

# How does austerity impact on women's human rights?

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I would like to thank the Women's Budget Group for organizing this event, Open Society Foundations and the New York University for their support to make it possible, and the panelists for making the effort to coming to London to participate in this discussion.

Today's topic is a crucial aspect of the discussion surrounding the link between human rights and economic policy: the impact of austerity measures on women's human rights. It is also an often neglected dimension of the discussion, especially among mainstream social scientists.

Let me start by offering some context for my work in this area and why I consider the report particularly important and timely: in March 2017, the Human Rights Council explicitly requested me to develop Guiding Principles for human rights impact assessments of economic reform policies. This request kick-started a process that has led me to the preparation of three reports including the one we are discussing today, and wide and rich consultations and discussions with States, international financial institutions, academics, NGOs, National Human Rights Institutions, and community organizations. The other two reports dealt with labor rights and austerity, and with a general mapping on HRIA in the realm of economic policies.

Most important of all, at least from my personal point of view and my political work, this process has truly opened my eyes to the fact that almost all macroeconomic policies are often male-biased. This is the result, at least partially, of mainstream economics being androcentric and of it continuing to be treated as a science without a social content.

Zooming in on the effects of austerity on women showed that overly restrictive macroeconomic targets and spending cuts have devastating consequences on women's human rights, like health, food or social security. It also forced me to understand, unravel and denounce the gender power relations that operate underneath the economic system. The work on the Guiding Principles that I have undertaken for over a year would have also fallen into this trap if I had not had the opportunity to devote work and time to learn from and about gender dimensions and feminist perspectives.

The current economic system is, for the most part, sustained by gender inequality and discrimination. This is particularly pervasive in the labour market. Of the various forms of inequality, women's unpaid care work is a crucial and yet often neglected consideration in the design of economic policies and reforms, or even in statistics and calculations.

The mainstream economic thinking does not take into account the value of domestic and unpaid care work and its contribution to the economy. Women carry out the bulk of that work, which underpins economic growth. In addition, and more related to the report, unpaid work unjustly absorbs economic

shocks and often compensates for austerity measures. The disproportionate burden of unpaid work on women and girls constitutes an important barrier to their gaining access to the right to work.

In the sphere of production, women are more likely to be employed in the public sector, especially as service providers in the education and health fields. Women are also employed in low-paid and precarious jobs and in the informal economy. Hence, cuts in employment opportunities in both the public and private sector have sent many women into unemployment, underemployment or temporary job positions, increasing their financial insecurity, the gender employment gap and the wage gap.

A clear and strong message from this work and from my report is: Austerity hits women harder. I would go further and say that austerity is the result of a ‘macho’ economic culture, or in Spanish, I’d say “La austeridad es machista”.

Most women are already confronting a range of structural inequalities, including pay gaps, occupational segregation, informality, precarious jobs, unemployment, lack of access to and control over land, credit and other productive resources, and, as I just mentioned, the heavy burden of unpaid work. Many women also face discriminatory norms, gender stereotypes and various forms of violence. In addition, women are often underrepresented in politics and decision-making, and may have fewer opportunities to participate in decisions that directly or indirectly affect their living conditions and those of their families and communities.

In some cases, owing to their economic disadvantages or specific needs, many women tend to use the employment, health and education services provided by the public sector. Often, women also depend on social transfers, social housing and utility subsidies, along with disability benefits and child benefits, or, in the case of women living in poverty, cash transfers and in-kind transfers.

Hence, austerity-driven fiscal consolidation measures and economic reforms, such as those encouraging labour market flexibilization, reductions in the coverage of social protection benefits and services, cuts to public-sector jobs, and the privatization of services, tend to negatively affect women more than men. Instead of creating such situations, which can often constitute discrimination, State policies should focus on their prevention.

Austerity and fiscal consolidation policies hit the most vulnerable groups within a given population, among whom women are overrepresented and the most exposed. It gives rise to intersecting forms of discrimination. We all know that women are not a monolithic group, and there are wide differences among women. However, among the women who are most exposed to the burdens created by austerity measures, regardless of country, we can identify those who can be hit the hardest: single mothers, young women, women with disabilities, older women, refugees and migrant women, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and intersex women, those women who belong to ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities, women in rural areas, and women who live in poverty or extreme poverty. A series and/or

combination of austerity and fiscal consolidation measures often provokes cumulative adverse impacts for these women.

