Gender Responsive Macroeconomic Policy Options for Africa: Egypt and Kenya as Illustrations

Marzia Fontana

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Bringing Rigour and Evidence to Economic Policy Making in Africa

Gender-Responsive Macroeconomic Policy Options for Africa: Egypt and Kenya as Illustrations

By

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Abstract

Austerity policies often prescribed as the remedy for economic crises tend to exacerbate gender inequalities as well as other inequalities. This paper asks what alternative macro-level policy responses are possible to alleviate the negative distributional effects of a crisis and build better foundations for a gender-equitable economy. It focuses on fiscal policy and considers Egypt and Kenya, two African countries with distinct gendered economic structures. The paper uses a range of data and indicators to draw an initial mapping of Egypt and Kenya as gendered structures, with attention to interdependencies and intersectionality. The data analysis highlights both commonalities and differences between the two countries. In both Kenya and Egypt, care systems rely on women's unpaid work, whereas institutional care provision is not sufficient to meet the growing care needs of the population. Deficits in health, childcare and elderly care infrastructure are significant in both countries, and gaps in physical infrastructure are also present in Kenya, especially in rural areas. Regarding women's terms of access to paid employment, Egypt is characterized by a dualistic labour market, with few jobs for educated women in the public sector, high levels of female youth employment, and overall low levels of female labour force participation. In Kenya, female labour force participation is higher, but the incidence of vulnerable employment is greater among women, especially in agriculture. Substantial public spending in support of a comprehensive strategy for inclusive structural transformation is required to address these deficits and reduce the barriers that women face in accessing quality jobs in both countries. For all of this to happen, both domestic and external resources need to be mobilized. Some effort needs also to be put into changing ways of understanding the economy, by developing new analytical frameworks and modelling approaches that account for the investment quality of social spending.

1. Introduction

A rich body of literature developed since the late 1980s shows that economic crises in both the global South and the global North disproportionately affect women, particularly in low-income groups. Some women are particularly hard hit because of their ethnicity, migration status, disability status, geographical location, or family circumstances. The specific gender effects of a crisis are likely to vary depending on the nature of the crisis and the socio-economic structure of the country concerned (Elson, 2010). Different groups of women and men are involved in a variety of paid and unpaid economic activities under different conditions, and it is important to collect and examine data on all these dimensions when assessing the distributional effects of economic shocks in a country and designing policy responses (UN Women-ILO 2021).

This paper asks what macro-level policy responses can best alleviate the negative distributional effects of a crisis and build better foundations for a gender-equitable economy. It discusses fiscal policy responses and considers two African economies with distinct gender economic structures. It provides suggestions on the public investment required to promote gender equality and resilience to crises in these two countries, guided by an understanding of their gendered structure. Gender-responsive public investment can itself create fiscal space. Additional resources to fund such investment, in the form of both domestic revenue and external finance, are also needed, but reviewing the full range of tools to finance gender equality is beyond the scope of this paper.

Scholars have observed that the austerity policies often prescribed as the remedy for economic crises tend to exacerbate gender inequalities as well as other inequalities (Elson 1991, 2014; Rubery and Karamessini 2013). Diane Elson's seminal analysis of the structural adjustment programmes that many African, Asian, and Latin American countries implemented under the aegis of the World Bank in the 1980s draws attention to the fact that these programmes had 'male bias because they failed to take account of the gender division of paid work, unpaid domestic work, and intra-household resource allocation. They implicitly assumed that any cuts in public services would be resolved through more unpaid domestic work by women, and did not consider effects on inequality and people's well-being. These arguments are still relevant today for understanding current dynamics between macroeconomic policies and gender inequality in Africa and elsewhere. Economic shocks and related policy responses are gendered processes because economies are gendered

structures. The concept of economies as gendered structures emphasises that economies comprise both *a paid market sphere*, which produces goods and services for sale, and is counted as contributing to economic growth as measured by GDP, and *an unpaid non-market sphere,* which supplies services directly concerned with the daily and intergenerational reproduction of people, through their care, socialisation, and education (Elson 2010). The unpaid non-market sphere is essential for the functioning of the market sphere, and understanding the interdependence between market and non-market sectors should constitute the starting point of any economic policy analysis.

Both the paid and the unpaid economy are characterised by gender inequalities. In most households, women bear disproportionate responsibility for unpaid domestic work and care. In the labour market, they have access to fewer job opportunities and lower earnings than men. Large businesses and financial institutions are often led by men, and households are subject to internal gender inequalities in income, consumption, asset ownership and decision-making (UN Women 2015, 2020). For a long time now, many feminist economists have been advocating for a reorientation of economic policy in favour of a people-centred approach, in which the sphere of market production serves the needs of the non-market sphere of social reproduction rather than vice versa (e.g. Elson and Seth 2019). Adequate standards of living for all, and human capacity development, rather than GDP growth per se, are considered the central objectives of economic policy. Concerns about the impact of economic growth on the environment are adding to this vision, leading scholars and civil society organizations to call for greener as well as more caring economies (e.g. Ilkarracan 2016).

Economic crises tend to shift the boundaries between what gets produced in the market, and by whom, and what must be provided at home, and by whom, with important gender consequences. When responses to economic crises involve restrictive fiscal measures, this makes it harder to prioritize government budgets towards improving the lives of low-income groups and disadvantaged women, and prevents the investments required to support human capacities development and the productivity of the labour force in the long term.

Assessments undertaken by UN Women on national responses to the recent COVD-19 pandemic (UN Women 2021) show that, even when fiscal stimulus was employed, in many LMICs initial mitigation measures insufficiently

addressed the needs of women and girls. For instance, women were less likely than men to receive cash relief or social protection, even though they were more likely to lose their jobs. Women without children, and women aged 15-24, have been left out of government support. This can be partly explained by the fact that young women tend to be overrepresented in temporary and 'gig' employment, and that, moreover, social assistance programmes often prioritize women who are mothers of young children. Further evidence suggests that the recovery from COVID-19 has been uneven not only across regions and economic sectors but also by gender and status in employment. For example, women lost more jobs than men in proportional terms, especially in lower-middle income countries, and their employment recovery was slower than that of men by the end of 2021 (Esquivel 2023). Inequalities between women and men in the informal workforce remain higher than in the formal workforce (Chen et al 2024) and female youth unemployment rates remain elevated, particularly in Arab countries and Sub-Saharan Africa (Elder and O'Higgins 2023).

