

KEY CONCEPTS

GENDER JUSTICE, MACROECONOMIC POLICIES & HUMAN RIGHTS

Key Concepts is our series that breaks down complex topics for readers keen to unlock the power of human rights to build just and sustainable economies.



Here, we answer:

1. What is macroeconomic policy, and why does it need to change for gender justice?
2. What do we gain from looking at gender justice in macroeconomic policy through a human rights lens?
3. What do human rights obligations say about the actions needed to ensure gender justice in macroeconomic policy?
4. How can we hold governments and other powerful actors accountable for their economic decisions?

Key Messages

- Every day, women and girls (especially those already marginalized) are harmed by economic policies that claim to be neutral but in fact deepen existing inequalities.
- Mainstream economics, with its emphasis on profit-seeking approaches, routinely leads to decisions that neglect women's role in the economy, overburden them with care work, and decrease funding for services essential for gender equality.
- Looking at macroeconomics from a gender justice and human rights angle can make visible its social dimensions and the intersecting forms of discrimination women face; promote accountability from States and international institutions; and challenge technocratic narratives about macroeconomics.

1. What is macroeconomic policy, and why does it need to change for gender justice?

Our global economic system is structured in ways that increase inequalities and injustice, reducing the opportunities and agency of people facing overlapping forms of discrimination and economic hardship. For example, in 2015, more than 95% of women in South Asia, 89% in sub-Saharan Africa, and 59% in Latin America and the Caribbean were in informal employment, limiting their access to labor and social security protections.

Gender norms have remained strong over time, with women expected to take on caregiving roles and men to be breadwinners. Women perform about 75% of global unpaid care work, including childcare, eldercare, and household tasks, and care for people with disabilities and those that are terminally ill. Oxfam's Time to Care report (2020) estimates the value of this unpaid care work (performed mostly by women) to be at least \$10.8 trillion annually, or three times the size of the global tech industry. This gender gap is fueled by weak labor protections, inadequate social protection, insufficient investment in social infrastructure, and austerity policies that erode the social contract and undermine economic and social rights.



What we mean by gender justice?

Gender justice is more than equality between women and men. Everyone has a gender identity, and gender norms shape all of our lives. Gender identity exists along a spectrum and includes transgender, non-binary, and intersex people, as well as those who identify outside binary categories. Gender justice is about ensuring gender is not a barrier to equal treatment and equal outcomes. People marginalized because of gender often experience intersecting forms of discrimination linked to ethnicity, caste, class, religion, sexual orientation, disability, age, or migratory status. We live in a time of unprecedented global wealth. Never before has humanity generated so many resources, yet so few people control so many of them. In a world this prosperous, economic systems should not only recognize gendered inequalities but work to remedy them as a matter of justice.

Macroeconomic policies refer to the decisions governments and international institutions make about how to raise and spend resources and how to guide the overall functioning of the economy. These include tax, spending, trade, investment, and debt policies, all of which shape both paid and unpaid work. The right political choices can advance gender equality and women's rights, but "gender-neutral" economic policies (presented as not affecting people differently based on their gender) often become barriers to progress and can even undermine equality.

Macroeconomic policies are often treated as technical and "neutral," detached from social realities and beyond the influence of those most affected. Yet these policies have a profound impact on daily life, from access to housing, education, and health care to the availability of decent work and social protection. Transforming economic governance is therefore essential to advancing gender justice.

Mainstream economic thinking (often called orthodox or neoclassical due to its overly conservative and neocolonial assumptions) promotes market-driven and profit-seeking approaches at the expense of human rights. For example, international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) prioritize lowering inflation, reducing public debt, and attracting private investment, often through fiscal consolidation. These agendas promote private investment and public-private partnerships while pressuring States to cut public spending on essential services such as health, education, and social protection.

Such measures disproportionately harm women. Women are overrepresented in public sector jobs, so austerity triggers job losses for many, while cuts in essential services increase unpaid care work at home, a double burden that deepens inequality.

