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# GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND MINIMUM STANDARDS ON UNPAID CARE AND DOMESTIC WORK

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Care and domestic work, both paid and unpaid is at the heart of communities and is an integral component of economies all over the world. However, when it comes to unpaid care and domestic work, women bear a disproportionate burden. Although there are significant variations across countries and contexts, on average, globally, women spend four hours and 25 minutes daily doing unpaid care work, in comparison to men's average of just one hour and 23 minutes and this is changing very slowly – by less than a minute per year in the past 15 years.<sup>1</sup> In 2019 the International Labour Organisation (ILO) estimated that, continuing present trends, it will take 209 years to close the gender gap in time spent on unpaid care work.<sup>2</sup> The ILO defines unpaid care work as “non-remunerated work carried out to sustain the well-being, health and maintenance of other individuals in a household or the community.”<sup>3</sup> These activities are recognized as work, but typically not included in the System of National Accounts or – in the case of activities like fetching water/fuel – are theoretically included but often not well documented or accounted for.<sup>4,5</sup>

The time-consuming and often physically demanding nature of unpaid care and domestic work impedes their access to decent work opportunities,<sup>6</sup> as well as basic rights to education, political participation and leisure. Although the gendered division of labour affects women globally, it is especially onerous on women living in poverty, particularly young women who are also underserved by infrastructure and public services, and those who have limited finances to purchase goods and services to substitute the labour required for such work. Significant challenges related to the global climate emergency, such as its impact on livelihoods, access to water and food security only increase the care burden. The undervalued and gendered nature of the care chain carries over into paid care work, where women who work in health and social care, delivering the vast majority of the world's care, face gender-specific barriers at work which undermine their well-being and livelihoods.<sup>7</sup> Women account for 70% of the health and social care workforce globally, accounting for almost 100 million workers in total. In some countries in the global north such as the US and the UK<sup>8</sup> a significant number of these workers are black, Asian or minority ethnic people, mostly in middle and lower job grades.

The COVID 19 pandemic has sent shockwaves across the global economy, bringing major pre-existing inequalities into sharp focus, including those related to women's labour. It pandemic has exacerbated the burden of unpaid care work on women and girls across the globe.<sup>9</sup> With the closure of essential services such as schools and day-care centres, the responsibility



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of educating and caring for children has been borne disproportionately by women. Women are also taking care of sick family members and ensuring hygiene practices within the home. School closures have not only resulted in girls taking on more chores at home but has also led to more girls dropping out of school.<sup>10</sup> School closures have also meant that mothers and other caregivers are staying at home to look after children, impacting their ability to continue paid work, especially for the vast majority who cannot work remotely. This is especially true for women workers in the informal economy estimated to make up 92% of all women workers in the developing world.<sup>11</sup> Their increased care burden is compounded by the pandemic's impact on their livelihoods — including restrictions on ability to operate in public spaces, lack of access to markets, decreasing demand and rising commodity prices — and their widespread exclusion from labour and social protections. There has also been an significant increase in gender-based violence during the pandemic, and women and girls continue to face barriers to accessing essential sexual and reproductive health information and services.

A major problem for countries across the global south is the absence of universal, quality gender-responsive public services. Recent ActionAid research<sup>12</sup> found that countries who spend more than 12% of their budgets on debt servicing are invariably forced to cut their spending on public services. External debt payments by developing countries grew by 85% between 2010 and 2018, from 6.6% of government revenue to 12.2%.<sup>13</sup> The austerity policies of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and particularly its loan conditions profoundly impact the availability of resources for gender-responsive public services. This is primarily through insisting that governments overcome or avoid debt crises through sharp limits on public spending, limiting fiscal deficits and holding inflation down.<sup>14</sup> Governments then fail to deliver public services and cannot employ or pay teachers, doctors, nurses, social care workers and other frontline public service workers, many of whom are women. This is directly related to the privatisation of public services. The reality is that privatization and public private partnerships (PPPs) are, more often than not, driven by corporate interests more than public needs. They are frequently characterized by the reduction of wages and removal of labour regulations, and ultimately job losses as public sector workers are 'cut' to reduce costs. Even under a PPP providing services that are free at the point of use, the costs and risks to the public purse are often high, transparency and accountability are usually low, and human rights violations are often exacerbated.<sup>15</sup>

