

The Price of Development

80 Years of Economic Colonisation
in Asia and the Pacific



Introduction

For the past eight decades, the global economic order has been governed by an architecture designed in the waning years of World War II—not in the interests of the global majority, but to preserve the hegemony of former colonial powers. As the nations of Asia and the Pacific fought for independence from colonialism, a new appendage of global power was being institutionalised through the Bretton Woods institutions, namely the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. Eighty years on, this international financial architecture continues to shape the political economies of our region in profound and enduring ways.

Framed as pillars of post-war reconstruction and global stability and ‘development’, the IMF and the World Bank have instead entrenched a model of economic governance rooted in neoliberalism, extraction and structural inequality. For many countries in Asia and the Pacific that are still fighting for liberation, their creation marked not a rupture from colonial domination, but its reconfiguration.

This report situates these International Financial Institutions (IFIs) within a longer history of colonialism and imperialism. It argues that contemporary economic policies are not departures from that history, but rather its continuation in many forms.

The international financial architecture was built upon centuries of extractive colonialism. Where empires once relied on military force to seize land, labour and resources, the post-World War II order in 1944 introduced a subtler, more enduring system of control—one enforced through persistent debt, loan conditionalities and policy prescriptions. The language shifted from conquest to ‘development’ and yet the logic remained the same: to organise our economies in the service of external interests. For communities across the region, particularly women, this transition was not liberation. It was the continuation of subjugation under new, shiny terms. What was once taken by force is now extracted through fiscal and monetary discipline.

The Neoliberal Project Of Peddling The ‘Development’ Myth

Over the past eight decades, ‘development’ has been deployed as both a promise and a threat. It is invoked to justify sweeping economic reforms, even as it obscures the structural violence embedded within them. In Asia and the Pacific, development has been sold as a pathway out of poverty, through infrastructure, investment and integration into global markets. Yet beneath these promises lies the machinery of neoliberalism.

From post-war reconstruction to present-day debt crises, IFIs have advanced a singular vision of development anchored in liberalisation, privatisation, deregulation, austerity and export-oriented/import-dependent growth. Across Asia and the Pacific, these policies have been imposed in order to restructure economies to serve global capital while systematically undermining national sovereignty and public welfare systems. Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), fiscal austerity and policy conditionalities have deepened inequalities within and between countries and disproportionately burdened those already marginalised, particularly women, Indigenous Peoples, rural communities and workers both in formal and informal employment. These policies are not neutral, but deliberate instruments that restructure economies to favour transnational capital while weakening public institutions and eroding state responsibility to its people.

The result, thus, is not development, but maldevelopment. Across Asia and the Pacific, this has taken concrete and devastating forms. In South Asia, countries such as Sri Lanka and Pakistan have been pushed into cycles of debt distress, where austerity measures have driven up the cost of basic goods and stripped away essential subsidies. Women, who manage households and stretch limited resources to ensure survival, are forced into deeper precarity, often relying on informal debt just to feed their families.

In Southeast Asia, the push toward privatisation has hollowed out public services. In the Philippines, for example, public investment in social housing has sharply declined, shifting the burden onto the urban poor. Women in informal settlements carry this weight most acutely, navigating insecure housing, rising costs of living and the daily labour of making ends meet.



These policies are not neutral, but deliberate instruments that restructure economies to favour transnational capital while weakening public institutions and eroding state responsibility to its people.



In Central Asia, neoliberal reforms intersect with entrenched patriarchal systems to exclude women from control over land and resources. As extractive industries expand, women are displaced not only physically but economically and socially, cut off from livelihoods they have long sustained.

In East Asia, export-driven industrialisation and global value chains have entrenched highly gendered labour regimes, where women are concentrated in low-wage manufacturing and precarious work. Labour rights and social protections have become the cost of sustaining his so-called competitiveness.

In the Pacific, the crisis of 'development' is stark. Small island states, which are already at the frontlines of the climate crisis, are pushed further into debt while IFIs promote so-called 'climate solutions' that prioritise large-scale infrastructure and renewable energy projects that often fail to respond to community

needs. These interventions risk reproducing extractive models under a green label, while communities continue to bear the brunt of climate catastrophes they did not create.

Yet these are not isolated failures. They are predictable outcomes of a model designed to prioritise profit over people.

The Architecture Of Bondage: Debt, Trade And Extraction

At the heart of this system lies debt, a mechanism that disciplines nations and binds them into cycles of dependency. For many countries in our region, debt is not simply a financial obligation; it is a tool of control.

When crises emerge, which are often triggered by global shocks beyond national control, IFIs intervene not to protect people but to stabilise markets and ensure that creditors are repaid. The cost is thus borne by the public through cuts to health, education and social protection, through higher taxes and reduced subsidies and through the quiet erosion of dignity and security.

This architecture of bondage is reinforced in multiple ways. Corporate capture, for one, has shifted the power of decision-making away from democratic institutions and into the hands of private entities. Essential public services such as water, energy, education and healthcare, are increasingly treated as commodities, accessible only to those who have the means to pay. Meanwhile, a broader military-industrial-financial nexus sustains extractive economies, securing trade routes and resource frontiers at the expense of communities and often escalating conflict and violence that women and communities must endure and resist. At the same time, unequal trade regimes lock countries into positions as exporters of raw materials and cheap

labour, limiting the possibility of building self-determined, truly resilient economies.

Increasingly, this architecture extends into the realm of climate governance. IFIs are playing a central role in dictating climate responses by promoting market-based solutions, debt-financed adaptation and large-scale renewable energy projects. Rather than addressing the structural drivers of the climate crisis, these false solutions deepen inequality while opening up new frontiers for profit and extraction. Across these processes, a familiar pattern is reproduced: wealth flows outward, while risk and hardship remain rooted in our communities.

Reframing Women's Labour

A feminist analysis demands that we look beyond macroeconomic indicators and ask an important question: Whose labour sustains this system and at what cost?

IFI frameworks often celebrate increasing women's participation in the labour force as a sign of progress. But this narrow metric obscures the conditions under which women work and the vast realm of her labour that remains invisible.

Across the region, neoliberal economies rely on the subsidy of women's unpaid and underpaid work. As public services are cut or privatised, the responsibility for healthcare, education and social reproduction is transferred to households, specifically to women. This unpaid labour props up economies while limiting women's own opportunities and autonomy. Meanwhile, paid work has become increasingly precarious. Women are concentrated in low-wage, informal and 'flexible' labour sectors, from garment factories to domestic work to the expanding platform or gig economy. These jobs offer little security, scant social



Yet these are not isolated failures. They are predictable outcomes of a model designed to prioritise profit over people.



protections and minimal recognition of rights. This is thus the reality of women's 'double burden': women must navigate the harsh realities of her paid work and the difficulties of unpaid domestic work, both within systems shaped by her class, race, ethnicity and even migration status. Rural and indigenous women, migrant women and those in informal economies face compounded layers of exploitation and exclusion. Land dispossession, labour flexibilisation and environmental degradation have intensified gendered vulnerabilities, while corporate-led development projects, often facilitated by IFI financing, have displaced communities and undermined collective rights. These processes, racialised and classed as they are, reproduce hierarchies that mirror colonial patterns of domination and exploitation.

For APWLD, women's empowerment cannot be reduced to market participation. It must mean strengthening women's capacity to exercise real power and control over their own lives and over the terms on which they engage with economic and social systems. This is only possible through the full realisation of women's human rights. Anything less is not empowerment, but exploitation repackaged.

Why This Report: Naming The System, Amplifying Our Resistance

For APWLD, this report emerges from decades of organising, knowledge production,

analysis and struggle by women and feminist movements across Asia and the Pacific. It is both an indictment and an offering.

This report brings together seven chapters that trace the contours of economic imperialism in our region. Each chapter examines a specific facet: the historical evolution of IFI interventions, the political economy of debt and fiscal control, the impacts of austerity on public services and social protection, the gendered consequences of labour and migration regimes, the role of IFIs in climate finance and food and environmental injustice, the expansion of digital and financial capitalism, and the criminalisation and repression of dissent.

Taken together, these analyses expose the systemic roots of the multiple and intersecting economic, social and ecological crises facing the region. They demonstrate how these crises are not accidental, but are produced and sustained by an international financial system designed to prioritise profit over people and capital over care.

But this report is not only about what is broken. It is also about what lives and persists.

CHAPTER 1

Corporate Capture of International Financial Architecture



Despite formal independence, many nations in the Global South continue to navigate unequal political and economic power dynamics that have sustained the extraction of wealth and resources from local economies, under the guise of globalisation.

Policies of external dependence have continued, as weak domestic capacity of the newly independent states often compelled them to borrow from wealthy nations. Following World War II, institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, originally established to support post-war reconstruction, came to play a key role in sustaining unequal financial structures through their governance systems and policy frameworks. Further, alliances such as North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO) further entrenched neoliberalism as the dominant economic development model.¹

Obligatory conditionalities in loan agreements, also called Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) are among the primary ways International Financial Institutions (IFIs) such as the IMF and World Bank, wield significant influence in shaping macroeconomic policies in indebted economies. These conditionalities include drastic cuts in public spending, regressive taxation, the elimination of price controls, liberalising trade and the financial sector as well as flexibilisation of the labour market.² Today, of the countries in Asia and the Pacific, many have been integrated into global markets to prioritise foreign investment and exports, while minimising government regulation, often at the cost of the growth of local industries and robustness of social, economic and political structures. This has reinforced vulnerability to un/foreseen crises, resulting in recurring cycles of borrowing. In addition to the IFIs, the WTO plays

¹ Salvador, J. (2024). *Scoping Paper on Trade and Corporate Power in Asia Pacific*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). [Unpublished].

² McQuillan, L. (2026, March 21). *International Monetary Fund*. Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/International-Monetary-Fund/Criticism-and-debate>

a significant role in controlling the economy through binding trade rules and conditionalities. For the highly import-dependent economies and mostly agrarian countries in Asia and the Pacific, these constraints compound existing debt burdens, force local farmers to rely on expensive chemical fertilisers and pesticides and restructure agricultural production to be dependent on imported agricultural products. Ultimately, this system further impoverishes medium, small and marginal farmers while fueling the corporatisation of agriculture. As reliance on external borrowing grows, debt functions as a structural tool to shift resources and wealth from the Global South to the Global North. This is clear from significant financial outflows generated by massive debt-servicing that often exceeds new financing inflows to indebted countries. Thus, the exploitative legacies of colonial financial systems continue to manifest in the present-day, as wealth, capital, technology and intellectual property that remain concentrated in the Global North.³

The Corporate Capture Of Multilateralism

Multilateralism, based in theory on principles of equality, inclusivity and mutual cooperation between countries to ensure Development Justice and peace for all nations, has itself been compromised.

The contemporary global order, while increasingly interconnected and interdependent, is yet simultaneously fractured. Escalating geopolitical tensions among major powers and raging conflicts have eroded the landscape for democracy,

human rights and pushed multilateralism into further decline. Across regions, new wars and civil unrest continue to erupt, authoritarianism and corruption is on the rise and military spending have reached historic highs⁴ while communities are pushed deeper into debt and poverty, struggling to make ends meet. These expose the failures in global governance as much as the persistence of colonial and imperial histories prioritising profit and power over people.

Over the past decades, multilateralism has been infiltrated by corporations, IFIs and corporate-led foundations institutionalised as legitimate partners in decision-making processes. Framed through the language of 'partnership', 'innovation', 'networked multilateralism' and 'financing gaps', this shift normalises the presence of private interests in a system mandated for the public good, blurring the distinct role of rights-holders and duty-bearers.

In its eightieth year, the United Nations (UN) finds itself at a critical juncture and in severe institutional and political crisis.⁵ Corporate influence within the UN system is exercised through multiple channels: formal mechanisms such as the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) consultative status, where business associations such as the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) and the International Organisation of Employers (IOE) leverage significant access to influence intergovernmental policy processes; institutional platforms such as

3 Taneja, A., Kamande, A., Gomez, C. G., Abed, D., Lawson, M. & Neelanjana, M. (2025). *Takers Not Makers: The Unjust Poverty and Unearned Wealth of Colonialism*. OXFAM International. <https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2025-01/English%20-%20Davos%20Full%20Report%202025.pdf>

4 Stockholm International Peace Research Institute. (2025). *Unprecedented rise in global military expenditure as European and Middle East spending surges*. <https://www.sipri.org/media/press-release/2025/unprecedented-rise-global-military-expenditure-european-and-middle-east-spending-surges>

5 Reuters. (2026). *Guterres warns of UN's 'imminent financial collapse'*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/un-chief-guterres-warns-imminent-financial-collapse-2026-01-30/>

the UN Global Compact,⁶ which promotes voluntary corporate commitments without binding accountability; and financial vehicles such as the UN Foundation, which have become key conduits for private sector funding and influence.⁷

Corporations thus operate as donors, implementing partners and policy ‘experts’, using their financial leverage to shape programme agendas and institutional direction. Within the UN system, the convergence of financial dependency and corporate influence is reshaping both process and substance. Corporate actors are not only present in negotiations and high-level panels, but are increasingly positioned as agenda-setters in global policy spaces—

from digital governance to food systems.⁸ This often advances technocratic and market-based solutions that fail to address structural inequalities and has real impacts on peoples lives.

These developments are inseparable from the broader neoliberal international financial architecture, driven by institutions like the IMF and World Bank and reinforced through global trade and investment regimes. This architecture has entrenched austerity, privatisation and deregulation as dominant policy paradigms, systematically constraining fiscal space and weakening public institutions. By enabling corporate power to shape national economies policies, these dynamics disproportionately impact women and marginalised communities by enabling corporate power to shape national economies and global governance.

6 UN Global Compact. (n.d.). *Our Participants*. <https://un-globalcompact.org/what-is-gc/participants/>

7 UN Foundation. (2023). *Our Partners*. <https://unfoundation.org/who-we-are/our-partners/>

8 Civil Society Organisations. (2020). *Letter to UNSG on Food Systems Summit*. Civil Society and Indigenous Peoples’ Mechanism. https://www.csm4cfs.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/EN_CS0-Letter-to-UNSG-on-UN-food-systems-summit.pdf



The world is now less than five years away from the development targets of the 2030 Agenda and yet, none of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are on track to be achieved.



Rather than enhancing inclusivity, multistakeholder approaches have contributed to a deterioration of global governance, aligning UN processes with actors complicit in perpetuating inequality, climate inaction and human rights violations, while granting them disproportionate influence. Without confronting the structural power of neoliberalism and dismantling corporate capture within the international financial architecture, the impact on multilateralism continues to extend beyond institutional processes and reshape the very substance and direction of global development itself.

The Corporate Capture Of The Development Agenda

The world is now less than five years away from the development targets of the 2030 Agenda and yet, none of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are on track to be achieved.

The UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) SDG Progress Report of 2026 states that 88 per cent of the target goals will not be achieved by 2030 in Asia and the Pacific.⁹ The report shows slow progress in most goals and a negative regression in environmental targets. Data availability for the region also remains a massive gap due to poor national statistical capacities. The state of the 17 SDGs reflect that the current neoliberal paradigm of development is not delivering and instead has paved the way for 'false solutions' that further widen the inequality gap.

Sustainable Development Goals on Gender Equality (SDG 5) and SDG 16 on Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions have persistent data gaps. There is a stark contrast between progress in SDG 9 on Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure and the regression in SDG 13 on Climate Action. Critical areas such as decent work (SDG 8), reducing inequalities (SDG 10), responsible consumption and production (SDG 12) and partnership for the goals (SDG 17) have made little progress. It is expected that 103 of 117 targets will be missed, while lack of available data for 52 targets remains a major challenge to measure implementation.¹⁰

In 2021, the UN Secretary General released the 'Our Common Agenda' and a series of policy papers that discusses the need to restore trust in multilateralism. It also aims to 'turbocharge' the SDGs through different investments, estimating a USD4 trillion gap in financing the SDGs. Thus, the UN has proposed 'networked multilateralism' or 'multistakeholderism' that invites as many stakeholders in the development process, including the private sector and big businesses.

9 United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. (2026). *Asia and the Pacific SDG progress report 2026*. https://repository.unescap.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/86497019-0af7-40e3-b1d0-f6c5641bbf0e/content?gl=1*z863kl*_ga*MTQyNDI3NzY3Ny4xNzIyO-TU2Mjg2*_ga_SB1ZX36Y86*cze3NzM5MDcwNDYkbzEyNiRn-MCR0MTc3MzkwNzA0NiRqNjAkBDakaDIwMDkxMDczOTM

10 United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. (2026). *Asia and the Pacific SDG progress report 2026*. https://repository.unescap.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/86497019-0af7-40e3-b1d0-f6c5641bbf0e/content?gl=1*z863kl*_ga*MTQyNDI3NzY3Ny4xNzIyO-TU2Mjg2*_ga_SB1ZX36Y86*cze3NzM5MDcwNDYkbzEyNiRn-MCR0MTc3MzkwNzA0NiRqNjAkBDakaDIwMDkxMDczOTM



#BlockBlackRock campaign

On 25 May 2022, UN Women announced a partnership with BlackRock Inc. to promote the growth of gender lens investing.¹¹ BlackRock Inc. is an investment firm with a long-standing history of investing in large scale infrastructure, extractives and fossil fuel projects that harm grassroots communities, disproportionately impacting women in the Global South. The backlash was swift, leading to serious concerns and global debates on the credibility of the UN and the extent of influence of the private sector in UN spaces.

Feminist groups led the #BlockBlackRock campaign. In August 2022, 600+ Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), feminist activists and women-led groups/ organisations around the world jointly signed a letter to UN Women and demanded an immediate termination of the partnership.¹² The public backlash ultimately resulted in the termination of the partnership.¹³

11 AWID and other organisations. (2022). *Feminists Demand End Of UN Women's Partnership With Blackrock, Inc.* AWID. <https://www.awid.org/news-and-analysis/feminists-demand-end-un-womens-partnership-blackrock-inc>

12 Third World Network. (2022). *UN: CSOs, activists demand UN Women rescind its BlackRock partnership.* <https://www.twn.my/title2/unsd/2022/unsd220802.htm>

13 Kutz, J. (2022, August 25). *UN Women terminates partnership with investment firm BlackRock after public outcry.* The 19th News. <https://19thnews.org/2022/08/un-women-partnership-blackrock-public-outcry/>

Who Really Finances The Development Agenda?

At the Fourth International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD4) in 2025, we witnessed the takeover of the development narrative by the neoliberal agenda. Governments of the Global North have declared their inability to fulfill Official Development Assistance (ODA), as well as climate finance obligations. Instead there is an increased push for financial instruments such as blended finance, debt swaps and carbon market mechanisms,^{14,15,16} tapping the so-called potential of private capital and loans to diversify the sources of funds. But these have been critiqued for not necessarily being pro-poor, supporting projects that may not align with country plans, giving preferential treatment to donors' own private sector firms and failing to ensure stakeholder participation, among other concerns.¹⁷ While the Outcome Document of the FfD4 or the Compromiso de Sevilla, aims to address the

14 Blended Finance refers to a practice of combining development assistance with public or private resources, so as to leverage additional funds from other actors. It is promoted by IFIs as a way to mitigate risks and attract more private sector financing, but it is critiqued because it does not necessarily support pro-poor activities. | Periera, Javier. (2017). *Blended Finance: What it is, how it works and how it is used.* Oxfam. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/blended-finance-what-it-is-how-it-works-and-how-it-is-used-620186/>

15 A Debt Swap is an agreement between a government and one or more of its creditors to replace existing sovereign debt with a spending commitment towards a specific development goal such as in climate action, nature conservation, education etc; The World Bank and IMF. (2024, July). *Debt for Development Swaps: An Approach Framework.* <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099080524122596875/pdf/BOSIB170e4732504619bc417c0d0996ec21.pdf>

16 Carbon Market mechanisms refer to market systems where a price is put on any reduction in carbon emissions by a project or initiative and these units of savings or carbon credits can be bought or sold by governments, companies or individuals to offset their own emissions for instance. There are different types of market mechanisms. For more on 'Nature Markets' and related instruments: Hache, F. (2026). *The New Nature Markets Explained to My Grandmother.* Third World Network and Green Finance Observatory. https://greenfinanceobservatory.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/newmarketsfinalebc_compressed.pdf

17 Periera, Javier. (2017). *Blended Finance: What it is, how it works and how it is used.* Oxfam. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/blended-finance-what-it-is-how-it-works-and-how-it-is-used-620186/>

financing gap in the 2030 Agenda, it falls short of recognising the systemic root causes of multiple crises. In its many chapters, it refers to the private sector as a potential and untapped resource and recommends policy reforms at the national level to de-risk and open local economies for greater Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs), while also recognising and mandating IFIs such as the IMF-World Bank and multilateral development banks to propose reforms, particularly in debt sustainability, management and restructuring.

