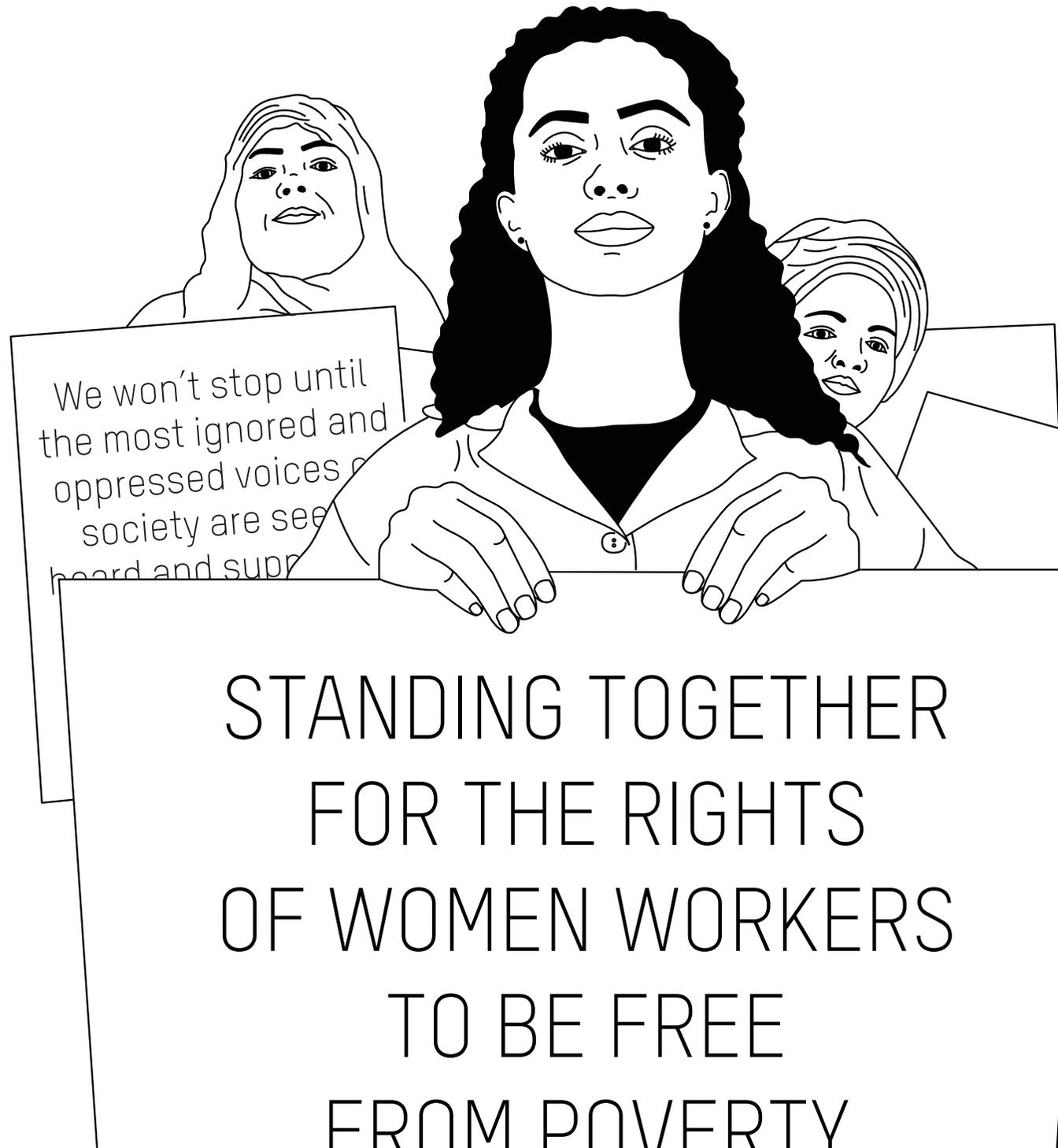


# VALUING ALL WOMEN'S WORK

Challenging the global  
inequalities that push people  
into poverty



OXFAM



# In summary...

## THE PROBLEM:

**The hard work carried out by over a billion women worldwide is being ignored. This injustice turns a blind eye to the true value women bring to societies and economies, deepens inequalities, and ultimately prevents a huge proportion of women from living free from harm and poverty.**

Most women who are from low income countries, and in paid work, have informal jobs – like house cleaners, farm workers, and street vendors. The world-over, women in informal work are left unprotected by contracts and laws, and unrecognised by the economy. Their hard work is unnoticed, and they face problems like low pay, no job security or sick leave, and the threat of abuse.

