

WEAVING OUR FABRIC

Framing an African Feminist
Public Services Agenda



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We know that this this work will go a long way in shaping and shifting narratives on public services from an African Feminist perspective.

SECTION ONE:

BUILDING BLOCKS FOR AN AFRICAN FEMINIST PUBLIC SERVICES AGENDA

INTRODUCTION

Covid 19 and the ongoing climate and cost of living crises continue to surface fundamental questions on the state of the global economy, health systems, labour, and the holistic wellbeing of people and the planet. Across Africa we have witnessed the failure of struggling health systems to adequately take care of the sick, particularly if they are not rich; the rise in gender-based violence, loss of jobs and livelihoods; the realities of collapsed social services and the sharp increase in women’s already disproportionate share of unpaid work in homes and communities. These questions have been brought into sharp focus by the multiple crises we are facing, but they are certainly not new. Feminist, peasant, farmer, indigenous, labour and other movements have long been calling for a complete overhaul of how economies and societies are governed and organised and a reconstruction of what is valued and protected.

In April 2010, the World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother

Earth produced what is popularly known as the *Peoples’ Agreement of Cochabamba*. The People’s Agreement calls out a dominant capitalist system underpinned by competition, progress and limitless growth, seeking profit without limits, transforming everything (‘water, the human genome, ancestral cultures, biodiversity, justice ethics, human rights and life itself²) into commodities and separating human beings from nature. It recognises that capitalism relies on a powerful military industry to facilitate accumulation, control of territories and natural resources and the suppression of the resistance of the people, amounting to an ‘imperialist system of colonization of the planet’.³ Crucially, in proposing solutions, the People’s Agreement stresses that all countries need to produce the goods and services necessary to satisfy the needs of their populations, but that this cannot be built on a model of limitless and destructive development. It holds that it is ‘imperative that we forge a new system that restores harmony with nature and among human beings. And in order for there to be balance with nature, there must first be equity among human beings.’⁴

Humanity confronts a great dilemma: to continue on the path of capitalism, dadepredation, and death, or to choose the path of harmony with nature and respect for life.

Peoples' Agreement of Cochabamba, April 2010

Most people would agree that public services are crucial for equal, fair, safe and inclusive societies and a dignified life for all. It has been argued that public services are also central to state and nation-building (at least in some contexts) as they make the state visible to citizens through daily direct and indirect interactions.⁵ Public services can be seen as part of wider public goods, defined as produced by governments or other public sector agents (and not by businesses, NGOs, households or individuals). Seen this way, public goods are created through collective choice (voting) and are paid for collectively (by public financing) and include products, services, benefits, standards and rights.⁶ Therefore, public goods should not be subject to market dynamics - no one should pay for a public service at the point of service delivery or if they do, it should not be at a commercial rate. Yet, the opposite of is true of the state of access to services across Africa. Throughout the continent, states are breaking social contracts, resulting in the majority of populations living in poverty and indignity.

The current crises we are confronted with continue to shine a spotlight on a range of pre-existing inequalities characterised by the unequal distribution of resources, power and labour. Feminist thinkers have been describing for decades how prevailing economic models rely on the invisibilised and exploited labour

of women inside and outside of their homes - whether this labour is paid or unpaid. Neoliberal impositions of austerity, characterised by the shrinking of the role of the state and the public sector - most notably by the defunding of public services and the promotion of various models of privatization - consistently deepens and cements these inequalities.

The aim of this paper is to offer a frame for African feminist public services advocates - from individuals to collectives - taking this on both as a standalone agenda and as part of their fight for wider social and economic justice. It is intended to contribute to the shaping of societies that put universal wellbeing at the centre of economies and life, including through the application of appropriate African indigenous and contemporary ethics, knowledge and approaches. Critically, this agenda calls for the disruption of legacies of racial, gender and geopolitical inequalities and domination, as well as understanding and confronting the anchors of political, economic and cultural colonization. It is not exhaustive, nor is it intended to be prescriptive, but rather to offer building blocks for reference, discussion and expansion in a way that makes most sense to the context and needs of whoever is using it. It is but the beginning of a collective 'weaving together' of this agenda to respond to the significant challenges of our time.

The first section contains reflections on six threads that, woven together, could provide a frame for the wider agenda: (1) Reclaiming *Ubuntu* (2) States as answerable to people (3) End exclusion and advance justice (4) Reject the commodification of dignity (5) Value for public sector workers (6) Make public money work for the public. The second section provides some guiding questions based on a further six related areas: *Ubuntu*, solidarity and collective wellbeing; design and delivery addresses exclusion and advances justice; universality; quality; publicness and decent work. The paper is accompanied by a visual representation of how this agenda comes together, to serve as an easy and accessible reference.

It is important to say on the onset that this is by no means a new agenda. For decades, African women have been mobilizing for fair

economies and the defense of the commons, and against the patriarchal, colonial, capitalist conditions that block the attainment of these goals. In what is now known as the 'Aba Women's Riots of 1929'⁷ women in the provinces of Calabar and Owerri in South Eastern Nigeria led a war against the colonial imposition of exploitative taxes on market women and the excessive power of the warrant chiefs. Under Igbo tradition, market women, who were responsible for supplying food to the growing urban populations in Calabar, Owerri, and other Nigerian cities, were exempt from tax. The introduction of taxes would potentially drive them out of business and disrupt the supply of food and other goods across the region. Many more cases can be found across the continent, dating back to the colonial era all the way through to contemporary times.

More recently, in 2019, a constellation of African feminists issued a statement⁸ containing African Feminist Visions for a Post-Covid Economic Recovery, which was addressed to the Special Envoys that the African Union mandated to mobilize international support to address the pandemic in Africa. The statement was written by feminists drawn from a range of communities, formations, sectors and disciplines who share a set of pan-African visions for a liberated Africa. These visions, anchored in the fundamental right to equality guaranteed in all African constitutions, include agroecology-based localized food supply chains in which smallholders are valued as guardians of biodiversity, seed and land; the institution of universal access to land, water, food, healthcare, education, housing, sanitation, electricity and information technologies; quality and accessible social services for all populations and systems that sustain public wellbeing; the recognition of informal economies as the engine of African markets (and treating it as an 'economy in its own right rather than as an object of comparison with the formal sector'⁹) and accordance of full labour and decent work rights to workers in the informal economy; recognizing the economic, social, political and cultural value of the care economy and building a just and resilient care sector; and progressive tax policy.

These visions inform this paper, and it is inspired by the decades of incredible work of African feminists from all walks of life who continue to reject the imposition of external visions and conditions and instead constantly lead the deeply political process of reclaiming our collective knowledge, stories, power, rights and dignity.

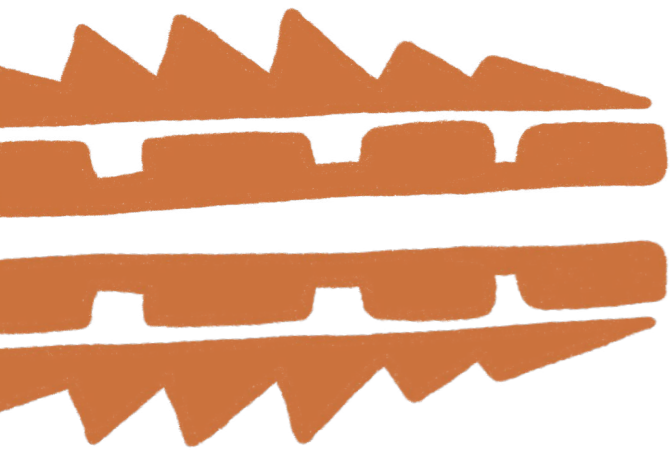
Why we need to build a distinctly African feminist agenda¹⁰

- ▶ To reflect on, describe and respond to Africa's separate cultural, social, economic and geopolitical landscapes and the diversity of our realities
- ▶ To continue building African feminist discourse and produce knowledge that is our own and that underscores and documents our experience and agency
- ▶ To do the deconstruction and reconstruction necessary to centre Africa and its people and reclaim our humanity and dignity



“Whatever the questions may be that we prioritise, they need to be ones which we ourselves formulate out of our own understanding of our social and political contexts. They need to be relevant to us, and they need to take our own histories seriously. This is an additional challenge that must be posed to the issue of decolonization.”¹¹

