

Mandates of the Independent Expert on the effects of foreign debt and other related international financial obligations of States on the full enjoyment of all human rights, particularly economic, social and cultural rights; the Special Rapporteur on the right to development; the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights and the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls

Ref.: OL OTH 16/2022
(Please use this reference in your reply)

2 March 2022

Dear Ms. Georgieva,

We have the honour to address you in our capacity as Independent Expert on the effects of foreign debt and other related international financial obligations of States on the full enjoyment of all human rights, particularly economic, social and cultural rights; Special Rapporteur on the right to development; Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights and Working Group on discrimination against women and girls, pursuant to Human Rights Council resolutions 34/3, 42/23, 44/13 and 41/6.

In the context of the current consultations that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is conducting on its institutional strategy on gender, we would like to seize this opportunity to provide some initial reflections from a human rights perspective before the strategy is presented to the IMF's Board this spring. Our mandates have examined the potentially harmful consequences of gender-blind economic policies and issued recommendations that could inform your strategy and country specific actions, since we also conduct country visits.

We welcome the IMF's initiative to develop a gender strategy that could positively impact women and girls' human rights in the context of its surveillance, lending and capacity development programmes. This step is greatly needed given the current challenges women and girls face in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and growing backlashes against gender equality, the debt crisis and climate change.

We have noted the inclusion of references to gender-disaggregated data and gender budgeting and expanding the collaboration with other organizations as part of the critical elements of the proposed gender strategy. According to the concept note on the strategy, it will "not consider all aspects of gender issues" and will be "focusing on the macro-criticality of gender gaps, in accordance with the Fund's mandate". While we are fully aware of the IMF's mandate, we would like to stress the interrelatedness and indivisibility of all human rights. As documented by the UN Working Group on discrimination against women and girls, among the many obstacles to gender equality that women and girls face, the most significant challenges remain in the areas of family, culture and sexual and reproductive rights and are those in which there has been a backlash against gains in women's equality. The Working Group regrets that women's economic empowerment and political participation are too often tackled as isolated issues. The interdependence of human rights cannot be overlooked: persistent discrimination in family, cultural and sexual and reproductive rights have a debilitating impact on women's capacity to claim equal standing in all aspects of life. This selective approach towards discrimination against women is an

International Monetary Fund (IMF)

unfortunate practice and is a core problem affecting the way gender equality is addressed and a major obstacle to sustainable progress. Without eliminating discrimination in family, cultural and sexual and reproductive rights, there will be no lasting progress in the other fields (see HRC/38/46).

Furthermore, we would like to stress the importance of ensuring that all IMF staff have the necessary skills and capacity to genuinely mainstream gender issues throughout their work and the need for integration of a gender perspective taking an intersectional approach in terms of substance and process. Macro economic policy has an androcentric bias that needs to be addressed on a substantive and definitional level. Women are typically excluded from these processes which leads to their concerns and perspectives being ignored.

We acknowledge the efforts made by the IMF since 2015 to incorporate gender in its work. In that regard, the systematization of experiences issued in the 2018 IMF's paper, "How to operationalize gender issues in-country work", recognizes that macroeconomic policy advice provided by the IMF can deepen gender inequalities and that micro-funded analysis has allowed country teams in the field to measure the specific consequences that fiscal and tax policy recommendations can have on women and girls.

Nonetheless, we regret that the IMF's prescription of austerity measures has affected public investment in areas of particular concern for women and girls. A gender strategy that benefits women and girls in the fulfilment of their human rights could only be achieved if: a) the procedure for the development of the strategy respects a human rights-based approach and; b) the substantive contents reflect gender roles and women and girls different needs ([A/73/179](#)). Women and girls are half the world's population, therefore, each and every policy, strategy and operations of the IMF should be gender responsive. Adding a gender strategy to a host of other strategies and an operating system which are gender-blind will not help address the needs of women and girls and end the systemic drivers of their disadvantage and exploitation. We would like to underscore the importance of the IMF prioritizing the adoption of a fully gender-responsive strategy which would require integrating goals and methods of work that take into account not only systemic biases and the disadvantages that they produce but also the ideologically motivated backlash against gender equality at the heart of which lies an attempt to enforce gendered roles, which are unfortunately often reinforced by gender blind economic policies.

In this regard, the COVID 19 pandemic has increased the effects already observed by the Independent Expert on the effects of foreign debt in the reports to the Human Rights Council and General Assembly as restriction over protection policies against gender-based violence, daily care policies, and the public health sector during the COVID pandemic response and aftermath affected women and girls directly. For example, cuts to contraceptive supplies in the public sector could increase unintended pregnancy and trigger unsafe abortion. Likewise, austerity measures that affect social housing, and shortcuts in programmes that provide shelter to escape domestic violence, exacerbate the constraints women face for autonomy. (see [A/73/179](#)).

An IMF gender strategy that includes a human rights approach should recognize and address the differentiated roles of women and girls in our societies and the constraints they face because of their sex and gender. Women's role as unpaid caretakers is reflected in the kind and quality of employment they access. Women are generally segregated to the lower-paid jobs and the informal economy. Also, jobs that are dominated by women, like domestic workers, are largely overrepresented in the informal sector. As a result, when social insurance schemes are tied to work-related criteria, women often do not qualify as beneficiaries; contributory pension schemes, for example, have a differentiated impact on women. In addition, consumption taxes, especially VAT, have a regressive impact on low-income households, which often include female-headed households. This information should be considered when recommending tax measures, such as increases in VAT and other sales taxes, that could further shrink women's available income and reduce their purchasing power (see [A/HRC/34/57](#)).