Similarly, unfair expectations within society put unpaid care duties (like looking after children or the elderly) mostly on the shoulders of women and girls the world-over. This work takes time and energy, and benefits the wider society and economy, yet it's taken for granted, ignored and devalued by our economic system.

In a world full of inequalities that oppress large sections of our global society based on race, gender identity, migration status and so much more – Black, indigenous and migrant women workers tend to be particularly overlooked, and are often pushed into the most unsafe and unvalued work.

It's an injustice that women's paid and unpaid work is habitually and grossly undervalued. Economies and societies depend on their hard work, yet our policies and systems fail to recognise it. It leaves too many women with little choice over their time, income and safety, and entrenches millions of women worldwide in poverty.

## THE SOLUTION:

**It doesn't have to be this way. Our vision is of a radically better world where all work is fairly valued – including the informal and unpaid care work carried out by 1.3 billion women around the world<sup>1</sup>. Together, let's push for a fair economy that works for women instead of against them.**

This isn't about getting more women into work, it's about changing the system that too often ignores, oppresses and excludes women. This is about women's fundamental rights, and pushing for an economy that works for everyone.

There's a groundswell of women's rights activists and economists working for this better, fairer world. And with decades of experience fighting for women's rights and economic justice, Oxfam is in a strong position to contribute to this growing movement. Together, we'll support women informal workers and unpaid carers to lead the conversations that drive change and shape our economy. Together, we'll stand up for women's right to be recognised, invested in, safe from harm, and free from poverty. We won't stop until the most ignored and oppressed in our society are seen, heard and supported.

## WHAT OXFAM WILL DO:

**STAND TOGETHER:** We'll campaign with coalitions of activists and others – including progressive governments and companies – in the global movement for an economy that's defined by and works for women from all backgrounds.

**SUPPORT:** We'll identify communities driving change, in particular women informal worker organisations and unpaid carers. We'll support them to access the resources they need to come together and claim their right for their work to be fairly valued – to a life without poverty.

**SPEAK OUT:** We'll push governments and companies to actively recognise, value and invest in all work carried out by women – paid or unpaid, contracted or not.

**DEMONSTRATE CHANGE:** We'll partner with others to design and deliver projects that show how valuing and sharing work more fairly can change lives for good.

## WHAT YOU CAN DO:

**As ever, we rely on the solidarity and generosity of those who share our vision of a better world.**

Let's fundraise and campaign together for a future where everyone has the respect, time and power needed to claim their rights, and to stand up to the injustice of poverty.



Too many women have little control over their time, income and safety – and millions are entrenched in poverty worldwide.

# In more detail...

## THE PROBLEM:

Whether in Zambia, the UK, or Bangladesh – the hard work carried out by 1.3 billion women worldwide is being ignored. This injustice turns a blind eye to the true value they bring to societies and economies, deepens inequalities, and prevents a huge proportion of women from living free from harm and poverty.

## THE REASON:

Our global economy values work that is visible, high-paying and considered 'skilled' – work that is often (but not exclusively) done by men. It devalues and exploits workers who aren't in 'quality' employment. Many of these workers are actively discriminated against based on their unpaid care responsibilities and social status that prevent them from getting better jobs. This injustice mostly affects women – much of their time is spent in an oppressive combination of low paid informal work, and working hard in the home for no pay. Women who face other inequalities – including those based on race, sexuality, class or migration status – are most exposed, with some of the most precarious and invisible work being done by Black, Indigenous and migrant women.

## THE RESULT:

This injustice leaves many women in highly vulnerable situations, with little or no access to legal protection – trapping them in cycles of poverty, exhaustion and often abuse. They're left with limited choices or opportunities for quality paid work, education and for taking part in civic and political life. And they are denied a say in how the economy is run. Critically, their hard work is taken for granted, overlooked, and grossly undervalued.

## WHAT'S BEHIND THIS?

Informal jobs and unpaid care work that are ignored by an unfair economy – all fuelled by discrimination, and now the Covid-19 pandemic.

**INFORMAL JOBS:** 90% of working women from low-income countries are in informal jobs<sup>2</sup>, like house cleaners, farm workers and market stall holders. From clothing factories to plantations, from hotels to private homes, women account for most workers in the lowest paid end of production chains. Unrecognised by the economy and unprotected by laws, these women often don't earn a living wage, or receive sick pay and parental leave. They're pushed into work that's widely deemed and devalued as 'unskilled', in conditions that are unsafe and unpredictable.