▀ Lyn Ossome



AFRICAN SOCIALISM AS THE MARROW FOR A PAN AFRICAN FEMINIST AGENDA

Many of the prominent African political leaders of the independence era had a shared interest in advancing socialism as the basis of the post-colonial state. Although varied, these and other imaginations of and for African socialism(s) could contribute the marrow for a contemporary feminist public services agenda. The independence era was a time of critical social, political and economic transition and Africans were ‘seeking new identities at personal, national and international levels’.¹² Detecting a tendency to towards ‘distracting terminology’ leading to ‘general confusion’, Kwame Nkrumah supported the definition of socialism as describing ‘a complex of social purposes and the consequential social and economic policies, organizational patterns, state structure, and ideologies which can lead to the attainment of those purposes’.¹³ Nkrumah saw the aim of socialism in Africa as to ‘... reconsider African society in such a manner that the humanism of traditional African life re-asserts itself in modern times’.¹⁴ This involved the introduction of a ‘new social synthesis in which modern technology is reconciled with human values, in which the advanced technical society is realized without the staggering social malefactions and deep schisms of capitalist industrial society’.¹⁵ Nkrumah stressed that ‘what socialist thought in Africa must retrieve is not ‘the structure of the “traditional African society,” but its spirit,’ for the spirit of communalism is crystallized in its humanism and in its reconciliation of individual advancement with group welfare’.¹⁶

In their article ‘*African Democratic Socialism: An Account of African Communal Philosophy*’, A. Auma Osolo and Ng’weno Osolo-Nasubo describe African socialism as ‘an African political, economic and social system that is positively African’.¹⁷ They identify two African traditions which form the basis for African socialism: the first being political democracy, ‘which in the African traditional sense provided a genuine hedge against the exercise of disproportionate political power of an individual or group’;¹⁸ and the second being mutual social responsibility, in which members of society ‘would be conditioned or obligated to do their very best for each other with the full knowledge and understanding that

if society prospers, its members will share in that prosperity’.¹⁹ They also assert that African socialism differs from communism because it ensures that ‘every mature citizen has equal political rights’ (something absent in the communist world) and from capitalism ‘because it prevents the excessive or disproportionate political influence by economic power groups’.²⁰ Osolo and Osolo-Nasubo advocate for the concept of “Afrika Huru” (African freedom and liberty), with freedom not for Africans alone ‘but for everyone on the continent of Africa whose hopes and aspirations are to pass his (sic) life there, temporarily or permanently’.²¹

Julius Nyerere’s approach to socialism was as a ‘state of mind’ concerning how one relates to other humans and the community in general. According to Nyerere, “...it is the socialist attitude of mind, and not the rigid adherence to a standard political pattern, which is needed to ensure that the people care for each other’s welfare...”.²² His ideas on socialism were defined by his experience of traditional African society which he describes as being shaped by four interlocking norms: mutuality, generosity, work and collective ownership of the primary means of production – land.²³ This meant that land ownership needed to be restored to the collective from the private, an end to the hoarding of wealth, ensuring that everyone with the capacity is gainfully employed, and that there is equitable distribution of the proceeds of the economy.²⁴ Nyerere rejected the idea that one could look at one class of people as their brethren and another as their natural enemies, whether at a family or global level. African socialism then provided the backdrop for pan-Africanism as ‘no true African socialist can look at a line drawn on a map and say, ‘The people on this side of that line are my brothers, but those who happen to live on the other side of it can have no claim on me’; every individual on this continent is his brother’.²⁵

As mentioned, there were significant variations in approach. For example, Nkrumah’s vision was for the rapid industrialisation of Ghana as the basis for economic independence and modernisation, while Nyerere (although this was not his sole focus) prioritised the rural economy and ensuring that people lived a good life in the rural context.²⁶ Nevertheless, a central pillar of African postcolonial imagination was

the negation of colonial underdevelopment.²⁷ During this time, states attempted to create new forms of independent development – with social policies such as free education and healthcare and a reliance on regional cooperation. Nationalistic independence projects ‘also understood independence as needing to go beyond the nation’.²⁸ However, current approaches to regionalism are quite different, fuelled by a neoliberal framework that ‘operates at the state level and prioritises free trade, access to foreign capital and foreign direct investment, producing citizens as competitive workers in the global world market’.²⁹

There is still grossly inadequate attention paid to the contributions of African women to the pan-African movements or how they mobilised and organised outside of or away from the mainstream post-colonial state and leadership.



The pan-African movement spanned the 20th century ideological spectrum, ranging from more right-wing, pro-capitalist, race-based nationalism to more revolutionary socialist discourses advanced by men like George Padmore, Walter Rodney, Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Amilcar Cabral, Stephen Bantu Biko and Frantz Fanon, all of whom locate Africa’s underdevelopment in capitalism, challenging the class system, racism and in the case of Fanon in particular, race-based nationalism. Yet an accurate historic record must include women like Mable Dove Danquah, Adelaide Caseley-Hayford, Bibi Titi Mohamed, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, Gambo Sawaba, Muthoni Likimani, Thenjiwe Mtintso, Djamila Bouhired, Charlotte Maxeke, Albertina Sisulu, and the other uncouneted numbers of women who mobilised for Africa’s liberation.³⁰

In her article, *Radical Regionalism: Feminism, Sovereignty and the Pan-African Project*³¹, Sara Salem looks at a series of feminist conferences in the immediate post-independence era, tracing the contributions of Southern feminists to the decolonisation project and African feminists to the conception of pan-Africanism. There are several key observations, including

that women at these conferences consistently stressed the need to hold both their own states as well as imperial states to account. They 'often elaborated a double critique, of both Western feminism as well as of postcolonial states. For example, the focus of some feminists on social reproduction posed a question to such states as to whether they were taking the gendered consequences of state-led capitalism seriously'.³² These questions extended into whether gender equality principles would be enshrined in independence constitutions (we now know that some were and some were not), pushing 'states to think about what the project of decolonisation meant for everyone'. For these women decolonisation was about liberation for both men and women, not just about men gaining political power. Therefore 'feminist and pan-African visions...aligned in some ways while clashing in others'.³³ Feminist organising at the time (as it does now) took on both patriarchy and imperial capitalism. As pointed out by Hakima Abbas and Amina Mama in their commentary³⁴, the recent 'discovery' of women (by the African Union, multinational corporations and numerous others) more than half a century after Africa women actively participated in liberation struggles on the continent is both troubling and ironic, and should be interrogated. If we are to pursue a decolonial, anti-capitalist, anti-neoliberal and pan-African feminist visions that allow every African to live a life of dignity, then it is important to build from early feminist organising while recalling the visions we share with the early proponents of African Socialism, how these were expressed in development policy then, and how we could apply them in our times.

"We cannot leave each generation to flounder and begin again without knowledge of what was achieved and indeed what was lost. We can now pursue, from a position of strength and information, African visions of what Africa can yet become." ³⁵

▀ **Amina Mama**



UNDERSTANDING THE POST-INDEPENDENCE ECONOMIC REALITIES OF AFRICA AND THEIR IMPACT ON PUBLIC PROVISIONING

It is critical to have some understanding of the events, decisions and crises that continue to shape the economic realities of both individual countries and the continent as a whole. It is impossible to do that in a single section of this framing paper, but there is a wide variety of knowledge, literature and analysis speaking to various aspects of this question that should be comprehensively explored.

