more harm than good as ultra-targeted social services often fail to accurately identify beneficiaries. Women who are overrepresented in the informal economy and people with intersecting identities – racialised people, migrants, people with disabilities, and LGBTQIA+ people – face higher barriers to access and are most likely to fall through the cracks. In an age of accelerating digitisation of public services, the digital gender divide further threatens women’s access to essential services as they become more finely targeted. Not only is the universal provision of services the most effective way to ensure equitable participation in the labour force, but the concept of universality is the corollary of SDG 1.3 which requires that we “implement social protection systems and measures for all, including floors.” The gender strategy must assert universality of social protection systems as a priority for gender equality and clarify how fiscal policies are in service to that goal in the short-term.

The challenges that lie ahead and the continued failure of development policy to lift women out of poverty call for a comprehensive and thorough reassessment of our economic system through a gender lens. The global economy is structured in a way that conceals, undervalues and exploits working women. The World Bank’s gender strategy must focus not only on *whether* women are working but also on *how, where, and under what conditions* they are working. To strengthen its gender strategy, we recommend that the World Bank:

1. Provide a rigorous analysis of the gendered impacts of macroeconomic policies by including a gender lens in the Bank’s Core Analytics suite;
2. Align the World Bank’s gender strategy with other multilateral institutions such as the ILO and implement international standards all the way to the project level;
3. Include women workers and their representative worker organizations in decision-making, project design, implementation, and evaluation;
4. Strengthen the public sector’s capacity to provide essential social services by investing in public workers and universal social protection systems.