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Just Transition and Gender – A Review

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Just Transition and Gender – A Review

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I. Introduction.

The UN’s Just Transition Guidelines, negotiated in the International Labor Organization, emphasize the importance of gender and “the strong gender dimension of many environmental challenges.”¹ Gender is also a critical lens for the world of work and social protection. We face a persistent gender gap in labor force participation and appropriate social protection, revealed and deepened by the COVID 19 pandemic.² Efforts on Just Transition so far, though, have focused mostly on the phaseout of coal-fired power, involving a mostly male workforce, as opposed to promoting decent work for women.³

This paper gives a labor movement perspective on the gender dimension of Just Transition and its critical importance in an effective response to the climate emergency. It outlines UN policy on Just Transition; gives examples of on the ground practice on Just Transition; identifies some emerging issues related to gender in Just Transition; and concludes with conclusions and questions.

II. Just Transition – UN policy architecture.

The UN has established global architecture for Just Transition, starting with the ILO Just Transition Guidelines that define the concept and process. The ILO Just Transition Guidelines are the result of a negotiation between experts representing 162 governments, employers and their associations, and unions.⁴ They provide a framework for managing transitions to environmentally sustainable, low carbon economies so that they create decent jobs at scale, minimise impacts on affected workers, make the economy more inclusive, eradicate poverty and promote social protection.⁵

The ILO Just Transition Guidelines were produced with an eye to influencing the negotiation of the Sustainable Development Goals and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change. Indeed, the Paris Agreement enshrines “the imperative of the just transition of the workforce and the creation of decent work.”⁶ Subsequent decisions in the UN climate negotiations have reinforced the importance of Just Transition as a key part of climate action under the Paris Agreement and in March 2021, UN Secretary General Antonio

¹ (ILO 2015)

² (Azcona 2020)

³ (Walk, et al. 2021)

⁴ (ILO 2015)

⁵ (Just Transition Centre 2021)

⁶ (Just Transition Centre 2021)



Guterres called on all states to embrace the ILO Just Transition Guidelines and adopt them as a minimum standard.^{7 8}

Under the ILO Guidelines, Just Transition always involves social dialogue between the social partners. In almost all jurisdictions these are unions, employers, and sometimes government. Social dialogue is itself part of the fundamental rights to freedom of association and effective collective bargaining.⁹ The ILO Guidelines also require a separate and important process of stakeholder engagement involving actors who are not social partners, usually communities and civil society organizations.

Gender is one of the seven Guiding Principles in the ILO Just Transition Guidelines: “Policies and programmes need to take into account the strong gender dimension of many environmental challenges and opportunities. Specific gender policies should be considered in order to ensure equitable outcomes.”¹⁰ Subsequent analytical work by the ILO emphasizes the transformative role that “a just transition with inclusive climate action can play ... in transforming gender norms and furthering gender equality, including in the world of work, while ensuring women have the opportunity to participate as actors, including at the decision-making and leadership level, in combating climate change and spurring green growth.”¹¹ At the same time the ILO notes that “the impacts of climate change, and actions that exclude women” may have magnifying effects on decent work deficits in sectors with large numbers of female workers, such as agriculture.”¹²

Similarly, the Paris Agreement calls for gender responsive adaptation action, including consultation with Indigenous Peoples. The Paris Agreement’s Gender Action Plan (GAP), adopted at COP25, calls for enhanced implementation of gender-responsive climate action at all levels and to preserve local, Indigenous and traditional knowledge and practices in different sectors. It takes into account human rights, Just Transition and the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

III. Experience with Just Transition so far.

Meaningful action on climate change requires fundamental changes to virtually all economic sectors as well as to systems of social protection and care. While more than two-thirds of global emissions come from the energy sector, other sectors such as agriculture are also big contributors.¹³

Action on climate change also includes responses to its impacts. And climate change already has severe impacts on human life, disproportionately affecting women and marginalised groups who risk greater job and income loss. For instance, the income and wellbeing of women living in rural areas who are threatened by the immediate and devastating impacts of climate change, including loss of habitats, soil erosion and desertification, all of which affects food security and incomes. Climate change affects gender