By the end of the 1980s, many African countries had a lower gross domestic product (GDP) per capita than they did at independence. However, our postcolonial economic history is one of 'fairly respectable rates of growth for nearly a decade (including some "miracles" in a number of countries) and then a decline after the oil crisis of the mid-1970s'.³⁶ Between 1965 and 1974, annual growth in GDP per capita averaged 2.6%.³⁷ It is important to point out here that there are various feminist criticisms of GDP as a measure of development as it tells us very little about actual human and ecological wellbeing. However, while it is true that on average our economies continue to perform poorly, African scholars have emphasized the importance of recalling that this has not always been the case 'if Africa is not to be condemned to the ridiculously low measures of "success" that are now peddled by international financial institutions so desperate for evidence of the usefulness of their prescriptions'.³⁸

The prescriptions here are the structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) of the 1980s and 1990s, which have been described as 'grossly defective as a policy package for addressing the endemic poverty and pervasive underdevelopment of the region'.³⁹ SAPs are the conditional lending programmes of the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) including the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. They imposed several policies, including opening or liberalizing and deregulating economies, freeing up prices, reducing the role of the state, cutting back

government expenditure, reducing subsidies, privatizing parastatals and basic services (including by introducing user fees in the health and education sectors), lowering public sector wages and reducing employment protections. SAPs became the main model of economic governance of most developing countries in the world in the 1980s. The loosening of restrictions on capital flows, privatization of state enterprises and liberalization of trade undermined the capacities for local manufacturing and led to reliance on imports of manufactured goods and export of raw materials for foreign exchange. Structural adjustment 'led to the deindustrialization of the continent and returned Africa to its colonial-style extraction economy'.⁴⁰

African scholars⁴¹ have identified a number of characteristic features of African economies "pre-crisis". First, the atypical high dependence of economic performance on the external environment tied to terms of trade and volatility of markets for Africa's exports, climatic conditions (mainly drought) and civil strife and wars on the continent. Second, lower investment and savings due to a combination of capital flight and de-investment at the eve of the independence era (much of the private investment in the colonial period was by foreigners) and poor response from domestic capital. Third, flawed industrialization that lacked value-added export-oriented strategies and did not appropriately harness technology. Fourth, poor performance of agriculture due to penalizing policies (including trade policies) and poor agricultural infrastructure. These factors must be looked at in combination with the changing realities of social development over time. Most African governments made considerable investments in the social sector (including by producing a cadre of public service professionals) to counter the impact of colonial heritage. As a result, for example, there was a marked improvement in primary school enrolment from 41% in 1965 to 68% in the mid-1980s.⁴² Much of this investment was financed by domestic savings. In what is commonly referred to as Sessional Paper No. 10 (*African Socialism and its Application to Planning in Kenya*),⁴³ the Government of Kenya, eighteen months after independence, laid out its plans for the country's development, which were based on the concepts and philosophy of Democratic African Socialism.

The paper makes clear its rejection of both Western Capitalism and Eastern Communism and emphasizes the choice of 'a policy of positive non-alignment'⁴⁴ as well as its desire for the Africanization of the economy and the public service. However, the economies of Kenya and other African countries 'remained largely market economies with varying levels of controls and "distortions".⁴⁵ We have what has been described as "an uncomfortable mixture of the pre-colonial, colonial and global economic structures"⁴⁶

Still, African countries continued to lag behind other developing countries. One reason for the failure of economic policy in Africa has been described as "too many cooks in the policy kitchen" - with, at least in the mid-1990s, more expatriate advisers in Africa than there were at the end of the colonial period.⁴⁷ In some countries, whole ministries were partitioned among different donors. The effect of this was that there was little room for African states to define and chart their own policy agenda. At the onset of the debt crisis of the 1980s, the policies of many African countries were decided by donors and creditors, including the IMF and the World Bank, with negative results.

"Debt is neo-colonialism, in which colonizers transformed themselves into 'technical assistants'. We should say 'technical assassins'."

▀ **Thomas Sankara**

So, whereas Africa 'is constantly berated for its poor politics and bad economic ideas, much of the mischief has come from the outside.'⁴⁸ It has been reported that when African economists rejected structural adjustment donors ghost wrote reports, pretended they were written locally and then praised them

for their thoughtful insights.⁴⁹ The crisis in African universities generated by reductions in academic wages created an opportunity for donor-driven aid packages that retrained old faculty and produced a new generation of economists under the Western neoclassical model that provided the theoretical basis for neoliberal policies.⁵⁰ The World Bank and other agencies injected tens of millions of dollars into a number of organizations who funded economic departments to 'revamp higher education by training graduate students and by providing financial support to economics departments in African countries to organize graduate coursework and research along Western lines'.⁵¹

Recognising the impact of external interference is not intended to amount to scapegoating. There has been and continues to be grave economic mismanagement and institutional failure overseen by African governments and it is important to look at the balance between internal and external factors. In building an African feminist public services agenda and indeed broader policy agendas, the sovereignty of African states and people, coupled with democratic accountability of states to people is a central principle. One of the characteristics of the neoliberal project is described as the 'deliberate attempt to discredit the experience of the first two decades of post-independence development in Africa by casting it as an unmitigated failure'.⁵² Crucially, in moving forward, as cautioned by African scholars two decades ago, we as Africans must 'avoid a "failure complex," which leads to a tendency to adopt self-fulfilling blanket condemnations of our own reality and makes us incapable of learning from our experiences'.⁵³





Below are a set of interlinked and interdependent building blocks for an African feminist public services agenda:

1. RECLAIMING UBUNTU

Ubuntu is widely recognised as philosophy covering a number of aspects of wellbeing, community and humanness across the continent. There are several equivalent words in various languages, including *utu* and *umunthu*. It is used to describe ‘belonging to a bundle of life’⁵⁴; ‘norms of human mutuality’⁵⁵ and the idea that ‘you cannot be human on your own, only through relationship’.⁵⁶ According to one definition, *ubuntu* recognises that ‘all beings have a life-force and are interdependent’ and that this reality imposes a ‘natural duty on us, as humans: to learn, honour and promote the sacredness of the entire eco-system in which we are privileged to live’.⁵⁷ Although there are various definitions, interpretations and indeed critiques of the concept, as with Nkrumah’s advice on socialism, perhaps it most useful to retrieve the spirit of *ubuntu* in its most progressive version(s) suitable for contemporary application.

Ubuntu is closely related to care – care sustains households, communities and the earth. But the current social division of care is unequal, gendered, racialized and classed, actively exploiting women’s labour from the household through to (under) paid public and private provisioning, effectively undermining their rights and deepening gender inequalities. Unpaid care and domestic work in particular, though valuable and rewarding, is taxing with potentially adverse effects on the physical and mental wellbeing of carers – the vast majority being women. It also affects their ability to access education, employment of their choice and public and social life.

Neoliberal economic models neither value care nor recognise the human right to care yet benefit from it immensely through free or cheap labour with little to no regulation. Solely as a means of describing the scale, it is estimated that the monetary value of unpaid care work done globally by girls and women aged 15 and over is at least \$10.8 trillion

annually – three times the size of the world’s tech industry.⁵⁸ Although care work and care workers are gaining increasing attention in international policy especially under the Covid spotlight, unpaid care and domestic work still remains largely invisibilised, undervalued and unjustly distributed, with women carrying a disproportionate burden of it. The time women spent on unpaid care work in Africa was already almost three and half times more than that of men pre-pandemic, with overwhelming evidence⁵⁹ of increased unpaid workloads globally due to the pandemic. For instance, young women in informal urban settlements in Kenya, Ghana and South Africa have reported that they spent two to four more hours daily on housework as a result of Covid, with the time being distributed between cooking, cleaning and sanitizing the home, caring for sick household members, childcare and education of children. 60 Across the three countries, between ⁶⁰ and 90% of the young women said that their access to basic services had been disrupted during the pandemic – citing transport, health and water and sanitation as the most severely affected.

“We came to the realization that what traumatizes us is not an individual experience of exposure to one violent act: it is living in environments that deny you your basic dignity.” ⁶¹

▀ **Jessica Horn**

Feminist economists like Nina Banks continue to draw attention to sites of unpaid work beyond the household, including by broadening definitions to incorporate work that is done in communities, such as the work of political activism.⁶² This allows for a ‘more meaningful analysis of the way in which racial inequities are reproduced and sustained within communities because of racial exclusion, and isolation, and various forms of violence, physical and structural violence’.⁶³ Women’s unpaid community work increases in crisis situations – whether these are economic, climate, public health or violent conflict-related or others. Although Banks’ work focuses on African American women in the US, this framing is applicable to women experiencing marginalization globally and engaging in unpaid collective work in and on behalf of their communities.⁶⁴

2. STATES ARE ANSWERABLE TO PEOPLE

States bear all primary responsibility for delivering on human rights. *Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want*⁶⁶ is Africa’s master plan that aims to deliver on its goal for inclusive and sustainable development and is ‘a concrete manifestation of the pan-African drive for unity, self-determination, freedom, progress and collective prosperity pursued under Pan-Africanism and African Renaissance’. While holding states accountable for Agenda 2063, an African feminist public services agenda must be anchored by universal and equal rights to life, integrity and security of the person (including the right to freedom from violence and harmful practices) access to justice, education, economic and social welfare, health (including sexual and reproductive health), food security, housing and a healthy and sustainable environment. These are enshrined in the both the (Banjul) African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (ACHPR) and the (Maputo) Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa.⁶⁷ It should also forefront special protections and considerations for structurally excluded and marginalized people including migrant women, women with disabilities and queer and transgender people.