The *Compromiso de Sevilla* sealed mobilisation of private finance through financial instruments such as blended finance and FDIs. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-Operation

and Development (OECD), blended finance aims to leverage developmental or public funds to mobilise private sector investments, in particular, sustainable development programmes. This works on the notion that public finance is not sufficient to deliver the SDGs and instead proposes to invite or 'blend' public and private funds to deliver development programmes.¹⁸ Blended finance is therefore being promoted as a mechanism to encourage private investment, and reform of financial infrastructure is encouraged to allow such arrangements.¹⁹

18 OECD. (2025). *Blended finance*. <https://www.oecd.org/en/topics/sub-issues/leveraging-private-finance-for-development/blended-finance.html>

19 United Nations General Assembly. (2025). *Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 25 August 2025*. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/RES/79/323>



Blended Finance Through The European Union Global Gateway

The Global Gateway 2021 is the European Union (EU)'s new flagship strategy to support infrastructure projects across the world in five priority areas: the digital sector, climate and energy, transport, health, and education and research. The proposed plan aims to mobilise EUR300 billion in investments through the 'Team Europe' approach, bringing together EU institutions, EU member states, European financial institutions and national development finance institutions.²⁰

The EU signed Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) with Vietnam and the Philippines in 2022. In Vietnam, the MOU supported implementation of a 'Just Energy Transition Partnership (JETP)' with a mutual commitment to set up a multi-project credit facility worth USD15.5 billion.²¹ In the Philippines, it was an MOU worth EUR60 million for a green economy programme intended to reduce Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions by 75 per cent by 2030.²²

However, the Global Gateway Programme has been critiqued for prioritising the promotion of European businesses in the Global South over development objectives such as poverty

20 Sial, F. & Sol, X. (2022, September 29). *EU-global-gateway-report-FINAL*. Research Gate. https://www.researchgate.net/publication/367524455_EU-global-gateway-report-FINAL

21 European Commission. (2022, December 14). *International Agreement to support Viet Nam's ambitious climate and energy goals*. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_7671

22 European Commission. (2023, October 25). *Global Gateway Forum: EU and Philippines sign €60 million Green Economy Programme*. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_22_7671

reduction; the promotion of EU's commercial and geopolitical interests; the encouragement of the privatisation of infrastructure and public services in the energy sector in the Global South; increasing the debt burden of partner countries; negative impacts on human rights and the environment; and that it is not transparent and democratic in development and implementation.²³ The EU is criticised for excluding the Global South countries and CSOs from its designing, governance and priority-setting process and adopting a top-down approach while engaging with big corporations' interests.

23 Eurodad, Oxfam, & Counter Balance. (2024). *Who profits from the Global Gateway?*. https://cisp.cachefly.net/assets/articles/attachments/93807_01_eu-gg-report-2024-final.pdf

Other financing approaches have been Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) and debt swaps.

Public Private Partnerships (PPPs)—partnerships between the public and private sectors for development projects—have been adopted by national governments to deliver basic social services such as healthcare, education and infrastructure. These services have traditionally been provided by governments but PPP approaches have been adopted in contexts of basic services such as water and electricity being privatised, liberalised and deregulated. According to the World Bank, PPPs are an approach to support 'efficient' and 'high quality' and 'cost-effective' services.²⁴

But decades of implementation and experiences of grassroots communities say otherwise. Oftentimes, PPP projects lack accountability and safeguarding mechanisms that have led to displacement of communities and/or the inability of governments to regulate private sector interventions. Rising inequality as a result has also led to further marginalisation of grassroots communities. 'Debt for Development Swaps' became

a popular approach due to the debt crisis accumulated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Debt swaps are agreements between a government and one or more of its creditors to replace existing sovereign debt with one or more liabilities that include a spending commitment towards a specific development goal such as climate action, education, social services or others.²⁵ However, this does not address the systemic imbalances in creditor-debtor relationships. It may even reinforce the dominant creditor control of developing countries' resources and policy choices. Debt-for-nature swaps have been criticised for being overly complex instruments that transfer control of biodiversity to the private sector and financialise conservation. They have been called a false solution to both the debt and the climate crisis as it has a very small effect on overall debt burdens and it distracts from more effective climate action.²⁶ Debt swaps also do not reverse conditionalities attached to previous loans.

25 The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. (2024). *Debt for Development Swaps An Approach Framework*. The World Bank. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099080524122596875/pdf/BOSIB170e4732504619bc-417c0d0996ec21.pdf>

26 Meadows, S. (2026, June 22). *Inside the Rise of Debt-For-Nature Swaps*. New Lines Magazine. <https://newlinesmag.com/reportage/inside-the-rise-of-debt-for-nature-swaps/>

24 World Bank Group. (2024). *Public-Private Partnerships (International Monetary Fund)*. <https://ppp.worldbank.org/library/public-private-partnerships-international-monetary-fund>

In 2024, Indonesia and the United States (US) signed a debt-for-nature swap of USD35 million, that aimed to conserve coral reefs in the country, with the funding offset by canceling sovereign debt payable to the US.²⁷ But a study of past debt-for-nature deals between Indonesia and the US says that they often failed to deliver additional resources to the debtor country and its budgets, failed to deliver more resources for conservation or the climate and it had a negligible effect on overall debt burdens of Indonesia.²⁸

The 2030 Agenda is a litmus test on whether development policies globally can achieve human rights and environmental standards. Current trajectories, however, make it abundantly clear that they cannot.

The Enduring Myth Of Climate Finance

The abundance of false climate solutions in response to the climate crisis is an extension of this corporate capture of multilateral institutions, including IFIs and multilateral development banks, and of a neoliberal development paradigm that places profits over people and the environment. The assumption that the climate crisis can be solved through financial markets, private capital and debt-generating instruments has reproduced the same patterns of dispossession across communities. Rather than mitigating environmental destruction, these market-oriented mechanisms accelerate the corporate plunder of land, water and oceans.

Carbon markets, blue bonds, sustainability bonds, debt swaps and a bewildering array of financial instruments are increasingly promoted to indebted states as climate finance or as ways to fund adaptation, mitigation, conservation, resilience and so-called just transition. Yet these instruments often shift costs and risks onto communities while preserving the profits and privileges of wealthy states and private investors. For instance, Small Island Developing States (SIDs) have faced enormous climate-related economic losses over recent decades,



Public Private Partnerships (PPPs) in Southeast Asia

Water privatisation schemes in Manila, Philippines and Jakarta, Indonesia largely failed to provide efficient and affordable access to clean water to poor populations and in particular, impacted women's access to water.²⁹ Women were burdened with the additional task of trying to find water and managing their families' meagre budgets between water, food and other needs. In both cases, the national governments passed laws that allowed private sector take-over of water management, particularly in major cities. This also led to increased prices that the government could not or was unwilling to regulate.³⁰

27 Ambari, M. (2024, August 30). *\$35m debt-for-nature deal aims to protect Indonesia's coral reefs*. Mongabay. <https://news.mongabay.com/2024/08/35m-debt-for-nature-deal-aims-to-protect-indonesias-coral-reefs/>

28 Cassimon, D., Prowse, M. & Essers, D. (2011). *The pitfalls and potential of debt-for-nature swaps: A US-Indonesian case study*, *Global Environmental Change* Volume 21, Issue 1, pp. 93-102. ScienceDirect. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0959378010000981>

29 Pamintuan, M. (2025). *10 Years of SDGs in Asia and the Pacific: A Feminist Analysis*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/10-Years-of-SDGs-in-Asia-and-Pacific_Digital_March2025.pdf

30 Pamintuan, M. (2025). *10 Years of SDGs in Asia and the Pacific: A Feminist Analysis*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/10-Years-of-SDGs-in-Asia-and-Pacific_Digital_March2025.pdf

while being pushed to borrow or rely on market-based instruments to recover from crises they did not create.³¹ Rather than reparations or adequate public finance from high emitters, the Global South faces instruments that reinstate dependency and debt. All of these false solutions, whether framed as conservation finance, just transition technologies, deep-sea mining, nuclear fixes or commodified blue carbon—risk converting the commons into cashflows and locking the Global South into new forms of dispossession.

They are also an attempt by countries of the Global North to avoid obligatory commitments for historical emissions under the agreed-upon framework of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC).³²

31 World Meteorological Organization. (2020). *2020 state of climate services: Risk information and early warning systems*. <https://library.wmo.int/records/item/57191-2020-state-of-climate-services-risk-information-and-early-warning-systems>

32 The framework of Common But Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC) is a critical cornerstone of international climate law and agreements. It recognises that while every country has a responsibility to safeguard the environment, the responsibilities are not equal. It acknowledges that so-called developed nations have historically contributed to greenhouse gas emissions and therefore bear higher responsibility for climate justice and action to address its impacts.

At COP29 in 2024, governments adopted a new global climate finance goal, setting a target of at least USD300 billion per year by 2025 for developing countries, with developed countries taking the lead. The decision also launched efforts to scale up finance to developing countries to USD1.3 trillion per year by 2035. However, the outcome falls far short of what climate justice demands: the urgent delivery of public, grant-based, non-debt-creating and reparative climate finance by developed countries. These obligations must not be diluted or substituted by ODA, private climate investments, Multilateral Development Bank (MDB) lending, carbon markets or other financing that allows wealthy countries and corporations to avoid responsibility. By relying on a wide range of sources, including private finance and multilateral channels, the outcome risks further legitimising profit-driven mechanisms, debt-creating instruments and MDB-led approaches that benefit private investors and corporations over frontline communities.

The World Bank has been designated as interim trustee and host of the secretariat of the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage (FRLD), raising serious concerns



The World Bank has been designated as interim trustee and host of the secretariat of the Fund for Responding to Loss and Damage (FRLD), raising serious concerns given the Bank's long history of debt-driven development, policy conditionalities and by economic imperatives that often prioritise financial management over ecological justice and community self-determination.



given the Bank's long history of debt-driven development, policy conditionalities and by economic imperatives that often prioritise financial management over ecological justice and community self-determination. A particular concern is accountability: unlike governments, the World Bank, other MDBs and private sector actors are not public duty-bearers in the same way, nor are they accountable through democratic and human rights mechanisms in the same manner as states. When climate finance is channelled through or mobilised by these institutions,

affected communities may face additional barriers in holding them accountable for harms, conditionalities, debt burdens or project failures. Public climate finance obligations must therefore be treated distinctly from private finance mobilisation, and must not be outsourced to institutions and investors whose primary accountability lies with creditors, shareholders or financial markets rather than communities.



False Solutions To Climate Crises

Tools such as PPPs and debt-for-nature swaps are also promoted as solutions to address climate crises, but results in countries in our region incurring more debt for a crisis it did not create.

For example, hydropower projects in Nepal are promoted as renewable energy and part of Nepal's decarbonisation pathway to reduce reliance on fossil fuels. These projects are funded by MDBs, such as the Likhu Project, the Tanahu Project, the Upper Trishuli-1 Project and the Upper Arun Project, which report recurring patterns of failures to uphold the rights of Indigenous Peoples. The World Bank is to lead the 1,063 megawatt Upper Arun Hydropower project with blended finance of USD1.71 billion under the ratio of 70 per cent debt to 30 per cent equity.³³ Affected communities across these projects share that Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) was not obtained, customary land rights were disregarded, there was incomplete information disclosure and inadequate compensation and harassment of people who resisted the projects, including through the use of militarised force.³⁴

Despite the fact that the hydropower activities have displaced millions and affected nearly 500 million people living downstream of the projects, governments keep on rolling them out with at least 3,700 new hydroelectricity facilities (greater than 1 megawatt) planned or under construction, with electricity production from hydropower to grow by 45 to 70 per cent by 2040.³⁵

33 The Kathmandu Post. (2024, April 20). *1,063 MW Upper Arun receives World Bank nod*. <https://kathmandupost.com/money/2024/04/20/1-063-mw-upper-arun-receives-world-bank-nod>

34 Ishita, C. & Durga Mani, R. (2025). *Hanging by a Thread: Indigenous Peoples Rights in Renewable Energy Transition How Multilateral Development Banks and States Deny the Rights to Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) in Hydropower Projects in Nepal*. https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/68e5762082f60ead6d3ad3ab/696932760aa489cae76e4ef8_hanging-by-a-thread-english.pdf

35 Women & Gender Constituency. (n.d.). *Issue Brief: False Solutions*. *Women Gender Climate*. https://womengenderclimate.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/wgc_issuebrief_falsesolutions_en.pdf

Corporations and countries of the Global North are therefore able to wield immense influence in shaping climate policies and climate-related investment, supported by IFIs, state policies and trade rules that ensure market access and protect corporate profits. This further reinforces corporate capture of land, forest, marine and ocean resources, while undermining the self-determination, food sovereignty and collective rights of women, IPs and local communities.

Feminist Alternatives And Resistance At The Nexus Of Climate And Economic Justice

In 2025 in Ban Pred Nai, Trat, Thailand, the local community, with the support of the Sustainable Development Foundation (SDF), successfully resisted the imposition of carbon market mechanisms on their mangrove forests and formally registered community-led management instead. This was much more than an administrative achievement. It marked a turning point in how communities in the province understood their collective power, how they interpreted climate solutions and how they positioned themselves in negotiations with both government agencies and private actors.

Through sustained organising and advocacy, they challenged state and corporate attempts to monetise ecosystems without consent. For several years, different groups had attempted to introduce carbon credit programmes to coastal communities in the area, presenting these as technical opportunities for income generation or as a modern pathway for conservation. Women in Ban Pred Nai repeatedly raised concerns about how these programmes could restrict their access to forests, redefine community responsibilities and shift control away from local people toward external actors. They put forward a clear position and argued that

protecting and restoring mangroves must remain under community leadership and that entering market-based carbon schemes would undermine local stewardship, introduce new risks and limit community autonomy. Their arguments connected questions of conservation with food sovereignty, human rights and justice. Their reflections were grounded in long-standing relationships with the mangroves, which they rely on for food, income and cultural practices. When the Department of Marine and Coastal Resources officially approved the registration of the mangrove forest under community management, it validated years of local organising.

The process leading to the registration was not straightforward. Women had to repeatedly explain to different authorities why the carbon credit model did not align with their needs or the ecological realities of their forests. They also created collective spaces to understand what ‘carbon markets’ meant in practice and why the framing of these schemes often overlooked local knowledge. These discussions strengthened the community’s political awareness and helped build a shared analysis of what real climate solutions look like. They went on to build alliances forming a network with 41 coastal groups in Thailand.

The impact of this moment quickly extended beyond Ban Pred Nai. Word spread across the province, and many other coastal groups began reconsidering offers that had been presented to them by banks, investors and project developers. Some communities postponed existing agreements, while others initiated internal discussions about whether carbon market participation aligned with their needs or undermined their sovereignty. The deeper shift was in how communities interpreted the meaning of ‘climate action’. Instead of viewing external schemes as inevitable or unquestionable, they felt more

confident treating their local knowledge as legitimate and politically relevant. They also saw that resistance could lead to structural outcomes, not just symbolic ones.

Climate Watch Thailand (CWT) and local women's groups joined forces to disrupt the construction of the Thepha coal-fired power plant, forming a movement identified as the 'Deep South Pattani Women Watching Climate'. They continue participating in international climate talks and developing campaigns to amplify their voices. While the government has since shifted from coal to gas as an alternative, women's movements are determined to continue their advocacy to realise energy democracy that puts people and the planet at the centre.

In Borneo, Dayak Bahau Indigenous women's organisation, Perkumpulan Nurani Perempuan, are fighting against deforestation by subsidiaries of the Roda Mas Group. They are also mobilising local communities to demand their legal status as a Customary Law Community that would guarantee their autonomy over their ancestral land and forests.



Advancing Development Justice starts with rejecting false solutions, as these mechanisms perpetuate the inequalities and ecological crisis they claim to resolve.



Feminist Demands For Accountability And Justice

Advancing Development Justice starts with rejecting false solutions, as these mechanisms perpetuate the inequalities and ecological crisis they claim to resolve. From a feminist perspective, rejecting false solutions means dismantling extractive and patriarchal systems and replacing them with people-centred, public and rights-based systems that uphold sovereignty, dignity and self-determination. The transformation into a just and sustainable economy should dispel the misconception that Development Justice is not possible without financial contributions from the private sector, market-led mechanisms, or the involvement of IFIs.

A feminist vision for an international financial architecture is based on reparations, care, equality and peace and is centered around the peoples' right to development and self-determination.³⁶ This includes:

- **A planned economy that is not market or export-driven but is a system of peoples' self-determined production and trade.** This requires a fundamental redistribution of power and resources from the private sector and financial institutions to people and communities;
- **Trade agreements prioritise needs-based production and consumption** and are based on principles of self-reliance and mutual benefit. This includes channels for technology and knowledge transfer;
- **A debt-free world with redistributive justice**, where tax and fiscal policies are based on the peoples' economic and social

36 Guzman, R. (2025). *Another World is Possible. A Feminist world is Possible: Policy brief on Women's Human Rights, Macroeconomic Transformations and Development Justice*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/APWLD_Policy-Brief-on-Macroeconomic-Transformations.pdf

needs and their capacities to contribute to revenues. Peoples' participation is crucial in the whole cycle—from decision-making on what loan portfolios are productive and pro-people, to budget discussions and development policies;

- **Development finance is decolonised and public finance is mobilised for people.**

This rejects neocolonial extractivism, debt dependence and debt accumulation. It includes democratic and participatory decision-making where communities and marginalised groups are recognised as rightsholders of development; and

- **Gender-just reparative climate finance.** This addresses historical inequalities in power and access to and control of natural resources.