With pay levels that fuel rather than fight poverty, the informal nature of this work means that if they – or those in their care – are unwell, they lose income and often their jobs. It also leaves them exposed to the risk of violence and abuse, which is often used to intimidate and stop women from speaking up for their rights. What's more, women from Black, indigenous, migrant and other discriminated groups often face the lowest pay, most insecurity and least legal protection. For example, when Covid-19 hit Lebanon in 2020, Ethiopian domestic workers – who were unprotected by local laws – were left without income, housing, or legal protection.

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**UNPAID CARE WORK:** Society relies on our families and homes being looked after – without this, our economy wouldn't function. Yet the time and energy spent on doing so is ignored and grossly undervalued by governments and businesses. Whether looking after children and elderly relatives, collecting water, cooking or cleaning – unfair expectations mean that women and girls are three times more likely<sup>3</sup> to do this unpaid care work. It means they face particular pressures on their time, with 42% of working-age women unwillingly outside the paid labour force as a result. Many more are forced into part time<sup>4</sup> or informal jobs with few benefits and social protection. Ignoring the time and energy that goes into this work is a huge injustice – 12.5 billion hours are spent each day on unpaid care around the world.

**AN UNFAIR ECONOMY:** Despite their vital role, informal workers and unpaid carers are nowhere to be seen in social or economic policies – spending on care is generally seen as a cost not an investment, and official employment figures tend to relate only to 'formal' jobs. Workers' unions – where they exist – rarely extend to this kind of work. Our unfair economy keeps 1.3 billion women's hard work hidden from view, and their true contribution to our societies and economies is grossly undervalued.

**COVID-19 AND THE CLIMATE CRISIS:** The pandemic has made the problem more visible but also much worse – with extra caring responsibilities and zero-hour or non-contracted (informal) workers excluded from most pandemic relief schemes. It has also meant even more job losses for women – in the UK, women were about a third more likely than men to work in a sector shut down by the pandemic (such as retail and catering). Meanwhile the climate crisis is destroying crops and water sources, meaning informal agricultural workers are losing income and women are walking so much further to collect water. In the context of Covid-19 and the climate crisis, the undervaluing of the work carried out by millions of women worldwide is an even more significant driver of poverty and inequality<sup>5</sup>.

# It doesn't have to be this way...

## OUR VISION:

We believe in a radically better world where all work is fairly valued – not just for the benefit of women, but the whole of society. We believe in a world where all work – paid or unpaid, formal or informal, performed by women and men from all backgrounds – is recognised and invested in by society, and measured in the economy.

**Together, let's push for a fair, caring and sustainable economy that works for women instead of against them.**

## THE SOLUTION:

The very definition of work must transform.

Women have an equal right for their hard work to be rewarded and protected, to work safely from harm, and to live free from poverty – for the true value of their work to be recognised, fairly measured and invested in as part of the global economy. While our main concern is the disproportionate injustice faced by women, particularly those from minority groups – we know that these changes will benefit all carers and informal workers, men included. We must do what we can to support women informal workers and unpaid carers to come together and demand their right to an economy that works for them – with organisations of Black, indigenous, and minority ethnic and migrant women workers at the heart of this struggle. Racial inequalities mean that these minority groups are always the most overlooked, so until their work and rights are equally valued and supported, we won't stop.

**This isn't about getting more women into work, it's about changing the system that too often ignores, oppresses and excludes women. This is about women's fundamental rights, and pushing for an economy that works for all people and our planet.**

## WHY OXFAM?

Around the world, women's rights activists and economists are pushing for this better, more just world. With decades of experience working with them, fighting for women's rights and economic justice, Oxfam is in a strong position to contribute to this global network and growing movement.

This work builds on our history of challenging social expectations and norms around unpaid care work, violence against women and girls, unfair market systems and economic inequality. It builds on years of influencing policy-makers to tackle this problem, and of collaborating with civil society and women's rights organisations, as well as feminist economists. It builds on our work supporting women's organisations to join forces and demand change. Together, we've already developed innovative research tools that measure unpaid care work (such as household care surveys), and influenced national statistics offices and governments to explore alternative measures of economic progress.



Unpaid care responsibilities mean that women face particular pressures on their time – with 42% of working-age women unwillingly outside the paid labour force as a result.

**CHANGE IS HAPPENING** – This work builds on past successes of various organisations we partner with, including:

- The Bangladesh Domestic Workers’ Rights Network that **pushed for a protection policy**, improving the lives of over 1.3 million domestic workers.
- Youth Alive! Kenya and NOPE who worked with women in informal settlements in Kenya, leading to the government **increasing the budget for accessible water points** and Early Childhood Development Education Centres by 30% and 11%, respectively.
- The Scottish Government has openly recognised the care sector as a key function of our economy and has committed to **developing economic measures** that take ‘proper account’ of both formal and informal care.
- The Domestic Workers Rising Platform that secured **improved insurance at work** for 1.1 million domestic workers in South Africa.