Feminist, labour and other social justice movements are leading a global push for the rebuilding of the social organization of care. This includes: **recognising** care as a human right and its social and economic value; **rewarding** and remunerating care work through equal pay for work of equal value, decent pensions, dignified working conditions and comprehensive social protection; **reducing** the burden of unpaid care work on women and **redistributing** care work within households and between households and the State; and **reclaiming** the public nature of care services by restoring duty to the State for public care services and mobilizing financing for this through fair and progressive taxation.⁶⁵

National constitutions also contain a range of fundamental rights and freedoms, generally contained in a Bill of Rights that bind the state to the provision of public services. These include rights to food, water, healthcare, social security, housing, a healthy environment, education, and fair labour practices, as well as freedom of assembly, association and demonstration for all citizens. National constitutions represent consensus on a range of social, economic and political parameters that should be drawn on in the struggle to secure rights to public services.

All 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which African governments have committed to, require a healthy and robust public sector and public service delivery if they are to be achieved. Target 5.4 requires States to ‘recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies, and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate’ – although target indicator 5.4.1 falls short by only measuring the proportion of time spent on unpaid care work while failing to measure any changes in public service provision. There is also an African Charter on Values and Principles



of Public Service and Administration⁶⁸, which entered into force in July 2016. The charter aims to ensure quality and innovative service delivery. It addresses the regional harmonization of a range of issues including strengthening capacity for the improvement of public services, citizen participation, transparency, working conditions for public service workers and gender equality.

There are also a number of processes to continue to watch including the ongoing drafting of an AU Policy on Business and Human Rights and the rolling out of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA), which is bound to have significant gendered human rights and socio-economic impacts.



“We believe that our democratic African socialism does not compete with state ownership of all means of production, but that our state ownership duly vests ownership in the “Wananchi” (people), and we strongly anticipate to see it remains as constant as possible.”

▲ A Auma Osolo and Ng’weno Osolo Nasubo

Public sector worker organizations⁷⁰ refer to the concept of gender responsive, quality public services (GRQPS). The term ‘gender transformative’ is also gaining popularity. The unequal distribution of unpaid care and domestic work, and specific health needs (reproductive and maternal) are some of the factors that mean that women are particularly reliant on public services. Women are also more likely to claim social welfare payments, use public services and be employed by the public sector.⁷¹

Women’s (and girls’) disproportional responsibility for domestic work means that they spend an incredible amount of time sourcing water. Water is inextricably linked to the right to an adequate standard of living, the right to health and the right to life as recognised⁷² by the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESR). It is fundamental to human survival and a range of rights and freedoms are connected to **water and sanitation**. Universal gender transformative, quality access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) – both in and beyond household level (in schools, hospitals,

public toilets and other public spaces etc.) increases health, happiness and wellbeing, improves school attendance and performance, maintains sexual and reproductive health, reduces risks during pregnancy and childbirth and eliminates risks to personal safety (such as violence and harassment in seeking WASH).⁷³

Article 12 of CEDAW requires States to eliminate discrimination against women in access to **healthcare** services throughout the life cycle. Article 14 of the Maputo Protocol provides for the right to health of women including by ensuring that their sexual and reproductive health is respected and promoted. Gender-transformative, quality public services would expand this requirement, particularly when it comes to **sexual and reproductive health** to include people who are gender diverse and non-binary, who face extreme discrimination in access to services and unique health risks, including increased risks of mental health issues. 32 countries in Africa criminalize homosexuality⁷⁴, fostering a culture of homophobia and transphobia and greatly affecting mental health and hindering access to healthcare.

3. ADDRESS EXCLUSION AND ADVANCE JUSTICE

An African feminist public services agenda has to radically transform what public services look like and how they are delivered. One way to do this is to work from their potential to dismantle neocolonial, patriarchal, racialized, classed and heteronormative structural gender inequalities including the gender division of labour. It is not enough to guarantee rights. It is important to recognise that there are individuals and groups for whom those rights remain inaccessible or who face violations when essentialist assumptions are made about rights. Political economists such as Lyn Ossome provide examples of how some ‘donor driven’ countries remain ‘sharply focused on constitutionalism, rights, and liberties, while the economic demands of the population are neglected’⁶⁹. This is likened to the neocolonial pacts through which ‘African states were granted

ostensible political freedom and autonomy while perpetuating the oppressive economic status quo’. In other words, without addressing certain contexts of political, cultural and economic exclusion, the pursuit of human rights can reproduce violations rather than resolve them.

Centering women’s rights and gender justice in public service design and delivery means that public services (a) respond to and work towards eliminating the gendered division of labour and access to decent work (b) promote bodily autonomy and freedom from violence (c) address multiple and intersecting discrimination including on the basis of gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, class, ethnicity, location and migrant status.



Catastrophic Household Spending on Health

In 2001 in Abuja, AU member states pledged to increase government funding for health to at least 15.0% of their annual budget. More than ten years later, in 2014, only four countries – Malawi, Swaziland, Ethiopia and Gambia – have met the Abuja target, spending more than 15.0% of their annual budget on health (16.8%, 16.6%, 15.7% and 15.3%, respectively)⁷⁵

Out-of-pocket health expenditure comprises direct payments made by households to providers of healthcare and other health-related goods and services. The level of out-of-pocket can be seen as a proxy of the equity of the health system of a country: the higher the proportion of out-of-pocket health expenditure, the less equitable the health system of a country is likely to be.

The global average for out-of-pocket health expenditure as a percentage of total health expenditure was 18.2% in 2014. Of the 53 African countries covered, nine had a level of out-of-pocket health expenditure higher than 50.0% in 2014, ranging from 75.5% to 50.8%: Sudan, Nigeria, Cameroon, Sierra Leone, Morocco, Egypt, Eritrea, South Sudan and Côte d'Ivoire. Only 11 countries had a level of out-of-pocket health expenditure lower than the global average in 2014 (18.2%), ranging from 17.5% to 2.3%: Congo, Gambia, Lesotho, São Tomé & Príncipe, Malawi, Swaziland, Mozambique, Namibia, South Africa, Botswana and Seychelles.

When a household's out-of-pocket health spending exceeds a given percentage of its ability to pay, it is labelled catastrophic – that is, likely to reduce the household's consumption of other basic needs. Within the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) monitoring framework, catastrophic health spending is defined as out-of-pocket health spending exceeding 10% or 25% of the household's total consumption or income (budget).⁷⁶ A study in Zambia found that expenses related to delivering in a maternity facility account for approximately one third of the monthly household income of the poorest Zambian households. It found that despite the abolition of user fees, women in remote areas still faced high out-of-pocket expenses in the form of delivery supplies that facilities should provide as well as unofficial policies or norms requiring women to bring new baby clothes/blanket to a facility-based delivery⁷⁷.

Some crucial aspects of public **transport** services for women tend to be neglected. The issue of safety for women and girls in public transport systems does get some attention, and there is a need to move towards concrete actions to ensure that women, girls and LGBTIQ+ people can travel free of violence and harassment. The Covid pandemic has

seen a reported global rise in GBV in general including on public transport⁷⁸. This also affects women public transport workers. Alongside the important issue of safety concerns for users, how public transport is designed and delivered has a profound impact on women's unpaid care work, access to decent work and ability to access other rights. Fear of using

public transport affects freedom of movement and lack of mobility impacts access to other essential services, schools, work, social and public life. Unreliable, poor quality and inefficient transport services mean increased time pressure and overall stress for women who have to combine unpaid and paid work – and influences the kind of paid work they can take on.⁷⁹ High fares and inefficient routing (requiring multiple stops and vehicle changes) mean that women, who generally have lower incomes, bear the cost burden as they take children and other people under their care to schools and hospitals and do household shopping.

A crisis in **childcare** services results in increased domestic workloads for women and reduced decent work opportunities especially for women in rural areas and in the popular economy, who have little to no social and labour protections. The childcare sector – comprising nurseries, daycare centres, crèches, and early childhood development (ECD) centres – has a predominantly female workforce and has the potential to provide decent jobs for millions of women. However, the Covid crisis has seen widespread closures of childcare centres, pushing women into joblessness or into precarious types of work.⁸⁰ Ensuring universal access to gender responsive, quality **education** means eliminating gender-based violence risks (both in school and on the way to and from school), ensuring that there is adequate clean water supply and sanitation facilities and providing social protections to ensure retention and transition to the next level of learning.