Cuts to social services also often intensify the demand for unpaid care work, which is disproportionately carried out by women and girls (notably in poor households). These cuts also often force women to fill the gaps, taking over even more chores. In addition, in the light of all the forms of violence and discrimination that women face, emerging evidence suggests that the burden of the crisis has been disproportionately shouldered by women owing to, inter alia, reductions in public sector employment, cuts and caps on public sector wages, the phasing out of basic subsidies, cuts to social welfare services and benefits, and reforms to pensions.

In addition, loss of or changes to household income might also reshape the decision-making power of women, leading to less spending on goods and services that are likely to generate benefits for women and children, in particular girls. Such economic pressures may also contribute to increasing rates of domestic violence.

In my report, I offer insight into the particular channels through which economic reform policies affect women's human rights and suggest what can and should be done to prevent and address negative impacts. I argue that a human rights perspective, combined with a feminist economics analysis, can help expose policy biases. This combination of perspective and analysis can guide policymakers in devising alternative solutions that are inclusive and advance gender equality and human rights.

A human rights impact assessment of economic reform policies, which properly takes into account an impact on gender equality, should lead to a gender-responsive policymaking. To that end, States and other stakeholders should ensure women's participation in the process, especially those who are likely to be affected and those groups of women most exposed to the negative impacts of the reforms.

HRIAs can only be effective if they incorporate a clear gender focus and aims at ensuring the realization of women's human rights by addressing structural socioeconomic barriers. Some policies that might improve overall social indicators might not do so for women, and such an unfortunate consequence must be prevented. In Latin America, for example, while overall income inequality seems to have decreased, female poverty rates have increased, and, more specifically, young women of reproductive age are more likely to live in poverty than their male counterparts since they cannot gain access to the labour market in the absence of public care services. All this proves that impact assessments of economic policies must be gender transformative, and not pay lip service to women's human rights.

Human right impact assessments also must serve to identify risks of –and prevent- impermissible retrogressive measures that disproportionately discriminate against women, and must guarantee that these considerations are embedded in the discussion of economic policy reform. In other words, the design, monitoring and implementation of economic policy reforms should be guided by the principles of

non-discrimination, the progressive realization of economic, social and cultural rights, and the use of the maximum of available resources.

I must also note that any discussion on economic policy and gender would be incomplete without addressing the role that international financial institutions play. These institutions (and many States) have adopted an instrumentalist agenda on gender equality that focuses almost exclusively on economic growth and efficiency. The issue of gender equality cannot be reduced to women's labour force participation alone and should not be approached as a separate or emerging ad hoc issue. The agenda of international financial institutions should be reshaped and bound by human rights considerations.

International financial institutions should urgently address the impact of prescribed macroeconomic policies, lending and technical assistance on women's opportunities to exercise their rights to work, to social protection and to gain access to public services. Women's disproportionate unpaid care burden, limitations on their ability to exercise choice over their economic activities, and the adverse gender implications of regressive tax regimes should also be urgently addressed.

Before closing, let me go back in circle, where I started, by making some final remarks about the Guiding Principles. I am currently in the final stages of this process. A few weeks ago, I organized a final expert consultation in New York, where a group of committed colleagues provided very valuable suggestions and contributions. I have been working non-stop to incorporate these comments. I was pleased to hear that there was agreement from all participants that a gender dimension had to be centrally incorporated in the GP. Currently, there are several references to women and gender dimensions, and there are also specific principles addressing multiple and intersectional discrimination, as well as substantive equality. In my view, one of the strengths of these principles comes from the work with feminist social scientists, and I am very grateful to several of them who are in the room today, as well as others who have contributed to this report and to the process, like Abby Kendrick from the NYU, who wrote a background research paper for the report. 19 States, the IMF, and 26 feminist organizations submitted contributions responding to call organized from the mandate. All these letters are available on the mandate website.

The GP will be formally presented in Geneva, before the HRC, which will discuss the document in February 2019. I count on you all to make use of this tool in your advocacy, strategic and academic activities, to apply them and ensure that they become a lively document, standards against which Governments and other actors are held accountable.

Many thanks,