Looking ahead, promoting a sustainable economic recovery from any crisis in any country, must involve macroeconomic responses that are free from gender bias, and aim to strengthen human capacities for all. This would require not only well-tailored gender-responsive social protection measures to mitigate the immediate negative effects of shocks, but also a combination of context-specific policies at both the macro and sectoral level to address the underlying structural inequalities that undermine inclusive development.

Informed by this analytical vision, this paper uses the cases of Egypt and Kenya as illustrative examples. It examines statistics on the gendered structure of their economies and identifies macro-level economic policy options that could contribute to redress key gender inequalities and promote gender-equitable structural transformation in the medium to long term. While acknowledging that fiscal policy, monetary policy and financial policies are all relevant for the achievement of these objectives, this paper focuses on public investment. Egypt and Kenya are both lower-middle income economies but have different production and trade structures. They have been differently affected by the recent global disruption in commodities prices and financial flows caused by the Russia-Ukraine conflict (e.g. Raga and Velde 2022 among others). These two countries are also characterized by different patterns of gender inequality in the labour market and systems of care provision, thus making the comparison instructive.

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 briefly summarises the literature on gender and economic crises, and ongoing debates on the macroeconomic approaches needed to promote gender-equitable patterns of growth and adequate care provision for all (e.g. UN Women-ILO Joint project on "Promoting decent employment for women through inclusive growth policies and investments in care"). Section 3 describes the Egyptian and Kenyan economies as gendered structures. It presents selected data on sex-disaggregated employment alongside data on economic structure and the organization of care provision, drawing on secondary literature. Section 4 offers suggestions on policy options for the promotion of gender equality in the two countries informed by an understanding of their gendered structure. Section 5 concludes.

2. Why economic crises are gendered and what kind of macroeconomic response is needed for a sustainable gender-equitable recovery

Many African countries have been facing frequent financial and economic crises, with interacting causes and consequences. Challenges related to a lack of jobs, the environment, and the provision of care appear to have intensified in the last years. These crises are gendered, in the sense that gender inequalities contribute to crises and, in turn, are often exacerbated by them**.** A long-standing body of feminist economics literature explains why.

Gender inequalities contribute to economic crises

Gender inequalities contribute to economic crises. Why? Because insufficient investment in women's education and health, combined with patterns of gender segregation in the labour market, means that many women remain confined to precarious low productivity jobs, and their talent and resources are underutilized. This makes the whole economy vulnerable, less productive and less resilient to shocks (Klasen and Lamanna 2009, Agénor et al 2010).

For example, women's low productivity in agriculture can exacerbate the balance of payments constraints that several African countries face. In net food-importing countries, improving women farmers' productivity could boost agricultural output and reduce the need for food imports, thereby contributing to greater food security as well as easing pressure on the balance of payments (Seguino 2019, Ghosh 2013).

Crises tend to exacerbate gender inequalities in both paid and unpaid work

In turn, crises tend to exacerbate gender inequalities in both paid and unpaid work (Elson 2010). Regarding paid work, crises lead to falling employment, reduced working hours and earnings. Different groups of women and men are likely to experience differently employment loss and/or deteriorating working conditions, depending on the sectors of the economy in which they work, their access to social protection and their care responsibilities, and the extent of gender-based segregation in the labour market. For example, during the financial crisis of 2008-09, globally, the first wave of job losses occurred in sectors that disproportionately employed men, such as construction and manufacturing. The following austerity-driven crisis threatened key sectors of women's employment such as the public sector and pushed growing numbers of women workers into informal employment (Karamessini and Rubery 2013, Ghosh 2013). During the COVID-19 pandemic, however, service sectors which traditionally employ large numbers of women, were the hardest hit in the first place (Esquivel 2023). Moreover, unlike previous crises, informal employment experienced a larger contraction than formal employment, especially in sectors where women predominate such as informal retail and domestic work (Chen et al 2024).

Even when women are not disproportionately employed in the sectors that contract the most during a crisis, they may still be at higher risk than men of losing their jobs or experiencing reduced working hours and worsened working conditions. This is because they are often clustered into lower status occupations with more tenuous contractual arrangements. Women in the Global South are overrepresented among informal workers who lack social protection and employment rights and are often found in the most vulnerable forms of informal employment such as contributing family workers (OECD/ILO 2019). This means that, when economic crises strike, these women may lose their livelihoods without access to safety nets and may have to resort to even more precarious ways of earning a living. Evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic suggests that not only did women lose more jobs than men, especially in lower-middle income countries, but also that their employment recovery continued to lag that of men two years later (Esquivel 2023).

About unpaid domestic work and care provision, crises cause income losses in many households due to both men and women losing their jobs. In poor families, children may become malnourished and other family members' care

needs (e.g. for health or education) may go unmet, particularly if public services also contract. Women and girls bear a larger share of household work, childcare and elderly care. In a situation of crisis, it is women who are often expected to take main responsibility for the survival of household members and act as 'safety net of last resort' (Elson and Cagatay 2000). They will increase their unpaid work as an alternative to purchasing household goods and services (e.g. meals, healthcare), for example, with possible negative consequences for their own health and levels of stress. In a study of six low- and middle-income countries during the 2008-09 financial crisis, Elson (2010) found that women were increasing both paid and unpaid work hours, but this was not sufficient to compensate for the decline in household income.