In line with the convention on Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Beijing Platform for Action in urges states to develop methods for assessing the value of unpaid work in quantitative terms.<sup>16</sup> Furthering this directive, the Sustainable Development Goals of 2015 established a specific target on unpaid care work under Goal 5 (Gender Equality). Target 5.4 requires member states to not only recognise and value unpaid care work, but also to provide public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and to promote shared responsibilities for care work within the home. While target 5.4 of the SDG directly addresses unpaid care work, it must be noted that other SDGs on education, poverty eradication and decent work also highlight the need to address the gendered care burden, as it is a major barrier to women's potential to benefit from any such initiatives and their ability to enjoy wider economic and social human rights. Over the past seven years, ActionAid has worked with our partners through various programmes with women living in poverty and exclusion, including the



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Promoting Opportunities for Women's Empowerment and Rights (POWER<sup>17</sup>) and Young Urban Women: Life Choices and Livelihoods<sup>18</sup> programmes. From these interventions we have learned that an integrated understanding of the intersections of women's paid and unpaid labour, gender-based violence and sexual and reproductive health and rights is crucial in policy decision-making.

These guiding principles and minimum standards on unpaid care and domestic work have emerged from our work at the intersections of these thematic areas. We outline six principles for countries to use as guidance in developing policy to address unpaid care and domestic work both in COVID 19 response and recovery efforts and in wider economic policy. They are accompanied by minimum standards to ensure that policy is implemented in ways that bring transformative change for women's and girls, particularly those from the poorest and most excluded communities.

# GUIDING PRINCIPLES ON UNPAID CARE AND DOMESTIC WORK

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- 1 Recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care and domestic work
  - 2 Maximise public financing for universal, quality gender-responsive public services
  - 3 Address broader economic justice for women, including access to decent work
  - 4 Recognise the differential impact of unpaid care and domestic work on different groups of women and girls
  - 5 Apply a life-cycle approach to care work
  - 6 Ensure that the process of policy formulation is participatory and accountable
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## PRINCIPLE 1: RECOGNIZE, REDUCE AND REDISTRIBUTE<sup>19</sup> UNPAID CARE AND DOMESTIC WORK

**RECOGNITION** of unpaid care work within households means that it should be seen and acknowledged as valuable work, as a social good and a major contribution to the economy. Recognition also requires that it is included in the established definitions understanding of “work” and “production”. States should acknowledge that unpaid care and domestic work has inherent social value beyond financial measurement due to its centrality to overall societal functioning and wellbeing.

**REDUCTION** means that the overall burden and drudgery of unpaid care and domestic work decreases. This can be achieved by providing labour-saving technologies or infrastructure and offering services in a different way

**REDISTRIBUTION** requires that while overall levels of care work may remain the same, it is more fairly distributed within households (between women and men) and between households and the state. While redistributing this work more fairly among members of the household is crucial, it will not address the wider structural challenge of the care burden being passed on to households, and particularly poor and excluded households. The most sustainable and structurally achievable form of redistribution is through State provision of universal, quality gender-responsive public services including health, education and water and sanitation.

An important fourth ‘R’ is **REPRESENTATION**, which requires that States ensure that women and girls are able to present their own demands and are meaningfully involved in the design, delivery and monitoring of policies and programmes related to care and domestic work and their social and economic rights as a whole

A comprehensive application of this guiding principle requires States to apply the following standards:

- 1 Adequately measure and value unpaid care and domestic work. Regular data collection should see information disaggregated by gender, age, disability, location and type of activity. This data should be used to monitor States’ commitment to recognizing and valuing unpaid care and domestic work (SDG 5.4). However, in terms of valuing the goal is not merely the assignation of a monetary value to the UCD but to enable States use that information in assigning a greater percentage of national and local budgets to provisioning of gender-responsive public services.
- 2 Ensure that universal and publicly funded public services including education and health, energy, water and sanitation, transport and care services (including for the elderly, disabled and early childhood) are of a good quality and gender-responsive.<sup>20</sup> They should be accessible, affordable, adaptable and acceptable, with the aim of redistributing unpaid care and domestic work. Additionally, states must review relevant existing legislation, policy and regulatory frameworks on social service provision to ensure that they recognize care and respond to the rights of caregivers, paid and unpaid and in both the formal and informal sectors.