The **Abidjan Principles**⁸¹ on the human rights obligations of states to provide **public education** and to regulate private involvement in education were adopted in February 2019.

As is the case with water, women are the primary producers of **energy** particularly in rural areas, where they spend many hours collecting mainly firewood for household use.⁸² Only 43% of the people in Africa south of the Sahara have access to clean and modern electricity.⁸³ Access to clean electricity has numerous social, economic and health benefits. It extends leisure hours and has great potential to increase access to information (through television, radio, internet), it can reduce the amount of time and energy spent on household tasks (with the use of technologies) and decrease the indoor air pollution caused by other energy sources such as charcoal.

Public spaces are also crucial public goods. SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities recognises the importance of 'universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces, in particular for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities'.⁸⁴ There are glaring gender inequalities when it comes to access to public spaces of any kind. Charging entrance and other user fees, for example, excludes women more due to lower incomes. Additionally, failing to address gender-based violence and harassment in public spaces means that women, trans and gender non-conforming people will stay away from them. Taking measures such as installing adequate lighting, providing safe toilets and security stations help to make public spaces safer, inclusive and accessible.

Special attention needs to be paid to the range of gendered barriers to access to public services. One prevalent barrier centres on the issue of national identification documents (IDs). Many social services require users to produce national IDs to register for and access services and facilities such as national hospital insurance funds, cash transfers or other social protection programmes. Such requirements do not take into account gender gaps in national identification systems where, for example, there is a gap of over 10% between men and women in Nigeria.⁸⁵ There are also major barriers for transgender people in accessing national IDs and other documents upon transitioning.⁸⁶

Article 8 of the Maputo Protocol on Access to Justice and Equal Protection before the Law require states to take measures to ensure that women have equal access to **judicial and legal services**; and that law enforcement organs interpret and enforce gender equality rights.⁸⁷ Still, women's pursuit of justice continues to be blocked by legal discrimination on paper and in practice, uneven implementation of safeguards and patchy legal protection.⁸⁸

Universality as a key principle

The principle of universality holds that every single person is entitled to services that are sufficient to meet their needs, regardless of their ability to pay.

Universality includes **universal access**, meaning that every person has access to the service and to the same quality of service. It also includes **universal coverage**, ensuring that everyone can obtain the service free or without financial hardship.

4. REJECT THE COMMODIFICATION OF DIGNITY

If our agenda is driven by the understanding that our identity is tied up with relationships with each other, then it follows that our dignity is tied up in our collective dignity. A combination of slavery, colonization, neoliberalism and coloniality (the invisible power structure that sustains colonial relations of exploitation long after the end of direct colonialism⁸⁹) have contributed to a structural stripping away of African dignity. The privatization of public services and state-owned enterprises pushed by powerful private players, international financing and, increasingly, national governments is that it is easier and more efficient. The truth is that private delivery of public services – whichever form it takes – means that only those who can afford to pay for a service have access to it – this amounts to a gross violation of human rights and means that the human dignity quality public services help to deliver becomes a commodity. Even models that appear to use private sector financing for social outcomes end up diverting savings or surplus to private profit. Private companies are driven by their bottom line – to make profits – which is antithetical to the notion of public goods.

The austerity measures of the dominant global neoliberal economic system (as described in earlier sections) espouse cuts in public

funding, widespread privatization and corporate capture as well as deregulation. These policies reduce the role of the state by forcing it to do less at the exact time when its citizens need it the most. The global and internalized view applied to African states as incompetent and corrupt fuels the privatization agenda.

When states fail to deliver public services – health, energy, water and sanitation, care, social services and other services that sustain life – they transfer the burden to women. Women are the biggest 'reserve army of labour'.⁹⁰ Women's unpaid (and underpaid) labour subsidizes the state. Most crucially, privatization means that women, who already are the majority of the continent's poorest, are forced to borrow or stretch existing meagre resources to pay **user fees** or **out of pocket payments** in order to access basic services, in many cases forcing households and individuals into unsustainable debt. Waiving of user fees does not automatically translate into free services or no costs. As an example, what initially looked like a progressive decision to waive fees on maternal deliveries in Kenya in 2007 'saw an increase in demand for services as more women went to hospital to deliver..... the "free delivery" did not always exclude other costs

such as consumables and drugs.⁹¹ A study in Zambia found that despite the abolition of user fees for delivering at a health facility, women in remote rural areas still face high expenses – amounting to approximately one third of the monthly household income of the poorest Zambian households – in the form of delivery supplies that the facilities should provide.⁹²

One of the most common forms of privatization of public services is **public-private partnerships** (PPPs), actively promoted by the World Bank and other institutions, both public and private, and including governments and funders. The World Bank in particular claims that PPPs 'can bring greater efficiency and sustainability to the provision of public services such as energy, transport, telecommunications, water, healthcare, and education and allow for better allocation of risk between public and private entities.'⁹³ It provides advice to governments on how to get their projects "investor-ready" in order to leverage private investments.

The main characteristic of PPPs is that a private company (or consortium of private companies) raises the up-front capital for the investment, which is then paid back by the taxpayer (directly, or through the state) over the course of the contract during which the private company builds, maintains and/or operates the infrastructure or service⁹⁴ PPPs are a core feature of the World Bank Group's wider Maximizing Financing for Development (MFD) model through which it aims to 'systematically leverage all sources of finance, expertise, and solutions to support developing countries' sustainable growth'.⁹⁵ They are also actively promoted by regional development banks and other international finance institutions as a way to guarantee funding to achieve

the SDGs. MFD stands in direct opposition to the notion of public goods by asserting that 'nothing should be publicly financed if it can be commercially financed in a sustainable way'.⁹⁶

In reality, PPPs are immensely costly in multiple ways. For example, in 2006, the government of Lesotho launched a PPP to upgrade its health infrastructure. A private sector consortium was contracted to design, build and operate the main (Queen Mamohato Memorial) hospital and a network of urban clinics for 18 years. This was all financed by a mixture of public and private funds and supported by international institutions including the World Bank. The arrangement included a loan of 94.9 US dollars, ten times the annual budget of the health ministry, which was guaranteed by the government. A 2014 report by Oxfam and the Lesotho Consumer Protection Association showed that the PPP hospital and its three filter clinics consumed more than half of the total government health budget thereby diverting urgently needed resources from primary and secondary healthcare in rural areas where three-quarters of the population live. The project was expected to generate a 25.0% rate of return on equity for the PPP shareholders, underwritten by taxpayer money. ⁹⁷ More recently, in Kenya, a PPP that saw the leasing and servicing of medical equipment in public hospitals cost taxpayers three times what it would have cost to purchase the equipment at market price.⁹⁸

Privatization only 'works' in places and situations deemed profitable

Examples across Africa show that privatised services are absent in rural and poor urban areas.

In Tanzania, poorer neighbourhoods in Dar es Salaam are left out of private waste management, resulting in 70% of waste being disposed informally by dumping into waterways and fields or being burned.

Kenya has one legal dumpsite in Dandora, Nairobi, which was declared full in 1996. As of 2021, it continues to operate and is surrounded by low-income residential areas. Nairobi River runs right through the dumpsite, carrying polluted water downstream where it is used to irrigate small farms and also as drinking water. Dandora, aside, most private waste collection companies dump their collections in over 70 illegal dumpsites scattered across the city.

Privatization sidelines workers in the informal (popular) economy

Informal waste workers continue to play a central role in waste management across Africa – they do most of the recycling, are contributing significantly to waste management in Africa by doing most of the recycling.

In South Africa, between 80 – 90% of the paper and packaging waste is recovered by the informal sector, saving municipalities millions of dollars in freed landfill space. In 2016, a private company took over the Genesis landfill in Johannesburg where informal workers had been working for 17 years. It used intimidation to prevent the workers from accessing the landfill and, in 2018, it hired a private security company to violently raid their homes in the surrounding areas.