These negative effects on gender (and income) inequalities might further intensify if, concerned with rising public deficits and debt-to-GDP ratios, governments resort to cutting public spending and reducing social and care services**.** An important issue of concern to feminist economists is therefore how governments respond to economic crises.[1]

Competing views on macroeconomic responses to crises

Since the oil crises of the 1970s, the prevailing macroeconomic approach to recession in both high-income and low-income countries has involved targeting low inflation and prudent debt-to-GDP ratios. This 'orthodox' approach was challenged by the financial crisis of 2008-09 and the COVID-19 crisis, which both confirmed the importance of countercyclical macroeconomic policies-- that is, expansive fiscal and monetary policies aimed to boost demand and maintain/create jobs to pull out the economy out of a recession. The austerity policies following the financial crisis of 2008-09, most notably in Europe, showed the dangers of premature fiscal adjustment, which prolongs recessions and hurts employment (Varoufakis 2013). Significant fiscal stimulus and monetary policy easing were employed during the COVID-19 crisis, but mainly in high-income countries, while in many low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) the scope for action was limited due to weaker public finances, debt overhang and fear of capital flight (Raga and Velde 2022; Ghosh 2024). In response to new and increasingly complex crises, high and persistent inflation, and the pressures on servicing higher debt levels,

[1] Feminist economics is not the only school of thought to be concerned with these issues. Other heterodox economics approaches (e.g. the human development paradigm) share with feminist economics a similar emphasis on well-being and the realization of human rights as the central goals of economic policies.

the overall macroeconomic environment has become less supportive. A general perception among policymakers in many countries of the Global South is that fiscal space is now even more constrained. In other words, earlier plans to 'build back better' appear more difficult to realize.

Recent feminist economics research contributes to this policy debate on what LMICs governments could do to expand fiscal space and make the investments required to promote gender-equitable economies that are both more just and resilient to crises. These contributions are both analytical and empirical and are briefly summarized below.

Feminist economics perspectives on public investment in LMICs

Ongoing analytical efforts in feminist economics aim to expand and re-conceptualize conventional definitions of fiscal space and what counts as investment (e.g. Heintz 2019; Seguino 2019). The aim is to better account for the growth-enhancing potential of allocating public expenditure to gender equality objectives, especially in areas such as education, health and other care services. These services are conventionally counted as current spending (unlike physical infrastructure which is counted as investment) but generate long-term benefits for both direct users and the wider economy. They should therefore be categorised as an investment (which would justify government borrowing).

The case for increased public spending to counteract an economic crisis is rooted in Keynesian economics, which emphasises the importance of maintaining the overall level of spending in an economy but does not engage much with the question of which sectors should be prioritized in public expenditure allocations. Governments adopting Keynesian expansionary macro-economic frameworks have tended to invest mainly in physical infrastructure. Feminist economists add to this approach by offering ideas on how to ensure that physical infrastructure projects are designed and implemented to address women's needs and reduce their unpaid domestic work and care (e.g. piped water on household premises, electricity, and safe transport; Small and Rodgers 2023). Importantly, they also propose to expand the options available for countercyclical investment policies and demonstrate that prioritizing health, education, and other care services (often referred in the literature as social infrastructure) in fiscal stimulus packages is an

especially effective strategy to strengthen aggregate demand and improve longer-term economic growth (UN Women-ILO 2021a, Braunstein et al 2020).

Both physical infrastructure and social/care infrastructure investments can contribute to greater gender equality and societal well-being, provided they are adequately designed and implemented (ILO 2018). For example, addressing women's needs in water, sanitation and electricity infrastructure can reduce the drudgery of women's unpaid domestic work and enable them to spend more time in education and leisure, especially in low-income countries where this infrastructure remains patchy (Darkwa 2024). In principle, time-saving infrastructure can also help women to increase their hours of paid work, but only if employment opportunities are available in the area where they live. Physical infrastructure investment does not by itself create jobs for women. Expansion of care services, on the other hand, can directly create jobs for women (Fontana and Elson 2014).

Spending on social infrastructure creates fiscal space

As already mentioned, feminist economists critique the notion that expenditures on health, education and other care services should be categorized in national accounting as merely government current consumption. They draw attention to the investment nature of such expenditures which, by promoting human capacity development for all, generate many positive externalities and spill-over effects on economy-wide productivity, in both the medium and long term. They also note that social infrastructure investment can be partly self-financing because, by stimulating employment growth and increasing incomes, it has the potential to generate a future stream of taxable revenue. In other words, social infrastructure investment can by itself become an instrument to create fiscal space (Seguino 2019). The problem is, however, that most existing conventional assessment of fiscal space and fiscal sustainability adopt a short-term framework and/or fail to capture the lagged multiplier effects of gender-responsive social infrastructure investments on GDP growth (Bretton Woods Project 2017).

Informed by these conceptualizations, recent empirical analyses provide detailed country-level estimations of the multiple benefits of public investment in social infrastructure, by quantifying increases in employment (especially for women) and tax revenue as well as declines in gender gaps and poverty. UN Women for example (2019) covers South Africa, Turkey, and Uruguay, and similar assessments are in progress for other countries.

The approach of these country case studies involves, first, assessing and costing coverage gaps in various care sub-sectors such as early childhood education and care (ECCE) or long-term care (LTC). In a second step, input-output methodologies are used to estimate short-run direct and indirect job generation of investing in these sectors. as well as the increased tax revenues resulting from the new job generation. Findings are consistent across countries and show that, given the substantially higher labour intensity of care work, each dollar spent on care sectors has the potential to generate two to three times more jobs than if the same dollar was to be spent on sectors such as transport and construction (a common target of fiscal stimulus spending). The higher jobs generation improves wage earnings and hence stimulates short-run demand-side growth. Care services expansion creates new jobs in sectors and occupations that disproportionately employ women, thus also contributing to reduce gender gaps in employment and earnings.

Other macro-economic tools to create fiscal space

Social infrastructure investment can create fiscal space but cannot by itself generate all the resources needed to support the full range of gender-responsive policies in a country: other macro-level tools to mobilize finance are also needed.

Taxation can be a main tool to generate revenue to finance gender-equalizing investment. The way revenue is raised has itself implications for gender equality. The challenge is therefore to identify sources and levels of taxation to ensure that the overall taxation structure of a country is progressive (Grown and Mascagni 2024).