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## PRINCIPLE 2: MAXIMISE PUBLIC FINANCING FOR GENDER-RESPONSIVE PUBLIC SERVICES

The first step towards ensuring the provision of publicly funded, universal, quality gender-responsive public services in order to redistribute unpaid care and domestic work is to address chronic underfunding caused primarily by austerity policies pursued by governments. The most reliable, sustainable and democratic way of raising money to fund quality, gender responsive public services is through taxation. At present the average tax-to-GDP ratio for low income countries remains below 17%. By some estimates, countries need to achieve a 20% tax-to-GDP ratio as a bare minimum to achieve the SDGs.<sup>21</sup> How tax revenues are raised matters. Regressive taxes place burdens on those least able to pay, such as value added tax (VAT) and other indirect taxes. This has a gendered impact, affecting women disproportionately as they are overrepresented among people living in poverty. Instead, governments should tax in a progressive manner including through direct taxes, such as personal and corporate tax (on income, property and wealth), alongside removing harmful corporate tax incentives. There would also be strict measures to control revenue lost through tax incentives and tax holidays, as well as tax evasion by multinational corporations and wealthy individuals, plus other illicit financial flows.

An application of this guiding principle requires states to apply the following standards:

- 1** Conduct gendered human rights impact assessments of macroeconomic policy in line with the UN Guiding Principles on the formulation and implementation of economic reform measures.<sup>22</sup> Macroeconomic policies and other development policies must be substantively redesigned so that they support the recognition, reduction and redistribution of the burden of unpaid care and domestic work. Crucial to this is the existence of a gender-just progressive tax system, public provision of quality gender-responsive services and universal labour rights and social protection for all, including women in the informal economy.
- 2** Allocate sufficient budgets towards gender-responsive public services and care supporting infrastructure, with a view to increasing the size, share, sensitivity and scrutiny of budgets.<sup>23</sup>
- 3** Critically assess austerity, privatisation and other measures that restrict public spending against their (States) own rights obligations to citizens. States must put in place counter-cyclical measures that deliver on rights as well as generate growth and jobs through increased public spending and investment in social infrastructure

## PRINCIPLE 3: ADDRESS BROADER ECONOMIC JUSTICE FOR WOMEN, INCLUDING ACCESS TO DECENT WORK FOR ALL WORKERS

Policies and programmes addressing women's economic rights must look at unpaid care and domestic work alongside their access to and control over productive and natural resources including land, control over their time, freedom from violence, and ensuring that they have a voice and choice and in all areas of life.<sup>24</sup> Any efforts aimed at increasing women's participation in paid labour must first uphold rights to decent work, a living wage and income security. In line with the recommendations of the UN High Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment,<sup>25</sup> States should ensure that macroeconomic policies do not directly or indirectly negatively impact upon women's enjoyment of their economic rights – whether through taxation, austerity measures, trade policies or industrial and labour market policies.

A comprehensive roll-out of this guiding principle requires states to apply the following standards:

- 1 Guarantee decent work, labour and social protections and income security for all women workers including workers in the informal sector and workers across the care sectors including health, education, social care and domestic work,
- 2 Address violence and harassment in the world of work by ratifying and implementing ILO Convention 190.<sup>26</sup>



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## PRINCIPLE 4: RECOGNISE THE DIFFERENTIAL IMPACT OF UNPAID CARE AND DOMESTIC WORK ON DIFFERENT GROUPS OF WOMEN AND GIRLS

While unpaid care and domestic work is undertaken by all women, multiple and intersecting inequalities around income status, geographic allocation, age, migrant status, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, class, caste, race and ethnicity, nationality – exacerbate the burden of such unpaid care and domestic work.<sup>27</sup>

The care burden is also exacerbated by climate change. In rural communities, disasters such as droughts, floods and cyclones substantially increase the time and energy women spend on food production, including farming and the collection of water and firewood.

A comprehensive application of this guiding principle requires states to apply two standards:

- 1 Address the disproportionate impact of unpaid care and domestic work on excluded communities in all aspects of policy formulation. This encompasses every area from needs assessment to design, financing, implementation and monitoring, while ensuring that the needs of diverse groups including persons living with disabilities, women in rural areas, young and elderly women, women in urban areas, LGBTIQ+ people and other minorities are centered and addressed.
- 2 Ensure that all climate-related goals and policies take unpaid care and domestic work into account, acknowledge women's labour and include significant investments in care infrastructure
- 3 Ensure that the provision and delivery of services do not further enhance existing inequalities and actively take steps to end discrimination against excluded groups in all current and future laws and policies.



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## PRINCIPLE 5: APPLY A LIFE-CYCLE APPROACH TO CARE WORK

States must recognise that the difference in time spent by boys and girls on domestic and care activities begins early and progressively increases with age. Girls aged five to 15 incrementally take on much more household work compared to their male counterparts,<sup>28</sup> affecting their ability to play, to attend school and access education. This accordingly affects their access to decent work and limits their earning power. In addition, it reduces their ability to save or contribute towards a pension or any other social insurance scheme not provided by the state, pushing them into a forced, life-long cycle of economic disadvantage. Additionally older women continue to provide care at household and community level, sometimes taking on additional work as younger women take on other work outside the home.



Rwanda. Jean Bizimana/ActionAid

Application of this guiding principle requires states to apply the following standards:

- 1 Acknowledge that the care burden evolves and disproportionately affects women and girls throughout their lifetime,<sup>29</sup> limiting access to opportunities at each stage, while also accounting for this in policy formulation.
- 2 Provide universal social protections such as pensions, paid parental leave for men and women, social assistance and other forms of income security for women throughout the life cycle

## PRINCIPLE 6: ENSURE THAT THE PROCESS OF POLICY FORMULATION IS PARTICIPATORY AND ACCOUNTABLE

States should develop policies in consultation with diverse groups of women and girls to ensure that the distinct needs and priorities of different groups are reflected. Furthermore, states must monitor their effectiveness along with relevant survey data (see Principle 1) to gauge their impact on gender equality, by measuring performance against gender-based indicators.<sup>30</sup> For instance, a key indicator for water-related infrastructure projects could be the proportion of households within 15 minutes of the nearest water source.<sup>31</sup> This requires allocation of sufficient finances, transparency, and the provision of accessible information to citizens.

A comprehensive roll-out of this guiding principle requires states to apply the following standards:

- 1 Ensure that policies truly advance gender equality by meaningfully involving women (including women workers and their organizations) in every level of decision-making across social and economic policies and programmes
- 2 Implement structural policy changes which actively challenge norms, perceptions, attitudes and behaviours that spread harmful stereotypes and entrench gender-based discrimination
- 3 Develop comprehensive social policy that moves beyond social protection and promotes social justice. This requires a macroeconomic policy focus and strong sectoral linkages across line ministries and departments and coordination with women's movements, labour unions and other social justice and human rights organizations.



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# ENDNOTES

- 1 ILO. *A quantum leap for gender equality*, 2019. Page 19 figure and page 31.
- 2 ILO. *A quantum leap for gender equality*, 2019.  
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- 3 ILO. *Care Work and Care Jobs*, 2019. <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/care-economy/care-for-fow/lang--en/index.htm>
- 4 Despite the vast contribution that UCDW makes to economies and societies, unpaid care and domestic work is excluded from national accounts. It is also largely absent from analysis of macroeconomic and tax policies, labour market and industrial policies and budget allocation. Instead, most efforts by states and other development actors have to date focused on securing the piecemeal economic rights of women under the guise of job creation or women ‘empowerment’ strategies.
- 5 Despite the vast contribution that UCDW makes to economies and societies, unpaid care and domestic work is excluded from national accounts. It is also largely absent from analysis of macroeconomic and tax policies, labour market and industrial policies and budget allocation. Instead, most efforts by states and other development actors have to date focused on securing the piecemeal economic rights of women under the guise of job creation or women ‘empowerment’ strategies.
- 6 According to the ILO, decent work involves opportunities for work that are productive and deliver a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, as well as better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organise and participate in key decisions and provide equality of opportunity and treatment for all. See <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang--en/index.htm>
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- 14 ibid
- 15 ActionAid (2019) *Position Paper on Privatisation and PPPs*
- 16 UN General Assembly (United Nations General Assembly). 1995. *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action Adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women*, 27 October 1995. A/CONF.177/20 and A/CONF.177/20/ Add.1.
- 17 The Power Project mobilises and organises women in rural communities to raise their awareness and claim their rights as farmer and carers. It achieves this through an integrated approach combining unpaid care work, agroecology and addressing violence against women. See: <http://powerproject.actionaid.org/>
- 18 “Young Urban Women: Life Choices and Livelihoods” (YUWP) is a multi-country programme that works with young women in informal settlements on issues of economic security, bodily integrity and unpaid care work.
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