Realising A Vision For A Feminist International Financial Architecture

Urgent calls to realise this vision are categorised into: the rejection of false and market-based solutions, funding and technologies, Just and Equitable Transition, infrastructure and reparations:

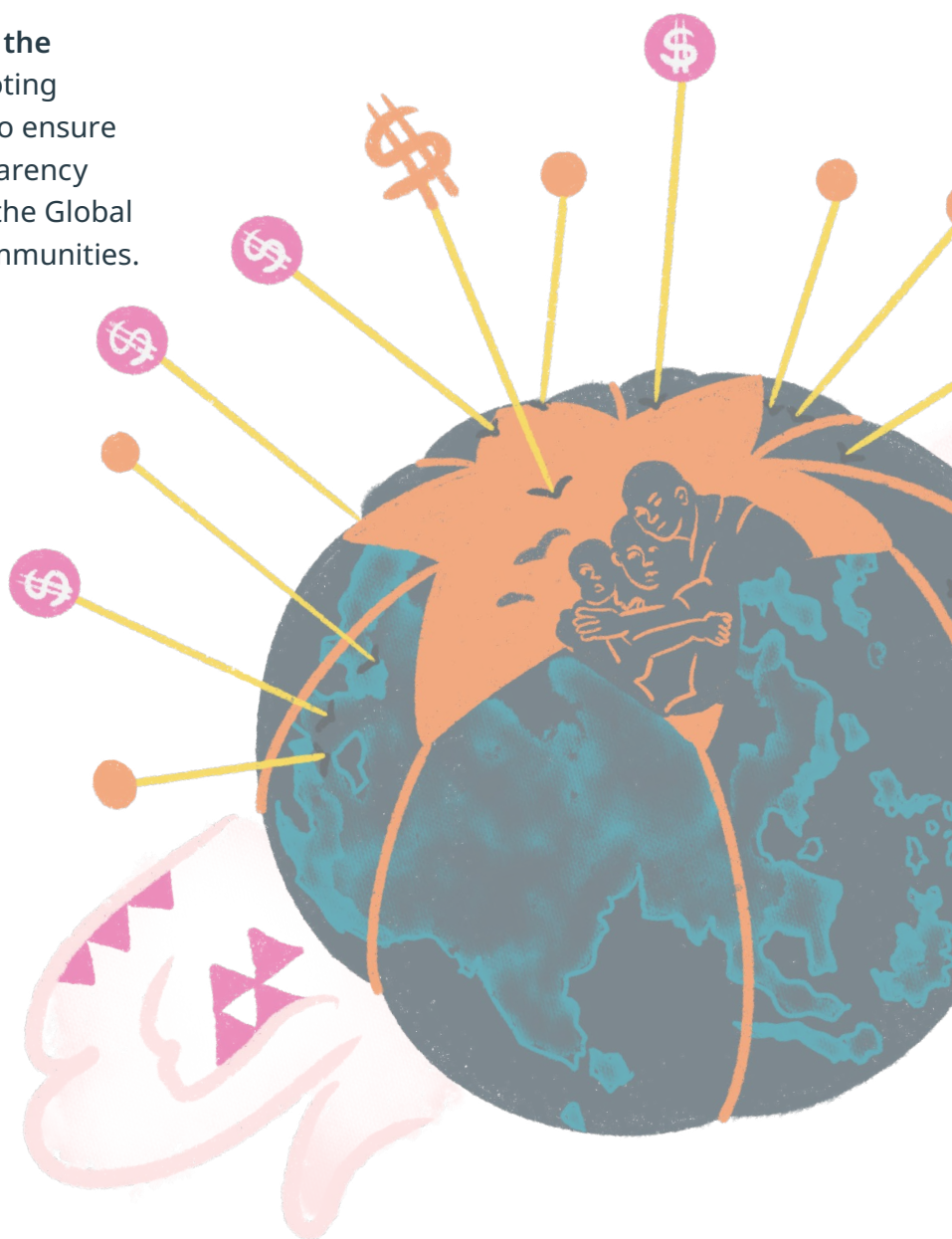
- **Recognising local, traditional and indigenous knowledge systems** in conservation and management of ecosystems. These would be concrete climate actions that can be replicated and adapted by communities based on their local context;
- **Strictly limit the influence and control of big corporations and fossil fuel lobbyists in climate negotiations.** Strengthen safeguards against corporate capture by introducing clear conflict of interest rules and restricting the participation of corporations with vested fossil fuel interests in decision-making. Clearly distinguish the roles of rights holders and duty bearers, ensuring that corporate actors are not afforded the same influence

as those whose rights and responsibilities are central to climate actions;

- **Rechannel public finance to community-led conservation of ecosystems.** Reject funding for false solutions like carbon markets, emissions trading, debt for nature swaps etc. that are unjust and destructive;
- **Restructure the current climate finance architecture to support locally-led and community-determined climate action.** This includes gender-transformative climate finance that is public, grant-based, non-debt creating, direct, flexible and predictable or long-term. Funding must be aligned with the peoples/communities' self-determined priorities and strategies, provide flexible support to counter emergencies and work towards long-term unrestricted funding for the Indigenous Peoples, women-led groups and climate-affected communities;
- **IFIs and MDBs must stop financing climate-labelled projects that violate human rights,** undermine Indigenous Peoples' right to Free Prior and Informed Consent, displace communities, increase debt burdens or enable corporate control over land, forests, rivers, coastal and marine ecosystems;
- **IFIs must be held accountable and provide remedy and reparations for harms caused** by their projects and ensure binding accountability to affected communities. IFIs and MDBs must be held accountable for climate-labelled projects and financing instruments that create debt, enable corporate control, violate human rights or undermine communities' self-determined climate actions;
- **Climate finance flows must be public, new and additional and delivered in the form of grants, not loans.** Developed countries must pay their fair share of climate and ecological debt, rooted in colonialism and historical

emissions to developing countries as part of reparations;

- **Developed countries must fulfil their climate finance obligations.** These obligations must not be substituted by ODA, private investment, MDB lending, carbon markets, blended finance or other market-based mechanisms. Adequate public climate finance is possible through political will, redirecting public resources away from fossil fuel subsidies, militarism and extreme wealth tax towards climate justice;
- **Advance a debt-free world by cancelling illegal and unsustainable debts,** ending austerity based loans and ensuring that debt resolution prioritises human rights, climate justice and public investment over creditor interests; and
- **Democratise the governance of the IMF-World Bank** by reforming voting power and leadership selection to ensure equitable representation, transparency and meaningful participation of the Global South countries and affected communities.



CHAPTER 2

In War and Crises, IFIs Are Never Far Behind



International Financial Institutions (IFIs) have long financed and propped up militarised and authoritarian regimes in Asia and the Pacific, even as they peddle a narrative of economic growth and development. In effect, the policies of institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank have ruthlessly furthered resource extraction at the expense of human rights, creating the conditions ripe for war and conflict. They do this even as they simultaneously diminish the role and primary obligation of the state in protecting basic human rights.

By enforcing stringent austerity measures in the form of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), IFIs have engendered a political system that has diminished the role of the state in providing and protecting its citizens through the provision of public services such as food security, health, nutrition, education, housing and social protection, while military spending, policing and surveillance infrastructures remain

protected or even expanded.¹ The IMF's intervention in Pakistan for instance, pushed for privatisation of the power sector and opened it up to massive foreign ownership who receive the bulk of government subsidies, destabilising the country's national budget.² Amidst the economic turmoil, IMF has prescribed cutting public expenditures, but has not questioned the steep 20 per cent rise in the military budget the government declared in 2025.³

The IFIs have justified their policies saying that their domain of intervention is purely economic and thus human rights do not

- 1 Toussaint, E. (2024, October 23). *The World Bank, the IMF and the respect of human rights*. Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt. <https://www.cadtm.org/The-World-Bank-the-IMF-and-the-respect-of-human-rights#nb3>
- 2 Rahman, Taimur. (2023, October 17). *How the International Monetary Fund is squeezing Pakistan*. Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research. <https://thetricontinental.org/dossier-69-how-the-international-monetary-fund-is-squeezing-pakistan/#toc-section-3>.
- 3 Jamal, U. (2025, June 12). *Pakistan's FY25 budget balances defense needs and economic revival*. The Diplomat. <https://thediplomat.com/2025/06/pakistans-fy25-budget-balances-defense-needs-and-economic-revival/>

come under their purview.^{4,5,6} The argument is a selective one. IFIs have refrained from questioning the rising military expenditures of debtor countries on the pretext of not impinging on their national sovereignty.⁷ But it refuses to consider that forcing countries to adopt strict economic measures is an attack on their sovereignty to make independent economic decisions about the use and distribution of their own resources. The stance that human rights does not form part of the mandate of IFIs⁸ has been rightfully criticised,⁹ given that as specialised United Nations (UN) agencies, both the World Bank and the IMF have human rights obligations and need to comply with the UN Charter where human rights are enshrined.¹⁰



By enforcing stringent austerity measures in the form of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), IFIs have engendered a political system that has diminished the role of the state in providing and protecting its citizens through the provision of public services.



Waves Of Unrest

Between the years 2000 to 2002, the World Development Movement (WDM) recorded a wave of protests across 25 developing countries against the economic restructuring and austerity measures imposed by the IMF and the World Bank.^{11,12} Many of these protests were suppressed using police and military measures resulting in '10 documented fatalities, and arrests and injuries running

4 Toussaint, E. (2024, October 23). *The World Bank, the IMF and the respect of human rights*. Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt. <https://www.cadtm.org/The-World-Bank-the-IMF-and-the-respect-of-human-rights#nb3>

5 Woodward, S.L. (2013). The IFIs and post-conflict political economy. In M. Berdal & D. Zaum (Eds.), *Political economy of statebuilding: Power after peace (1st edition)*. Taylor & Francis Group. <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/chapters/edit/10.4324/9780203101308-11/ifis-post-conflict-political-economy-susan-woodward>

6 Caliri, A. (2023). IMF accountability to human rights: Breaking the dead- lock?. In E. Bilsky, A. Caliri, N. Chami, D. Cibrario, B. Ellmers, T. Gerhartsreiter, A. Gurumurthy, H. Lanz, S. Liebenberg, B. Lindh, J. Martens, G. Massobrio, P. Miranda, C. Mukumba, P. Simonetti, A.M. Suarez Franco, A. Sunstrom & A. Wulff, *Spotlight on global multilateralism: Perspectives on the future of international cooperation in times of multiple crises* (pp. 49-87). Global Policy Forum Europe. https://www.globalpolicy.org/sites/default/files/IMF%20Accountability_final.pdf

7 United Nations Development Programme. (1994). *Human development report 1994*. <https://hdr.undp.org/system/files/documents/hdr1994encompletenostats.pdf>

8 World Bank Group. (n. d.). *The World Bank Group and human rights*. <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/Documents/Events/HRCReport/UNs/World-Bank-Group.pdf>

9 Bretton Woods Project. (2016, February 10). *World Bank safeguards review: "human rights-free zone"*. Bretton Woods Observer. <https://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/2016/02/world-bank-lack-of-human-rights-problematic-for-safeguards/>

10 Caliri, A. (2023). IMF accountability to human rights: Breaking the dead- lock?, *Spotlight on global multilateralism: Perspectives on the future of international cooperation in times of multiple crises* (pp. 49-87). Global Policy Forum Europe. https://www.globalpolicy.org/sites/default/files/IMF%20Accountability_final.pdf

11 Woodroffe, J. & Ellis-Jones, M. (2000, September). *States of unrest. Resistance to IMF in poor countries*. World Development Movement. https://www.globaljustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/states_of_unrest_amended_2000_version.pdf

12 Ellis-Jones, M. (2002, April). *States of unrest II. Resistance to IMF and World Bank policies in poor countries*. World Development Movement. https://www.globaljustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/states_of_unrest_ii.pdf



Between the years 2000 to 2002, a wave of protests was recorded across 25 developing countries against the economic restructuring and austerity measures imposed by the IMF and the World Bank. Many of these protests were suppressed using police and military measures, resulting in fatalities, arrests and injuries.



into thousands'.¹³ According to economist Dr. Jayati Ghosh, IMF's push in Bangladesh for reduced public spending that in turn negatively affected social programmes was a crucial cause behind the nationwide uprising against the repressive regime of former Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in 2024.¹⁴

The World Bank in particular has been critiqued for its so called 'development' projects which have often disregarded environmental safeguards and rights of rural and Indigenous communities leading to land dispossession and conflicts. The International Finance Corporation (IFC), the World Bank's member promoting private sector investments, has financed the Shwe Taung Cement Company¹⁵ and the Ban Chaung coal project via Raiffeisen Bank International (Austria) in militarised Burma/Myanmar.¹⁶ Both of these projects are

linked to military cronies, caused massive environmental destruction and brought about land disputes and livelihood displacements.^{17,18} The projects have been met with resistance by the impacted communities from the outset. In 2014, the villagers staged protests blocking the road construction to the mining site of Ban Chaung.¹⁹ Further to this, the village representatives with the support of local groups Tarkapaw Youth Group, Spirit in Education Movement and the organisation, Inclusive Development International (IDI), filed a complaint to the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand (NHRCT) to investigate the role of Thai corporations involved in the project.²⁰

13 Ellis-Jones, M. (2003, April). *States of unrest III. Resistance to IMF and World Bank policies in poor countries*. World Development Movement. https://www.globaljustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/02/states_of_unrest_iii_04.03.pdf

14 Ghosh, J. (2024, August 13). *Lesson from Bangladesh's uprising*. Project Syndicate. <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/india-and-imf-should-heed-the-lessons-of-sheikh-hasina-downfall-by-jayati-ghosh-2024-08>

15 Martov, S. (2017, August 23). *IFC Approves Support for Controversial Tycoon's Mandalay Cement Project*. The Irrawaddy. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/ifc-approves-support-controversial-tycoons-mandalay-cement-project.html>

16 Martov, S. (2017, March 30). *World Bank Financing Arm Under Fire Over Burmese Coal Mine Link*. The Irrawaddy. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/world-bank-financing-arm-under-fire-over-burmese-coal-mine-link.html>

17 Earth Rights International. (2017, June 8). *Open letter to the IFC regarding its proposed financing of a crony-owned cement factory and coal mine in Myanmar*. https://earthrights.org/media_release/open-letter-to-the-ifc-regarding-its-proposed-financing-of-a-crony-owned-cement-factory-and-coal-mine-in-myanmar/

18 Tarkapaw Youth Group, Dawei Development Association and Tenasserim River & Indigenous People Networks. (2015). *We used to fear bullets, now we fear bulldozers. Dirty coal mining by military cronies & Thai companies Ban Chaung, Dawei District, Myanmar*. Burma Library. https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/TRIPN-2015-10-We_Used_to_Fear_Bullets-Now_We_Fear_Bulldozers-en-red.pdf

19 Tarkapaw Youth Group, Dawei Development Association, and Tenasserim River & Indigenous People Networks. (2015). *We used to fear bullets, now we fear bulldozers. Dirty coal mining by military cronies & Thai companies Ban Chaung, Dawei District, Myanmar*. Burma Library. https://www.burmalibrary.org/docs21/TRIPN-2015-10-We_Used_to_Fear_Bullets-Now_We_Fear_Bulldozers-en-red.pdf

20 Global Atlas of Environmental Justice. (2022, May 2). *Ban Chaung coal mine, Karen state, Myanmar*. <https://ejatlas.org/print/ban-chaung-coal-mine-karen-state-myanmar>

Hand-In-Glove With Militarised Regimes

IFIs have not shied away from collaborating with dictatorships and authoritarian and military regimes despite their human rights abuses. According to a study on the relationship of IMF engagement and human rights conditions, longer periods under IMF programmes have led to higher incidence of torture, extrajudicial killings and also deterioration of the overall human rights conditions in developing countries.²¹

Between the 1970s and 1980s, the Ferdinand Marcos Sr regime in the Philippines implemented the IMF-World Bank's 'tariff cuts, removal of import licenses and quantitative restrictions, lowering protections, and export promotion to "restructure" the economy' as part of a loan programme worth USD 5.5 billion.^{22,23} The restructuring stripped away the protections from indigenous industries and local agriculture, leading to a further loss of livelihoods and accelerated the underdevelopment of these sectors. Even when the country was riddled with widespread cronyism, corruption and many human rights violations during the Martial Law, the IFIs refrained from criticising the government's repressive measures and continued to provide them aid until its downfall in 1986. The IFIs similarly supported Suharto's brutal regime in Indonesia despite the embezzlement of development funds including those from the World Bank's

loans.²⁴ They ignored human rights violations, brutal crackdowns of dissenting voices and corruption of the regime. They remained silent during Indonesia's bloody invasion of Timor Leste leading to a 24-year long war.²⁵ The World Bank has in fact been the primary funder of the Indonesian government's transmigration programme, which has been used to increase militarisation in West Papua in order to extract its rich natural resources, resulting in large scale displacement and genocide of Indigenous populations.²⁶ In Cambodia, Hun Sen was officially branded as a 'fully fledged military dictator' in 2018 by

24 Toussaint, E. (2024, October 18). *IMF and WB: the destruction of Indonesia's sovereignty*. Committee For the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt. <https://www.cadtm.org/IMF-and-WB-the-destruction-of#:~:text=This%20was%20far%20ahead%20of%20Ferdinand%20Marcos,embezzled%20and%20Bank%20loans%20are%20clearly%20involved>

25 Toussaint, E. (2024, March 27). *The World Bank and the IMF in Indonesia: An emblematic interference*. Committee For the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt. www.cadtm.org/The-World-Bank-and-the-IMF-in-Indonesia-an-emblematic-interference

26 International Parliamentarians for West Papua. (2024, October 29). *Transmigration to West Papua: IPWP statement*. <https://www.ipwp.org/statements/transmigration-to-west-papua-ipwp-statement/>



Studies show that longer periods under IMF programmes have led to higher incidence of torture, extrajudicial killings and deterioration of the overall human rights conditions in developing countries.



21 Abouharb, M.R. & Cingranelli, D.L. (2009). IMF programs and human rights. *Rev Int Organ*, 4, 47–72. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11558-008-9050-5>

22 Debt Justice. (n. d.). *Philippines: Country case study*. <https://debtjustice.org.uk/countries/philippines>

23 BON Foundation. (2021, September 21). *Golden years?: The real long-lasting economic damage wrought by Marcos*. <https://www.ibon.org/golden-years-the-real-long-lasting-economic-damage-wrought-by-marcos/>

a Human Rights Watch report for his control over the military and his brutal crackdown on human rights defenders, journalists and opposition parties.²⁷ The regime's violent disregard of human rights²⁸ between the late 1990s and early 2000s was ignored by the World Bank as long as the regime complied with the bank's mandate of privatisation, trade liberalisation and investment.²⁹ Despite the pervasive corruption and human rights abuses, the IMF and World Bank have continued to aid not only Hun Sen's government, but also that of his son, Hun Manet, who inherited the position from his father in 2023. In 2024, CSOs wrote to World Bank President Ajay Banga condemning the Cambodian government's assault on human rights groups, including reprisals against World Bank project stakeholders. However, their requests have remained unanswered.³⁰

Disruption Of Fragile Post-Conflict And Post-Disaster Recoveries

Post-war or post-conflict contexts are highly fragile as there are multiple layers of rebuilding that need care, justice and attention. The reconstruction efforts have almost always been guided by the interests of foreign donors and corporations who focus on economic growth based on neoliberal principles, promotion of extractive industries, debt servicing, large scale infrastructure and investment by foreign corporations. This approach is at the expense

of addressing socio-economic inequalities, demands for lasting peace and justice and accountability for violence and human rights violations.³¹ Countries in the region faced with overwhelming post-conflict conditions and in dire need of economic assistance, are forced to undertake market-driven measures that treat them as investment opportunities rather than prioritising local recovery needs like healthcare, education and access to justice including gender justice. Post-conflict reconstruction processes are also frequently shaped by IFIs who promote large-scale infrastructure projects as pathways to economic recovery.

Expanding natural resource extraction and exports in countries affected by war is also often promoted as a crucial aspect of recovery even without credible evidence that these industries contribute to sustainable development. Encouraging foreign investments and enabling their unrestricted movement is given top priority, alongside the use of foreign reserves to service debt burdens.^{32,33} The use of foreign reserves poses several problems, draining the country's liquidity needed to buffer the economy, limits import capacity for essential needs like food, fuel and medicines, causes high domestic inflation and sets up the risk of currency collapse.

27 Ellis-Petersen, H. (2018, June 28). *Cambodian PM now 'fully fledged military dictator', says report*. The Guardian. www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jun/28/cambodian-pm-hun-sen-fully-fledged-military-dictator-says-report

28 Human Rights Watch. (2001). *Focus on human rights Cambodia*. www.hrw.org/legacy/campaigns/cambodia98/index.htm

29 Fawthrop, T. (2015). *The dark side of Cambodia's development*. Third World Resurgence, 293/294, 49-15. www.twm.my/title2/resurgence/2015/293-294/world4.htm

30 International Federation For Human Rights. (2024, October 21). *Cambodia: Joint statement urging World Bank action on civil society reprisals*. <https://www.fidh.org/en/region/asia/cambodia/cambodia-joint-statement-urging-world-bank-action-on-civil-society>

31 Cohn, C. & Duncanson, C. (2020). *Whose recovery? IFI prescriptions for post-war states*. Review of International Political Economy, 27(6), 1214-1234. https://www.pure.ed.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/131012158/Cohn_Duncanson2019RIPE-WhoseRecovery.pdf

32 United Nations Development Programme. (2008). *Post-conflict economic recovery enabling local ingenuity*. <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/publications/undp-cpr-post-conflict-economic-recovery-enable-local-ingenuity-report-2008.pdf>

33 Cohn, C. & Duncanson, C. (2020). *Whose recovery? IFI prescriptions for post-war states*. Review of International Political Economy, 27(6), 1214-1234. https://www.pure.ed.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/131012158/Cohn_Duncanson2019RIPE-WhoseRecovery.pdf



Natural disasters also often create conditions in which aid, recovery programmes and development initiatives become entangled with militarisation and political agendas.