(Source: *The Future is Public: Towards Democratic Ownership of Public Services*)⁹⁹

Feminist analysis¹⁰⁰ of PPPs in the global south (the majority world) shows that the global financial architecture continues to employ a neocolonial approach in imposing private financing models which are complex and non-transparent, driven by profit interests and are blind to the needs or priorities of the citizens who they claim to benefit. PPPs lead to poor priority-setting and come at great risk to the public good as all risk falls on the public purse. PPPs privatize profit and socialize risk and loss. Most PPPs are more expensive in the long run than traditional government investment. They have a direct impact on women's livelihoods – with mega infrastructure projects causing

displacements and loss of access to land and natural resources with major impacts on food production and health. PPPs also mean that alongside the economic loss coming from being forced to make out of pocket payments, comes the reality of declines in the quality of services (due to segmentation of users on the basis of ability to pay). More difficult material conditions also mean an increase in unpaid care and domestic work and the deterioration of paid working standards due to the promotion of casual contracts and different types of informal work.¹⁰¹ Women's voices remain systematically locked out despite the direct impact on their lives, livelihoods and rights.

(Re)municipalization: the growing movement to reclaim local public services

Even as public crises persist globally, made worse by the Covid pandemic, African feminist organizations and public service defenders can draw on the inspiring work of '(re) municipalization' movements around the world who are pushing back on decades of cuts, chronic underinvestment and privatization.

Remunicipalisation: bringing previously private or privatised services under public ownership and control at the local level

Municipalization: creating brand new public services

(Re)municipalization: both the creation of new public services and reversals from private management

Similar actions at national level would be considered (re)nationalization.

An example from Egypt:

The Zabaleen community set up a sophisticated waste management system in the 1940s, with approximately 70,000 people reaching up to 85% recycling rates over time in what many regarded as an effective circular economy. However, in the early 2000s, the government decided to privatize waste management in Cairo as part of its wider agenda for urban development projects and land speculation. Due to its proximity to Cairo's tourist area, the Zabaleen settlement (known as 'Garbage City') was seen as a lucrative urban investment opportunity and the government aimed to privatize waste management in order to move the community out into new suburban settlements. Residents now began to be charged for waste collection through their electricity bills. Although the Zabaleen community were promised half of the waste in return for them sorting it, this represented only a fraction of their previous earnings. The privatization of waste management led to the loss of livelihoods for the community. Hundreds of Zabaleen protested this move and the resultant influx of foreign companies. The private companies incurred municipal fines of up to 2 million US dollars due to citizen complaints of irregular collection and dirty streets. Hundreds of citizens in Cairo and Giza filed and won lawsuits against the government for the imposed addition of collection fees on to their electricity bills. Eventually, the government had no choice but to give up on its privatization plans and did not renew the contracts of the private companies. New system was gradually put in place that saw the remunicipalisation of waste services in Cairo, Alexandria and Giza, with a public company – Nahdet Misr – taking over services in Alexandria from the end of 2011 and subcontracting the informal sector.

(Source: *The Future is Public: Towards Democratic Ownership of Public Services*)¹⁰²



5. VALUE FOR PUBLIC SECTOR WORKERS

The public sector across most of Africa tends to be dismissed as inefficient, ineffective and corrupt. This is evident, for example, in the public denigration of public officers (particularly health and education workers such as teachers, nurses and doctors) when they exercise their right to strike. Public sector workers are on the receiving end of a backlash that does not often reflect wider structural failings and rarely pays attention to their individual and collective labour rights as workers.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), between 2012 and 2016, there was an average ratio of 0.45 physicians to 1,000 people on the continent. Only three African countries had at least one physician per 1,000 people: Libya, Mauritius and Tunisia, with a physician-to-population ratio of 2.09, 2.00 and 1.29, respectively.¹⁰³ In 2014, there was an average of 41.7 pupils to a single teacher in primary education, more than twice the average in Europe, Central Asia and North America.¹⁰⁴

Public sector jobs are essential for countries to increase access to employment and decent work for their populations. In the period between 2009 and 2015, public employees constituted almost one third of paid employment on average in Africa. In seven countries the public sector represented 40.0% or more of their total paid employees: Chad, Egypt, Ethiopia, Gambia, Mauritania, Seychelles and Tunisia. In only five countries, the public sector accounted for less than 20.0% of the total number of paid employees: Malawi, Mali, Morocco, Rwanda and Uganda.

However, only 25% of countries in Africa south of the Sahara have achieved gender parity in the public sector. Women's participation in public administration in fragile and conflict affected countries averages just 23 percent, less than half of the same figure in all other countries.¹⁰⁵ In many cases, notably Nigeria and Tunisia,¹⁰⁶ women's participation in the public sector is higher at subnational level than in central government. A feminist public services agenda includes a **focus on women public**

sector workers at national and subnational levels and must be tailored to be context-specific. Attention should also be given to the differences in participation in urban versus rural areas. Even in countries where women are well represented in the public sector overall, they are less likely to advance into public administration management and leadership. Gender division of labour extends into the public sector with women making up 70% of frontline workers in the health and social sector globally.¹⁰⁷ The WHO estimates that a quarter of all violent assaults in the workplace are in the health sector – with the perpetrators ranging from patients and their relatives to co-workers and superiors.¹⁰⁸ Workplace **violence and harassment** can be linked to austerity and deregulation, with increases reported¹⁰⁹ as a result of restructures, insufficient staff, excessive workload, non-standard contracts and lack of adequate safety standards. Occupational segregation and the polarization by gender of industries and economic sectors stand out as key factors in the global **gender pay gap**¹¹⁰. Studies have found that the undervaluation of work in 'feminized' occupations and the 'motherhood gap' remain prevalent on a global scale.¹¹¹

A common feature of austerity measures, including those imposed on governments by the IMF, is **public sector wage bill cuts**. In the lead up to the current Covid pandemic, every single low income country that the IMF had advised to cut or freeze public employment in the previous three years had already been identified by the WHO as facing a critical health worker shortage.¹¹² Africa has the most severe shortage of health workers in the world and if we continue on our current trajectory our health workforce shortage is estimated to reach 6.1 million by 2030.¹¹³ One major problem for the continent is that many countries cannot afford to absorb all the health workers they train – therefore, ironically, there is high health worker unemployment in the midst of acute health worker shortages.¹¹⁴ Public sector wage bill cuts are common throughout the continent. Kenya's most recent (2021) 2.3 billion US dollar loan¹¹⁵ has seen the government impose pay cuts for civil servants to meet its commitment to the IMF to lower the public sector

wage bill.¹¹⁶ The allowances caps, pay and hiring freeze stands until 2025. In South Africa, labour unions took the government to court over plans for pay cuts of up to 300 billion rands.¹¹⁷

With the public sector commonly described as 'bloated', reducing pay and staff levels appears to be an easy fix. However, considering the impact of the Covid pandemic alone on livelihoods, governments should be creating decent jobs, not reducing them. A reduced public workforce depletes the much-needed frontline response and impedes longer term economic and social recovery. Defending the public sector

6. PUBLIC MONEY WORKS FOR THE PUBLIC

Earlier sections of this paper have referred to the enduring legacy of SAPs and the attendant **austerity 'cult'** that continues to significantly incapacitate African governments when it comes to delivering public services and wider social protection. Upholding public services means renouncing austerity (and privatization) and promoting public financing. By recent estimates, 85% of the world's population will be living under austerity in 2023.¹²⁰ Austerity's aims are to cut or reverse public spending and to reduce the public sector. Meanwhile, one report¹²¹ found that spending to respond to Covid 19 fell way short of what should have been a People's Recovery, with close to 40% of stimulus funding in the majority world going to large corporations. It may not come as a surprise that even measures directed at social protection were generally gender blind. As of the end of September 2020, a total of 45 countries and territories in Africa south of the Sahara had adopted 189 social protection and labour market measures in response to COVID-19, but only 16% of these measures were considered "gender sensitive". Similarly, of the 98 fiscal and economic measures that 31 countries and territories adopted, only 19% were aimed at strengthening women's economic security

