

## **Austerity measures hurt women and girls the most**

Austerity hurts women, it kills women and robs us of our time. As South Africa's economy descends further into crisis, we must make sure that women and girls are not sacrificed at the altar of austerity.

Feminist economists, civil society and care advocates have been fighting for integrated, gender accountable budgeting and for women to be prioritised in policy making. That's because when governments try to reduce budget deficits through spending cuts, tax increases, or a combination of both, the care needs of society shift to women and girls. Cuts to public expenditure hit public services such as health, education and other public care activities the most. Austerity in patriarchal contexts means that women and girls become slaves to unpaid care work.

When an economic crisis hits, such as the current crisis in South Africa, women and girls become the economy's shock absorbers. They find themselves forced to fill in the gaps left by a failed public sector. An example of this is the current water crisis ravaging our country. Women manage water in households so during a water crisis, they are the most affected as they need water to cook, clean and do the family laundry. They must walk long distances to fetch water which can also increase their risk of experiencing gender-based violence. Austerity measures force households to absorb care-work that should be provided by the state and the private sector. Women and girls perform this care work for free in their households and workplaces hampering their ability to participate in the economy or in their own development. This opportunity cost to women, and the investment they are making into the economy through unpaid care work are not counted when looking at the broader economy and what is being produced within it.

Unpaid care work is caring for people, the young, ill and old, or undertaking domestic work (such as cooking, cleaning, washing, mending, fetching water and firewood) without receiving any explicit financial compensation. It takes place within households, but can also be caring for friends, neighbours or other community members, including on a voluntary basis. Paid care work is caring for people or doing domestic work for pay. It takes place in both public and private sectors such as education, health and social work, but also in private households.

Care work is largely misrepresented and unrecognised globally. Unpaid care work should also be understood in the context of capitalist production. When corporations take men away to perform under-remunerated labour, women are left to fill the gap in social reproductive work. When corporations fail to pay their fair share of tax, they are shifting the burden onto women as states have less resources to provide public services and women must step in to fill this gap.

Care work is seen as a labour of love that only women can do rather than being recognised as productive work that contributes to the economy. Care work has tremendous social and economic value without which the wellbeing of our societies will deteriorate. Present day economies and societies reproduce themselves through the exploitation of women's work. Even when women are not the ones on the factory floor, society, the state and capital are still exploiting their unpaid labour. There is a generalised sentiment that we cannot place a price tag on the value of women's care work. But this is not true.

This only serves to erase the contributions women and girls make in the upkeep of society and to the global economy.

Tomorrow we release Oxfam's latest global inequality report which focuses on care work titled "*a Time to Care*". The report calculates the cost of unpaid care work to the tune of trillions of dollars annually. Globally, women lose out on income during their most productive years because of childcare responsibilities when compared to men of the same age. This patriarchal distribution of labour matters for economic inequality because it is both a product and a driver of gendered economic inequality.

At Oxfam South Africa, we have spent a lot of time engaging women in care worker industries like domestic work. They spend the whole day doing domestic work for others for pay and then come back home to do the same care work for no pay at home. Men in their households spend a lot less or no time at all in care work even when they are unemployed, yet still expect women to carry out care work duties.

The World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF) and its allies argue that austerity is the key to boost sluggish economic growth. They contend that this can be done through cutting public expenditure, privatising state-owned companies and deregulating the labour market. This ideology continues to be popular despite the criticism that comes from the first round of failed Structural Adjustment Programmes across Africa and other developing economies.

South Africa is officially amongst the two thirds of countries that are following this dangerous path of austerity as prescribed by these international funders. The Minister of Finance announced plans to cut public expenditure by between 5-7 percent over the next three years. A plan that will see mainly poor, peri-urban and rural black women buckling under more care responsibilities.

Unpaid and underpaid care work must be prioritised and paid for by the state and private sector for women to realise their financial independence. As a starting point, policies and practices in government and the private sector must prioritise women in order to serve all of society. As the economic crisis deepens, it's time women occupied their rightful place in the economic policy debate, which is often the domain of men and male analysts. That's why, as Oxfam South Africa, we are part of women's movements making the demand for an economy that works for women as the current one does not.

*Siphokazi Mthathi is Executive Director at Oxfam South Africa*