Other **stories of progress** include (and are not limited to): New Zealand’s 2019 wellbeing budget, a new law in Cercado province in Bolivia to provide public care services, and various local laws in Philippines requiring unpaid care work to be included in budgeting processes.

The Covid-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented increase in workers’ protections, although still not enough. In Brazil, for example, emergency financial aid was introduced which has led to activists pushing for more policy change so that this emergency aid can become a permanent part of the social support infrastructure.



There’s a groundswell of women’s rights activists and economists working for this better, fairer world. And with decades of experience fighting for women’s rights and economic justice, Oxfam is in a strong position to contribute to this growing movement.

## WHAT WILL OXFAM DO?

We'll focus on where we can have the biggest impact, in eight to ten countries across Asia, Africa, Middle East and in the UK. We will:

- **SUPPORT:** We'll support groups of women informal workers and unpaid carers to drive change – we'll invest in, stand with, and support them, helping them to access the resources needed to come together and claim their rights.
- **SPEAK OUT:** We'll do everything we can to influence how the world defines, talks and thinks about the economy and the true value of work accomplished by women – in particular, we'll push governments and companies to actively recognise, value and invest in all work carried out by women.
- **DEMONSTRATE CHANGE:** We'll partner with others to develop and deliver projects to demonstrate the lasting change we need – that show how valuing and sharing work more fairly can change lives for good (for example those where we've made water points more accessible, demonstrating the impact on women's time).

**Importantly, we'll also invest in our own policies and behaviour in order to 'walk the talk' on quality employment, care provision, keeping people safe from harm, and to be held to account by the people we work with.**

We envision that this work will help drive fundamental and innovative shifts in how the economy is understood, and what 'work' truly means. It should lead to governments and employers ensuring ALL workers and carers are treated equally, supported and invested in.

## HOW WILL WE KNOW IT'S WORKING?

We'll know it's working when millions of women who contribute to their societies and economies through informal jobs and unpaid care work have their work recognised, measured, invested in and valued – and are ultimately out of poverty.

**We'll know it's working when we see:**

**EQUAL RIGHTS:** We want to see millions of women informal workers and unpaid carers including women migrant, Black and minority ethnic workers having the same access to rights as those in formal contracted and 'quality' jobs, including the right to participate in economic and labour decision making.

**RESPECT, RECOGNITION AND INVESTMENT:** We want to see a shift in how women's informal and unpaid work is concretely valued by governments and businesses in the 8-10 countries where we work. This will be demonstrated by things like increased government spending on social care, and company policies such as sick and parental leave. We also want to see a societal shift in how work is publicly viewed and talked about, recognising the effort and true value of all work.

**A FAIR, CARING ECONOMY:** We want to see the reality of informal work and time spent on unpaid care work being used by 2-3 governments or international bodies to redefine economic success, and to make decisions that support progress and the people doing that work. This must include sectors that are predominantly occupied by minority groups who tend to be the most excluded, such as domestic cleaning.

## LET'S DO THIS TOGETHER

As ever, we rely on the solidarity and generosity of those who share our vision of a kinder, fairer more equal world. Emerging from the pandemic, now's the time to reflect on the reality of work and its true contribution to our society – to truly transform the way work is seen and whose work is valued. We all have a part to play. Together, let's fund, campaign, and join the growing global movement and make a difference to the lives of 1.3 billion women workers worldwide. Let's join together to profoundly change our global economy, for a future where everyone has the power and respect needed to overcome poverty and injustice for good.

Our work is aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals and the pledge to leave no one behind. We focus on where we believe Oxfam and its partners and the communities we support can make the biggest difference to people's lives. This 'Valuing Women's Work' strategy specifically addresses SDG1: No poverty; SDG 5: Gender equality; SDG 8: Decent work & economic growth; and SDG 10: Reduce inequality.



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- 1, 2 [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms\\_626831.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_626831.pdf)
- 3 <https://indepth.oxfam.org.uk/time-to-care/>
- 4 <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN06838/SN06838.pdf>
- 5 <https://www.consultancy.uk/news/27229/womens-jobs-hit-hardest-by-covid-19> & [https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS\\_813449/lang--en/index.htm](https://www.ilo.org/global/about-the-ilo/newsroom/news/WCMS_813449/lang--en/index.htm)