Mainstream economics treats people and nature as resources to be managed for economic gain rather than as rights-holders with inherent dignity. Neoliberal approaches sideline human rights and ecological limits in favor of growth-first strategies. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, vaccine apartheid exposed deep inequalities between countries in the Global North and the Global South, as pharmaceutical companies' profits were prioritized over equitable distribution.

Feminist economics offers a broader and more pluralistic approach to economic policymaking. It emphasizes social provisioning, examines how gender, class, and other identities shape economic experiences, and questions who benefits from current systems. It challenges inequities and proposes alternatives that improve the lives of those most affected by today's economic arrangements.

A transformative approach to economic policy requires recognizing gender as a system that shapes power, access, and rights, not treating women as an isolated category. Feminist economics highlights the importance of social reproduction (the activities that sustain families and societies) and emphasizes the central role of paid and unpaid care work, including in the informal economy.

Gender-equitable macroeconomic policies include equitable tax systems that raise revenue from those most able to pay; strong action against corporate tax abuse and illicit financial flows; taxes on extreme wealth; trade and investment rules that do not privilege foreign investors over domestic needs; and well-resourced, gender-transformative public services in health, education, and social protection.

2. What do we gain from looking at gender justice in macroeconomic policy through a human rights lens?

Gender justice is a human rights issue. A human rights lens helps connect the dots between the lives of women and gender-diverse people and the macroeconomic decisions that shape their opportunities. Feminist movements and human rights advocates have worked for decades to show how economic policy affects people differently based on gender. Their work has generated evidence, indicators, and collective advocacy that exposes and challenges these unequal impacts.

In 2021, the Center for Egyptian Women Legal Assistance (CEWLA) and CESR submitted a joint report to a key human rights body, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), analyzing women's economic and social rights in the COVID-19 pandemic, in the context of the IMF-backed economic reform program in Egypt. The report highlighted the pervasive impact of the pandemic on women's rights and gender equity, including issues of loans and microfinance, irregular and informal workers, social housing, social protection, and maternity leave. It put unequal and gendered policies into the spotlight and flagged measures needed to enable the realization of the rights of women and girls, in all their diversity.

While not a silver bullet to address structural gender discrimination in macroeconomic policy, the human rights “framework” (the set of principles, norms and entities that seek to protect and promote human rights globally) has many advantages. Human rights, for example:

- **Clarify the duties of States:**

Human rights law requires states to address economic gender inequality and to avoid policies that fuel it, including structural austerity or tax practices that benefit the wealthy at the expense of essential services. This focus on states helps challenge narratives that leave gender equality to markets or private actors.

- **Make visible the political nature of macroeconomic decisions:**

Human rights allow us to challenge the idea that macroeconomic issues are purely technical and should be reserved to specialists, by visualizing the human--and differentiated--impacts of macroeconomic decisions. As such, human rights promote a person-centered approach to

macroeconomic policy that demonstrates its political (not purely technical) dimension.

- **Expose the differentiated impacts of unfair macroeconomic policies:**

Human rights illuminate the differentiated impact of unfair macroeconomic policies on women and girls, and how gender inequalities intersect due to factors such as race, class, disability, migratory status, or age. The core human rights principles of equality and non-discrimination are essential to anchor actions to address those disproportionate impacts.

- **Provide binding legal standards:**

Human rights provide a normative framework with legal obligations that most States in the world have assumed through international human rights treaties. As binding rules, they help promote accountability and scrutiny.

- **Strengthen transparency and participation:**

Human rights principles require governments to produce and publish data with sufficient disaggregation to support gender analysis. They also call for meaningful participation of those most affected in economic decision-making, as well as effective monitoring and review processes.

- **Help build alliances across movements:**

Human rights norms recognize shared entitlements for all people, including the rights to health, education, social protection, a clean and healthy environment, and participation in public life. Because these rights are interconnected, human rights offer a common platform for cooperation across gender justice, labor, environmental, economic justice, and social movements.



