A gender lens must be at the heart of World Bank Group reform

Position Paper

Gender Equality & Macroeconomics Project

Bretton Woods project

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The authors of this position document, a group of civil society activists, women's rights defenders and feminist economists, are issuing **an urgent call to the World Bank's executive board and gender team. The World Bank Group and its incoming president must** expand the current gender strategy 'update' to a broader review and reform of the Bank's approach to gender. **This must involve committing to include gender as a central element of the 'Evolution Roadmap' and ensuring the gender team is substantively consulted through all phases of the process.**

As the Bank deliberates on reforms crucial to tackling climate change and achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, and as the patriarchal gentleman's agreement maintains its grip on the presidential selection process, **gender is quickly falling to the wayside**. While the gender team, headed by Hana Brixi, is investing time and effort into the strategy 'update', this process must be integrated and closely aligned with the wider reform process. Currently, they are separate. We note with concern that gender is mentioned only once in the evolution roadmap draft, and the Bank's recently published Paris Alignment methodology is equally lacking a synergetic approach to a gender-just green transition. We stress that any commitment to transforming and deepening the Bank's mission to address poverty and to move with the times on the climate crisis without integrating a gender and inequality lens will hinder real transformation.

At this crucial moment, when the Bank's six-year strategy to address gender inequality hangs in the balance, we are concerned by delays to the gender team's consultation process. We see no clear justification for maintaining the four pillars of the existing gender strategy, given today's intersecting and worsening global crises.

Research from members of the End Austerity Campaign has shown that 85 per cent of the world will live under austerity measures in 2023 and beyond.[1] This will erode key social protection systems, cut or cap the wages and number of teachers and healthcare workers, eliminate vital subsidies, privatise public services, and reduce workers' rights as countries aim to achieve the ideal 'business enabling environment'. Women will once again be the shock absorbers of such policies. Relying on private sector investment in care services and focusing the Bank's programmatic efforts on micro-level 'economic empowerment' and 'labour force participation' will not achieve gender equality if the public systems and services women require to free them from precarious work, and unpaid and domestic responsibilities are removed or weakened under fiscal consolidation.

The Bank, from board to departments, must work closely with the gender team to review the harmful gendered effects of the World Bank's macroeconomic policy. It must learn from and adopt the plethora of critical analyses and policy alternatives to existing macroeconomic policy offered by Southern feminists, grassroots and country-level organisations, heterodox feminist economists and women's rights champions.

Recently published research by civil society organisations Gender Action, Friends of the Earth and Urgewald ranked 13 major international financial institutions based on the strength of their gender policy goals and safeguarding frameworks, including mandate, staffing, operations, monitoring and integration of multiple aspects of gender inequality, such as care work and gender-based violence, into their operations.[2] **The World Bank scored near the bottom on almost every indicator.**

Previous research from the Bretton Woods Project highlighted that, because **the environmental and social safeguard framework does not apply to World Bank lending** through Development Policy Financing, the bulk of the Bank's lending and associated 'prior actions' are effectively 'gender blind', as gendered social impacts are not monitored.[3] To avoid undermining even its own micro-level gender goals with gender blind macro-level policies, the Bank needs to apply a structural gender lens both as part of its 'reform', and as part of the gender strategy update.

There is substantial difference between, and implications arising from, seeking to redistribute power and capacity to give people agency and putting the onus on individuals to safeguard the quality of their own life. The Bank's continued focus on 'voice and agency' and 'challenging gender norms' risks perpetuating a neoliberal idea of individualism and perpetuating the myth that hard work equals success. This isolates and atomises women's struggle, which suffers without the power of collective action in the context of intersectional, systemic and structural inequality that requires structural solutions, not another fund for women entrepreneurs. To capture this approach, we recommend a framing around women's economic justice and rights rather than economic empowerment.

It is encouraging to see the gender team welcome civil society feedback over the past months, particularly in relation to increased commitment to "walk the talk internally", and to explore the possibility of a macroeconomic assessment of wider Bank work as one of the proposed thematic policy notes. The Bank must ensure the gender team is given capacity and influence to achieve more.

We call upon the World Bank to:

- **The World Bank Group and its incoming president must commit to including gender as a central element of the 'Evolution Roadmap' and engage the gender team in the process.**
- Similarly, the gender team should align the strategy update process with wider Bank reform and 'meet the moment', including engagement with departments and members across the entire WBG, including the IFC. The development of the new strategy should be ambitious, challenging the Bank to rethink its approaches and seek synergies in its necessary transformation to become a real champion of "ending poverty" and promoting "shared prosperity" in the 21st century.
- The relevance of all existing thematic pillars must be empirically assessed, their success and challenges investigated, and trade-offs between different strategic priorities evaluated. Thus far, evidence to support chosen new themes for the gender strategy update has been lacking – e.g., it is unclear what research has confirmed that "challenging gender norms" is the best use of Bank time, resources and expertise.
- To address structural barriers to gender inequality, the Bank should complete an assessment of the gendered effects of its macroeconomic policies over the past decades and develop a thematic policy note to inform the creation of an additional strategy pillar. This should include consultations with heterodox experts and institutions.
- A more thorough strategy review requires inward-looking gender impact assessments of the Bank's macroeconomic approaches, and learning lessons from research that demonstrates the trade-offs, inequality impacts and historical failures of the Bank's market-led approach. Assessing gender impacts of public private partnerships and blended finance as a financing mechanism for public services, as we are concerned by the bank's central role in changing the aid architecture and redirecting aid, grants and loans to the private sector.[4]
- Make sure that the next gender strategy includes follow-up mechanisms and action plans. A robust and multi-dimensional results framework that also addresses macro-economic policies should be in place.

Endnotes

1 Ortiz and Cummins, 'End Austerity: A Global Report on Budget on Cuts and Harmful Social Reforms 2022-25', (London, UK), 2022
2 Gender Action, 'IFIs' Rhetorical Gender and Climate Promises', 2023
3 Bretton Woods Project, Briefing: 'The World Bank and gender equality: Development Policy Financing,' 2019. Bretton Woods Project, Briefing: 'Learning lessons from the Covid-19 pandemic: The World Bank's macroeconomic policies and women's rights,' 2021
4 Akina Mama wa Afrika and WEMOS, 'The Africa Medical Equipment Facility (AMEF): Does this new blended finance facility contribute to equitable access to healthcare services?' 2022

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