In Sri Lanka for example, infrastructure expansion, particularly the development of ports, has been closely tied to international financing and geopolitical competition. Ports are strategically significant because they regulate the movement of goods, while also serving as sites of military and commercial activity. Control over these facilities can therefore influence trade routes and regional power dynamics. United States (US) backed financing for terminal development at Colombo has been framed in the context of rivalry with China.³⁴

For communities living near these projects, however, the consequences often include land acquisition, displacement and restrictions on access to coastal and marine resources. In Sri Lanka, post-war development in the Northern Province has prioritised tourism, infrastructure and Special Economic Zones, contributing to land grabbing and limiting communities' access to traditional lands and natural resources. Women, particularly women-headed households face disproportionate impacts, as discriminatory land tenure systems

and patriarchal norms make it more difficult for them to reclaim land and rebuild their livelihoods. Development strategies centred on ports, logistics hubs and foreign investment can thus undermine local food systems and communities' sovereignty by diverting land, labour and public resources away from small-scale agriculture and fisheries.³⁵

Natural disasters also often create conditions in which aid, recovery programmes and development initiatives become entangled with militarisation and political agendas. Following disasters such as earthquakes or tsunamis, military institutions frequently assume a central role in relief and reconstruction efforts. While such involvement is often justified as necessary for emergency response and coordination, it can also provide governments with opportunities to reshape land ownership patterns and development priorities. In Sri Lanka for instance, post-war and post-tsunami reconstruction policies led to the creation of coastal 'buffer zones' that prevented many displaced fishing communities from returning to their homes.³⁶ At the same time, these same coastal areas were opened up for tourism projects and private investment. As a result, communities that had relied on fishing for generations were cut off from their traditional livelihoods and local food sources.³⁷

34 Mallawarachchi, B. & Tang, D. (2023). *US plans to build a \$553 million terminal at Sri Lanka's Colombo port in rivalry with China*. The Associated Press. <https://apnews.com/article/us-sri-lanka-port-china-bri-debt-d39cdd2446e8c5ab95f4181960f7958a>

35 Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development. (2025). *Food Sov Convening 2025 – APWLD Documentation Report*. [Unpublished].

36 Riccoboni, G. (2024). *Sri Lanka: Women's collective struggles for land, livelihoods, & security in the Northern Province*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development. <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/Peace-FPAR-Country-Briefers-Sri-Lanka-as-of-February-22-pages-2.pdf> Based on the work of Sri Vimukthi Fisher Women Organization (SVFWO).

37 Riccoboni, G. (2024). *Silenced no more: Women forging peace, demanding justice*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Peace-FPAR-Regional-Report-as-of-November-27-2024.pdf> Based on the work of Flower Aceh, Our Common Wealth 670, Indigenous Women League, SAMAKANA, Weaving Bonds Across Borders and Sri Vimukthi Fisher Women Organisation.



The World Bank And Post-War Reconstruction In The Pacific

The World Bank strategically installed itself in the post-war reconstruction of Timor Leste managing the grants provided by international actors.³⁸ The post-war reconstruction in Timor Leste relied heavily on the oil and natural gas resources in the Timor Sea while other critical sectors such as agriculture and manufacturing were ignored.³⁹ This was in a context where 70 to 80 per cent of the Timorese population was dependent on subsistence agriculture, while oil and gas generated less than one per cent of employment. Further, the resources generated from oil and gas have been heavily reinvested in infrastructure to promote their extraction and associated private enterprises, while expenditure on health and education decreased up until 2013.

Similarly, the IFIs have promoted extractive industries such as mining in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea ignoring the fact that the impact of mining has been the primary cause of the conflict.⁴⁰ The World Bank engineered the Bougainville Mining Act (2015) to promote mining in the region and has been strongly resisted by the local indigenous communities as it gives the government the right to acquire customary land without Free Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) and impose penalties on those who resist the acquisition.^{41,42}

-
- 38 Toussaint, E. (2024, June 19). *The World Bank and IMF have set their sights on East Timor, a state officially born in May 2002*. Committee for the Abolition of Illegitimate Debt. <https://www.cadtm.org/The-World-Bank-and-IMF-have-set-their-sights-on-East-Timor-a-state-officially>
- 39 Dal Poz, A. (2018). 'Buying peace' in Timor-Leste: Another UN-success story?. *Peace Human Rights Governance*, 2(2), 185-219. https://phrg.padovauniversitypress.it/system/files/papers/2018_2_3.pdf
- 40 Cohn, C. & Duncanson, C. (2020). *Whose recovery? IFI prescriptions for post-war states*. *Review of International Political Economy*, 27(6), 1214-1234. https://www.pure.ed.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/131012158/Cohn_Duncanson2019RIPEWhoseRecovery.pdf
- 41 Ginnivan, E. (2016). *Asia Pacific mining, law, and war: Bougainville's legislative gamble*. *Alternative Law Journal*, 41(1), 60-62. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1037969X1604100116>
- 42 Lasslet, K. (2015, May 20). *Australia's interest in Bougainville's independence is far from local's wishes*. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/20/australias-interest-in-bougainvilles-independence-is-far-from-locals-wishes>

Feminist Demands And Recommendations

- **IFIs must center their international human rights obligations in their policies and programmes:** These human rights obligations including economic, social, and cultural rights must form the basis of their work;
- **IFIs must not fund and provide technical support to authoritarian and dictatorial regimes** who violate the democratic and fundamental rights of their citizens;
- **IFI programmes must be designed in consultation with the grassroots communities.** This includes fully respecting the FPIC of communities and their meaningful inclusion;
- **IFIs policy advice should be subject to wider scrutiny and impact assessments** including environmental and gender impact assessments, particularly in post-conflict reconstruction; and
- **IFIs must be held accountable by communities impacted by their neoliberal policies and programmes.** This includes payment of reparations for the harms caused by their policies and programmes.

CHAPTER 3

Resource Extraction, Food Injustice and IFIs



Asia and the Pacific is among the most ecologically diverse regions in the world. Its unique ecosystems comprising mountains, rainforests, lush plains, rivers, lakes, coastal and mangrove areas, among others, hosts an impressive number of flora and fauna species that are not only sources of food, livelihoods and cultural life, but also regulate the climate and strengthen communities' resilience to climate impacts and disasters.¹ Aside from biological resources, the region is also teeming with various mineral deposits such as iron, nickel, copper, gold and bauxite aluminum. Marine and coastal areas are also abundant in titanium, zirconium and rare-earth elements.² Hosting seven of the 17 megadiverse countries in the world,³ the region's rich biodiversity, ecosystems and

mineral resources are also centrally significant to the cultural and spiritual identities of the peoples and the communities.

These precious resources have always been the subject of colonial occupation, bloody conflicts and even slow genocide among local and Indigenous communities.⁴ What cannot be grabbed through violent means during physical occupation are controlled through economic frameworks, trade and investment policies, debt and financial agreements that are slowly crippling the peoples of Asia and the Pacific.

In the region, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank and other International Financial Institutions (IFIs) have been funding infrastructure projects that are supposed to help 'develop' poor countries. Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) have been implemented in the region since the 1980s, wreaking havoc in food and agriculture systems and in the overall national

1 Göran Ek. (2021). *Biodiversity in the Asia/Pacific region*. Sida's Environmental Helpdesk. https://sidaenvironmenthelpdesk.se/sites/default/files/2024-12/Biodiversity%20in%20Asia-Pacific_web%20report%202021.pdf

2 Peters, S.G., Nokleberg, W.J., Doebrich, J.L., Bawiec, W.J., Oris, G., Sutphin, D.M. and Wilburn, D.R. (2005). *Geology and nonfuel mineral deposits of Asia and the Pacific: U.S. Geological Survey Open-File Report 2005-1294C*, p. 67. U.S. Geological Survey Open-File Report 2005-1294-C. <http://pubs.usgs.gov/of/2005/1294/c/>

3 The seven megadiverse countries in Asia and the Pacific are Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, India, China, Papua New Guinea and Australia. | Puron, M. (2024, June 4). *World Environment Day: An A-Z of the world's 17 megadiverse countries*. WeForum. <https://www.weforum.org/stories/2024/06/environment-day-biodiversity-world-megadiverse-countries/>

4 Martov, S. (2017, March 30). *World Bank Financing Arm Under Fire Over Burmese Coal Mine Link*. The Irrawaddy. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/world-bank-financing-arm-under-fire-over-burmese-coal-mine-link.html>

economic development directions.⁵ These SAPs, along with the neoliberal development agenda espoused by the IMF-World Bank and later by the World Trade Organisation (WTO), have wantonly opened up national markets to foreign investments, facilitating widespread resource extraction from the Global South. This extractive model is increasingly being reproduced through IFI-backed projects promoted as climate action, renewable energy, conservation and green transition, even where they create new debt, dispossess communities or expand corporate control over land and natural resources.

Far from improving the social and economic conditions of the people in the Global South, acute hunger and food injustice are in fact worsening due to the unbridled power and control of capitalists and financiers over the world's oceans, land and natural resources. Studies are linking the World Bank to more than three million people who were physically or economically displaced by the projects it has funded.⁶ Disguised as projects for 'food security', the World Bank has facilitated thousands of land deals spanning millions of hectares, more than half of which are used for export-bound products while food crops are only cultivated on less than 10 per cent of the land area.⁷



Studies are linking the World Bank to more than three million people who were physically or economically displaced by the projects it has funded. Disguised as projects for 'food security', the World Bank has facilitated thousands of land deals spanning millions of hectares, more than half of which are used for export-bound products while food crops are only cultivated on less than 10 per cent of the land area.



5 Sayeed, A. T. (2023). *Unravel Neoliberal Trade: A Failed Solution to Food Sovereignty*. Asia-Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/UnravelNeoliberalTrade_APWLDFoodSovereigntyBriefer.pdf

6 Galizia, M. C., Gallego, C.S., Cabra, M., Lindenberg, F., Shiflett, S., Fitzgibbon, W., Boland-Rudder, H., Rey, M.G., Reuter, D. & Díaz-Struck, E. (2015, April 14). *Explore 10 Years of World Bank Resettlement Data*. International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. <https://www.icij.org/investigations/world-bank/explore-10-years-world-bank-resettlement-data/>

7 Peoples' Coalition on Food Sovereignty (PCFS) and CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE). (2018). *IMF-World Bank Group Landgrabbing Funding Rural Peoples' Destitution*. PCFS. <https://pcfs.global/imf-wbg-and-landgrabbing-funding-rural-peoples-destitution/>



In Thailand for instance, major water development projects such as Pak Mun Dam, Rasi Salai Dam and the Khong-Chi-Mun Basin Development Project, displaced over 1,000 families and impacted the socio-economic livelihood of more than 20,000 people with a drastic reduction in fish species.



The World Bank Disrupts Collective Land Tenure In The Philippines⁸

A World Bank funded project to divide 1.4 million hectares into individually titled parcels of land to farmers in the Philippines is disrupting the livelihoods of tens of thousands of farmers and jeopardising an established system of collective land tenure.

The SPLIT project or 'Support to Parcelisation of Land for Individual Titling' with a USD370 million investment by the World Bank aims to issue 139,000 Certificate of Land Ownership Awards (CLOAs) for 1.1 million Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARBs) within four years. It is being implemented by the Philippines' Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR). However, four organisations representing 14,000 small farmers, ARBs, Indigenous and rural people, have flagged

concerns and are challenging the project's claims.⁹

The SPLIT project would in effect allow for land developers and multinational corporations to buy up large extents of rural land and take it out of smallholder ownership. It undermines collective land tenure that has been operational since 1988. The Philippines' agrarian reform programme established collective land tenure to distribute land to the landless farmers and farm workers. While still largely flawed, this collective land titling affords the farmers some level of protection, but the SPLIT project would instead intensify land grabbing and landlessness among Filipino farmers and peasants and disputes amongst them. The weakening of collective tenure can also undermine community food systems and the capacity of rural and Indigenous communities to collectively respond to climate impacts and protect land and natural resources. Peasant women in

⁸ Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP), Paghida-et Sa Kauswagan (PDG), IBON International, People's Coalition for Food Sovereignty (PCFS), Center for Social and Economic Rights (CESR). (2023.) *Decoding the WBG's SPLIT Project in the Philippines: Resisting Agrarian Injustice*. IBON International. <https://iboninternational.org/download/split-primer/>

⁹ ATFI, FARMCOOP, Kaisahan & PAKISAMA. (2024). *Collective Lands in the Philippines targeted by World Bank 'SPLIT' programme: small farmers seek solidarity from the global community*. BananaLink. <https://www.bananalink.org.uk/news/collective-lands-in-the-philippines-targeted-by-world-bank-split-programme-small-farmers-seek-solidarity-from-the-global-community/>

the Philippines reject the project, believing it will worsen the local and national food crisis as agricultural lands are converted into large-scale monoculture production.¹⁰ Women farmers also face the risk that ownership arrangements offered by SPLIT will further weaken their control over land and increase their dependency and unpaid work. Experience shows that these massive land-use conversions often displace rural and Indigenous communities and gravely harm biodiversity and critical ecosystems. SPLIT is being implemented within a context of heightened militarisation in response to peasant resistance. The project is also reportedly being implemented with little transparency.¹¹

Initially slated to be completed in 2025, Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr. has since extended the programme to coincide with his term's conclusion in 2028. Meanwhile, violence and threats are being perpetrated by the state forces to intimidate the farmers into signing on and joining the SPLIT project.¹² In response, four organisations representing 14,000 small farmers, agrarian reform beneficiaries and Indigenous and marginalised rural people organised together to call for suspending the project.¹³

10 Amihan Women. (2022). *STATEMENT | DAR's SPLIT program threat to country's food self-sufficiency – peasant women group*. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/amihanwomen/posts/statement-dars-split-program-threat-to-countrys-food-self-sufficiency-peasant-wo/2286968458127373/>

11 ATFI, FARMCOOP, Kaisahan & PAKISAMA. (2024). *Collective Lands in the Philippines targeted by World Bank 'SPLIT' programme: small farmers seek solidarity from the global community*. BananaLink. <https://www.bananalink.org.uk/news/collective-lands-in-the-philippines-targeted-by-world-bank-split-programme-small-farmers-seek-solidarity-from-the-global-community/>

12 Gutoman, D. (2025). *World Bank-funded project in Negros spells division, violence for farming communities*. Bulatlat. <https://www.bulatlat.com/2025/07/27/world-bank-funded-project-in-negros-spells-division-violence-for-farming-communities/>

13 ATFI, FARMCOOP, Kaisahan & PAKISAMA. (2024). *Collective Lands in the Philippines targeted by World Bank 'SPLIT' programme: small farmers seek solidarity from the global community*. BananaLink. <https://www.bananalink.org.uk/news/collective-lands-in-the-philippines-targeted-by-world-bank-split-programme-small-farmers-seek-solidarity-from-the-global-community/>

IMF And World Bank Sponsored Land And Ocean Grabbing

"The IMF-World Bank itself is complicit in the piling bodies of farmers and land rights activists in the Global South. Almost one-fourth of the reported number of killings of farmers and environmental rights defenders at the global level were state-sponsored."¹⁴

– Peoples' Coalition on Food Sovereignty (PCFS) and CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE)

14 Peoples' Coalition on Food Sovereignty (PCFS) and CSO Partnership for Development Effectiveness (CPDE). (2018.) *IMF-World Bank Group Landgrabbing Funding Rural Peoples' Destitution*. PCFS. <https://pcfs.global/imf-wbg-and-landgrabbing-funding-rural-peoples-destitution/>

The IMF and World Bank's various development projects have driven people away from their communities and sources of livelihoods. While projects such as dams are peddled as solutions for energy crises or for improvement and modernisation of food production, the actual experience on the ground paints a different picture. In Thailand for instance, major water development projects such as Pak Mun Dam, Rasi Salai Dam and the Khong-Chi-Mun Basin Development Project, displaced over 1,000 families and impacted the socio-economic livelihood of more than 20,000 people with a drastic

reduction in fish species.¹⁵ This disrupted river-based food systems and resulted in a loss of farm lands due to reservoir flooding or soil salinisation. There were few community consultations and inadequate compensation for the harms caused. While many of these projects were originally promoted under the language of development, energy security and agricultural modernisation, the same large scale and debt financed infrastructure model is now being repackaged as renewable energy, decarbonisation and climate mitigation. Additionally, hydropower projects in Nepal, including projects financed by the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank (ADB), show how climate finance for mitigation can reproduce these long standing patterns of exclusion and extraction.

Similarly, large-scale displacement of about 200,000 Indigenous Peoples in India, 6,000 people in Laos, 50,000 people in Bangladesh took place due to the World Bank-funded Narvada Dam Project, Nam Theun 2 Dam and Phulbari coal mining project, respectively. In Papua New Guinea, the Ok Tedi Mine Project for large scale copper and gold mining had one of the worst environmental damages with massive mine waste dumping into the Ok Tedi river. Women also experience displacement differently and more severely than men, facing gender-biased resettlement processes and limited access to compensation and resources. The loss of access to water, forests and agricultural land reduces household food security, intensifies the informality of women's work in the agriculture sector and compels women to increase unpaid care work and

other livelihood strategies.¹⁶ Displacement impacts women differently, increasing the risks of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) and loss of critical reproductive health and other medical care needs and social support and security.

IMF and World Bank projects are also exploiting the worsening climate crises. So-called climate mitigation projects in many cases paved the way for grabbing forest lands that, often in clear violations of the Free Prior and Informed Consent of the communities, are then converted to large-scale monocrop plantations. These further exacerbate not just Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions, but also the systematic displacement of Indigenous communities and the oppression and exploitation of agricultural workers, including women workers. Women workers in large agribusiness operations suffer suppressed wages, unsafe working conditions, labour precarity and even denial or attacks on their rights to unionise.

16 Tilt, B., Braun, Y. & He, D. (2008, July 30). *Social impact of large dam projects: a comparison of international case studies and implications for best practice*. ScienceDirect. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0301479708002697?via%3Dihub>

15 Srettachau, C. & Imhof, A. (2000, August 9). *A Thai dam, a mistake, a debt*. Living River Siam. <https://www.livingriver-siam.org/th/component/content/article/a-thai-dam-a-mistake-a-debt?catid=50&Itemid=101>



Governments in the region are aggressively pursuing foreign investments in agribusiness through Agribusiness Venture Agreements (AVA), moving away from traditional farming to mass production. One such corporation that invested in an AVA with the Philippines was Sumifru, a Japanese conglomerate in fruit exportation that set up operations in Davao de Oro in Mindanao, where it has banana plantations and banana packing plants.¹⁷

The company has applied a 'no work, no pay' policy with a quota system, allowing exploitative and precarious working conditions. Women workers spend 12-20 hours a day in the banana packing plant, with only about one hour and 41 minutes for a break. Women workers had to fulfil the quotas, or they were unable to leave their work premises even if they had been working for more than eight hours. In some cases, women finished work at 2:00 AM but had to report to work at 6:00 AM.

For all this laborious work, the workers only received a wage of PHP586.2 (around USD11) per day,¹⁸ which could only afford their family unhealthy food such as dried fish, noodles and canned goods. This rule applied during pregnancy, forcing pregnant women to work until their due date and get back to work as soon as possible. Due to contract renewals and the evaluation process, workers avoided calling in sick. Some workers, despite working for the company for 18 years, were not yet regularised.¹⁹

-
- 17 Pamintuan, M. (2023). *Strengthening Feminist Movements for Trade & Economic Justice: WITCH FPAR Regional Report*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/WITCH_FPAR-REPORT.pdf Based on the work of Pakistan Kissan Mazdoor Tehreek (PKMT), Women Studies and Resource Center (WSRC), Gabriela Youth and Sisters Garden (SG).
- 18 Pamintuan, M. (2023). *Strengthening Feminist Movements for Trade & Economic Justice: WITCH FPAR Regional Report*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/WITCH_FPAR-REPORT.pdf Based on the work of Pakistan Kissan Mazdoor Tehreek (PKMT), Women Studies and Resource Center (WSRC), Gabriela Youth and Sisters Garden (SG).
- 19 Pamintuan, M. (2023). *Strengthening Feminist Movements for Trade & Economic Justice: WITCH FPAR Regional Report*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/WITCH_FPAR-REPORT.pdf Based on the work of Pakistan Kissan Mazdoor Tehreek (PKMT), Women Studies and Resource Center (WSRC), Gabriela Youth and Sisters Garden (SG).