The gender-aware literature lists various reasons why different groups of women and men are likely to be affected by tax mixes differently. These include women's more vulnerable position in paid employment; women's unpaid work; women's more limited asset ownership and property rights; and different responsibilities for consumption expenditures (Grown and Valodia 2010). For example, in low-income countries, poor women do not pay personal income tax because their income is usually too low to be taxed. They are likely, however, to be disproportionately affected by broad based indirect taxes on goods and services such as Value Added Tax (VAT).

Overall, indirect taxes tend to be regressive, in the sense that low-income households pay a higher share of their income in VAT than better-off households, while taxes on wealth are progressive and disproportionately

affect men, who represent a larger proportion of the very wealthy. In sum, increasing income tax and reducing indirect taxes is likely to reduce the incidence of tax on poor women. The incidence of tax on poor women is also reduced if taxes paid by corporations and wealthy individuals is increased relative to taxes paid by persons. Addressing tax evasion by domestic and multinational firms and curbing illicit financial flows is also important for domestic resource mobilization.

To assess whether fiscal policies meet gender equality objectives, the gender distributional effects of taxes should ideally be jointly considered together with the gender distributional effects of public expenditure. In practice, it is difficult to establish the combined gender impact of taxation and expenditure because of a lack of comprehensive data and methodologies (Birchall and Fontana 2015)

Monetary policy is another macro-economic tool that could be used to mobilize resources to promote gender equality objectives but is rarely used for this purpose. For example, central banks could use innovative tools beyond managing interest rates to support employment generation, and target sectors that disproportionately employ women and/or provide care services. Commercial banks tend to favour large borrowers, and interest rates and access to credit are more difficult and expensive for small enterprises. Gender-aware policy actions could then include targeted lending and loan guarantees to priority groups such as women-led SMEs or small-scale farmers (Seguino 2019), with stringent measures to monitor bank discrimination against women and small businesses.

External finance to create fiscal space

Strategies for mobilizing domestic resources for gender-responsive public investment are essential, but policy initiatives to be agreed at the international level are required too. Access to external finance can be a critical avenue for creating and expanding fiscal space in support of gender equality objectives in LMICs countries. It is important, however, that the terms and conditions attached to this finance do not further contribute to austerity.

It has been already noted that many national governments in the Global South have limited ability to raise and spend revenue, and to decide how their government deficit is managed, partly due to international rules and structures, such as pressure to maintain debt service capacity and other

conditions attached to concessional finance (Bretton Woods project 2017; Varoufakis 2013). More than half of the world's low-income countries are currently facing debt distress. In many African countries debt service now exceeds total spending on education, health, social protection and climate, combined (Development Finance International 2023).

In response to this situation, civil society organizations and scholars alike are calling for a comprehensive set of measures to mitigate external debt burdens and liquidity pressures (Ghosh 2024). New proposals for alternative approaches to debt sustainability are put forward. Impact assessments under these approaches would disaggregate the effects of debt burdens on gender equality, the environment, and human rights indicators, and would account for the longer-term effects on GDP growth from expenditures with investment characteristics such as health and education (Grabel 2024, Seth 2024).

3. The Egyptian and Kenyan economies as gendered structures

Egypt and Kenya belong to two different geo-economic regions and have different output and trade structures. The nature and extent of women's inclusion in economic activities in these two countries also vary, thus making comparison interesting. The next paragraphs use internationally comparable datasets and indicators available online to outline the main gender features of these two economies. Attention is given to the structure and quality of paid employment; unpaid domestic work within households; and the extent of institutionalized care provision. These features are likely to shape the gender differentiated effects of an economic crisis. Looking at data on these aspects, even if just in a broadbrush manner, can provide insights into the structural changes needed to promote a gender-equitable economic recovery and reduce the chances of further crises. Policy options to promote these structural changes are outlined in Section 4.

Output, trade structure and gender patterns of employment

Both Egypt and Kenya are classified as lower-middle income countries, but Egypt has a higher GDP per capita than Kenya (as shown in Table 1). Egypt is an oil producer and exporter, but a net food importer. Growth of the oil exports sector is unlikely to have positive effects for employment in general, and female employment in particular, because oil production is capital intensive and employs largely men. Food imports may be associated with negative gender effects, as observed in other mineral exporting African countries (e.g. Wamboye and Seguino 2015). A recent study by Baliamoune (2024) notes that in the past 30 years MENA countries (including Egypt) have promoted significant trade expansion, but this has failed to create wage employment opportunities for women and attract them to the labour market. This contrasts with other Asian and Latin American countries, where trade expansion has been associated with an increase in female participation.

Kenya's export structure is dominated by agricultural products, mainly traditional crops such as coffee and tea but also non-traditional agricultural exports (NTAEs) such as cut flowers and horticulture. Women contribute a

considerable share of the workforce in these export-oriented sectors, either as smallholders or as wage labourers, but the quality of their employment (their working conditions and earnings) tends to be low (Dolan and Sorby 2003; Kihiu 2021).

As illustrated in Table 1, the overall female labour force participation rate in Kenya is close to the average for Sub-Saharan Africa, at about 63 percent, while in Egypt it is much lower, at about 15 percent. Male labour force participation rates in the two countries are similar. The gender gap in labour force participation is thus significantly larger in Egypt, an important difference in the gendered structure of the respective labour markets.

Egypt and other MENA countries have among the lowest female labour force participation rates in the world, and this trend appears to continue despite significant progress on women's education (what several scholars have termed the MENA paradox, e.g. Assaad et al 2019; Lassassi and Tansel 2020). In recent years, female participation in Egypt seems to have further declined, and unemployment among young, educated women, has further risen, a fact which has been partly attributed to public sector cutbacks (Kabeer et al 2020, Assaad et al 2019).