⁷ (United Nations Secretary General 2021)

⁸ (Kadel 2021)

⁹ (United Nations 1948) (ILO 1998)

¹⁰ (ILO 2015)

¹¹ (Dhir 2017)

¹² (Dhir 2017)

¹³ (IPCC 2014)



roles, accessibility to decent work, health, reproductive justice, quality of life and food accessibility, and leads to forced displacements and labour migration, which will increase socio-economic vulnerability and the risk of gender-based violence among migrant and forcibly displaced women.¹⁴

Nonetheless, the focus of most efforts on Just Transition so far has been the energy transition, particularly the phaseout of unabated coal-fired power. This is because the burning of coal accounts for more than 40% of all global CO₂ emissions.¹⁵ Measures to reduce emissions from unabated thermal coal have tended to focus on the phaseout of utility scale coal-fired power and coal mining.

In most countries men hold the overwhelming majority of formal jobs in the coal sector, particularly coal mining.¹⁶ Women who work in the coal sector tend to be employed in clerical and non-technical jobs or, in some countries, work informally as coal pickers or in slave labor-like conditions in illegal mines.¹⁷

Just Transition processes in the coal sector also have focused on pathways for formal workers in coal,¹⁸ which de facto means focusing on mostly on male workers.¹⁹ Pathways for these workers sort primarily into transition to new, good jobs in energy or potentially skilled construction; or enhanced social protection such as a bridge to pension for older workers who are closer to retirement, additional unemployment insurance, and securing health care.

Better practice in Just Transition takes broader approaches to energy transition. One approach targets decent job creation on a regional basis and across different economic sectors, including those with a higher share of women workers. This approach requires real investment in modern infrastructure, including the “soft” infrastructure of care and public quality services. Indeed investment in care brings at least as many economic and long-term social benefits as investment in traditional infrastructure.²⁰ Further, adequate care services and gender appropriate social protection make it possible for more women to participate in formal and decent work.²¹ Higher female workforce participation drives growth, supports household incomes, and accelerates progress on poverty eradication and other key SDGs.²²

Another, related approach focuses primarily on improving the wages and conditions of existing jobs in low emitting sectors, such as construction, renewable energy, and public transport, and creating new and decent jobs in these sectors. The idea is that decent low emissions jobs need to be in place before it is possible to have a Just Transition in the energy or any other high emitting sector. These new, good jobs create opportunities for women to access decent work.²³ However, in many countries specific policies

¹⁴ (UN Women n.d.)

¹⁵ (IEA 2019)

¹⁶ (Kuykendall and Potter 2019) (Nayak 2020)

¹⁷ (The Advocates for Human Rights 2019)

¹⁸ (Piggot 2019)

¹⁹ (Walk, et al. 2021)

²⁰ (Addati 2018) (ITUC 2016)

²¹ (ITUC 2016)

²² (ITUC 2016)

²³ (ILO Green Jobs Program 2015)



need to be put in place, including public, quality care services and education and skills training, so that women can get and keep these quality jobs in sectors that are traditionally dominated by men.²⁴

Finally new initiatives aim to ensure a gender-responsive Just Transition and decent jobs in sectors where women have a substantial share of employment, such as agriculture, tourism, and hospitality. For example, the European Federation of Food, Agriculture, and Tourism Workers has adopted climate change and Just Transition as a priority and is developing policy and collective bargaining models for the issue. South African unions have designed a blueprint for Just Transition in agriculture amongst other sectors, which focuses on the role of women workers. Brazilian unions are in an alliance with women's organization to help drive a gender responsive approach to climate and Just Transition. And in India, the Self Employed Women's Association (SEWA) works with rural women in informal occupations to help them access and own renewable energy for use in agriculture and salt farming, as well as organizing waste pickers for collective bargaining with municipalities. Together with ITUC, SEWA is initiating work on Just Transition for informal women workers in coal regions.