The loss of access to water, forests and agricultural land reduces household food security, intensifies the informality of women's work in the agriculture sector and compels women to increase unpaid care work and other livelihood strategies.



Infrastructure development projects such as the Thailand Resilient Transport Connectivity Project (TRIP), Jakarta Giant Sea Wall Project and Mandalika urban and tourism infrastructure project²⁰ in Indonesia are being promoted as new investments under climate resilience agendas and energy transition/renewables projects. Communities that resist these projects are intimidated into relocation by increased state-sanctioned military operations. Militarism becomes the coercive arm of the extractive economy that benefits the IFIs and big polluters in ensuring and protecting its operations around the globe. The demand for renewable energy and low-carbon technologies is also accelerating. But the manufacturing process of these technologies is highly mineral intensive. This ties renewable energy back to extractive economies and geopolitical competition for the same critical minerals.

Using clean energy as a way to reduce Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions to 1.5 degree celsius above preindustrial levels, would require almost 300 new mines by 2030, which depends on extraction of rare earth and critical minerals and an investment of approximately USD800 billion by 2040, according to reports.²¹ China is projected to dominate 60 per cent of the global supply of critical minerals by 2030 as it leads the refining of cobalt, copper, graphite, lithium and rare earth minerals. As the geopolitical rivalry between China and the United States (US) intensifies, states in the region are attempting to position themselves as key players within this evolving landscape while

liberalising their laws and policies to allow for extraction and resource capture under the guise of technologies for climate solutions such as electric vehicle batteries, wind turbines and solar panels. Mining of critical and rare earth minerals have socio-economic, cultural and environmental impacts affecting the overall livelihood of the small-scale fisheries, Indigenous Peoples and coastal communities.



Using clean energy as a way to reduce Greenhouse Gas (GHG) emissions to 1.5 degree celsius above preindustrial levels, would require almost 300 new mines by 2030, which depends on extraction of rare earth and critical minerals. But mining of critical and rare earth minerals have socio-economic, cultural and environmental impacts on communities.



20 Just Finance. (2025.) *Indonesia-Based Civil Society Coalition Call on AIIB to Halt Forced Evictions in Mandalika*. <https://justfinanceinternational.org/2025/07/17/indonesia-based-civil-society-coalition-call-on-aiib-to-halt-forced-evictions-in-mandalika/>

21 McClure, T. (2026, March 12). *"The last frontier": how red globules of nickel ore are suffocating an island's precious wilderness*. The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2026/mar/12/clean-energy-demands-philippines-island-nickel-palawan-mining-environment-aoe>



In the Philippines, after lifting the national ban on new concessions for mining in 2021, Ipinal Nickel Corporation (INC) began aggressive nickel mining in Palawan, Philippines to supply the growing demand for the electric vehicle market. They destroyed forests, violated environmental laws, did not obtain Free, Prior, Informed Consent (FPIC) of the communities and encroached on their territories. Communities experienced severe health impacts including failure of crops, declining fish stocks, water resource contamination and forced displacement.

This led to people mobilising for their rights and resisting, resulting in a 50-year moratorium on new mines in Palawan and cancellation of the 67 pending requests as at March 2025. However, the government allowed 11 existing mining contracts to proceed, while intimidating and filing lawsuits against Environmental Human Rights Defenders (EHRDs).²²

22 Strinati, M. (2025, August 1). *Philippines: Palawan under attack for "critical minerals."* Égalité. <https://www.egalite.org/en/palawan-estrazioni-minerali-critici/>

The Blue Economy: A New Frontier Of Extraction

The oceans are crucial for global food security and provide an estimated 20 per cent of animal protein for more than 3 billion people, with fish being a major affordable source.²³ But for imperialist powers, the oceans are a new frontier for extraction unlocked with the burgeoning 'Blue Economy'. The framing of

23 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (UN FAO). (2024.) *G20 backs FAO's Blue Transformation for sustainable fisheries and aquaculture, highlights family farming.* <https://www.fao.org/newsroom/detail/g20-backs-fao-s-blue-transformation-for-sustainable-fisheries-and-aquaculture--highlights-family-farming/>

the Blue Economy as a new economic frontier encompassing the sustainable use of ocean and aquatic resources for economic growth, improved livelihoods, and ecosystem health is not a neutral one. The whole concept of the blue economy creates new markets, trade flows, and investment opportunities largely dominated by transnational corporations headquartered in the Global North, while the labor, resources and environmental costs are borne by the Global South. It in fact advances the same extractivist and patriarchal systems that commodify nature and exploit women's labour and knowledge.²⁴

Every fishery and fish farming operation sustains, directly and indirectly, at least 600 million people. Yet, research on the ocean economy identifies 100 largest transnational corporations as owning 60 per cent of the revenues of the predominant ocean industries (i.e. offshore oil and gas, industrial fishing, shipping and cruise line entertainment). This economy is valued at USD1.8 trillion and projected to reach USD3 trillion by 2030—the eighth largest economy in the world, comparable to Japan.²⁵ This concentration of economic power enables a small group of corporations to control access to marine and coastal resources, effectively edging out small-scale fishers and coastal communities whose livelihoods and food security depend on these resources. It is driven by the same development model of large-scale extraction of resources seen across forests and other land, in detriment to people and the planet.

Programmes led by the World Bank and ADB have been advancing a broader 'blue finance' agenda, with 'blue carbon' (carbon stored

24 Salvador, J. (2025). *APWLD Blue Economy Briefer Series: Briefing Paper on Blue Economy and Trade.* Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). [Unpublished].

25 Virdin, J., Vegh, T., Jouffray, J.-B., Blasiak, R., Mason, S., Österblom, H., Vermeer, D., Wachtmeister, H. and Werner, N. (2021). *The Ocean 100: Transnational corporations in the ocean economy.* <https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/sciadv.abc8041>



Every fishery and fish farming operation sustains, directly and indirectly, at least 600 million people. Yet, research on the ocean economy identifies 100 largest transnational corporations as owning 60 per cent of the revenues of the predominant ocean industries.



in coastal ecosystems) being positioned as a high-value commodity within carbon markets. Initiatives such as the World Bank's 'ProBlue' channels hundreds of millions of dollars into projects framed as marine and coastal 'sustainable development'.²⁶ The Asia Pacific region is the heart of the global blue economy, accounting for over 60 per cent of maritime trade and two-thirds of global fisheries production, and has become the epicentre of blue economy projects. There is fever-pitch interest and a race for massive, untapped deposits of critical minerals and rare earth elements in the deep sea bed that could supply the raw materials needed for the global transition to renewables. But deep-sea mining remains highly contentious. Experts point to the damaging impacts of extraction that will be done by massive vehicles that will trawl the seabed and the potential extent of greenhouse gas emissions in the process and the disruption of marine ecosystems that could cancel out the benefits to the climate from shifting to electrical vehicles and renewable energy

powered by critical minerals.²⁷ Geopolitical tensions in the region, especially between China and the United States, has resulted in political manoeuvring for control of critical minerals and other resources. This power contest has escalated militarisation of the oceans and regulatory and economic measures to maintain dominance of offshore resources including seabed minerals.

From Asia-Pacific, China leads the economic interests in deep sea mining for polymetallic nodules and sulphides and cobalt-rich crusts in international seabeds. India, Japan, South Korea and Singapore, as well as Nauru, Cook Islands and Tonga in the Pacific either have government agencies or government-owned or controlled companies that have contracts to conduct exploration mostly in the Clarion-Clipperton Zone (CCZ) in the eastern Pacific Ocean. The United States is seeking to secure critical mineral supply chains to pursue exploration and exploitation of deep-sea resources both within the US Exclusive

26 As of March 2024, PROBLUE has increased its overall portfolio of technical activities to USD182 million in support of 247 activities in over 100 economies. | World Bank Group. (2025). *PROBLUE 2024 Annual Report (English)*. <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/099605202142527732>

27 Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). (2025). *APWLD Blue Economy Briefer Series: Briefing Paper on Blue economy and climate change*. [Unpublished].

Economic Zone (EEZ) and areas beyond its national jurisdiction, challenging China's dominance in the industry but also undermining global ocean governance.²⁸

Masked as efforts for conservation and sustainable economic development, large areas of coastal ecosystems are being transformed by commercial interests, including tourism, port construction and urban sprawl. Reclamation projects such as those in the Philippines²⁹ and in Indonesia³⁰ that urbanise and commercialise coastal regions in Southeast Asia, are blocking traditional fishing routes and destroying critical fishing ecosystems. The Jalaur River Multi-Purpose Project in Panay Island, Philippines, for example, has submerged Indigenous territories and displaced thousands of Tumandok people whose livelihoods depended on agriculture and river ecosystems.³¹ Coastal ecosystems being engineered for tourism, infrastructure and industrial exploitation further marginalises communities who have historically sustained themselves from the sea.

Turning Community Lands Into Tourist Zones

Across Asia and the Pacific, islands and coastal areas have been subject

to lease and sales by private actors for tourism development. This has, in effect, transformed the commons into exclusive economic zones for profit, replacing customary access with permits and security forces.

- In Indonesia, private tourism development has monopolised several small islands and coastal areas, putting restrictions on access to local fishing communities and increasing the cost of living for local residents. In the east of Indonesia, the expansion of tourism around the Komodo National Park in Labuan Bajo has displaced local livelihoods and restricted fishing activities due to the conversion of coastal land into tourism-related services.
- Women seaweed farmers and fish traders in coastal Sulawesi and Lombok report that tourism development and coastal privatisation have reduced access to traditional fishing grounds.³²
- In Cambodia, the leased coastal islands of Koh Rong have been subjected to large-scale tourism development by private actors, displacing fishing communities and creating a 'maritime commons' devoid of resources.
- In Maldives, many resort islands are leased exclusively to private tourism companies, effectively turning entire islands into private enclaves for international visitors. While tourism generates significant national revenue, local communities often lose access to traditional fishing grounds and coastal resources that historically supported food security.

28 Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). (2025). *APWLD Blue Economy Briefer Series: Briefing Paper on Blue economy and climate change*. [Unpublished].

29 In The Philippines, numerous reclamation projects and proposals (over 187) have been documented, especially around the Manila Bay area. These projects have resulted in the killing of critical fishing ecosystems and the fish species that inhabited the area, in addition to miniaturising the fishing domain available to subsistence fisherfolk.

30 In the areas surrounding Jakarta, flood conditions are exacerbated and fishing species populations are lowered due to development and coastal infrastructure projects. People who rely on food production, whether from agriculture or fishing, on land and water, have also been displaced by development or climate change infrastructure projects.

31 International Indigenous Peoples Movement. (2025, February 12). *Land, Water, Life: Resist the Flood of Injustice, Stop the Jalaur Mega Dam*. <https://www.ipmsdl.org/campaign/land-water-life-resist-the-flood-of-injustice-stop-the-jalaur-mega-dam/>

32 Rimmer, M. A., Larson, S., Lapong, I., Purnomo, A. H., Pong-Masak, P. R., Swanepoel, L., & Paul, N. A. (2021). *Seaweed Aquaculture in Indonesia Contributes to Social and Economic Aspects of Livelihoods and Community Wellbeing*. Sustainability, 13(19), 10946. <https://doi.org/10.3390/su131910946>



The Case of Kepulauan Seribu or the Thousand Islands

There is an ongoing struggle of communities in the Kepulauan Seribu (Thousand Islands) north of Jakarta, Indonesia where corporate capture, state collusion and environmental degradation have converged to dispossess island residents of their land and livelihoods. Jakarta is not only a mainland city but also administers a cluster of 110 islands, of which 74 have already been privatised and are now controlled by the private sector. The process of island privatisation began as early as 1985 and has been systematically driven by political and business elites, including former governors, members of parliament and private investors with strong ties to state institutions. Under the government's ambition to transform Jakarta into a 'global city', these islands—known for their natural beauty and ecological richness—have been targeted for high-end resort development.

To fast-track these projects, the government declared the islands part of Proyek Strategis Nasional (PSN) or National Strategic Projects, granting developers exceptional legal privileges and immunity from environmental and community concerns.³³ This designation allowed corporations to carry out large-scale construction and reclamation with minimal oversight. In many cases, state apparatus and military personnel were deployed to secure project sites, intimidate residents and enforce private ownership. Entire islands were fenced off and marked with signboards declaring them 'private

property', barring entry to local people who had lived and fished there for generations.

Five out of seven islands in the Pari Island cluster have already been privatised and are hotspots of corporate interest due to their tourism potential and proximity to Jakarta's urban elite market. The privatisation extended beyond land to surrounding waters, restricting local access to fishing grounds and further eroding traditional livelihoods. On Tengah Island for instance, the government initially approved a reclamation project covering eight hectares, which later expanded illegally to 26 hectares, destroying mangrove habitats and damaging the surrounding marine ecosystem. Guards stationed on these islands were armed and hostile, preventing residents from accessing fishing grounds or even passing through reclaimed areas. Though the government has since declared parts of the reclamation illegal, enforcement has been weak, and developers have retained control. In Biawak Island developers destroyed 40,000 mangrove seedlings planted by the local community as part of rehabilitation efforts—a move that not only undid years of conservation work but also sent a clear message of intimidation.

The social and economic repercussions of reclamation have been severe. As access to coastal and marine resources shrank, fishers were forced to travel further and spend more to find fish, deepening poverty and food insecurity. Many residents lost their alternative livelihoods, such as seaweed farming and small-scale tourism. The government, instead of protecting its citizens, criminalised them: several residents were prohibited from building homes on their ancestral land and four were detained during the protests. Adding to this injustice, Pari Island's residents

33 Presidential Advisory Council of the Republic of Indonesia. (2025, March 12). *New National Strategic Projects*. <https://wantimpres.go.id/en/2025/03/proyek-strategis-nasional-ba-ru/>

(The Case of, continued)

are also grappling with rising sea levels and coastal erosion—compounding the effects of state-backed environmental destruction. Yet, despite these overlapping crises, the community continues to resist.

In a historic milestone for community resistance, residents of Pari Island filed a climate lawsuit in 2023 against the Swiss cement giant, Holcim, in Switzerland—accusing the corporation of contributing to the climate crisis that directly threatens their homes.

Alongside protests and legal advocacy, the women have turned to collective action as a form of resistance from direct protests and local mobilisation to legal action by filing lawsuits against private companies such as PT BPS, political lobbying with the President and Governor of Jakarta, building solidarity with environmental justice movements across Indonesia and even international engagement. They have been rehabilitating mangroves, running communal gardens and planting seaweed to sustain themselves and preserve the ecosystem. The seaweed initiative has inspired other residents to join, and some of the produce is now being exported, creating small but vital sources of income.

Feminist Resistance And Alternatives

To combat hunger and food injustice in the region, it is necessary to address the level of corporate concentration in these systems and restore community rights to the coastal and marine commons. Communities in the region have been fighting back fiercely to defend our resources and challenge neoliberalism and imperialism.

In Raja Ampat, West Papua, where Indonesia's nickel project has caused pollution and contamination of marine biodiversity, locals have waged a resistance movement against the extraction. The #SaveRajaAmpat social media campaign exerted pressure against the government, and as a result, four out of the five mining licenses were revoked in June 2025.

In Bangladesh, the International Finance Corporation (IFC), the World Bank's private arm, funded the Rampal Power Plant Project which will impact the Sundarbans, a critical ecological and heritage site in the country. The coal power plant was met with a peoples' movement as it stands to harm not just the ecosystem, but also will impact as many as 50 million coastal people. In 2017, a global call to #StopRampal resounded not just on social media but also in the streets.³⁴

In India, Indigenous communities of Assam resisted the 1,000 megawatt solar power park that was to be constructed with a loan of USD434 million from ADB. After sustained protests and allegations of inadequate consultations and safeguards, and violations of constitutional protections for tribal lands of over 20,000 families who

34 Asia Pacific Forum on Women Law and Development (APWLD). (2017). *Successful Global Day of Protest to Protect Sundarbans*. <https://apwld.org/press-release-successful-global-day-of-protest-to-protect-sundarbans/>

were directly threatened with displacement, ADB withdrew from the project and cancelled the loan in mid-2025.³⁵ This was the same experience in Wae Sano, Flores Island in Indonesia when the World Bank exited due to the persistent opposition of the communities against a disputed geothermal power plant project.³⁶

With the significance of the region's natural and mineral resources to the lives, livelihoods and identity of local and Indigenous communities, especially to women, the struggle and resistance against IMF-World Bank are both just and necessary. And as the cases above show, people and communities working collectively can push back against the power of these IFIs.

Feminist Demands For Food, Environment And Climate Justice

Rural and grassroots women in Asia and the Pacific are critical actors for local development. The current market-led, neoliberal system not only neglects women's role but in fact further exploits and oppresses them. IFIs must stop promoting fiscal and trade policies that lead to resource extraction, weaken the environment and food systems and stop direct and indirect financing for projects that displace communities. Thus, Asia Pacific rural women demand the following:

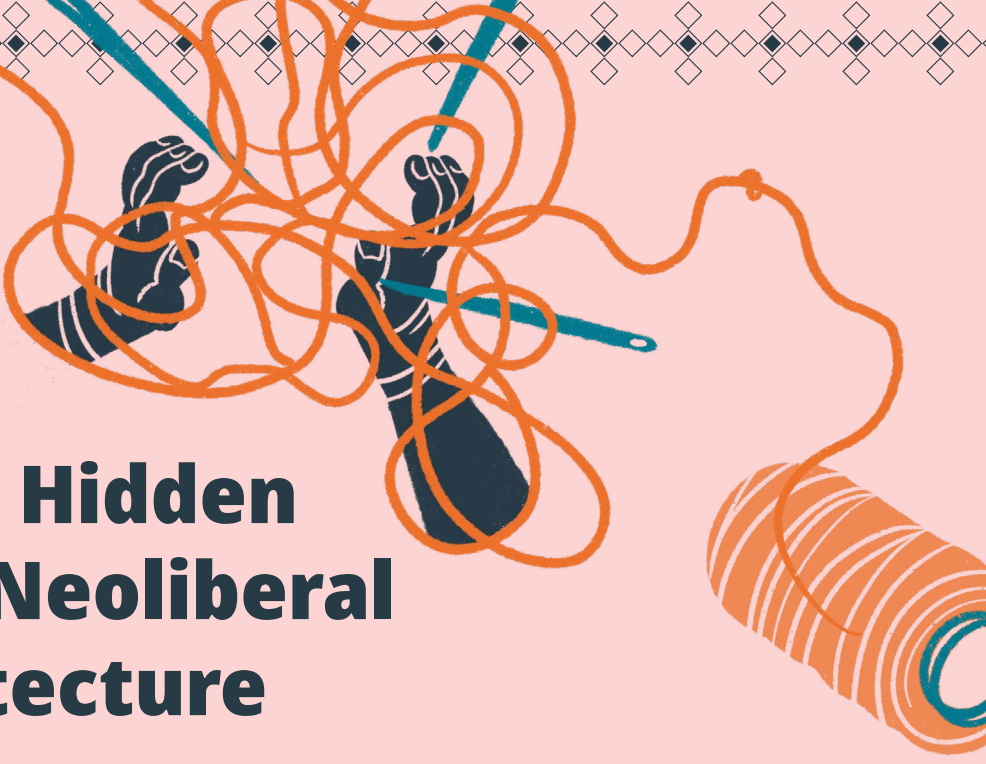
- **Stop land grabbing and resource dispossession.** Communities must have access and control over vital productive

resources such as land, water and forests. Genuine agrarian reform and equitable land redistribution must be promoted and enacted to ensure control over resources and to contribute to local economic development;

- **Uphold Feminist Food Sovereignty.** Women play a central role in food production and environmental protection thus their rights must be recognised and respected. Food production systems that centre this role, such as agroecology must therefore be promoted rather than the market-based, conventional and chemical-intensive agricultural systems;
- **End extraction and capture of ocean resources.** The development agenda that continues to follow an extractivism modality that does not benefit local communities but causes ecological and environmental damage and displacement of Indigenous communities, must be challenged.
- **Hold corporations accountable.** Big corporations need to be held accountable for damages caused by extractivism and profit-driven strategies, as they continue to place Indigenous communities, particularly women, in vulnerable positions; and
- **Due diligence through Free, Prior, Informed consultation and Consent.** Transparent due diligence policies for the private sector that focuses on protection and promotion of human rights, labour and the environment should be instituted. This should include an independent mechanism to monitor the impact of the private sector in communities. Local communities need to be consulted, be well informed and their consent obtained prior to any investment and policy change.