3. What do human rights say about the actions needed to ensure gender justice in macroeconomic policy?

International human rights law sets out the obligations that States must meet to ensure that all people can enjoy their rights without discrimination. These obligations are drawn from widely ratified international treaties, from authoritative interpretations by human rights bodies, and from political commitments that, while not legally binding, carry significant weight and can be used for advocacy.

Alongside universal protections that apply to everyone, there are specific standards developed in recognition of the structural discrimination faced by women and girls. These include:

- The [United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women \(CEDAW\)](#)
- The [1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#)
- The [African Union's Convention to End Violence against Women and Girls](#)
- The [Inter-American Convention on the Prevention, Punishment and Eradication of Violence against Women](#)

Other human rights instruments also contain relevant obligations and recognize that gender discrimination intersects with race, disability, age, migration status, and other identities.

International human rights law offers a wide range of tools to challenge gender discrimination in macroeconomic policy. These standards come from both United Nations and regional human rights systems and can be used to claim rights at national, regional, and international levels. Key principles include the following:

- **Equality and non-discrimination:**

Human rights law requires States to ensure substantive equality and to prevent discrimination, including through an intersectional approach. Core treaties affirm that all people are equal in dignity and rights and that States must guarantee these rights without distinction, including on the basis of sex, gender, race, class, disability, or other status.

CEDAW outlines the nature of [sex and gender discrimination](#), identifies its root causes, and requires States to adopt concrete measures to eliminate structural barriers. These include addressing harmful gender stereotypes and discriminatory practices. For example, tax systems that rely heavily on consumption taxes can make women net contributors to the system, reinforcing income and wealth gaps. Similarly, austerity measures that reduce public services often place a disproportionate burden on women, who both absorb the resulting increase in unpaid care work and are overrepresented in the public-sector workforce. CEDAW also recognizes that States may need to adopt special temporary measures, such as quotas or targeted budget allocations, to close persistent gender gaps.

- **Duty to mobilize maximum available resources:**

Human rights treaties require States to mobilize the maximum of their available resources to progressively realize economic, social,

and cultural rights. This includes generating adequate revenue through equitable taxation, allocating budgets in ways that support gender-responsive public services, and ensuring that spending reaches those who need it.

Human rights bodies have repeatedly called on States to prioritize resources for essential services, address tax abuse, and create fair tax systems that work to close gender gaps.

- **Extra-territorial obligations:**

Human rights obligations do not stop at national borders. States must ensure that their actions do not undermine the rights of people living in other countries, especially in contexts shaped by colonial legacies and unequal global power. They must also cooperate internationally to support all governments in meeting their human rights commitments.

This includes combating transnational tax abuse and illicit financial flows, which disproportionately benefit powerful actors in the Global North and reduce the capacity of governments in the Global South to fund services essential for gender equality. For example, the CEDAW Committee has called out Luxembourg for enabling tax practices that harm women's rights in other countries. It recommended that the government conduct independent and participatory assessments of these cross-border impacts.

States also carry human rights obligations when they act as members of international organizations, including the IMF and other financial institutions. When these institutions design loan conditions or provide economic advice, they must ensure that their recommendations do not fuel human rights violations or gender discrimination.

- **Non-retrogression:**

States should not take steps backward in the realization of economic, social, and cultural rights. Human rights bodies warn against austerity measures that cut essential services and disproportionately affect women unless all alternatives have been exhausted. Even in crises, any cuts must be temporary, necessary, non-discriminatory, and subject to rigorous human rights impact assessments.

- **Participation, transparency, and accountability:**

These are essential conditions for gender-just economic policymaking. Transparency requires governments to produce and make available data that is detailed enough to support an intersectional gender analysis. Participation means that those most affected by economic decisions, including women and girls in all their diversity, must be able to engage meaningfully throughout the policy cycle. Accountability requires systems that allow people to challenge harmful decisions and seek remedies when rights are violated.