Table 1. Output, trade and employment structure of Egypt and Kenya (2023 or latest year available)

	Egypt	**Kenya**
GDP p.c. (2015 US$ c.p.)	4178 Lower Middle Income	1814 Lower Middle Income
FLFP (%)	**15.0**	**62.8**
MLFP (%)	69.2	72.6
Gap in LFP	54.2	10.2
Trade openness (Exports + Imports % GDP)	40.4 (19.1 +21.3)	31.4 (11.8 +20.6)
Main exports	Oil, Precious stones, Vegetables, Textiles	Tea, Coffee, Other agriculture, Cut flowers
Net importer of	Wheat, Edible oils, Sugar,	Fuel, Machinery
Agriculture		
GDP %	10.6	21.3

Female employment (% of total female employment)	**17.0**	**35.8**
Male employment (% of total male employment)	19.2	31.6
Industry*		
GDP %	32.7	17.1
Female employment (% of total female employment)	**8.5**	**10.4**
Male employment (% of total male employment)	32.1	19.2
Services		
GDP %	51.4	55.5
Female employment (% of total female employment)	**73.9**	**53.8**
Male employment (% of total male employment)	48.5	49.2
Source: ILO ILOSTAT for employment data; World Bank World Development Indicators (WDI) for output and trade Notes: *Industry includes construction FLPR/MLRP do not reflect 19th ICL changes 2022		

The number of women engaged in paid employment in Kenya is larger than in Egypt, but their jobs are mostly in the informal sector. High levels of informality characterize the employment trajectory of both Kenyan women and men, but women's jobs tend to be more precarious. For instance, outside of agriculture, 86 percent of Kenyan women and 77 percent of Kenyan men were in informal employment in 2019 (ILOSTAT 2018). Evidence suggests that the COVID-19 pandemic caused more job losses, and greater declines in working hours, for women than for men. Women in the most insecure forms of informal employment were not able to access any of the income support and social assistance made available during the crisis. This has increased their vulnerability, in both urban and rural areas (UN Women Kenya 2022).

More on the quality of women's paid employment

The indicators in Table 1 and Table 2 taken together offer further insights into the quality of women's paid employment and expose the limited availability of their options relative to men's.

Regarding the gender composition of employment by sector, in Egypt, services provide employment to about two thirds (74 percent) of the (few) women who are in the labour force. Women with high educational levels usually work in health, education, and social work, while women with lower education tend to engage in domestic paid work. Women are almost four times more likely than men to be employed in these care sectors compared to other sectors of the economy, suggesting a high level of gender-based sectoral segregation (Selwaness and Helmy 2020). Women with high educational qualifications usually can access formal wage employment in the public sector, where benefits and working conditions are favourable. However, it is the private care sector, where working conditions are more informal and precarious, that has been growing faster in the last decade or so.

In Kenya, services provide employment to about half of employed women (54 percent). These women mainly work as informal own-account workers in retail trade, tourism or domestic paid work. The share of men working in services is like that of women, at about 49 percent, although the specific occupations in which male workers cluster tend to be different (e.g. transport and logistics, finance). In Kenya, unlike Egypt, many women are also employed in agriculture. Agriculture in this country remains an important source of employment for both women and men, with about 36 percent of women and 32 percent of men working in this sector. Many rural women are involved, directly or indirectly, in commercial agriculture (e.g. directly in the cut flower or horticulture industry or, indirectly, as unpaid family workers in traditional agricultural crops) and usually face more barriers than men in accessing productive resources (Euromonitor International Kenya 2023).

In both countries, industry and construction in aggregate tend to be male dominated and account for only about 10 percent of female employment. At a more disaggregated level, reflecting patterns found in most countries of the world, a few low-tech manufacturing sectors, notably garments, disproportionately employ women, but their contribution to job generation is currently small.

As already observed, what matters for the quality of women's employment is not only its sectoral composition but also women's employment status within

each sector, which determines their enjoyment of labour rights and basic protections. About 71 percent of employed women in Egypt are wage workers while the corresponding figure in Kenya is only 25 percent (Table 2). Conversely, almost 40 percent of employed women in Kenya are own-account workers (a share like that of men) while only 10 percent of women in Egypt are own-account workers (a share lower than that of men). Both in Kenya and Egypt, more women than men are in the category of contributing family workers. Contributing family workers and own-account workers are the two employment categories considered by the ILO as 'vulnerable employment'.[2] As can be deduced from Table 2, female vulnerable employment is overall higher in Kenya than in Egypt, reflecting the higher share of women's self-employment in total employment in the former country (especially in agriculture). It is significant to note, however, that the share of female contributing family workers is greater than that of male contributing family workers in both countries.

Table 2. Labour utilization rates and employment status

	Unemployment Rate (%)	NEETs (% of youth aged 15-29)	Employers (% of the employed	Own-account workers (% of the employed)	Contributing family Workers (% of the employed)	Wage workers (% of the employed
Egypt						
Female	18.5	40.1	1.3	10.7	17.0	71.0
Male	5.1	15.8	3.4	20.0	2.2	74.0
Kenya						

[2] Own-account workers are self-employed individuals who do not employ others on a regular basis. They are often in informal businesses without structured contracts or guaranteed income. Contributing family workers are individuals who work in family-run businesses or farms without a pay or formal contractual arrangements. Both categories of workers lack the protections associated with formal employment, such as access to health insurance, unemployment benefits, pensions, sick leave and safe working conditions. Therefore, their livelihoods are at higher risk, especially during crises (ILOSTAT 2018; Lo Bue et al 2022).

Female	7.6	25.0	0.9	39.4	34.7	25.1
Male	3.9	12.2	1.1	34.4	22.2	42.3

Source: ILO modelled estimates, 2021, available in ILOSTAT
*The ICSE-93 classification of status in employment also includes a fifth category 'members of producers' cooperatives', which is usually negligible and not reported here. Each category of employment is expressed as percentage of the total employed population in each country.

Gender gaps in labour underutilization rates are substantial too. In both Egypt and Kenya, unemployment rates as well as NEET (Not in Education Employment or Training) rates are higher for women than for men. The gender gap in unemployment in Egypt is striking, a difference between female unemployment and male unemployment of more than 13 percentage points. Unemployment rates for young women are concerningly higher, at about 49 percent (compared with 13 percent for young men, ILOSTAT 2018).

In summary, the evidence presented in this section suggests a common pattern of marked gender-based sectoral and occupational segregation and limited availability of good quality jobs for women across the two countries. The proportion of women remaining outside of the labour force is higher in Egypt than Kenya, however, suggesting that some challenges are specific to each country context.

In Egypt, a major barrier to women's enjoyment of the benefits of paid employment appears to be a lack of jobs that are considered socially respectable for women and/or match their skills. This problem is especially pronounced for young women, as signalled by their very high unemployment and NEET rates. Wage employment in the public sector is usually seen as more appropriate for women than employment in the private sector and is preferred by women themselves because of a range of benefits associated with it. These include maternity leave, shorter working hours, job security, greater tolerance for sick leave, and even less likelihood of sexual harassment (Kabeer et al 2020). However, employment opportunities in the formal public sector are limited (and declining due to austerity policies), and usually only accessible to a well-educated minority. In Kenya, the main challenge to achieving gender equality in the labour market is related to the prevalence of low-productivity and precarious jobs for women, as well as gender gaps in vulnerable employment, more than female labour force participation per se. In terms of the sectoral structure of women's employment, more women are involved in

export-oriented production in Kenya than in Egypt, thus making their employment opportunities more exposed to possible changes in global demand for African goods.

Mirroring these gendered patterns in employment, selected responses from the World Value Survey (WVS 2017-22 wave) suggest that norms regarding the gender division of responsibilities for breadwinning and unpaid care might be stronger in Egypt than in Kenya. For instance, many more respondents in Egypt than in Kenya agree with the assertion that men are more deserving of a job when jobs are scarce (almost 90 percent of respondents in Egypt compared with about 37 percent in Kenya) and that pre-school children suffer if their mother is working outside the home (76 percent of respondents in Egypt compared with 22 percent in Kenya). It is worth noting that these are aggregate figures and there is a degree of variation in the extent to which these norms are supported, depending on socio-economic status. For example, respondents agreeing with these assertions are fewer among the young (16-29 age range, WVS 2017-22). Many factors are likely to be at play in influencing these responses. For example, it is possible that Egypt's greater wealth (e.g. oil resources) influences the strength of conservative gender norms, which are otherwise less affordable in an overall poorer country such as Kenya. To conclude, it is important to acknowledge the significance of norms, but it is also important to acknowledge that norms can change, and that many things can be conducive to such changes, including economic processes and policy reform.

An understanding of the distributional effects of current compounding crises in Egypt and Kenya needs to be situated within this gendered employment context.

Unpaid domestic work and institutional care provision

Households are key sites for the provision (and receipt) of care, through which people are nurtured and develop their human capabilities. The strength of norms regarding the gender division of roles within the domestic domain can vary across contexts (e.g. see the WVS responses highlighted earlier), but the primary responsibility for the care of children and adults alike is assigned to women, almost everywhere. As emphasised in feminist economics research, women's time, however, is not infinitely elastic. Coping strategies can produce

adverse consequences, for example by limiting women's ability to engage in income-earning activities and/or negatively affecting their own health and sense of well-being.

While families are important for the provision of care, the public sector (as well as private providers) should also play a significant role in financing and/or delivering care- to ensure that the care needs of the population are met, encourage a more equal sharing of unpaid care work within households, and enable women to more fully enjoy their economic rights (ILO 2018, UN Women 2015, 2019). The extent of institutional care provision, and country-wide availability of time-saving physical infrastructure can make an important difference to women's ability to engage in paid employment and the kinds of jobs accessible to them. In countries that invest more in care services to offset the care contingencies of the working-age population, maternal employment rates tend to be higher than those in countries investing comparatively less

As this overview suggests, examining how care provision is distributed not only between genders, but also between different institutions is thus important for gender-responsive policy planning. Data on time use by sex and other socio-economic characteristics, examined alongside information on the availability of institutional care (such as publicly provided childcare and health care, and physical infrastructure such as electricity and water), can offer an initial understanding of key gaps and care deficits. These aspects are less documented than employment patterns, especially in LMICs, but a few new surveys and care assessments undertaken in Kenya and Egypt (e.g. the first nationally representative Time Use Survey produced by the Kenyan Bureau of Statistics in 2021) are promising.

The distribution of unpaid domestic by sex and household characteristics

Egypt and Kenya are not exception to patterns found in other countries regarding the unequal gender distribution of unpaid domestic work and care within households. In Egypt, about 88 percent of women undertakes some form of unpaid domestic work while only 29 percent of men does (Selwaness and Helmy 2020). Women's unpaid work burdens tend to rise substantially at marriage and remains high, regardless of whether women are in paid employment (Selwaness and Helmy 2020, Kabeer et al 2020). Married women spend on average twice as much as unmarried women on unpaid care work,

and up to seven times as much as married men (about 22 hours per week for women compared with only 3 hours for men).

In both Egypt and Kenya, the largest effect on women's unpaid domestic work and care results from having young children. In Kenya, for instance, a child younger than six in the household adds about one hour a day to the unpaid work that a woman must carry out relative to women on average. Interestingly, men who live in households with children younger than six spend less time on unpaid work than men on average. Data from the 2021 Kenya Time Use Survey also suggest that unpaid domestic work takes longer hours in rural areas, due to a lack of adequate physical infrastructure, which especially affects poor households in remote villages (Charmes and Asiligwa 2022).

Public infrastructure that supports care provision

Glimpses into the structure of institutional care provision in the two countries can be gained from official statistics on pre-primary education enrolment rates and health spending and services (Table 3). For example, only about 23 percent of children aged 4-5 yrs old were enrolled in pre-primary school in Egypt in 2019, and 27 percent were enrolled in pre-primary school in Kenya. Other assessments of the childcare sector in both countries indicate that Early Childhood Development and Education (ECDE) centres are few and inadequate, and children of a younger age are even less able to attend publicly provided childcare (Charmes and Asiligwa 2022). In addition to publicly provided childcare, private providers are available, but these are usually less accessible to low-income families and the quality of services they offer is more variable.[3] In sum, these data expose a significant mismatch between the limited supply of childcare services and the growing demand for them., especially considering that fertility rates remain higher than 3 children per woman in both countries (World Bank Development Indicators https://databank.worldbank.org).

Regarding health indicators, in both countries, government health spending as share of total government spending is below the minimum 15 percent target agreed upon by African Union Heads of State in 2001 (2001 Abuja Declaration on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Other Related Infectious Diseases reported in

[3] Evidence suggests that direct public provision of services tends to bring better quality, better training for educators and higher equity of access compared with other models of provision (Darkwah 2024, Fontana and Elson 2014)

Valiani 2022). In Egypt, average out of pocket health expenditure is high, suggesting inequity in access: high health costs can keep women, especially poor women from getting the health care they need for both them and their families. In Kenya, the low number of nurses per 1000 people (an indicator of health outcomes) suggests a lack of adequate health care infrastructure overall. In depth studies of the health sector in Kenya (Charmes and Asiligwa 2022) corroborate these initial insights.

Table 3. Selected indicators on public infrastructure related to care provision Egypt and Kenya (around 2019)

	Egypt	Kenya
Publicly provided childcare		
Pre-primary enrolment rates 4-5 years (% pre-primary age population)	23.0	28.0
Health		
Government expenditure on health (% of general government expenditure)	6.8	9.3
Out of pocket health expenditure (% of current health expenditure)	54.9	22.8
Number of nurses and midwives (per 1000 people)	3.5	0.8
Physical infrastructure		
Households with access to water on premises (% of urban population)	98.4	63.0
Households with access to water on premises (% of rural population)	97.1	30.2
People with access to electricity (% of urban population)	100.0	98.0
People with access to electricity (% of rural population)	100.0	65.6
Source: UN Women for data on childcare and health and World Bank World Development Indicators for data on electricity, WHO/UNICEF JPM database 2022 for data on WASH		

Regarding access to physical infrastructure that could reduce the drudgery of housework, selected indicators in Table 3 show that, while in Egypt most households have adequate access to both electricity and water, in Kenya the situation is patchy and with significant disparities between rural and urban areas. For instance, in rural areas only 65 percent of people had access to electricity, and only 30 percent had access to water on premises, compared with 98 percent and 63 percent of people respectively in urban areas.

In summary, the selection of indicators on time uses and care-related infrastructure presented in this section, suggests a system of care provision that in both Egypt and Kenya heavily relies on women's unpaid work within families whereas institutional care is patchy and not adequate to meet the growing care needs of the population. Burdens of unpaid domestic work are especially heavy for women looking after young children and/or living in remote rural areas and are one of the causes of their limited opportunities for paid employment. This is likely to compound their vulnerability when an economic crisis strike. This lack of vital care infrastructure has negative implications not only for women but also for the health, well-being and opportunities of future generations of children, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The data analysis undertaken in this section is broadbrush and would need further refinements. However, it is sufficient to provide support to the idea that public investment in social and physical infrastructure should be a priority in policy efforts to promote gender equality and more inclusive economies in both Kenya and Egypt. Next section further elaborates on what would be required to achieve these goals.

4. Policy options to promote a gender-equitable recovery

Section 3 has provided an illustration of the kind of data and indicators that can help understand the key gender features of an economy and the intersectional nature of gender inequalities. These data can be useful in guiding macro-level policy choices that reduce gender inequality and, by doing so, encourage processes of economic transformation that are equitable and sustainable for both people and the planet.

The data analysis has drawn attention to several institutional care deficits in both Egypt and Kenya in terms of health, childcare and physical infrastructure-with the latter being more pronounced in Kenya. The analysis has also highlighted the persistence of marked gender inequalities in the labour market. These mainly take the form of higher incidence of vulnerable employment among women in Kenya, and very low female labour force participation rates in Egypt. Different groups of women are affected differently, depending on place of residence, educational level and stage in the life cycle.

The care deficits dimension and the gendered labour market dimension are interrelated and should be tackled through increased public investment and sectoral policies aimed at reducing both demand-side and supply-side barriers to women's inclusion in economic life. Designing and implementing these policies in a gender-responsive manner requires the full integration of gender-equality principles at each stage of government planning and sectoral targeting (ILO 2024). The following paragraphs set out some ideas on how this could be carried out.

Invest in structural transformation that generates good jobs with adequate benefits and rights for all workers

If economies are to meet goals of gender equality and social and environmental sustainability, production should be oriented towards meeting the needs of low- and middle-income women and men, without causing further degradation of natural resources. Government planning would thus need to prioritize economic sectors that have the greatest potential for job generation. The emphasis should be on ensuring that the new jobs provide adequate benefits and protections, and, importantly, are equally accessible to women and men.

Sectoral priorities would need to be set out to reflect a country's gendered economic structure. For example, in Kenya, where a sizeable share of the rural population still relies on agriculture, gender-responsive planning could include substantial investment in agriculture through policies that better recognize women farmers and strengthen their participation in high-value agricultural supply chains. As for Egypt, sectoral investment to diversify the economy could be directed at enabling women's participation in new dynamic areas such as ICT and green energy. Measures to make the private sector less gender-segregated and more hospitable to women's workers (e.g. by revising/enforcing relevant labour legislation) would be necessary.

In both countries, sustained investment in care-related infrastructure should be recognized as a critical priority for the twin objectives of gender equality and sustainable economic development.

Invest in care-related infrastructure

As discussed in earlier sections, there is a growing consensus, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic, that stable systems of care provision, staffed with well-paid and well-trained permanent workers, and universally provided, are vital for sustaining the development of any economy (ILO-UN Women 2021).

Both Kenya and Egypt seem to have significant institutional care deficits related to childcare and health care, and rely on traditional family provisioning of care, which is highly gendered. The (limited) education, health and other care services available in both countries disproportionately employ women. Expanding these services while improving working conditions for those working in these services, could therefore generate good quality jobs for women. Many studies demonstrate that expansion of care services not only has the potential to directly generate jobs, particularly for women, but is also important for the goal of promoting women's ability to participate in other types of paid work, community decision-making and training activities. Better working conditions in these professions might have the added benefit of also attracting more male workers, thus contributing to break gender-based segregation.