IV. Practice-based issues - Just Transition and gender.

These different on the ground approaches raise questions about how to deliver a gender focus in Just Transition. From a labor movement perspective, the aim of gender responsive and inclusive Just Transition is to ensure that women can get good jobs in traditionally male-dominated sectors, such as energy and construction. It ensures that Just Transition processes also have pathways to new jobs and enhanced social protection for women workers who are not directly employed in high emitting sectors. It is to ensure that jobs are decent and family-supporting across all sectors. And transform economies and societies that properly value, fund, and support care work. Labor unions and informal workers' associations can ensure that gender issues are a key part of Just Transition processes.

Trade unions have developed responses and practical approaches in these areas. In North America, Building Trades unions have developed programs to promote apprenticeships, training, and jobs for women in the skilled trades.²⁵ With the support of unions, some of these programs have become part of government procurement.²⁶ More broadly, trade unions are working to improve the quality of jobs in sectors that traditionally employ more women, such as care, cleaning, education, and hospitality. Although it is early days, trade unions in Europe are also exploring how to include an explicit focus on gender and job quality/job creation in sectors with a substantial share of female workers, as part of regional Just Transition processes. And trade unions continue to campaign for investments in care including the creation of decent care jobs as well as measures to address the disproportionate impacts on women in all their diversity of the COVID 19 pandemic, both of which are relevant to economy-wide and household approaches to Just Transition.

²⁴ (Dhir 2017) (Piggot 2019)

²⁵ (NABTU 2021)

²⁶ (Canadian CED Network 2019)



Finally there is an emerging body of (mostly academic) work on gender, formality, and job quality within agriculture and the related fields of nature based solutions and climate-smart agriculture.²⁷ Here, though, it must be said that real improvements for women workers in agriculture, afforestation, reforestation, and other similar activities, lie in changing deep structural issues such as land ownership and access, informality and precarity of work, and entrenched gender inequality.²⁸ It remains to be seen whether new concepts such as nature-based solutions contribute to or entrench these structural issues.

V. Conclusions.

On a global level, adequate and increased investments in Just Transition, its inclusion in policies and measures in new and enhanced NDCs, and the application of the ILO Guidelines for a Just Transition are critical parts of delivering the Paris Agreement and the SDGs. Specifically, governments and international financial institutions must ensure that Just Transition measures and initiatives are based on rights and social dialogue; ensure gender equality; guarantee decent work for all; seek to formalize informal work; and ensure universal access to social protection.²⁹ Other important flanking aspects of Just Transition include universal access to public quality care, health and education services, including transport services; overcoming sectoral and occupational segregation; realizing equal pay for work of equal value; eradicating wage and skills gaps; and providing occupational health and safety.³⁰

On a practical level and nationally, ensuring gender equality in Just Transition requires considering “specific gender policies .. in order to promote equitable outcomes.”³¹ With this perspective, it seems clear that a narrow approach to Just Transition, focusing only on 1-1 transfer of coal workers to new jobs in energy or to pension, is just a starting point.

As discussed above, specific policies and investments are needed to get gender equitable outcomes. These include policies to ensure that Just Transition measures for new jobs and social protection cover women workers in the energy value chain, including clerical and service workers, and in energy regions more broadly.³² They also include measures to break down sectoral and occupational segregation, so that women can get the skills, training, and opportunities they need to get good new jobs in low emitting sectors. Sectors with majority female employment such as care continue to have worse wages, more precarity, and worse conditions than sectors dominated by men. Investing in decent jobs in care at scale,

²⁷ (Bechauf 2021)

²⁸ (Lambrou 2020)

²⁹ (ILO 2015)

³⁰ (Dhir 2017) (ITUC 2017)

³¹ (ILO 2015)

³² (UNECE 2019)



and eliminating these gender deficits at work, drives economic and social development as well as increasing opportunities to raise household incomes.³³

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³³ (ITUC 2016)



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