4. How can we hold governments and other powerful actors accountable for their economic decisions?

- **Evidence-based and rights-based advocacy:**

CESR has developed tools that support accountability and make economic injustices visible. These include the [OPERA Framework](#) and the [Decoding Injustice](#) approach, which help assess whether States are meeting their human rights obligations. They enable researchers and advocates to identify problems, gather evidence, and build pressure for policy change.

Using these tools, civil society organizations can show how seemingly technical economic decisions produce real harm. For example, evidence may reveal that drug shortages in a local clinic, inadequate sanitation and water services, or rising food prices are linked to austerity measures or the pressure of sovereign debt. Documenting lived experiences, especially those of women and marginalized groups, is essential for understanding how macroeconomic policies affect daily life.

Human rights law and national or regional frameworks give civil society a basis for holding States accountable for violations of human rights, including violations of women's rights. In countries where constitutions do not explicitly guarantee human rights or where governments have not ratified key human rights treaties, civil society can advocate for these commitments as part of broader movement-building strategies.

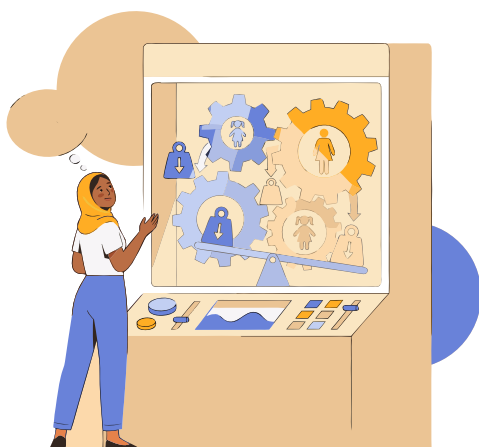
Civil society and affected communities can also report human rights violations arising from neoliberal macroeconomic policies to national human rights institutions, parliamentary oversight committees, or ministries such as national treasuries or finance ministries. These channels can help compel governments to respect human rights and uphold the rights of women and gender-diverse people.

Where political conditions allow, civil society organizations can pursue strategic litigation against governments or private companies to create legal precedents that strengthen respect for human rights and advance gender equality.

- **Narrative shaping and grassroots mobilization:**

Shifting public narratives is essential for transforming the economic systems that undermine gender equality. Feminist, labor, and human rights movements have long shown that care work is the invisible foundation of our societies and economies. Yet it remains undervalued, unpaid, or poorly paid, and overwhelmingly carried by women and girls. Recent advances, including the Inter-American Court of Human Rights' recognition of care as a human right, show the power of sustained organizing and cross-movement collaboration. CESR and allies have highlighted the significance of this shift in its analysis of care as a human right and a public good [in the Americas](#) and [at the global level](#).

These developments help reshape the public conversation. They challenge the idea that care is a private responsibility or personal burden and instead affirm it as a public good and a State obligation. A human rights narrative makes clear that care is essential social infrastructure. It



reframes childcare, eldercare, disability support, health care, and education as services that must be publicly funded, accessible, universal, and designed with the needs and rights of caregivers and those receiving care at the center.

Storytelling, journalism, arts and cultural expression, and social media campaigns play a crucial role in shifting these narratives. They make visible the lived realities behind macroeconomic decisions and help people understand why investments in care and public services are not optional but fundamental to gender justice. They also help build a shared understanding that the current global care crisis is not inevitable but the result of political choices and systemic underinvestment.

Grassroots mobilization is equally important. Communities affected by austerity, privatization, inadequate care services, or discriminatory economic decisions must have the tools and support to demand change. Civil society organizations can help build this power by offering community workshops, door-to-door outreach, and training on evidence gathering and rights-based advocacy. These efforts can help people understand government budgets and policies, prepare petitions and submissions, and engage directly with decision-makers. Partnering with faith-based groups, youth

organizations, unions, and local women's groups can expand reach and strengthen collective action.