The Covid pandemic came at a time of already high levels of **debt** distress in Africa, combined with the pre-existing gross inequalities. Insufficient fiscal and policy space continue to

includes pushing back on efforts by IFIs or any other players to shrink the role of government to that of creating an enabling environment for private sector and corporations. It involves a critical assessment of how IFI and private sector interests shape African national structures and public policy. The policy and structural underpinnings of Public Private Partnership Units (PPUs) in some countries are a live example.¹¹⁸ It also includes resisting market-fundamentalist arguments that define African governments as the problem and promote deregulation and privatization – sanctifying the market while denigrating and defunding governments.¹¹⁹

severely limit the ability of African governments to respond to shocks. The African Development Bank (AfDB), in its Economic Outlook for 2021¹²² estimated that 39 million Africans could fall into extreme poverty that year if the right support was not made available. Debt is not an Africa-specific problem, it is a global systemic one. However, the absence of a comprehensive framework to solve Africa's debt problem puts us in an extremely difficult situation considering that a large fraction of the debt is private, with private sector creditors much less likely to restructure debt.¹²³ There have been widespread calls for a global sovereign debt authority, independent of either (institutional or private) creditor or debtor interests. According to UNCTAD, such a mechanism should, at a minimum 'provide coherent frameworks and guidelines to facilitate automatic and comprehensive temporary standstills in recognised disaster situations, ensure that long-term developmental needs, including meeting the 2030 Agenda, are systematically taken into account in debt sustainability assessments, and provide an independent forum for expert advice to governments requesting this.'¹²⁴ In the longer run, this is about balancing out creditor and debtor interests more fairly and ensuring that 'the long-term collective interests of the many' are prioritized over 'the short-term interests of the few.'¹²⁵ Reining in corporate power is a prerequisite for this.

It goes without saying that the debt crisis in Africa has direct bearing on the ability of governments to effectively deliver public services. External debt payments by developing country governments grew by 85%, as a proportion of government revenue, between 2010 and 2018.¹²⁶ The IMF has estimated that public debt in Africa has risen to almost 58 % of the continent's GDP.¹²⁷ As of October 2022, one third of government spending was going to debt repayments, swallowing up half of the tax collected.¹²⁸ Not all debt is bad, but when debt means that states reduce social spending, impose austerity policies and deprive people of common goods, women carry the weight of it. Women provide huge subsidies to States; in fact, feminist activists stress that women are both the borrowers (as taxpayers) and the lenders (through their labour and costs); states spending more on debt servicing while they underfund public services transfers both labour and costs to women and girls in and outside of households.

Corruption is widely seen as a root cause of the poverty and poor economic growth seen across the continent – and is often described as 'endemic', implying that it is a naturally occurring characteristic of Africa and Africans. Corruption is indeed a widespread problem, but a more nuanced analysis needs to be applied to its causes, characteristics and effects. This entails approaches that consider corruption in both the public and private sectors, but also reflect on the wider problem of illicit net national outflows. Some controversial views exist, such as that corruption proceeds, if invested back into the national economy, can create value and economic growth – in the sense that the proceeds of corruption have fueled the growth of private hotels, schools and even hospitals, which provide services and create jobs.¹²⁹ This is, of course, not unique to Africa and neither is the problem of corruption. Even as the critical, local, national and regional campaigns to end corruption on the continent continue, a wider framing – that of **illicit financial flows** (IFFs) – is necessary. The UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) reports¹³⁰ that stopping illicit capital flight could almost cut in half Africa's annual financing gap of \$200 billion to achieve the SDGs. UNCTAD estimates that 88.6 billion US dollars, equivalent to 3.7% of Africa's GDP, leaves the continent as illicit capital

flight and that this is nearly as much as the combined annual inflows of official development assistance (48 billion) and yearly foreign direct investment (54 billion). IFFs include illicit capital flight, tax practices, illegal markets, corruption and theft and in Africa, they 'originate mainly from extractive industries'.¹³¹ In a period of 10 years (2000 – 2015) total illicit capital flight from Africa amounted to \$836 billion. When compared to Africa's total external debt stock of \$770 billion in 2018, this effectively makes Africa a net creditor to the world.¹³² African countries with high IFFs spend 25% less on health and 58% less on education than countries with low IFFs. This has a greater impact on women and girls who are already disproportionately excluded from access to health and education.¹³³

The most sustainable way to raise public funding for public services is through **progressive taxation**. It is important to pay equal attention to how tax money is raised as well as to how it is spent. A feminist framing of taxation¹³⁴ stresses its redistributive potential (beyond pure revenue-raising) and its potential to eliminate gender inequalities. Progressive taxation generally means that people with higher incomes pay more tax, and that the tax burden shifts from consumption taxes to wealth and property taxes. Women in low-income households spend a large proportion of their incomes on consumption taxes when they purchase food and basic household necessities. Progressive tax policy (and indeed wider fiscal and macroeconomic policy) would take this into account alongside the disproportionate amount of unpaid work women do at household and community level to sustain life. Increases in indirect taxes (which include consumption, sales, goods and services taxes) are common in the loan conditions of IFIs placing extreme burdens on poor households. Meanwhile, multinational corporations enjoy conditions that continue to deprive Africans of much needed revenue through tax exemptions, avoidance and evasion. Tax policy is and must be regarded as part of states' human rights obligation to provide basic, universal public goods for all and to redistribute wealth and power towards a more equal society.



SECTION TWO:

GUIDING QUESTIONS

With the building blocks of an African feminist public services agenda discussed in the previous section in mind, following are guiding questions that African feminist organizations, movements and activists can use in advancing a public services agenda.

The questions are organised under six key interlocking areas (1) *Ubuntu*: solidarity and collective wellbeing (2) design and delivery addresses exclusion and advances justice (3) universality (4) quality (5) publicness (6) decent work.

This is an overall guide whose applicability will depend on context which will vary based on sub-region, country, municipality or local administrative area, the type of public service or combination of services, how the public service is financed and delivered, among other factors. It is not intended as a blueprint and should be adapted to varying contexts and needs.



UBUNTU: SOLIDARITY AND COLLECTIVE WELL BEING

A uniting and foundational starting point is the *ubuntu* understanding that the wellbeing of a whole society is dependent on the wellbeing of every person in the society.

Key elements

- Recognition and valuing of care and collective well being
- Adjusting value systems away from valuing markets and profit to valuing the public good
- Valuing social infrastructure
- Prioritization of excluded and marginalised people

Guiding questions

How can the national/local discourse on public services foster a culture of public services as important and legitimate for all people?

What can cause a shift in favour of the valuing of collectivity when it comes to access to public services?

What can cause a shift in valuing the collective and public ideal over individual, private, self-help models?

What are the drivers of inequalities in access to public services? Who is left out when it comes to access and in what ways?

Is there a recognition of paid and unpaid labour and carers in the national/local discourse

What/where are the divides? E.g., rural vs urban? Male vs female? Are there targeted programmes for un(der)served populations and people in specific situations e.g.: pastoralist communities, displaced people etc.

What are the specific geophysical, political and economic contexts, and sociocultural aspects to be taken into account?

DESIGN AND DELIVERY ADDRESSES EXCLUSION AND ADVANCES JUSTICE

Public services essentially deliver human rights. However, human rights, though widely guaranteed in a range of international, continental and national instruments are not sufficient if they do not pay attention to particular political, social and cultural contexts.

Key elements

- Non-discrimination and protection under law for all
- Tackling exclusion, marginalization and reducing inequalities
- Accessible, effective and accountable remedies for violations of rights
- Specific attention to women's rights and the promotion of gender justice
- Corporate accountability

Guiding questions

Does the national constitution explicitly guarantee rights to public services? If so, which ones? How do these align with all other state human rights commitments?

Are there sector specific frameworks and/or policies? If so, are they rights-based? Do they reflect rights values and language?

Are there any legal barriers/caveats to a full rights-based approach? (e.g., language on finance or market-based approaches)

Are there explicit considerations for people who face discrimination in access to services based on disability, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, migrant/refugee status, cultural practices, employment status, job type, health status?

Do any of the public service/public sector policies contain a women's rights or gender analysis and gender-specific targets? E.g., specific measures to redistribute unpaid care and domestic work or prevent and respond to GBV

Does public service policy refer to/ align with the wider women's rights/gender agenda and instruments such as the Maputo Protocol?

Are there specific laws or policies for corporate accountability and private sector regulation in public service delivery?

Do they take into account the situation of individuals and communities most impacted by private sector activities?

Are these reflected in provisions for gender impact assessments and remedy mechanisms?

Are public sector workers trained on this?

Are there protections for whistleblowers and human rights defenders?

UNIVERSALITY

The principle of universality means that every single person is entitled to services that are of good quality and sufficient to meet their needs, regardless of their ability to pay.