35 NGO Forum on ADB. (2025.) *Indigenous communities in Assam win key victory as ADB cancels loan for controversial solar project.* <https://www.forum-adb.org/post/indigenous-communities-in-assam-win-key-victory-as-adb-cancels-loan-for-controversial-solar-project>

36 Sunday Examiner. (2023). *World Bank pulls out of Indonesia's disputed power project.* <https://www.examiner.org.hk/2023/11/03/world-bank-pulls-out-of-indonesias-disputed-power-project/news/>



CHAPTER 4

Trade Traps: Hidden Agendas in Neoliberal Trade Architecture

Trade liberalisation has long been promoted as an engine for development. However, across Asia and the Pacific, trade regimes have strong-armed countries into unequal economic relationships, reinforced dependency and thus limited their ability to pursue sovereign development pathways. While International Financial Institutions (IFIs) such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and World Bank advance liberalisation through loans and conditionalities, the global trade regime—anchored in the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and reinforced through bilateral trade and regional agreements—locks countries into neoliberal economic models by making these policies binding and enforceable.

Accession to the WTO effectively mandates a sweeping, top-down rewriting of the domestic regulatory state, thus forcing countries to implement aggressive economic liberalisation, remove domestic market protections and accelerate the privatisation of public utilities and state assets to satisfy accession protocols. Trade rules have ensured that liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation are permanent features of national economies.

Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) imposed since the 1970s forced countries across Asia and the Pacific to open markets, while deregulating and privatising public assets. This debt-trade nexus operates as a closed loop of continuous wealth extraction. The IMF routinely embeds WTO-style trade rules directly into sovereign debt conditionalities, which then pushes cash-strapped debtor countries to liberalise their domestic economies faster and deeper than their multilateral trade commitments would require just so they could access loans. These reforms now pervade trade agreements. Through dispute settlement mechanisms and looming threats of sanctions or retaliation, states are constrained from reversing these reforms, even if they threaten livelihoods, public services and long-term development.

The WTO, alongside the World Bank, continues to push for trade liberalisation as a pathway for growth. Free trade agreements such as the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), Comprehensive and Progressive Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) and Indo-Pacific Economic Framework (IPEF) work to further integrate Asian economies into global supply chains, thus enhancing

capital inflows and exports in the region. These 'new age' FTAs are not just simple trade agreements. They are modern tools of economic control designed to lock in 'WTO-Plus' obligations. By enforcing strict intellectual property rights, they allow corporate monopolies to restrict access to generic medicines and healthcare, enforce the privatisation of seed varieties that effectively criminalise traditional seed-saving for smallholder farmers and even ban 'buy local' policies that protect domestic industries. These agreements trap sovereign governments in restrictive legal straightjackets that penalise policies meant to help ordinary people. The argument is that free trade and integration into global value chains will drive growth, create jobs and increase economic opportunities. For the majority of developing countries, these promises have not materialised. Wealth continues to drain out of the Global South into the Global North countries, deepening poverty, sustaining recurring crises and perpetuating existing inequalities.

Trade As An Engine For Development, But For Whom?

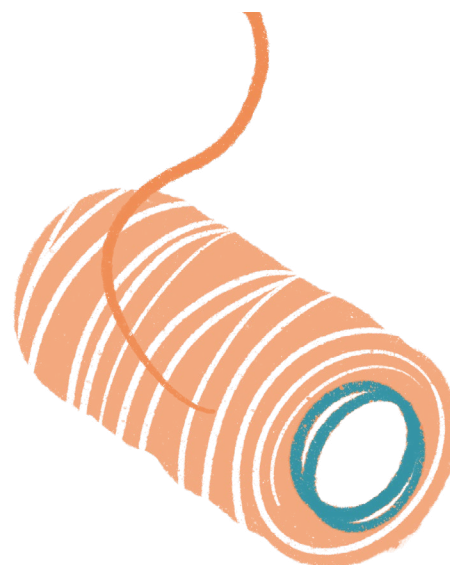
Since the establishment of the WTO in 1995, the policies of the WTO further cemented the trade liberalisation enforced by the IMF-World Bank since the 1980s. Member countries of the WTO from Asia and the Pacific are legally bound by the organisation's highly exploitative agreements such as the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) and the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). These agreements enforce compliance and alignment of domestic laws with global trade rules, with any violation resulting in disputes, penalties or retaliatory measures.

At the same time, bilateral and regional Free Trade Agreements (FTAs)—which surged in the 2000s when multilateral trade negotiations stalled¹—continue to trap developing countries into further trade liberalisation and export-dependence, positioning them as producers of raw materials, cheap labour and low-cost goods. This, in effect, licenses Global North countries to freely extract resources while concentrating profit, value and technology, more often than not, in the hands of corporations.

This system perpetuates lopsided trade relations by pressuring the Global South to prioritise the economic demands of developed countries. These structural imbalances restrict the ability of developing countries to diversify their economies and pursue industrialisation into high-value sectors, trapping them in a state of dependency on the developed countries.²

1 Bilaterals.org and GRAIN, (2007). Today's FTA frenzy. Bilaterals.org. <https://www.bilaterals.org/IMG/pdf/fightingFTA-en-Hi-1-b-todays-fta-frenzy.pdf>

2 Taneja, A., Kamande, A., Gomez, C. G., Abed, D., Lawson, M. & Neelanjana, M. (2025). Takers Not Makers: The Unjust Poverty and Uneared Wealth of Colonialism. OXFAM International. <https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2025-01/English%20-%20Davos%20Full%20Report%202025.pdf>





Pushing Back Against The WTO: A Dispute Over Indonesia's Nickel Exports

Indonesia's dispute with the WTO³ over an export ban on nickel ore is a strong example of Global South resistance. As one of the largest exporters of raw nickel ore, Indonesia imposed restrictions on exports of the material in 2020, in an attempt to develop domestic processing capacity and retain profitability and value. The export ban impacted the European Union (EU), one of the largest nickel importers and limited its access to raw nickel ore. The EU challenged this policy legally at the WTO and Indonesia was found to violate Article XI: 1 GATT 1994. Indonesia appealed against the WTO decision in 2022 and the case is still ongoing, with Indonesia yet to lift its export ban as of 2026.

3 World Trade Organisation. (2023). *DS592: Indonesia — Measures Relating to Raw Materials*. https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/dispu_e/cases_e/ds592_e.htm

The WTO and international trade agreements, supported by World Bank technical assistance, aim to integrate developing nations into the global trading system by aligning national policies with WTO rules. This framework pressures countries to lower tariffs and eliminate non-tariff barriers, effectively dismantling domestic market protections.⁴ For example, under the WTO AOA, IFIs

4 Taneja, A., Kamande, A., Gomez, C. G., Abed, D., Lawson, M. & Neelanjana, M. (2025). *Takers Not Makers: The Unjust Poverty and Uneared Wealth of Colonialism*. OXFAM International. <https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2025-01/English%20-%20Davos%20Full%20Report%202025.pdf>

provided loans and policy advice pushing for the neoliberal reform of agricultural policies. These reforms included cutting government subsidies, which destroyed the livelihood of small-scale farmers and allowed Global North countries and multinational corporations to capture the market. **These corporations have monopolised the global market, with the top 10 controlling at least 40 per cent of the global trade in agricultural commodities, and the top six controlling 58 per cent of the global seed market and 77.6 per cent of the global agrochemicals market.**⁵

Further, to attract foreign investors, developing countries are forced to compete with each other by adopting 'investment-friendly' regulations that sacrifice labour rights and environmental protection. The WTO continues to promote enabling environments for private investments through the Investment Facilitation for Development (IFD) Agreement, which enables foreign investors to bend national laws in their favour. Corporations are given access to government decision-making spaces that are not even accessible to impacted communities, nor to ordinary citizens and civil society groups.⁶

While extracting resources and benefitting from investment-friendly regulations in the Global South, the Global North dominates value chains by retaining control of design, technology, branding and market access, allowing them to control prices and production. Value and profits are distributed unevenly, with the Global North benefitting the most; between 1995 and 2015, the Global North extracted an estimated USD242 trillion

5 Shand, H., Wetter, K. J., Chowdhry, K. & the ETC Group Collective. (2022). *Food Barons 2022: Crisis Profiteering, Digitalization and Shifting Power*. ETC Group. https://www.etcgroup.org/files/files/food-barons-2022-full_sectors-final_16_sept.pdf

6 Civil Society. (2024, February 29). *Open letter from civil society to the Chair of the MC13 Opposing WTO Plurilateral on Investment Facilitation*. Our World is Not for Sale. https://owinfs.org/2024/2024-02-29_L_IF.pdf

in value from the Global South through unequal economic exchange.⁷

Holding Countries Hostage: Tools Of Corporate Capture In Trade

Many trade and investment agreements include Investor-State Dispute Settlements (ISDS) clauses, a mechanism administered by World Bank Group that allows foreign corporations to sue host governments if national laws and policies negatively impact their expected profits.⁸

In 2019, the International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) ordered Pakistan to pay USD5.8 billion in compensation to Tethyan Copper Company, an Australian subsidiary mining firm. The government of Balochistan in Pakistan had refused to grant the company a mining license, citing concerns over the inequitable distribution of profits and the company's unwillingness to increase local labour participation in the smelting process. In response, Tethyan filed a case against the Pakistan government for breaching the Fair and Equitable Treatment (FET) clause under the Australia-Pakistan Bilateral Investment Treaty (BIT). ICSID ultimately ruled in favour of the company, prioritising corporate interest over state's concerns.⁹

In 2025, the total number of ISDS cases reached 1,401, with 55 per cent of new

claims filed against developing countries. Moreover, 60 per cent of all ISDS cases involve damage claims exceeding USD100 million, including 143 instances where investors sought more than USD1 billion.¹⁰

This exemplifies disproportionate corporate power, as multinational corporations can hold countries accountable for threatening their profits, exacerbating austerity and debt in developing countries by penalising sovereign states for enacting public interest, environmental or redistributive labour regulations.

Digitalisation As The New Arena For Corporate Capture

Big Tech companies in the Global North dominate and push for further liberalisation of the digital economy, with implications on surveillance, land, labour rights and other areas. Data, being the new arena for digital colonialism and economic dependence, is being extracted globally, allowing new services to be developed by multinational corporations and Big Tech monopolies and exploited for their benefit.¹¹ **This liberalisation enables a handful of corporate giants—such as the Big Five US tech companies GAFAM (Google/Alphabet, Amazon, Facebook, Apple and Microsoft) and e-commerce giants Amazon (US) and Alibaba (China)—to consolidate wealth and stifle local innovation.** Meanwhile, the IMF-World Bank has provided technical assistance and development policy loans to developing countries to develop their digital infrastructure. However, developing countries in Asia-Pacific face critical deficits in necessary

7 Taneja, A., Kamande, A., Gomez, C. G., Abed, D., Lawson, M. & Neelanjana, M. (2025). *Takers Not Makers: The Unjust Poverty and Unearned Wealth of Colonialism*. OXFAM International. <https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2025-01/English%20-%20Davos%20Full%20Report%202025.pdf>

8 Tienhaara, K. (2019, July 22). *World Bank ruling against Pakistan shows global economic governance is broken*. The Conversation. <https://theconversation.com/world-bank-ruling-against-pakistan-shows-global-economic-governance-is-broken-120414>

9 Australian Fair Trade & Investment Network. (2021, April 8). *Pakistan prepares to eliminate ISDS from its Bilateral Investment Treaties*. Bilaterals.org. <https://www.bilaterals.org/?pakistan-agrees-to-new-isds>

10 UNCTAD. (2025). *IIA Issues Note, No. 2, 2025: Recent trends in investor-State arbitration cases*. https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/diaepcbinf2025d4_en.pdf

11 Scasserra, S. (2021). *Indonesia's digital economy commitments in EU and RCEP trade agreements: An analysis*. Transnational Institute. <https://www.tni.org/en/publication/indonesias-digital-economy-commitments-in-eu-and-rcep-trade-agreements>

infrastructure¹² such as high-speed internet and reliable electricity, alongside skills gaps in digital literacy. This reality prevents them from building any competitive domestic digital economies, thus creating a widening divide where developed countries still dominate sectors like e-commerce and fintech, while smaller states remain trapped in dependency. The ways in which digitalisation perpetuates existing biases and economic disparities further raise questions of sovereignty and long-term dependency.

Digital trade brings in new challenges in the region and extends well beyond the usual and already existing regulatory trade and policy frameworks. The liberalisation of e-commerce has significantly impacted developing countries as can be seen from agreements such as the WTO Moratorium on Customs Duties on Electronic Transmissions since 1998. This prohibits any member state from imposing tariffs on electronic transmissions and so, developing countries lose revenues. Initially limited to software, this Moratorium has evolved under strong US government campaigning to cover cloud computing, digital payments and online advertising. It has been continually renewed despite critical opposition from developing nations like India, Indonesia, Argentina and South Africa over revenue losses and eroded regulatory sovereignty.^{13,14} **It was estimated that in the period of 2017 to 2020, developing countries and Least-Developed**

Countries (LDCs) lost USD56 billion in tariff revenues.¹⁵ Furthermore, standardising rules that protect corporate interests over public welfare are increasingly finding their way into regional trade agreements (RTAs). Provisions on the non-imposition of customs duties on electronic transmissions (NICDET) are now commonly locked into frameworks like the CPTPP, RCEP, IPEF, and the ASEAN Digital Economy Framework Agreement.

The aggressive push for digitalisation and e-commerce amid domination, control and monopolisation of the market by the big tech companies is alarming. And concerns over regulation of cross-border digital services, data sovereignty, cybersecurity and Artificial Intelligence (AI) should not be ignored. The power of tech and e-commerce transnationals increasingly invades the realm of government functions, with private contractors running state databases and national elections. Because developing countries lack comprehensive digital trade policies or data privacy regulations, corporations easily organise their operations to bypass tax obligations and escape accountability for data privacy breaches, surveillance and human rights violations. These so-called new digital rules in RTAs are fundamentally engineered to expand the power of Big Tech while cementing global labour flexibilisation, leaving workers fragmented, underpaid and stripped of social protections.

Trade Wars, Sanctions And Coercive Economic Measures

Fierce competition over resources and markets have inevitably led to intensifying geopolitical tensions among imperial

12 World Bank. (2025, July 2). *Unlocking the Philippines' Digital Transformation by Increasing Internet Connectivity*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/results/2025/07/02/unlocking-the-philippines-digital-transformation-by-increasing-internet-connectivity>

13 Third World Network. (2023). *WTO: India, South Africa push back against proponents of e-com moratorium*. [https://www.twn.my/title2/wto.info/2023/ti230710.htm#:~:text=Ravi%20Kanth\)%20%E2%80%93%20Several%20developing%20countries,insisted%20that%20electronic%20transmissions%20in](https://www.twn.my/title2/wto.info/2023/ti230710.htm#:~:text=Ravi%20Kanth)%20%E2%80%93%20Several%20developing%20countries,insisted%20that%20electronic%20transmissions%20in)

14 Andrenelli, Andrea & Lopez Gonzalez, Javier. (26 March 2024). *Understanding the scope, definition, and impact of the WTO e-commerce moratorium*. <https://cepr.org/voxeu/columns/understanding-scope-definition-and-impact-wto-e-commerce-moratorium>

15 Bailey, R. (2024, February 16). *Understanding the Moratorium on Customs Duties on Electronic Transmissions*. Public Citizen. <https://www.citizen.org/article/understanding-the-moratorium-on-customs-duties-on-electronic-transmissions/>

powers, as they compete for a re-division of the world's territories to maintain economic hegemony.

In 2025, the United States (US), China, Germany, Japan and India possessed the largest economies in the world based on Gross Domestic Product (GDP). The ongoing US-China rivalry is a significant aspect of the geopolitical landscape, playing a key role in shaping economic policies and trade networks. This includes a complex web of economic alliances, plurilateral agreements and trade deals. China consolidated its influence in the Asia and the Pacific region through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) launched in 2013 and later through the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) with ASEAN nations in 2022.

The rising economic and military power of China has unnerved the US and challenged its hegemonic power. As both the US and China expand their influence, militarism intensifies in the region. Through security-related FTAs and multilateral frameworks, the resulting alliances act as cornerstones for their broader geopolitical strategies, including military and security networks across the globe. This rivalry led to a trade war in early 2025 with the second term of US President Donald Trump who introduced a series of tariffs of 10 per cent on all US imports in addition to country-specific reciprocal tariffs. These are indirect trade sanctions, disrupting the global supply chain and reshaping global trade dynamics.

Many countries in Asia were on the receiving end of the US tariffs, such as the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Cambodia, China, Burma/Myanmar and Vietnam. Developing countries are vulnerable to these tariffs, particularly when their economic strategy relies on export-led growth and they have a narrow range of

commodities to export.¹⁶ The competitiveness of their exports significantly diminishes as tariffs increase and has an immediate impact on job and foreign exchange earnings and decreases trade-related revenues. Countries like Vietnam and Cambodia that were facing tariffs of 46 to 49 per cent, had to substantially reduce their export prices to maintain access to the US market.¹⁷

This is all indicative of US attempts to maintain economic hegemony in the global market and challenge China's growing economic dominance in the region.¹⁸ This approach is not only creating uncertainty in the global economy but also allowing the US to force countries into new bilateral trade agreements. Asian countries such as Indonesia have closed their bilateral deals with the US, allowing the US to have duty-free access for select US products, increase imports of US energy and agricultural goods, and remove export restrictions on critical minerals. Other countries like the Philippines are expanding military collaboration and opening their market to the US with zero tariffs, while they will be paying a 19 per cent tariff if the agreement is ratified.¹⁹

These bilateral trade agreements largely benefit corporations and put developing countries in a position where they have limited

16 Hes, T. (28, November 2025). *The impact of trade wars and tariffs on developing economies*. Development Aid. <https://www.developmentaid.org/news-stream/post/202353/the-impact-of-trade-wars-and-tariffs-on-developing-economies>

17 Dinh, H. T. & Canuto, O (June, 2025). *THE GLOBAL IMPACT OF PRESIDENT TRUMP'S RECIPROCAL TARIFFS: Implications for Developing Countries*. Policy Centre for the New South. <https://www.policycenter.ma/sites/default/files/2025-06/RP>

18 Jiao, Y., Liu, Z. Tian, Z. & Wang, X. (2023, April 15). *The Impacts of the U.S. Trade War on Chinese Exporters*. The Review of Economics and Statistics (2024) 106 (6): 1576–1587. https://doi.org/10.1162/rest_a_01229

19 Buchwald, E. (2025, July 23). *Trump announces trade agreement with the Philippines and terms of deal with Indonesia*. CNN Business. <https://www.cnn.com/2025/07/22/business/trump-philippines-trade-deal>



Bilateral trade agreements largely benefit corporations and put developing countries in a position where they have limited gains. By turning resource-rich countries into compliant mineral providers while blocking their paths to domestic industrialisation, this architecture functions as a modern tool of extractive colonialism.



gains.²⁰ By turning resource-rich countries into compliant mineral providers while blocking their paths to domestic industrialisation, this architecture functions as a modern tool of extractive colonialism. The unethical use of unilateral coercive measures by powerful states to secure their geopolitical advantage, reflects the unfolding crisis in the multilateral trade system.