In Kenya, physical infrastructure is limited, particularly in rural areas, and this contributes to the drudgery of women's unpaid domestic work. Water, electricity, and roads infrastructure is recognized as key in supporting sectoral development and enhanced living standards. Synergies could be created by promoting physical infrastructural projects that are designed and

implemented to address women's needs. Water and electricity infrastructure that is affordable and reliable could reduce the hardship of women's and girls' housework and facilitate the viability of their home-based enterprises.

Help to change traditional gender patterns of employment

Employment data reviewed in earlier sections point to persistence of marked gender-based sectoral and occupational segregation in both Egypt and Kenya, even in contexts where gender gaps in education have been reduced. Stereotypes about what jobs are suitable for women seem to be widespread, both among employers and the wider public, including sometimes among women themselves. This does not mean, however, that these stereotypes, or norms, cannot be changed through policy. Addressing them requires country-level measures (such as adequate national legislation and capacity of the government to enforce it) as well as sector-specific measures.

Policies to reduce gender differences in technical skills, and help women develop skills that match emerging labour market needs (e.g. ICT) are evidently important. Equally important are interventions targeting employers and encouraging them to hire more women and offer them on-the-job training equivalent to that received by men.

As well as promoting women's inclusion in high-technology occupations and sectors, stereotypes about men being unsuitable for caring jobs also need to be challenged. In this way, male care workers could provide new role models for boys and girls.

Ensure social protection is gender-responsive both in design and implementation

Evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic indicates that own-account workers, temporary wage workers, and other workers with precarious entitlements (many of which are women) had limited or no access to government relief during that period in both Kenya and Egypt. As ever, it is crucial that adequate government resources are allocated to strengthen comprehensive social protection systems. Gaps in inclusion must be addressed by extending social protection to usually uncovered groups (e.g. domestic paid carers) and

designing programmes and implemented in a gender-aware manner (e.g. by introducing programmes that compensate for, or reduce, unpaid care work). A rich policy literature on how to make social protection more gender-responsive is available (Sabates-Wheeler et al 2024, Razavi 2011).

Mobilize domestic as well as external resources to finance gender equality

Both domestic and external resources are needed to fund investments for the promotion of gender equality. Domestic revenues can be mobilized through government spending on social infrastructure (since this itself creates fiscal space), progressive tax systems and monetary policies that support employment generation and target lending to women. As for external finance, measures would be required to mitigate external debt burdens and provide both Kenya and Egypt with access to concessional finance to enable progress on SDG targets, including those related to gender equality.

Promote gender-transformative data analysis

This paper highlighted several methodologies and indicators that could help to draw a comprehensive picture of different unequal gender patterns in an economy and guide budget allocations for the advancement of gender equality and sustainable development. These are summarised here.

Section 3 provided an initial mapping of both paid and unpaid dimensions of the gendered economies of Kenya and Egypt, with attention to interdependencies and intersectionality. This mapping should constitute preparatory work for any further analysis and/or future data collection. Exercises involving assessment and costing of coverage gaps in various health, education and care sectors of the kind described in Section 2 (e.g. Charmes and Asiligwa 2020 for Kenya) could be further developed to assist policymakers to determine the financing requirements for social care infrastructure. Studies on the gender effects of rural electrification, water and other physical infrastructure could also be undertaken to inform gender-responsive approaches to public spending, especially in Kenya where this infrastructure remains patchy.

As noted in various points of the paper, gender-aware analyses of labour market trends need to pay attention to women's terms of inclusion in paid employment, and not just to the mere quantity of jobs available to them.

Studies that examine the evolution and determinants of unequal gender employment patterns over time, ideally using mixed methodologies, should therefore be encouraged. For example, value chain methodologies can be an effective tool for gaining a deeper understanding of the policy interventions required to reduce barriers faced by specific groups of women in specific occupations along a particular production chain (e.g. food or manufacturing).

Economy-wide modelling, such as Input-Output and Social Accounting Matrix (SAM)-based modelling, could be used to simulate alternative policy scenarios—for instance to identify which sectors in an economy have the greatest job generation potential, and the broader gender effects of alternative government spending allocations. However, it is important that these models adequately represent the ways in which macro-economic variables interact with the gender nature of the economy, account for the investment quality of government spending on social services, and do not ignore the effects of policies on the unpaid sphere of social reproduction.

Finally, it would be useful to develop tools and indicators to not only assess whether government budgetary allocations reflect gender equality priorities but also monitor how allocations are operationalized on the ground.

5. Conclusions

This paper has argued the case for public investment in care services as an important tool for achieving the twin objectives of gender equality and sustainable development in LMICs and showed how to use basic indicators to draw an initial mapping of the gendered structure of the economies of Egypt and Kenya. This mapping is a helpful starting point and can be used to guide further analysis-- such as sectoral studies, costing exercises and model simulations-- to inform the design and implementation of gender responsive policies at the macro and sectoral level.

The data analysis in this paper has highlighted both commonalities and differences in the ways in which gender-based inequalities and other inequalities shape the structure of the economy in Egypt and Kenya. In both countries, care systems heavily rely on women's unpaid work within families, whereas institutional care provision is not sufficient to meet the growing care needs of the population. Deficits in terms of health, childcare and elderly care infrastructure are significant in both countries, and gaps in physical infrastructure are also present in Kenya, especially in rural areas. Regarding women's terms of access to paid employment, Egypt is characterized by a dualistic labour market, with few jobs for relatively educated women in the public sector, high levels of female youth employment, and low levels of female labour force participation overall. In Kenya, gender inequality in the labour market mainly takes the form of a higher incidence of vulnerable employment among women, especially in the agricultural sector.

Substantial public investment is required to address these deficits and reduce the barriers that women face in accessing good quality jobs in both countries. Investment in care could contribute not only to develop human capacities in the long term but also generate good quality jobs for women and reduce gender employment gaps. Evidently, specific policy measures and budgetary allocations to various sectors would need to be designed to reflect respective country contexts.

For all of this to happen, both domestic and external resources need to be mobilized. Efforts should also be aimed at changing analytical frameworks and ways of understanding the economy, by developing new conceptualizations of fiscal space and new modelling approaches that account for the investment quality of social spending. A return to mainstream economic thinking and austerity policies is not an option.

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