Key elements

- Accessibility
- Affordability
- Acceptability
- Universal coverage

Guiding questions

Can everyone get the service when they need it? Does it meet their specific needs?

Is it designed to address any inequalities in access?

Is it of the same (good) quality regardless of where it is delivered and to whom?

Is the service free? Or is it affordable for all? Are there enforceable standards to determine this, and if so, what are they?

How can universal access be enhanced? Examples: public finance, targeted measures, social protection floors, tariff schemes and subsidies etc.

QUALITY

Key elements

- Reliability, continuity, providing optimal service
- Privacy and dignity
- Gender responsive and transformative
- Ecological sustainability, safeguarding natural resources and respecting planetary boundaries

Guiding questions

Are services delivered in a way that protects and promotes user confidentiality, privacy and dignity?

Are services designed with specific gender considerations in mind?

Are environmental concerns integrated in policy and delivery?

PUBLICNESS

Public services must be public in nature – serving the people, accountable to the people and financed by the state. All rights holders can hold any institution or body with a public mandate responsible and answerable for their decision, actions and activities. This includes private sector actors involved in public service delivery in any way.

Key elements:

- Publicly funded
- Publicly delivered
- Publicly governed

Guiding questions

How are public services funded? Are there profit motives?

How are taxes collected and used? Are there progressive tax policies in place?

Are there specific frameworks that explicitly promote privatization or public private partnerships (PPPs)?

Are public services managed and controlled by government?

Are there mechanisms for public oversight of public service design and delivery? Is there transparent, free, publicly available, and accessible information on plans, budgets and spending? Are there regular and transparently scheduled public hearings? Are there clear and effective complaints and claims mechanisms, available and accessible to all rightsholders?

DECENT WORK FOR PUBLIC SECTOR WORKERS

Universal, gender transformative public services can only be delivered by a motivated, empowered and accountable public sector that provides decent work for workers. The ILO has a clear Decent Work Agenda which has gender as a crosscutting priority.

Key elements

- Job creation
- Rights at work
- Social protection
- Social dialogue

Guiding questions

What are the recruitment and retention policies in public sector? Are public sector jobs accessible to all? If not, what are the barriers? Are there differences between sectors?

Which sectors employ more women?

What are the specific deployment concerns – e.g. nurse to patient ratios? What is the level of unemployment of trained and qualified workers?

What are the working conditions and institutional cultures? Are there work-life balance policies? Parental leave? Workplace childcare provisions e.g. creches? Lactation facilities? Workplace safety provisions?

Is there wage equality/equal pay or remuneration for work of equal value? Are there gender pay gaps? How many women occupy senior positions?

Are there clear policies and remedies to address (gender-based) violence and harassment in the world of work?

Do workers have access to healthcare? Social insurance?

Are there structures for collective bargaining? Are unions legally recognised? Do all workers (including 'essential workers') have a right to organize and strike? What happens when workers strike: reactions from the state, media, general public?

INTERLOCKING AREAS



KEY ELEMENTS



GUIDING QUESTIONS

With the building blocks of an African feminist public services agenda discussed in the previous section in mind, following are guiding questions that African feminist organizations, movements and activists can use in advancing a public services agenda.

1. UBUNTU: SOLIDARITY & COLLECTIVE WELLBEING

Recognition and valuing of care and collective well being

Adjusting value systems away from valuing markets and profit to valuing the public good

Valuing social infrastructure

Prioritization of excluded and marginalised people

- >> How can the national/local discourse on public services foster a culture of public services as important and legitimate for all people?
- >> What can cause a shift in favour of the valuing of collectivity when it comes to access to public services?
- >> What can cause a shift in valuing the collective and public ideal over individual, private, self-help models?
- >> What are the drivers of inequalities in access to public services? Who is left out when it comes to access and in what ways?
- >> Is there a recognition of paid and unpaid labour and carers in the national/local discourse?
- >> What/where are the divides? E.g., rural vs urban? Male vs female? Are there targeted programmes for un(der)served populations and people in specific situations e.g.: pastoralist communities, displaced people etc.
- >> What are the specific geophysical, political and economic contexts, and sociocultural aspects to be taken into account?

2. DESIGN AND DELIVERY ADDRESSES EXCLUSION AND ADVANCES JUSTICE

Non-discrimination and protection under law for all

Tackling exclusion, marginalization and reducing inequalities

Accessible, effective and accountable remedies for violations of rights

Specific attention to women's rights and the promotion of gender justice

Corporate accountability

- >> Does the national constitution explicitly guarantee rights to public services? If so, which ones? How do these align with all other state human rights commitments?
- >> Are there sector specific frameworks and/or policies? If so, are they rights-based? Do they reflect rights values and language?
- >> Are there any legal barriers/caveats to a full rights-based approach? (e.g., language on finance or market-based approaches)
- >> Are there explicit considerations for people who face discrimination in access to services based on disability, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, migrant/refugee status, cultural practices, employment status, job type, health status?
- >> Do any of the public service/public sector policies contain a women's rights or gender analysis and gender-specific targets? E.g., specific measures to redistribute unpaid care and domestic work or prevent and respond to GBV
- >> Does public service policy refer to/ align with the wider women's rights/gender agenda and instruments such as the Maputo Protocol?
- >> Are there specific laws or policies for corporate accountability and private sector regulation in public service delivery?
- >> Do they take into account the situation of individuals and communities most impacted by private sector activities?
- >> Are these reflected in provisions for gender impact assessments and remedy mechanisms?
- >> Are public sector workers trained on this?

3. UNIVERSALITY

Accessibility

Affordability

Acceptability

Universal coverage

- >> Can everyone get the service when they need it? Does it meet their specific needs?
- >> Is it designed to address any inequalities in access?
- >> Is it of the same (good) quality regardless of where it is delivered and to whom?
- >> Is the service free? Or is it affordable for all? Are there enforceable standards to determine this, and if so, what are they?
- >> How can universal access be enhanced? Examples: public finance, targeted measures, social protection floors, tariff schemes and subsidies etc.

4. QUALITY

Reliability, continuity, providing optimal service

Privacy and dignity

Gender responsive and transformative

Ecological sustainability, safeguarding natural resources and respecting planetary boundaries

- >> Are services delivered in a way that protects and promotes user confidentiality, privacy and dignity?
- >> Are services designed with specific gender considerations in mind?
- >> Are environmental concerns integrated in policy and delivery?

5. PUBLICNESS

Publicly funded

Publicly delivered

Publicly governed

- >> How are public services funded? Are there profit motives?
- >> How are taxes collected and used? Are there progressive tax policies in place?
- >> Are there specific frameworks that explicitly promote privatization or public private partnerships (PPPs)?
- >> Are public services managed and controlled by government?
- >> Are there mechanisms for public oversight of public service design and delivery? Is there transparent, free, publicly available, and accessible information on plans, budgets and spending? Are there regular and transparently scheduled public hearings? Are there clear and effective complaints and claims mechanisms, available and accessible to all rightsholders?

6. DECENT WORK FOR PUBLIC SECTOR WORKERS

Job creation

Rights at work

Social protection

Social dialogue

- >> What are the recruitment and retention policies in public sector? Are public sector jobs accessible to all? If not, what are the barriers? Are there differences between sectors?
- >> Which sectors employ more women?
- >> What are the specific deployment concerns – e.g. nurse to patient ratios? What is the level of unemployment of trained and qualified workers?
- >> What are the working conditions and institutional cultures? Are there work-life balance policies? Parental leave? Workplace childcare provisions e.g. creches? Lactation facilities? Workplace safety provisions?
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- >> Are there clear policies and remedies to address (gender-based) violence and harassment in the world of work?
- >> Do workers have access to healthcare? Social insurance?
- >> Are there structures for collective bargaining? Are unions legally recognised? Do all workers (including 'essential workers') have a right to organize and strike? What happens when workers strike: reactions from the state, media, general public?

BUILDING BLOCKS

Here are a set of interlinked and interdependent building blocks for an African feminist public services agenda >>



Reclaiming Ubuntu



States are answerable to people



Address exclusion and advance justice



Reject the commodification of dignity



Value for Public Sector Workers



Public money works for the public

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WEAVING OUR FABRIC

Framing an African Feminist Public Services Agenda



**The African Women's
Development and
Communication Network**