Impacts On Grassroots Women: Labour, Land And Food Sovereignty

Trade and investment agreements fail to consider the gender-differentiated impacts of trade policies. The current economic model has resulted in debt, climate and humanitarian crises for developing countries across the Global South, and women are disproportionately paying the price. While the richest one per cent own 45 per cent of global wealth, 3.6 billion people live below the poverty line, including one in ten women living

in extreme poverty.²¹ This economic model has undermined human rights, particularly women's human rights. As the drive for profit and extractivism continues, it will perpetuate systemic barriers and reinforce patriarchal norms that further marginalise women. Consequently, wealth has concentrated in the hands of a few global elites, enabling an unchecked corporate plunder of finite natural resources that leads to severe socio-economic and environmental degradation, leaving women—who are overrepresented in the lower ranks of economic hierarchies—to bear a disproportionate burden of economic insecurity. In the digital era, this marginalisation is compounded by the lack of data privacy regulations and comprehensive digital trade policies in developing countries, making grassroots women highly vulnerable to corporate surveillance, data exploitation and digital economic exclusion.

In Asia, corporations have monopolised on cheap labour. Global value chains exploit women's cheap labour in Special Economic

20 Kagan, J. (2026, February 11). *Bilateral Trade: Key Benefits and Challenges Explained*. Investopedia. <https://www.investopedia.com/terms/b/bilateral-trade.asp>

21 Taneja, A., Kamande, A., Gomez, C. G., Abed, D., Lawson, M. & Neelanjana, M. (2025). *Takers Not Makers: The Unjust Poverty and Unearned Wealth of Colonialism*. OXFAM International. <https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2025-01/English%20-%20Davos%20Full%20Report%202025.pdf>

Zones (SEZs), while many others remain trapped in highly precarious informal work with low wages and no social protections. The displacement of local industries and reliance on export-driven economies have led to precarious employment, with women primarily impacted as they make up a significant 60 percent to 80 percent of the export manufacturing workforce in developing countries.²² When these sectors experience cuts, women are often the first to face unemployment, with fewer options to transition to other formal sectors. As decent jobs become scarcer, informal employment rises, where over 58 percent of the Asia Pacific workforce now work without security or benefits.²³ This precarity is aggressively accelerated by digital trade liberalisation and the rise of platform capitalism. Under the guise of digital efficiency, transnational tech platforms utilise algorithmic management to enforce extreme labour flexibilisation, keeping women workers trapped in hyper-fragmented piece-work, gig arrangements and informal digital labour with completely unclear job statuses, sub-minimum wages and a total absence of social protections. As decent jobs become scarcer due to this pervasive focus on profit maximisation, suppressed wages and the reduction of labour safeguards, women from low-income and debt-ridden countries are increasingly forced into informal or 'illicit' sectors, or forced to migrate domestically and abroad, only to become targets for illegal recruitment schemes, digitally-facilitated trafficking and forced labour.

Women's formal labour force participation in Asia and the Pacific has stagnated or shrunk, falling from 38.5 per cent in 1991

-
- 22 International Labour Organization and Asian Development Bank. (2023). *Where women work in Asia and the Pacific Implications for policies, equity and inclusive growth*. ADB. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/916051/where-women-work-asia-pacific.pdf>
- 23 Asia-Pacific Employment and Social Outlook 2024: Promoting Decent Work And Social Justice to Manage Ageing Societies, Geneva: International Labour Office, 2024.

to 37.5 per cent in 2021.²⁴ This is mainly due to women's unpaid care work not being recognised or valued. Women's caregiving duties limit their ability to enter or remain in the formal workforce, though women work the longest hours when their paid and unpaid work are both considered.²⁵ This burden is further exacerbated when states make cuts in public services such as health, education and social protection, further pushing women into informal and unpaid care work and deepening feminised poverty. These cuts are often driven by persistent trade deficits and the debt-driven model of 'development assistance' from the IMF and World Bank. To address reduced revenues and service sovereign debt, governments resort to regressive taxation and public spending cuts in sectors where women make up the majority of the workforce, resulting in immediate job losses for them while transferring a crushing burden of unpaid care work onto households. This destruction of small livelihoods reduces local income, pushing women into a vicious household debt trap cycle where they must rely on exploitative borrowing just to meet basic needs. Furthermore, the corporate infiltration of digital platforms into public functions has resulted in massive gaps in cybersecurity and digital infrastructure, exposing women to heightened risks of online gender-based violence (GBV), digital fraud and algorithmic biases that restrict their access to online financial support and services.

Moreover, the liberalisation of the agriculture and fisheries sectors has shifted farming from subsistence-oriented, biodiverse systems

24 International Labour Organization and Asian Development Bank. (2023). *Where women work in Asia and the Pacific Implications for policies, equity and inclusive growth*. ADB. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/916051/where-women-work-asia-pacific.pdf>

25 International Labour Organization and Asian Development Bank. (2023). *Where women work in Asia and the Pacific Implications for policies, equity and inclusive growth*. ADB. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/916051/where-women-work-asia-pacific.pdf>

toward profit-driven agribusiness and industrial aquaculture, gravely undermining women's capacity to ensure household food security.²⁶ The rise of export-oriented cash crops and commercial fish farming diverts local harvests to global markets, stripping communities of affordable nutrition. Corporate capture of the agricultural sector has led to increased land and ocean-grabbing by foreign investors, alongside the privatisation of seeds and marine resources. This is detrimental to small-scale farmers and fishers, who lose access to the traditional lands and fishing grounds essential for their livelihoods. These corporate land grabs decimate local economies and have worsened a global food insecurity crisis that has more than doubled since pre-Covid19 pandemic levels, leaving nearly 350 million people food insecure.²⁷

This liberalisation also endangers food sovereignty. Women farmers experience significant hardships as they face

competition from cheap food imports, which push down local prices and reduce farmers' incomes. Meanwhile, governments take measures to support large-scale commercial food production, as these systems are considered more efficient and competitive. This shift threatens to push out local and sustainable forms of food production and results in the loss of local seeds and traditional practices.²⁸ For peasant women, these challenges are compounded by structural barriers in accessing land, financing and technology in agriculture, leaving them even worse off than men.

Ultimately, this neoliberal trade model sacrifices the rights and livelihoods of women in order to sustain a system of corporate profit, further entrenching structural inequality.

26 Lelea, M.A., Garbaba, C.A., Guluma, A. & Hensel, O. (2022). *Gendering post-harvest loss research: responsibilities of women and men to manage maize after harvest in southwestern Ethiopia*, *Food Sec.* 14, 951–963. Springer Nature Link. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12571-022-01259-y>

27 FSIN and Global Network Against Food Crises. (2024). *Global Report on Food Crises*. <https://www.fsinplatform.org/grfc2024>

28 Pamintuan, M. (2023). *Strengthening Feminist Movements for Trade & Economic Justice: WITCH FPAR Regional Report*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/WITCH-FPAR-REPORT.pdf> Based on the work of Pakistan Kissan Mazdoor Tehreek (PKMT), Women Studies and Resource Center (WSRC), Gabriela Youth and Sisters Garden (SG).





The WTO Threatens The Livelihoods Of Women Livestock Farmers In Pakistan

In Pakistan, 90 per cent of consumers still buy fresh, unpasteurised milk, which is mostly being supplied by the informal milk sector. This sector is largely in the hands of small and landless farmers (as producers) many of whom are women, and a very wide network of milk vendors spread across the country both in rural and urban areas. The sale of fresh milk grants a steady source of income, especially for landless women agriculture workers who have tenuous and/or seasonal access to agricultural work.

Women's rearing of livestock is critical to household food security and nutrition and even more so in rural and remote areas. Caring for cattle enables women to produce fresh milk as well as other products such as butter, yogurt and ghee. Women can therefore secure food for their families by keeping a portion of their production for their own consumption. They can also make a small income by selling the milk to other households in their communities as well as to milk sellers. The milk sellers in turn supply milk to shops in the villages and the city, individual households in the city, tea stalls and hotels, as well as middlemen that also supply to dairy companies.

Pakistan as a member of the WTO adheres to the WTO's Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Agreement. The country also adheres to the 'Codex Alimentarius' or 'Food Code'. Adherence to the Codex and WTO rules has led to Pakistan signing several domestic and national laws that harms small dairy women farmers and consolidated the monopoly of the big dairy corporations in Pakistan's dairy sector's production and value chain. These laws—the Punjab Pure Food Authority Act 2011, the Pakistan Pure Foods Law 2011, the Punjab Pure Food Regulations 2018—form

the basis of the existing trade-related food quality and safety legislative framework and cover more than 400 items including milk and milk products. Since May 2019, the Punjab Food Authority (PFA) has been campaigning to ban the sale of fresh milk and intends to pass legislation prohibiting the sale of fresh milk in Lahore, the second largest city in the country in terms of population and the capital of the province of Punjab. The Minimum Pasteurisation Law was to be implemented by July 2022 to criminalise the sale of raw milk but was halted until 2026.

If the law is passed, the small and landless farmers who produce most of the fresh milk in Pakistan will lose the market for their produce since they cannot afford to pasteurise their milk, allowing corporations instead to step in to process and package milk for consumers. Women farmers who take care of cattle will lose their livelihoods when the ban on selling unpasteurised milk is implemented. Households which previously used unpasteurised milk will have to switch to packaged milk. Not only will they have to spend more on milk itself (since company-processed and packaged milk is more expensive), but they will also have to purchase other dairy products separately e.g. butter and yogurt. For a large segment of the population, this will not be financially feasible and women farmers foresee a fall in nutritional intake.

*Excerpts from the case study 'The Impacts of Trade Liberalisation in the Livestock and Dairy Sector in Punjab, Pakistan on Peasant Women, 2020' by Pakistan Kissan Mazdoor Tehreek (PKMT)²⁹

Feminist Demands For Trade Justice

29 Yahaya, D. (2023). *WTO in a nutshell: Why women say No to WTO*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/WTO-in-a-nutshell.pdf>

APWLD alongside other feminist movements and civil society have been resisting the WTO since its establishment, as well as the many unfair bilateral, plurilateral and regional trade agreements that have emerged since. In place of the global neoliberal economic system that undermines women's human rights, we call for:

- **A feminist trade justice agenda.**

This will remedy inequalities, ensure gender- transformative public services and infrastructure, promote and protect women's human rights and adheres to the principles of international cooperation and solidarity that truly advances Development Justice;

- **People-centred trade.** Local communities and elected people-centred governments have sovereignty over their own economies and development; and
- **Multilateralism based on solidarity, democracy, human rights and justice,** rather than the interests of unaccountable multinational corporations or wealthy states.

We demand the following trade related measures:

- **Abolish the ISDS mechanism.** Abolish trade rules and agreements that impose corporate interests through ISDS and other measures that undermine the state's obligation to protect public interests;
- **End trade sanctions and unilateral coercive measures.** People need a trade system based on cooperation, accountability and transparency, that recognises the primacy of human rights, public interest and state sovereignty;
- **Make all trade, tax and investment agreements public.** This allows for transparency, public oversight and independent monitoring,

including meaningful participation by local communities;

- **Independently monitor trade and investment agreements.** Conduct ex-ante, ex-post and periodic gender, environmental and human rights impact assessments of trade and investment agreements, led by independent oversight committees including parliamentarians, civil society and local communities; and
- **Revive and strengthen local sustainable food practices.** Guarantee people's rights and control over their food systems, such as seed saving practices and opposing agreements that limit farmers' rights to conserve and share genetic resources.



CHAPTER 5

Whose Debt is this Anyway? New Forms of Economic Colonialism

In the years between 2021 and 2023, nearly two billion people in Asia and the Pacific lived in countries that spent more on interest payments for debt than on health or education for their people.¹ Crippling debt burdens in the region, nurtured and kept in place by the neoliberal policies of bilateral and multilateral lenders including International Financial Institutions (IFIs) are a primary tool through which economic inequality can be sustained, allowing continued resource extraction from the Global South to the Global North. It is not a coincidence that during 2021—just one year in this same period—over six billion people worldwide or more than 80 per cent of the global population were affected by austerity due to International Monetary Fund (IMF)-led economic reforms.²

The loans disbursed by IFIs, particularly the IMF and the World Bank, come bearing

obligatory conditionalities that shape macroeconomic governance in the borrower economies. The loan conditionalities of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), which started in the early 1980s, are often criticised for not taking into account country-specific characteristics or needs.³

The IMF and World Bank have consistently enforced these loan conditionalities over the years, even in times of unprecedented economic crises in countries. In the aftermath of the 2007 to 2008 financial crisis, various countries in Asia and the Pacific implemented a range of neoliberal reforms, including austerity measures like regressive tax hikes, cuts in subsidies and public wage bills and the rationalisation of social protection

1 United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2025). *A World of Debt: It is Time for Reform*. https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/osgttinf2025d4_en.pdf

2 Ortiz, I., Cummins, M. (2022, September). *End Austerity: A Global Report on Budget Cuts and Harmful Social Reforms in 2022-25*. https://assets.nationbuilder.com/eurodad/pages/3039/attachments/original/1664184662/Austerity_Ortiz_Cummins_FINAL_26-09.pdf?1664184662

3 Bretton Woods Project. (2017). *The IMF and gender equality: A compendium of feminist macroeconomic critiques*. <https://www.brettonwoodsproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/The-IMF-and-Gender-Equality-A-Compendium-of-Feminist-Macroeconomic-Critiques.pdf>

programmes.^{4,5} Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, much of the pandemic recovery support provided by the IMF consisted of loans conditioned upon austerity measures,⁶ as were over half the IMF loans approved for countries between 2020 and 2023.⁷

For debt-burdened economies across Asia and the Pacific, the issue is two-fold:

1. The obligatory and endless servicing of unsustainable debts and the resultant diversion of fiscal resources away from developing robust national public

institutions and services that would ensure the fundamental human rights of its people; and

2. The ongoing, cumulative impact of long-standing, adverse neoliberal policies that maintain persistent underdevelopment, vulnerability to external shocks and other overlapping crises, making recurring borrowing necessary and maintaining the state of indebtedness.

It is also important to mention the role of domestic, privileged bureaucrat capitalists and domestic elites⁸ who amass wealth at the expense of the poor and marginalised in their own countries. They often collude with foreign creditors and benefit from privatisation and tax privileges, acquiring illegitimate debts and participating in large-scale corruption that drains the economy of critical resources for domestic growth.⁹

4 These measures came into effect in the following countries in Asia and the Pacific: Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Timor-Leste, Thailand, Philippines, Laos, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Palau, Marshall Islands, Tonga, Mongolia, Micronesia, Cambodia, Tuvalu and China.

5 Ortiz, I., Cummins, M., Capaldo, J. & Karuranethy, K. (2015, November 30). *The Decade of adjustment: A review of austerity trends 2010-2020 in 187 Countries*. International Labour Organisation (ILO). https://www.ilo.org/secsoc/information-resources/publications-and-tools/Workingpapers/WCMS_431730/lang-en/index.htm

6 Tamale, N. (2021, August 11). *Adding Fuel to Fire: How IMF demands for austerity will drive up inequality worldwide*. Oxfam. <https://policy-practice.oxfam.org/resources/adding-fuel-to-fire-how-imf-demands-for-austerity-will-drive-up-inequality-worl-621210/>

7 Human Rights Watch. (2023, September 25). *Bandage on a bullet wound: IMF social spending floors and COVID-19*. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2023/09/25/bandage-bullet-wound/imf-social-spending-floors-and-covid-19-pandemic>

8 State actors and other (economic, socio-cultural, political/non-partisan) sections of elites like industrialists, feudals, military etc. who use their influence to amass and expand their wealth and power.

9 Shumail, Z. (2026). *The Perils of Neoliberal Capitalism: Women's Lives Under Debt in Asia and the Pacific*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/APWLD-2026-DEBT-CRISIS-REPORT.pdf>





Wealth Extraction From The Global South For The Global North

- From 1970 to 2022, the Global South¹⁰ paid USD2.5 trillion in interest payments alone to creditors¹¹ and from 2022 to 2024, developing countries¹² paid USD741 billion more in debt repayments than they received in new financing.¹³
- In 2023, 51 developing countries experienced net debt outflows,¹⁴ paying USD48 billion more to private creditors than they received in new loans from multilateral and bilateral lenders, contributing to an overall net debt outflow of USD25 billion. Most of the affected countries were located in Africa and Asia and Oceania.^{15,16}
- Between 2021 and 2023, two billion people in Asia and the Pacific lived in countries that spent more on interest than on health or education. And in 2022 alone, six billion people worldwide faced austerity due to IMF-led economic reforms in 2022.¹⁷
- USD1 trillion is extracted from the Global South each year, based on 'the rigged nature of the global financial system' (e.g. through lower borrowing costs for the Global North).¹⁸

10 The terminology of Global South and Global North does not describe a strictly defined geographic region but is a reference to the relative economic and political power and wealth of countries across different parts of the world. This terminology emerged as a descriptor of the global political order in the late twentieth century, whereby the Global North generally includes the United States, Canada, England, countries in the European Union, as well as Singapore, Japan, South Korea and even some southern hemisphere countries such as Australia and New Zealand. The Global South is largely taken to include formerly colonised countries in Africa and Latin America, as well as parts of Asia. It comprises the majority of the world population in resource-poor and weak/dependent economies. | Braff, L. & Nelson, K. (2022). Chapter 15: The Global North: Introducing the Region, *Gendered Lives Global Issues*. MILNE Library. <https://milnepublishing.geneseo.edu/genderedlives/chapter/chapter-15-the-global-north-introducing-the-region/>

11 Debt Justice. (2022, August). *Colonialism and debt briefing: How debt is used to exploit and control*. <https://debtjustice.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/Colonialism-and-Debt-briefing.pdf>

12 Presently, the term 'developing country' denotes an economy with lower levels of industrialisation and ranking on indicators for human development, compared to more advanced economies in the world. The terminology of 'developed' and 'developing' economies emerged in the 1940s, based on the levels of countries' industrialisation. Over time, the term has become deeply embedded in institutional and academic discourse, while its meaning and use remain contested. | Farias, D. B. L. (2024). Unpacking the 'developing' country classification: origins and hierarchies, *Review of International Political Economy*, 31(2), 651–673. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09692290.2023.2246975>

13 World Bank Group. (2025, December 3). *Developing Countries' Debt Outflows Hit 50-Year High During 2022-2024*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2025/12/03/developing-countries-debt-outflows-hit-50-year-high-during-2022-2024>

14 Occurs when payments on external debt exceed new financing inflows.

15 Oceania includes American Samoa, Cook Islands, Fiji, French Polynesia, Guam, Kiribati, New Caledonia, Niue Island, Papua New Guinea, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Vanuatu, Australia and New Zealand.