Therefore, as stressed by the Independent Expert in these reports, austerity measures and other restrictive policies on public expenditure affect women and girls disproportionately because of a wide range of socio-economic reasons that could not be explained and analyzed only in terms of macroeconomic results or disparity in opportunities.

Vulnerability and economic disadvantage for women are exacerbated by macroeconomic policies that increase inequalities and reduce social protection floors. This is clearly visible in periods of economic crisis, particularly when governments adopt austerity measures. Although the specific effects of crisis differ by context, the overall picture is one of disparate impact on women, with deepening economic insecurity, an increase in precarious employment and a heavier burden of unpaid care work. Nonetheless, economic crisis merely accentuates existing structural economic disadvantages for women. Therefore, addressing the crisis provides an opportunity to tackle patterns of gender inequality and discrimination entrenched in the economic status quo and shape new gender equality responses. Alternatives to austerity have been applied successfully in some countries. Grounding development priorities in women's human rights is not only a legal and moral imperative but can also enhance effectiveness and accountability ([A/HRC/26/39](#)).

For these reasons, as stated by the Independent Expert on Foreign Debt, the IMF should ensure that loan programmes are agreed upon only after human rights with a precise gender dimension have been conducted and that any potential deficiencies are remedied; and that risks of negative impacts on women's human rights resulting from conditionalities, are monitored, and an alternative policy mix are proposed if adverse gendered implications are identified.(see [A/HRC/40/57](#)).

In the same line, the Special Rapporteur on the right to development has recently stressed that tax policy advice and conditions issued by multilateral development banks and development finance institutions to States, and in particular to developing countries, should be reviewed to take into account their impact on women's income and work, including unpaid labour and unpaid care work, and property and assets ownership ([A/75/167](#), para 60) and that in the framework of COVID recovery measures, the public-private partnerships promoted through loans,

projects and other financing arrangements involving multilateral development finance institutions should be subject to independent reviews of their development outcomes, including a thorough examination of their human rights and environmental impacts ([A/75/167](#), para 62). The Guidelines and Recommendations on the practical implementation of the right to development stress that international financial institutions should conduct systematic human rights impact assessments and monitor and evaluate their policies. In particular, human rights impact assessments should be conducted on austerity measures, structural adjustments, securities and trade and investment agreements; ([A/HRC/42/38 para 131](#)).

Furthermore, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights establishes that States should ensure the progressive realization of economic, social and cultural rights by using the maximum of their available resources. Likewise, the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women has clarified that those measures should aim to accelerate the achievement of gender equality and address "the structural, social and cultural changes necessary to correct past and current forms and effects of discrimination against women, as well as to provide them with compensation".

We would like to reiterate that the IMF gender strategy should support the full enjoyment of all women and girls' human rights. In the current context of persistent gender inequality and rollbacks which are being exacerbated by rising fundamentalisms of all kinds, coupled with political populism, unchecked authoritarian rule, disproportionate focus on corporate profits over human rights and most recently the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the IMF gender strategy should ensure that it does not contribute to further retrogressions in progress made by women and girls in the last decades. We think that our various reports briefly referenced in this letter could support your gender mainstreaming efforts. In this regard, we remain available to continue engaging with the IMF and to engage into a constructive dialogue which could support the genuine and comprehensive inclusion of women and girls' rights in the strategy and throughout your work.

In terms of the current consultation process undertaken, the IMF should ensure public access to information and ample consultation in developing the strategy. In this regard, we welcome the online consultation opened by the IMF on 10 February, but we think that the timeframe proposed might be too tight for various concerned stakeholders to provide substantive contributions, in particular if the strategy is supposed to be presented to the IMF board this spring. In addition, to guarantee transparency, accountability and meaningful and informed consultations, a draft of the gender strategy document should be made available to allow for civil society, women organizations, and other actors to participate in the process. The IMF could also establish an accountability mechanism to inform and promote the participation of women, girls and stakeholders during the development and implementation of the gender strategy.

In conclusion, and without prejudging the current process that the IMF is undertaking to develop its gender strategy, according to the responsibilities of our mandates, and on the basis of the reports mentioned above, we would be grateful for your observations on the following matters:

1. Please clarify how the gender strategy will ensure that all IMF programmes will benefit from a human rights impact assessment with a precise gender dimension and that any potential deficiencies are remedied.
2. Please clarify how the gender strategy will address the risks of negative impacts on women's and girls' human rights resulting from conditionalities, monitoring the effect of subsequent reforms and proposing an alternative policy mix if adverse gendered implications from the proposed conditionalities are identified.
3. Please clarify how the gender strategy will ensure that public investment, including in social and physical infrastructure, is guaranteed so that it supports the realization of women's and girls' human rights.
4. Please clarify how the gender strategy will address taxation and ensure that measures and mechanisms lead to more effective redistribution of resources between women and men.
5. Please clarify how the gender strategy establishes a transparent accountability mechanism to guarantee that the strategy is consulted, monitored, and evaluated with all interested parties' participation.

We would like to inform you that this communication will be made public via the communications reporting [website](#) after 48 hours, as well as any response received from your institution. They will also subsequently be made available in the usual report to be presented to the Human Rights Council.

Please accept, Ms. Georgieva, the assurances of our highest consideration.

Attiya Waris

Independent Expert on the effects of foreign debt and other related international financial obligations of States on the full enjoyment of all human rights, particularly economic, social and cultural rights

Saad Alfarargi

Special Rapporteur on the right to development

Olivier De Schutter

Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights

Melissa Upreti

Chair-Rapporteur of the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls