

ADVOCACY BRIEF

The Gendered Impacts of World Bank and IMF Policy in the MENA Region

**BY MENAFEM MOVEMENT FOR ECONOMIC
DEVELOPMENT AND ECOLOGICAL JUSTICE**



Women's Environment
& Development Organization



MENAFEM
الحركة النسوية للعدالة الاقتصادية، الإيكولوجية و التنمية في الشرق الأوسط وشمال إفريقيا
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INTRODUCTION

While macroeconomic policies are often portrayed as technical matters of numbers and indicators, this perception overlooks both the global power imbalance in economic relations and the gendered dimensions of macroeconomics—its differential effects on women, men, and non-binary people. Global economic relations are shaped by a colonial past, where extractivism and debt in the Global South have become cemented in global economic structures and institutions. The historical legacies of colonial economic architectures perpetuate structural inequalities, primarily through neoliberal policies peddled by international financial institutions (IFIs). These serve a small subset of wealthy Global North countries at the expense of, mainly, the Global South, hindering progress towards gender equality and inclusive development.

The intersection of macroeconomic policies and gender dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region forms a complex terrain where economic development meets gender equality aspirations. At the forefront of shaping this intersection are the Bretton Woods Institutions: the World Bank Group (WBG) and International Monetary Fund (IMF), pivotal actors in driving economic policies and initiatives across MENA. The macroeconomic policies instituted by these institutions extend beyond national boundaries, exacerbating gender disparities through the conditions attached to their loans and the global systems these institutions perpetuate. Discerning these effects requires a critical analysis that feminist economists and activists have been instrumental in providing.

ABOUT THIS BRIEF

This advocacy brief serves as a compass, navigating the intricate relationship between macroeconomics and gender dimensions within the purview of World Bank and IMF activities in MENA. Through an exploration of the macroeconomic policies and gender impacts in light of the nexus of conflict, and environmental crises, we aim to unravel the complexities, challenges, and opportunities facing women in the MENA region. Our analysis extends to the austerity measures implemented by the IMF and made worse by the WBG's push towards privatization, shedding light on the disproportionate burdens borne by women and marginalized communities.

Through an informed exploration of these themes, this advocacy brief aims to catalyze dialogue and action among policymakers, civil society organizations, and other stakeholders. By advocating for gender-responsive approaches within macroeconomic policies and interventions and calling for the decolonization of economic structures, we endeavor to advance the cause of gender equality, social justice, and sustainable development in the MENA region and beyond.

MACROECONOMIC POLICIES IN CONTEXT IN THE MENA REGION

Conflict

Conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly in Palestine, Sudan, Syria, Afghanistan and Iran, have inflicted profound suffering on women and girls, exacerbating their vulnerabilities and subjecting them to unique forms of violence and deprivation. In these conflict zones, women and girls confront a myriad of challenges that target their bodily autonomy, restrict their freedom of movement, and undermine their agency. Forced and child marriages proliferate,¹ and sexual violence,² trafficking, and heightened domestic abuse are among the harrowing realities that women and girls endure.

Sexual violence against Palestinians (both women and men) has long been entrenched within the tactics of the Israeli Occupation from 1948³ until now,⁴ especially in prison.⁵ The ongoing genocide in Gaza being conducted by Israeli forces has led to a proliferation of this sexual violence, from the Israeli soldiers' sexual assault of Palestinian women investigated by the UN⁶ to numerous accounts of Palestinian men being sexually assaulted in detention, including videos published by the Israeli soldiers who perpetrated the assaults.⁷

What distinguishes the plight of women and girls in these conflicts is the intersectionality of gender-based violence with the broader turmoil of war. The prolonged displacement,⁸ deliberate targeting of journalists, healthcare workers, and first responders, and the breakdown of essential services like healthcare in Gaza exacerbate the vulnerability of Palestinian women. The consequence is a perilous environment where women's reproductive health is under constant threat, and basic needs such as access to menstrual hygiene products become luxuries.

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- 1 Risha Singh, Srinivas Goli, and Abhra Singh, "Armed Conflicts and Girl Child Marriages: A Global Evidence," *Children and Youth Services Review* 137 (June 2022): 106458, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2022.106458>.
 - 2 Julian Borger, "Claims of Israeli Sexual Assault of Palestinian Women Are Credible, UN Panel Says," *The Guardian*, February 22, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/22/claims-of-israeli-sexual-assault-of-palestinian-women-are-credible-un-panel-says>.
 - 3 Ilan Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine* (Simon and Schuster, 2007).
 - 4 Kathryn Medien, "Israeli Settler Colonialism, 'Humanitarian Warfare,' and Sexual Violence in Palestine," *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, October 20, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2021.1882323>.
 - 5 Daniel J.N. Weishut, "Sexual Torture of Palestinian Men by Israeli Authorities," *Reproductive Health Matters*, January 1, 2015, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rhm.2015.11.019>; Ferdoos Abed-Rabo Al Issa and Elizabeth Beck, "Sexual Violence as a War Weapon in Conflict Zones: Palestinian Women's Experience Visiting Loved Ones in Prisons and Jails," *Affilia* 36, no. 2 (December 16, 2020): 167–81, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886109920978618>.
 - 6 Julian Borger, "Claims of Israeli Sexual Assault of Palestinian Women Are Credible, UN Panel Says," *The Guardian*, February 22, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/22/claims-of-israeli-sexual-assault-of-palestinian-women-are-credible-un-panel-says>.
 - 7 OHCHR, "Statement on Video Purportedly Showing Sexual Abuse of Palestinian Man in Israeli Detention - OHCHR," United Nations, August 8, 2024, <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/statement-ohchr-08aug24/>.
 - 8 Nadia Hardman, "Most of Gaza's Population Remains Displaced and in Harm's Way," Human Rights Watch, December 20, 2023, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/12/20/most-gazas-population-remains-displaced-and-harms-way>.

Moreover, the socioeconomic repercussions of conflict further compound the challenges faced by women and girls. Rapidly deteriorating economies and the disruption of livelihoods leave them economically marginalized, exacerbating their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse. Amidst this humanitarian crisis, issues like period poverty, increased risks of miscarriages, and complications during pregnancy emerge as urgent concerns, with potentially life-threatening consequences.

Recognizing and addressing the gendered dynamics of conflict is imperative not only for mitigating the immediate suffering of women and girls but also for fostering long-term peace and stability in these regions. Only through a comprehensive understanding of these dynamics can meaningful interventions be implemented to safeguard the rights and dignity of women and girls and pave the way for sustainable peacebuilding efforts.

Climate Crisis

Climate change is, above all, a crisis of inequalities. The 63 million people who make up the top 1% richest on the planet emit more than double the emissions of the bottom half, which consists of 3.1 billion people.⁹ Despite not being known for radical climate advocacy, the World Bank¹⁰ has recently found that, by the year 2050, approximately 216 million people worldwide are expected to be internally displaced due to climate events. This staggering figure underscores the urgency of addressing climate change as a global crisis.

The MENA region is one of the most vulnerable regions to climate change, as it is the most water-scarce region and one of the hottest regions in the world.¹¹ Recent devastating and deadly floods in Morocco,¹² Yemen,¹³ and Libya,¹⁴ the disastrous 2023 earthquake in Morocco,¹⁵ and rising heat mortality rates¹⁶ across the region, with Egypt witnessing 50 Egyptian deaths and 40 deaths of Sudanese refugees in Aswan over the course of a few days in summer 2024,¹⁷ are a testament to this vulnerability.

9 “Wealthiest 1% Uses up Twice as Much Carbon as 3.1 billion People, Asian Emissions Grow, Worsening Climate Crisis and Pollution,” Oxfam in Asia, September 24, 2020, <https://asia.oxfam.org/latest/press-release/wealthiest-1-uses-twice-much-carbon-31billion-people-asian-emissions-grow>.

10 Viviane Clement et al., “Groundswell Part 2,” September 13, 2021, <https://www.sidalc.net/search/Record/dig-okr-1098636248/Description>.

11 “Environment and Climate Change,” UNICEF Middle East and North Africa, accessed June 19, 2025, <https://www.unicef.org/mena/climate-change-in-mena>.

12 Alexandre Aublanc, “‘People Have Never Seen Anything like It’: Morocco Hit by Extraordinary Torrential Rains,” Le Monde, September 11, 2024, https://www.lemonde.fr/en/le-monde-africa/article/2024/09/11/people-have-never-seen-anything-like-it-morocco-hit-by-extraordinary-torrential-rains_6725563_124.html.

13 IFRC, “Yemen, MENA | Yemen Floods - Emergency Appeal #: MDRYE016 - Operational Strategy,” September 25, 2024, <https://reliefweb.int/report/yemen/yemen-mena-yemen-floods-emergency-appeal-no-mdrye016-operational-strategy>.

14 “Devastating Floods in Libya,” UNICEF, accessed June 19, 2025, <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/devastating-flooding-libya>.

15 John P. Rafferty, “Morocco Earthquake of 2023,” Encyclopedia Britannica, September 13, 2023, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Morocco-earthquake-of-2023>.

16 Tim Stickings, “Middle East Bears Brunt of 30-Year Rise in Heatwave Deaths,” The National, May 14, 2024, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/climate/2024/05/14/middle-east-bears-brunt-of-30-year-rise-in-heatwave-deaths/>.

17 “Aswan Heatwave: Extreme Temperatures and Power Outages Claim Dozens of Lives – ةشلل اء ءي واز,” accessed June 19, 2025, <https://zawia3.com/en/aswan/>.

Climate change disproportionately impacts women and girls,¹⁸ who constitute up to 80% of climate refugees.¹⁹ Climate change also exacerbates violence against women, which can lead them to seek refuge even in non-disaster scenarios. Significant observed impacts of the climate crisis on women and girls are security, health (both physical and mental), and subsistence, and independence. There is a significant gap between the extensive literature on women's vulnerability to climate change and the incorporation of measures that integrate gender into climate policy, planning, or funding: according to the UN, only 1.5% of climate finance is dedicated to supporting women.

Despite the disproportionate effect of climate change on women, the World Bank's 61-page **Climate Change Action Plan 2021-2025** only makes two references to gender.²⁰ The first states that the people-centered approach requires citizen engagement and participatory processes that consider diversity, including gender; the second entails a commitment from the WBG to mainstream a gender-sensitive approach to climate action without much elaboration. The IMF's climate strategy fares even worse,²¹ with absolutely no mention of gender and/or women anywhere in its text.

Urgent action is imperative to mitigate climate impacts, support women and other vulnerable communities, and foster international cooperation to address the root causes of climate change. Failure to act decisively could have profound and far-reaching consequences, both for human security and global stability.

The Role of the IFIs

In the intricate socio-economic landscape of the MENA region, the implementation of austerity measures by the IMF and the World Bank has reverberated with profound gendered implications. These policies, ostensibly introduced to address economic challenges and promote fiscal discipline, have wielded a disproportionate impact on women, exacerbating pre-existing disparities and impeding advancements towards gender equality. While both institutions have articulated commitments to gender equality and inclusion, their continued promotion of austerity measures and privatization undermines these goals. Instead of prioritizing investments in public services and social protection programs that would alleviate the burden on women, IFIs promote policies that exacerbate existing problems related to the interconnectedness of gender, conflict, and environmental/climate crises in the MENA region in several ways.

¹⁸ World Meteorological Organization, "United In Science 2023: Sustainable Development Edition," September 14, 2023, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/united-science-2023-sustainable-development-edition>.

¹⁹ Sofia Castelo, Lia Antunes, and Md. Ashrafuzzaman, "The Impact of the Climate Crisis on Gender Inequality. Looking to the Frontlines in Search of Priorities for Policy," *Frontiers in Sustainable Cities* 6 (March 4, 2024), <https://doi.org/10.3389/frsc.2024.1304535>.

²⁰ World Bank Group, "World Bank Group Climate Change Action Plan 2021–2025: Supporting Green, Resilient, and Inclusive Development," 2021, <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/entities/publication/ee8a5cd7-ed72-542d-918b-d72e07f96c79>.

²¹ "IMF Strategy to Help Members Address Climate Change Related Policy Challenges—Priorities, Modes of Delivery, and Budget Implications," IMF, accessed June 19, 2025, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/Policy-Papers/Issues/2021/07/30/IMF-Strategy-to-Help-Members-Address-Climate-Change-Related-Policy-Challenges-Priorities-463093>.

Austerity measures, such as cutting subsidies, eroding universal social protection systems, reducing public spending, and increasing indirect taxation, worsen structural inequality and ultimately have disproportionate effects on women. Austerity measures typically involve reductions in public spending, often targeting social services and public sector employment. According to data from the IMF itself, between 2010 and 2020,²² 187 countries implemented austerity measures, leading to significant reductions in public expenditure. The IMF's approach, which consolidates and reproduces gender inequalities and exacerbates violations of women's human rights, is likely to continue at least through 2025.²³

Cuts in public spending mandated by IMF austerity measures contribute to increased poverty, which leads to increased conflict and higher inequality. Further, austerity policies can hinder the ability of MENA countries to address environmental and climate crises. **Public spending cuts can lead to reduced investment in environmental protection and climate change mitigation and adaptation measures.** This can exacerbate the impacts of environmental degradation and climate change, which disproportionately affect women and other vulnerable groups.²⁴

Austerity measures can undermine efforts to promote financial transparency and combat corruption, which are critical for addressing governance pitfalls in the MENA region. The IMF's standardized approach to financial assistance can unintentionally magnify pre-existing challenges, particularly in countries where institutional checks and balances are weak. This can lead to inadequate and regressive budgeting practices and policies that exacerbate wealth inequality, further fueling conflict and instability in the region.²⁵ Finally, austerity policies can hinder the ability of MENA countries to integrate with the global economy and reform their exchange rate regimes. This can limit their access to foreign investment and trade, which are critical for economic growth and development. This can further exacerbate existing gender, conflict, and environmental/climate crises in the region.²⁶

On the side of the World Bank, policies including structural adjustment programs, fiscal and monetary policies, and investment projects, purportedly aim to promote economic growth, reduce poverty, and improve living standards. The World Bank also emphasizes the importance of gender equality and women's economic empowerment in its policies and strategies, as outlined in its new **Gender Strategy 2024-30.**²⁷

²² "The Impact of Economic Reform Policies on Women's Human Rights," OHCHR, accessed June 19, 2025, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/special-procedures/ie-foreign-debt/impact-economic-reform-policies-womens-human-rights>.

²³ Juan Pablo Bohoslavsky and Mariana Rulli, "Bretton Woods' Pandemic Policies: A Gender Equality Analysis—Perspectives from Latin America," *Development* 64, no. 1–2 (April 21, 2021): 97–106, <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41301-021-00290-4>.

²⁴ Mariya Sahnouni, "The IMF's Lazy Economics Will Not Save MENA," AWC, December 18, 2023, <https://arabwatchcoalition.org/2023/12/18/the-imfs-lazy-economics-will-not-save-mena/>.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ "The IMF and the Middle East and North Africa-- An IMF Issues Brief," IMF, accessed June 19, 2025, <https://www.imf.org/external/np/exr/ib/2003/081503.htm>.

²⁷ World Bank Group, "World Bank Group Gender Strategy 2024 – 2030: Accelerate Gender Equality to End Poverty on a Livable Planet," World Bank Group, March 7, 2025, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/gender/brief/gender-strategy-update-2024-30-accelerating-equality-and-empowerment-for-all>.

However, the Bank's on-ground operations, specifically in the Global South, fall short of—and directly undermine—these commitments. While the Bank's gender strategy has achieved some progress in terms of underscoring the importance of public funding for core services, acknowledging power relations and the social contract, and making references to human rights and labor protections, it is negated by the larger context of the Bank's violent push for privatization, which effectively works against the concessions made in the strategy.

The strategy fails to call for structural and economic transformations or even reforms in social and macroeconomic policy, whether for the Bank itself or through country-level policies. **Without effective integration within the Bank's core functions and policies, the strategy is only a public relations move intended to paint the bank's policies as women-friendly—and does not actually effect positive change for women and gender-diverse people in the MENA region or elsewhere.** Further, against the backdrop of austerity measures prevalent in the MENA region, the effective implementation of this strategy faces significant challenges, raising doubts about its ability to deliver tangible improvements for women in the region.

Similarly, the IMF's gender mainstreaming strategy²⁸ and recently published interim guidance note²⁹ (which offer non-mandatory suggestions) fail to address the gendered impacts of the IMF's austerity policies and debt or provide any commitments to steering away from austerity, instead framing gender equality solely as a means towards economic growth. The IMF has been criticized for not systematically integrating gender concerns into the design of its programs, ignoring the gendered impact of its macroeconomic policies—while women in the MENA region pay the price.³⁰

A MENA FEMINIST AGENDA FOR THE REFORM OF THE IFIS

To truly advance gender equality and empower women in the MENA region, it is essential for IFIs to adopt a feminist approach to policymaking that prioritizes **investments in public services, social protection, and care infrastructure**. The IMF, in particular, must prioritize gender equality in its lending and technical assistance. Gender impact assessments should be conducted for all policy recommendations to prevent harm to women's rights and well-being. Additionally, IFIs must engage with feminist organizations and civil society groups to ensure that their policies and strategies are informed by the diverse experiences and needs of women in the region.

28 "IMF Strategy Toward Mainstreaming Gender," IMF, accessed June 19, 2025, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/Policy-Papers/Issues/2022/07/28/IMF-Strategy-Toward-Mainstreaming-Gender-521344>.

29 "Interim Guidance Note on Mainstreaming Gender at The IMF," IMF, accessed June 19, 2025, <https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/Policy-Papers/Issues/2024/01/12/Interim-Guidance-Note-on-Mainstreaming-Gender-at-The-IMF-543779>.

30 Nabil Abdo, "The Gendered Impact of IMF Policies in MENA: The Case of Egypt, Jordan and Tunisia" (Oxfam, October 8, 2019), <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620878/bn-imf-gendered-impact-policies-mena-081019-en.pdf>.

This includes promoting women's participation in decision-making processes, challenging discriminatory norms and practices in the **labor market**, recognizing the value of **unpaid care work**, and promoting progressive taxation systems that raise revenue equitably and spend it on the public services key to advancing gender equality and wellbeing in general.

Decent work and labor force participation

In the MENA region, gender disparities in economic outcomes are significant. Women's labor force participation rates are low, and women contribute only 18% to the overall GDP of the region. The gender gap in labor force participation, in part driven by legal barriers women face in entering the workforce, has also affected women's access to and use of digital services.³¹ The World Bank's **Women, Business, and the Law** report shows that women enjoy only 64% of the legal protections that men do, and countries have established less than 40% of the systems needed for full implementation of equal-opportunity laws.³²

Despite gains in education, women in the MENA region continue to face significant barriers to entering and remaining in the formal job market. High unemployment rates among women, coupled with discriminatory hiring practices and cultural norms that prioritize men's employment, perpetuate gender disparities in labor force participation. Furthermore, austerity measures that prioritize privatization and reduce public sector employment opportunities disproportionately affect women, who are overrepresented in public sector jobs and rely on state-provided services.³³

Recommendations

- ➔ Policies aimed at promoting decent work for women are essential for addressing gender inequalities in the labor market. This may involve protecting workers' rights, ensuring fair wages, and extending social protections to workers in the informal sector. According to data from the International Labour Organization (ILO), investing in decent work for women can have positive ripple effects on families, communities, and economies.³⁴
- ➔ Governments should also prioritize job creation initiatives targeted at women, particularly in sectors where they are underrepresented.

³¹ Lili Mottaghi, "Invest in Women to Boost Growth in MENA," World Bank Blogs, accessed June 19, 2025, <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/arabvoices/invest-women-boost-growth-mena>.

³² World Bank Group, "New Data Show Massive, Wider-than-Expected Global Gender Gap," *World Bank Group*, March 4, 2024, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2024/03/04/new-data-show-massive-wider-than-expected-global-gender-gap>.

³³ Osama Diab and Salma Ihab Hindy, "Women and Economic Reform in Egypt: Impact of Production Changes on Female Waged Labor Force Participation," *Middle East Critique* 31, no. 1 (January 2, 2022): 61–79, <https://doi.org/10.1080/19436149.2022.2030984>.

³⁴ "Facts on Investing in Decent Work for Women," International Labour Organization, February 28, 2008, <https://www.ilo.org/publications/facts-investing-decent-work-women>.

Care

Despite the clear link between austerity, care work, and women's economic empowerment, the IMF and World Bank have failed to adequately address these issues in their policies and strategies. Instead, the reduction in spending required by austerity policies has significant implications for women, particularly in terms of care work. Unpaid care work, predominantly performed by women, is undervalued and often overlooked in economic policy discussions. Yet, it is a critical component of the economy, providing essential support for individuals and communities.

Cuts in public spending have reduced state provision of care services and increased privatization of essential arenas like education and healthcare. As families struggle to afford private services, women are expected to fill the gaps, taking on increased responsibilities for childcare, eldercare, and household duties. This increase in unpaid care work not only limits women's opportunities for economic participation³⁵ but also contributes to time poverty, depriving them of the ability to pursue education, employment, and leisure activities.

The effects of austerity on women have been three-fold, with cuts in public spending reducing state provision of care services, women's roles as household and community managers compounding time poverty as prices rise, and neoliberal policies implemented by governments everywhere reducing states' control of their own budgets and restricting public expenditure, all while promoting regressive forms of taxation.³⁶ The resulting financial instability exacerbates existing gender inequalities, particularly for low-income women and those in precarious employment.

Recommendations

- ➔ Recognizing the importance of unpaid care work is essential for addressing gender disparities exacerbated by austerity. **Governments must invest in quality care services** to alleviate women's care burdens and ensure universal access to these services—which can also yield significant returns in terms of economic growth and social development.³⁷
- ➔ Gender-responsive budgeting can help ensure that public spending prioritizes the needs of women and promotes gender equality.

³⁵ World Bank Group, "Better Childcare Encourages More Women to Join the Labor Market in the Mashreq," *World Bank Group*, March 6, 2025, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2024/02/14/better-childcare-encourages-more-women-to-join-the-labor-market-in-the-mashreq>.

³⁶ Gender & Development Network, "Submission to the Independent Expert on Foreign Debt and Human Rights on the Links and the Impact of Economic Reforms and Austerity Measures on Women's Human Rights" (OHCHR, March 2018), <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Issues/Development/IEDebt/WomenAusterity/GenderDevelopmentNetwork.pdf>.

³⁷ "Summary Report: The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action Turns 20," UN Women – Headquarters, n.d., <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2015/02/beijing-synthesis-report>.

Raising and spending money on gender equality

Maximizing resources for gender equality requires a concerted effort to raise additional revenue and allocate it effectively. Most middle-income countries in the MENA region rely on taxes on goods and services for the majority of their tax income. These consumption taxes have been forming an increasing share of tax revenue for Egypt and Morocco in recent years.³⁸ Egypt and Tunisia have also seen a recent increase in the share of personal income tax, coinciding with a decrease in the share of corporate taxes.³⁹

Taxes on goods and services are regressive by nature and form a greater burden on the poor and middle-class. Despite the utilization of tax brackets for personal income, the declining share of corporate taxes and increasing share of taxes on goods and services highlight the regressive nature of taxes in the region. Progressive tax regimes can help redistribute wealth and reduce economic inequality, benefiting women in particular. Counter-cyclical macroeconomic policies can help cushion the impact of economic shocks on women and ensure their economic security.

Recommendations

- ➔ Creating an **enabling macroeconomic environment** for gender equality requires a holistic approach to economic policy. Governments must evaluate the gender impacts of their policies and adopt measures to mitigate any negative effects.
- ➔ **Progressive taxation**, combined with measures to curb tax evasion by corporations and wealthy individuals, can generate funds for programs that promote gender equality and women's rights. These programs may include initiatives to prevent violence against women, challenge gender stereotypes, and provide reproductive health care.
- ➔ **Targeted expenditure** is crucial for addressing the specific needs of women and promoting their economic empowerment. **Investments in social infrastructure**, such as care services and education, can create opportunities for women and reduce their unpaid care burdens. **Social protections** must be extended to cover all women, regardless of their employment status, to ensure their economic security and well-being.

³⁸ Nirnanjan Sarangi et al., "Tax Reforms in the Arab Region: Assessing Equity, Efficiency and Progressivity toward Mobilizing Domestic Resources," UNESCWA (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia), accessed June 19, 2025, <https://www.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/event/materials/Tax%20reforms%20in%20the%20Arab%20Region%20Assessing%20equity%2C%20efficiency%20and%20progressivity%20toward%20mobilizing%20domestic%20resources.pdf>.

³⁹ Ibid.

CONCLUSION

This paper outlines how World Bank and IMF austerity policies exacerbate existing problems related to the interconnectedness of gender, conflict, and environmental/climate crises in the MENA region by reducing public spending on essential services, increasing poverty and inequality, hindering efforts to address environmental and climate crises, undermining efforts to promote financial transparency and combat corruption, and limiting the ability of MENA countries to integrate with the global economy and reform their exchange rate regimes.

In assessing the World Bank and IMF's approach to macroeconomic policies in the MENA region, it becomes evident that **a fundamental shift is necessary**. Rather than persisting with austerity measures and market-centric reforms, the institutions should pivot towards a framework rooted in principles of rights, equality, and social justice. This entails redirecting focus towards substantial investments in public services, such as education, healthcare, and social safety nets, which serve as foundational pillars for advancing gender equality and fostering inclusive development. Furthermore, meaningful collaboration with local communities and civil society organizations, particularly those championing women's rights, is imperative to ensure that policies are not only responsive but also reflective of the diverse needs and aspirations of women across the region.

Feminist strategies and actions for combating the co-optation of feminism by the interventions of IFIs in the Global South, particularly in the MENA region, include organizing, building transnational alliances, and fostering solidarity among feminists and other progressive actors across the MENA region and the Global South. These efforts are essential in opposing the interventions of IFIs that hinder progress towards gender and social justice and advocating for alternative approaches that prioritize the rights and needs of individuals and communities, and for a redistribution of power and resources⁴⁰.

Recommendations to the IMF and World Bank

1. **Reorient towards public service investments:** Prioritize channeling resources into bolstering public services like education, healthcare, and social protection. This enhances societal well-being and alleviates the disproportionate burden of unpaid care work on women, facilitating their greater economic participation.
2. **Embrace a rights-centric paradigm:** Recalibrate macroeconomic policies towards principles of gender equality and social justice. This requires dismantling entrenched structural barriers that impede women's access to economic opportunities and includes revising fiscal and monetary policy prescriptions that perpetuate austerity and undermine inclusive development.

⁴⁰ Zeina Mhaidly, "The Impacts of IFIs on Feminist Movements in the Global South/MENA," Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, accessed June 19, 2025, <https://feminism-mena.fes.de/en/the-impacts-of-ifis-on-feminist-movements-in-the-global-south-mena>.

3. **Forge stronger partnerships with civil society:** Engage in substantive dialogues with grassroots organizations and women's rights advocates. These partnerships ensure that interventions are attuned to the nuanced realities and pressing concerns faced by women at the local level, fostering more targeted and context-specific initiatives.
4. **Prioritize gender-transformative policies:** Invest in policies and programs that actively promote gender equality, fostering social inclusion and creating conducive environments for women's economic advancement.

Recommendations to MENA Governments

1. **Challenge systemic inequities:** Advocate for policies that dismantle systemic barriers and prioritize the rights and well-being of women in the MENA region, including advancing legal and institutional reforms that remove barriers to women's access to land, credit, employment, and political representation.
2. **Strengthen social protections:** Support the expansion and fortification of social protection programs to ensure equitable access to essential resources and services, particularly during periods of economic strain.
3. **Center local and feminist knowledge:** Create enabling environments for feminist organizations, cooperatives, traditional local governance structures, and informal workers' associations that already provide alternative economic models rooted in care, justice, and solidarity.

Achieving gender justice and equitable development in the MENA region (and Global South at large) requires more than just cosmetic policy changes and technical solutions. It requires a dismantling of the global financial architecture rooted in colonial legacies, which continue to manifest through debts, austerity, resource extraction, and economic reforms imposed by Global North-dominated financial institutions. This calls for a full reimagination of development and a multilateral system rooted in care, economic sovereignty, cooperation, and the collective wellbeing of people and planet.

MENA governments and regional actors must prioritize strategic investments in food sovereignty, renewable energy, and regional industrial policies that serve their own people and safeguard their resources and ecosystems, rather than serving the interests of creditors, foreign investors, and Global North governments. This shift would reduce the region's dependency on debt and global markets, while building resilience. Feminist and anti-colonial/decolonial movements across the region and the Global South have long advocated for these alternatives, rooted in justice, solidarity, and autonomy. Their visions must guide the way forward. Decolonizing economic structures is not a task to be delegated to the very institutions that have historically upheld and reinforced these structures. It is a political imperative that must be led from within the region and the Global South, by those most affected.