Through these combined strategies, narrative change and grassroots organizing help widen the space for bold economic reforms. They build public demand for care systems that are universal, well-funded, and grounded in human dignity, and for macroeconomic policies that work for people rather than markets.

- **Collective advocacy and building collective power:**

Coalition building amplifies impact. Not every organization needs expertise in all areas. Partnerships allow groups with different strengths to work together across research, grassroots organizing, strategic litigation, and multilateral advocacy. By coordinating at local, national, and global levels, coalitions can apply pressure on decision-makers more effectively.

Joint strategies may include cross-sector convenings, shared research outputs, joint statements, and coordinated advocacy campaigns. These collective efforts help build a stronger and more unified movement for gender-just macroeconomic policy.

- **Championing concrete policy reforms:**

Civil society can call for a rights-based and feminist approach to macroeconomic governance. This means ensuring that policies, laws, and institutions are gender-responsive and gender-transformative. Key demands include:

- Recognition of care as a right and a public good and public investment in essential care services.
- Progressive tax policies paired with strong measures to curb illicit financial flows.

- Trade and investment policies that are rooted in human rights and gender equality.
- Transparent, accountable, and participatory processes for setting national priorities and developing laws and policies.
- Gender-responsive budgeting and sustained increases in funding for gender equality across government sectors.
- Production and publication of gender-disaggregated data and establishment of mechanisms for participatory monitoring of public spending.
- International cooperation to create global rules that are rights-based and gender-responsive, including support for ongoing efforts to reform global tax governance.

5. Want to know more?

Here are more resources on this issue:

- [Decoding gender injustice](#): This guide, co-published with Third World Network, uses CESR "[Decoding Injustice](#)" research framework, to further unpack how global economic policies entrench gender inequalities and provides tools to challenge them.
- [Rights-based tax justice: A framework for a progressive, feminist, ecologically just, and decolonial approach to taxation](#): This advocacy brief outlines a rights-based tax framework focused on equity, access, and redistribution in a way that no principle is achieved at the expense of another. It also explores how taxation can be progressive,

feminist, environmental, and decolonial—advancing justice for people and the planet.

- [Climate finance, reparations and human rights](#): CESR unpacks the climate crisis, as a direct result of an unequal global economic structure that flourished in the colonial era through resource extractivism and the disproportionate impact. The piece explores how to resource responses to the climate crisis using a reparations-based approach.
- [Decoding Debt Injustice](#): This guide, co-published with Debt Justice, sets out how to collect, analyze, and present data, to shed new light on how the global debt crisis impacts people's rights, including women. It brings a human rights lens to their research on debt.
- [Seeking accountability for women's rights through the Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#): This briefing unpacks accountability in the context of SDGs, including how existing mechanisms and fora for strengthening accountability can be utilized to advance women's rights and how to ensure accountability processes of the SDGs are gender-sensitive.
- [Dismantling the Dogmas](#): This briefing debunks ten commonly held misconceptions about why fiscal consolidation policies are necessary. In the process, it makes a strong case for progressive structural tax reforms that are redistributive and would, in the long term, reduce inequality, guarantee rights and promote sustainable development.

The power of many can transform an economic system that only benefits a few.

Here are simple ways in which you can support us:

Follow us on social media:

Twitter: @social_rights

LinkedIn: Center for Economic and Social Rights

Facebook: CenterEconomicSocialRights

Join the mailing list:

cesr.org/subscribe/

Get to know our team & board:

cesr.org/team/

Donate:

donate.democracyengine.com/CESR

Contact us:

1330 Avenue of the Americas

23rd Floor

New York, 10019

+1 (212) 653 0978

info@cesr.org

cesr.org

CENTER for
ECONOMIC and
SOCIAL RIGHTS

The Center for Economic and Social Rights is registered as a 501 (c)(3) nonprofit organization in the state of New York.