16 United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2025). *A World of Debt: It is Time for Reform*. https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/osgttinf2025d4_en.pdf

17 United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2025). *A World of Debt: It is Time for Reform*. https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/osgttinf2025d4_en.pdf

18 Taneja, A., Kamande, A., Gomez, C. G., Abed, D., Lawson, M. & Neelanjana, M. (2025). *Takers Not Makers: The Unjust Poverty and Unearned Wealth of Colonialism*. OXFAM International. <https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2025-01/English%20-%20Davos%20Full%20Report%202025.pdf>

These debt burdens are further exacerbated by structural factors, such as: only being able to borrow in foreign currencies and at much higher borrowing costs. These countries have increased vulnerability to fluctuations in exchange rates and the pressure to maintain export-oriented economies to build up foreign reserves for debt repayments; complications with private lenders that include more expensive lending and greater difficulties in resolving cases of debt structuring as private lender regulations and interests vary.¹⁹ Further, increased shifts in Official Development Assistance (ODA) from grants to loans has compounded debt burdens. **The share of loans in the total ODA value to Asia and Oceania increased to 40 per cent between 2012 and 2022.**²⁰

For an indebted economy, failing to repay their debt risks the country being downgraded for creditworthiness. This impacts future prospects of access to international capital markets, as investor confidence weakens and borrowing costs rise.²¹ For millions of people in the region, a debt crisis manifests in intersecting, existential challenges of crushing austerity, dismal and/or inaccessible essential public services and an endless cost-of-living crisis, while simultaneously reinforcing vulnerability and exposure to other shocks, such as climate emergencies. As social safety nets are compromised to preserve fiscal resources for debt servicing instead, debts mount at the household level, thereby shifting the burdens of repayments from

the state and the financial sector onto individuals instead.²²

The impacts of stunted domestic economic governance, unsustainable debt burdens and vulnerability to other crises are not the same for all. The nexus of neoliberal capitalism and patriarchy ensures that women carry a disproportionate share of the burdens, manifesting through increased household debt, precarious, low-paying employment and care burdens, all at the expense of their physical and mental wellbeing.

Living With Debt: Women's Narratives From Asia And The Pacific

Women are often concentrated in underpaid and/or informal employment, as the pressure to make ends meet and ensure survival also compels them to take up any means of livelihood available. With low incomes compounded by cuts in social spending due to austerity, the burden is transferred to the household level and performed largely by women who try to stretch limited resources. Further, greater shares of their already small incomes are subject to taxation as well as higher expenses of health, education and nutrition for their families and themselves.

A home-based worker in Sri Lanka shared how her income from informal garment stitching barely covers daily food expenses. Like many women in the informal sector, she has no employment security, no pension and no access to social protection. When prices of food, transport and school expenses rise due to austerity driven cuts in public subsidies, she is forced to take on additional informal jobs often working late into the

19 United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2025). *A World of Debt: It is Time for Reform*. https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/osgttinf2025d4_en.pdf

20 United Nations Conference on Trade and Development. (2025). *A World of Debt: It is Time for Reform*. https://unctad.org/system/files/official-document/osgttinf2025d4_en.pdf

21 Mutesi, M. (2025, June 5). *Behind high borrowing costs: How credit rating agencies keep developing nations in the red*. AfriCatalyst. <https://africatalyst.com/behind-high-borrowing-costs-how-credit-rating-agencies-keep-developing-nations-in-the-red/>

22 The set of entities that provide financial services to commercial and retail customers, e.g. banks, investment companies, insurance companies, and real estate firms. | Kenton, W. (2025, October 9). Financial sector explained: Key players, importance, and economic impact. Investopedia. https://www.investopedia.com/terms/f/financial_sector.asp

night just to keep her household afloat.²³ Women also compensate for the gaps left by the state in the provision of essential public services through their time and physical labour by assuming greater domestic unpaid caregiving duties.²⁴

The gains of neoliberal capitalism are therefore built upon the dispensability with which women's labour is treated. Policies that liberalise trade, thus opening business to competition with foreign markets, and those that flexibilise labour regulations, enable businesses to optimise competitiveness by minimising costs. This includes greater liberties in determining workplace provisions and restructuring the workforce. Meagre wages, the lack of employment benefits and job precarity compel women to simultaneously take on multiple forms of employment, further exacerbating the burdens placed on their time and bodies. Ultimately, women tap into supplementary forms of financial support, including formal and informal lending, which worsens household debts and brings with it, its own set of physical and mental pressures and vulnerabilities. In Mongolia, one woman recounted taking out three to four loans to finance cancer treatments for her husband. Her family carried this debt for four years, enduring significant psychological strain and was only able to recover when their

daughter migrated to South Korea for work.²⁵ **Research findings from Sri Lanka show that 79 per cent of 150 women took loans due to severe economic pressure caused by hyperinflation and income loss.**²⁶

Sri Lanka suffered economic default in 2022, years of adverse neoliberal policymaking finally unravelling into a full-blown economic crisis. Its costs were increasingly shouldered by the people crushed under the conditions of the 2023 IMF bailout loan. These conditions included hikes in interest rates, the removal of subsidies, compromising workers' pensions and harsh austerity measures coupled with increased fuel prices.²⁷ This was combined with debt payments shrinking the fiscal space to sustain and rebuild essential public services. **In 2025, Sri Lanka's interest payments on multilateral, bilateral and domestic debt was equivalent to 8.9 per cent of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (five times the combined budget for health and education).**²⁸

These economic woes in the Sri Lankan economy are not a recent occurrence but have been repetitive and chronic in nature. Neoliberal measures dating as far back as the 1970s, including consistently low tax revenues due to corporate tax incentives, minimal wealth and income taxation and aggressive indirect taxation, have forced the country's people to make up for economic losses. These struggles are further exacerbated by a weak public infrastructure,

23 Pamintuan, M. (2026). *Women's rights on the line: How women defend rights to the commons and at the workplace in Asia amidst neoliberalism and corporate capture*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/WITCH-FPAR-2025-1.pdf> Based on the FPAR reports from Kalipunan ng Da-mayang Mahihirap (Kadamay, Philippines), Sentral Gerakan Buruh Nasional (SGBN, Indonesia), Sahita Institute (HINTS, Indonesia) and the Research Centre for Gender, Family, and Environment in Development (CGFED, Vietnam).

24 Abed, D. & Kelleher, F. (2022). *The Assault of Austerity: How prevailing economic policy choices are a form of gender-based violence*. OXFAM. <https://oi-files-d8-prod.s3.eu-west-2.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2022-11/bp-assault-of-austerity-prevailing-economic-choices-are-gender-based-violence-221122-en.pdf>

25 APWLD Debt MCRR. Centre for Human Rights and Development Mongolia. (2024). *Mongolia's Debt Analysis - Summary report*. [Unpublished].

26 We Women Lanka. (2024). *Multi-country rapid research on debt crises*. [Unpublished].

27 Vimuthi, S. & Wedagedara, A. (2025, August 29). *Sri Lanka's crisis shows how debt is devouring the Global South*. Aljazeera. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2025/8/29/sri-lankas-crisis-shows-how-debt-is-devouring-the-global-south>

28 Yukthi Collective. (2026). *IMF, hands off our future*. <https://yukthisl.org/imf-hands-off-our-future-yukthi-collective/>

as debt payments reduce the fiscal space available to invest in public services.²⁹

Women shared challenges of the disintegrating infrastructure of essential public services, resulting from, for instance, the systemic disinvestment in healthcare that brought its formerly renowned health system to its knees, increasingly unaffordable education (owing to a combination of decreasing government spending on education and increasing out-of-pocket expenditure for households despite the government's free education policy), forcing many to opt children out after primary school and a worsening crisis of malnutrition, as food items (largely imported, and heavily taxed) remained out of reach due to inflation. Underfunded social protection programmes add insult to injury.

"I do not send my son to school daily due to lack of food. I am afraid that he might faint without having breakfast. I only send him to school on some days when I can manage to arrange his meals."

–Laid-off garment factory worker, Sri Lanka³⁰

A year after Sri Lanka's economic default, Pakistan nearly defaulted had it not been for a last-minute bailout loan from the IMF. Industrial shutdowns, particularly from 2022 to 2024 and which continue till date, left thousands unemployed.^{31,32,33}

The privatisation of Pakistan's power sector bears significant responsibility for the current troubles plaguing the country's economic growth. The 1994 Independent Power Policy, strongly backed by the World Bank, initially attracted billions in private investment, but has had devastating consequences for the country's power generation and, in turn, economic growth. The contracts granted to Independent Power Producers (IPPs) impose significant economic burdens and the dollar-indexed returns guaranteed to IPPs transfer investment risks onto the state, forcing taxpayers to shoulder the burden of fluctuations of fuel prices and exchange rates. Delays in payments to IPPs lead to frequent power outages that prompt businesses to switch to costly private power generation arrangements, or risk going out of business altogether. Further, rising electricity prices reduce profitability and competitiveness of local industries, particularly export-oriented sectors like textiles. Hefty IPP contracts also worsen the country's budget deficits, eventually perpetuating reliance on foreign lending institutions, such as the IMF.³⁴

29 Saadoun, S. (2025). *Tax giveaways, struggling schools: How low taxes drove Sri Lanka's economic crisis and squandered its education lead*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/report/2025/10/14/tax-giveaways-struggling-schools/how-low-taxes-drove-sri-lankas-economic-crisis>

30 [APWLD Debt MCRR-I] We Women Lanka Sri Lanka. (2024). *Rural Women Affected by Sri Lanka's Debt Crisis*. [Unpublished].

31 Hanif, U. (2022, November 15). *Mills warn of chaos after gas closure*. DAWN. <https://tribune.com.pk/story/2386404/mills-warn-of-chaos-after-gas-closure>

32 Khan, A. (2023, May 7). *Economic slowdown triggers massive unemployment*. GIDS. <https://www.gids.org.pk/economic-slowdown-triggers-massive-unemployment/#:~:text=%E2%80%9CNearly%2030%2D50pc%20of%20the,a%20result%20of%20import%20restrictions.%E2%80%9D>

33 Ali, K. (2026, January 16). *FPCCI warns against widespread textile factory closures, unemployment amid high energy tariffs, taxes*. DAWN. <https://www.dawn.com/news/1967315>

34 Rahman, T. (2023, October 17). *How the International Monetary Fund Is Squeezing Pakistan*. Tricontinental. <https://thetribune.org/dossier-69-how-the-international-monetary-fund-is-squeezing-pakistan/#toc-section-7>

"It is tough for mothers to live in such conditions, see their children suffering from illnesses and their spouses going without work for the entire day before coming home empty-handed."

–Domestic worker, with no regular means of livelihood for the household, Pakistan³⁵

"The cost of wheat, cooking oil, tea, sugar and rice keeps going up, while our wages remain the same - the government must not tax staple goods."

–Housewife, Pakistan³⁶

In households in Karachi where the male breadwinners were laid off, women spoke of battling austerity measures that sent inflation soaring with increased consumption taxes, making basic food items unaffordable, amidst unreliable public services in education, healthcare, water and sanitation. Many turned to informal domestic work, reporting heavier workloads without corresponding pay increases. In both Sri Lanka and Pakistan, people resorted to borrowing from amongst community and/or informal, often predatory, lenders, including pawning jewellery or valuable household items.

Further in the east, almost three decades ago, South Korea suffered the same fate when the IMF-led SAPs were rolled out as a means of 'recovery' from the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis. Women were on the frontlines to absorb the shockwaves of labour market deregulation reforms that sanctioned layoffs and legalised contractualisation, thus disarming trade unions of the legal basis to contest the widespread exploitation that followed. Policies that eased access to credit meant rapid expansion of high-interest lending, trapping millions in cycles

of credit card debts as multiple loans were taken out to pay off each other. This prompted agonising financial distress as borrowers, particularly women, suffered abusive recovery practices, which often proved fatal, as feelings of anxiety and helplessness drove many to take their own lives.

"Every Monday was interview day. They kept bringing in new employees. And when things were going down, they would get rid of them. Once at the time of structural readjustment, they told us to play rock-paper-scissors; the winner would stay and the loser go. They didn't see us as people, they saw us as parts."

–Labour union member, referring to the labour market restructuring as part of the IMF structural adjustment programme post-1997 Asian Financial Crisis, South Korea³⁷

"Anyone could get a credit card. A lady next-door would come and ask us to sign something and we would get a credit card. When I first got into 'revolving' (the practice of using one credit card to pay off the loan on another), I did not really know what it was. I would keep thinking, "I will pay it (all the loans) off next month, then the next month and so on." Then, I realized that it was incurring a lot of interest. Usually, the interest rate would be around 6% APR, but this was 20% APR! This had not been explained properly, nor did the credit companies put this information in fine print. They just advertised that you could manage it all through 'revolving' multiple cards."

–Informal worker, South Korea³⁸

35 [APWLD Debt MCRR-I] Roots for Equity Pakistan. (2024). *Debt as an imperial weapon: The lives of Pakistan working women*. [Unpublished].

36 [APWLD Debt MCRR-I] Roots for Equity Pakistan. (2024). *Debt as an imperial weapon: The lives of Pakistan working women*. [Unpublished].

37 [APWLD Debt MCRR-I] Kim, Y. & Lee, J. (2024). *National Debt and Women: The Legacy of the IMF in Korea*. Korean People's Solidarity against Poverty South Korea. <http://antipoverty.kr/xe/publish/1277609>

38 [APWLD Debt MCRR-I] Kim, Y. & Lee, J. (2024). *National Debt and Women: The Legacy of the IMF in Korea*. Korean People's Solidarity against Poverty South Korea. <http://antipoverty.kr/xe/publish/1277609>



In the Philippines, the privatisation of healthcare began gaining momentum in the late 1970s amid the global rise of market-oriented reforms and policies embedded within IMF SAPs. Over time, this commercialisation of privatisation of health services has been implemented through a mix of strategies including outsourcing of public health services to private sector entities, introducing insurance/user-fee schemes that engage the private sector or through wide-ranging austerity measures that curtailed public spending on healthcare services altogether. These policies have reduced healthcare facilities to operate more like businesses that are responsible to generate their own revenues to maintain operations, primarily through service charges and patient payments.³⁹

Consequently, the financial burdens fall on the people, vulnerable to health concerns as they are stripped of their rights to essential safeguards such as healthcare. These policies have also impacted healthcare workers, as reduced salaries, loss of tenure and contractualisation foster low morale and dissatisfaction, compelling many to migrate abroad for better opportunities.⁴⁰

39 Nandi, S., Vračar, A. & Pachauli, C. (2020). *Resisting privatization and marketization of health care: People's health movement's experiences from India, Philippines and Europe*. *Saúde em Debate*, 44 (1), (37-50). <https://doi.org/10.1590/0103-11042020S103>

40 Caricativo, R.D. & Palaganas, E.C. (2014, July 26). *Health Services or Debt Servicing: SAPs in the Philippines and the healthcare delivery system*. Sigma Repository. https://www.sigmarepository.org/inrc/2014/presentations_2014/338/

In the Philippines, the country's political elites were notorious for growing illegitimate debts, while debt servicing was made mandatory by law, passing these costs on to the people, worsening burdens by years of capitalist neoliberal policy-making.⁴¹ Development of public services was/is far behind on the list of priorities. Women spoke of the insurmountable costs of living as privatisation rendered healthcare and water and sanitation either much more expensive, or unaffordable altogether.⁴² In addition, anti-poor neoliberal laws and policies, such as the Wage Rationalisation Law, have been used to

suppress workers' wages.⁴³ These also include laws and policies, such as the Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion (TRAIN Law)⁴⁴ and the Corporate Recovery and Tax Incentives for Enterprises (CREATE Act),⁴⁵ that continue to impose wide-ranging regressive taxes on basic commodities.

41 Centre for Women's Resources Philippines. (n.d.). *Neoliberal Programmes and Policies in the Philippines*. [Unpublished].

42 Shumail, Z. (2026, April). *The Perils of Neoliberal Capitalism: Women's Lives Under Debt in Asia and the Pacific*. APWLD. <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/APWLD-2026-DEBT-CRISIS-REPORT.pdf>

43 IBON Foundation. (2023, May 26). *Minimum wages today worth less than 34 years ago, even Php164 wage hike not enough-IBON*. <https://www.ibon.org/minimum-wages-today-worth-less-than-34-years-ago-even-php164-wage-hike-not-enough-ibon/>

44 In 2018, as prior action to the proposed USD450 million loan of the World Bank's International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD), the government approved the Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion (TRAIN) Law that imposed excise taxes on petroleum products, alongside expanding value added taxes.

45 In 2021, the CREATE Act substantially reduced corporate income taxes despite foregoing billions of pesos each year through existing tax incentive programmes. To offset the resulting losses in revenue, the government introduced a range of consumption taxes, such as VAT on digital services, taxes on single-use plastics and on fast food, the goods largely relied upon by lower income groups in the country.

Women, such as those in the Cavite Economic Zone, a leading hub of garment production for some of the world's major brands, spoke of the untenable cost-of-living crisis, increased care burdens juggling multiple contractual jobs, informal borrowings from community members and even pawning of Automated Teller Machine (ATM) cards to make ends meet.⁴⁶

"We only buy medicine when we are really sick. We are used to enduring our sickness."

–Worker, Philippines⁴⁷

In Kyrgyzstan, despite legal guarantees, debt limits access to essential services. Many women struggle financially, spending most of their income on basic needs and their time on domestic, unpaid care work responsibilities.

"We do not have any savings, and prioritise all expenses: in the first place, the education of the child, the second: the health of my husband, then the utility expenses. I come at last [laughs]."

–Worker, Kyrgyzstan⁴⁸

"Make complete information available on the public debt; we must know the duration of the credit, the interest, the repayment timeline, the breakdown by tranche, the receipts for the money responsible for 'our' wellbeing."

–Housewife, Kyrgyzstan⁴⁹

"To get quality, timely service from private hospitals one must have money. We deserve efficient, public healthcare for our needs, especially if there is something serious and needs immediate attention."

–Housewife, Mongolia⁵⁰

In Mongolia, families, especially single women and/or low-income households, depend on underfunded public services while private options remain unaffordable. Consequently, in both Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia, borrowing multiple loans at high interest rates against assets or income is a reality for many. Loans provide for needs ranging from basic and everyday essentials to long-term plans related to housing and children's education. However, high interest rates and rising living costs make repayments difficult and many borrowers take multiple loans to manage existing debt.

46 [APWLD Debt MCRR-I] Centre for Women's Resources Philippines. (2024). *Living on the Edge: Impacts of the Debt Crisis on Filipino Women*. [Unpublished].

47 [APWLD Debt MCRR-I] Centre for Women's Resources Philippines. (2024). *Living on the Edge: Impacts of the Debt Crisis on Filipino Women*. [Unpublished].

48 [APWLD Debt MCRR-I] Women's Public Foundation Kyrgyzstan. (2024). *Documenting the Impact of Economic Challenges on Women's Human Rights in Kyrgyzstan*. [Unpublished].

49 [APWLD Debt MCRR-I] Women's Public Foundation Kyrgyzstan. (2024). *Documenting the Impact of Economic Challenges on Women's Human Rights in Kyrgyzstan*. [Unpublished].

50 [APWLD Debt MCRR - I] Centre for Human Rights and Development Mongolia. (2024). *Mongolia's Debt Analysis - Summary report*. [Unpublished].

Feminist Demands For A Debt-Free World

The following political demands were developed by APWLD, its members and partners over the past three years, organising together for debt justice in the region.^{51,52,53}

1. **Cancel all unsustainable, odious and illegitimate debts.**
2. **Establish a UN Framework Convention on Sovereign Debt;** This would be a UN-hosted, binding and transparent multilateral debt workout mechanism that includes all bilateral, multilateral and private creditors.
3. **End harmful IFI-imposed loan conditionalities and hold IFIs, institutions and the government accountable for harmful lending policies and practices, through:**
 - a. **Undertaking independent gendered, human rights and environmental assessments.** This would be in particular on the impacts of loan conditions, related macroeconomic policies, reforms and legislation and the financial and human costs of repayment on the most vulnerable, especially women;
 - b. **Recognising and protecting people's sovereignty and self-determination.**
4. **Provide well-resourced public goods and services.** Rechannel public finance to ensure well-resourced long-term, sustained, public investment for goods and essential services to ensure women's human rights by:
 - a. **Guaranteeing universal social protection;**
 - b. **Ensuring that tax reforms are inclusive of those most-impacted.** The reforms need to be transparent, democratic and accountable and the outcomes just, human rights-centred and supporting the delivery of gender justice;
 - c. **Establishing transformative public services.** That is, public services, programmes and infrastructure that are accessible, participatory, transparent, and gender-transformative; and
 - d. **Ensure women's economic security** by expanding equitable access to resources, assets, finance, and opportunities that support women's livelihoods, enterprises and economic self-determination at local and national levels.
- c. **Ensuring women's access to vital and easily understandable information,** especially on economic and financial policies; and
- d. **A mechanism for remedy and reparations** by creditors for harms caused.

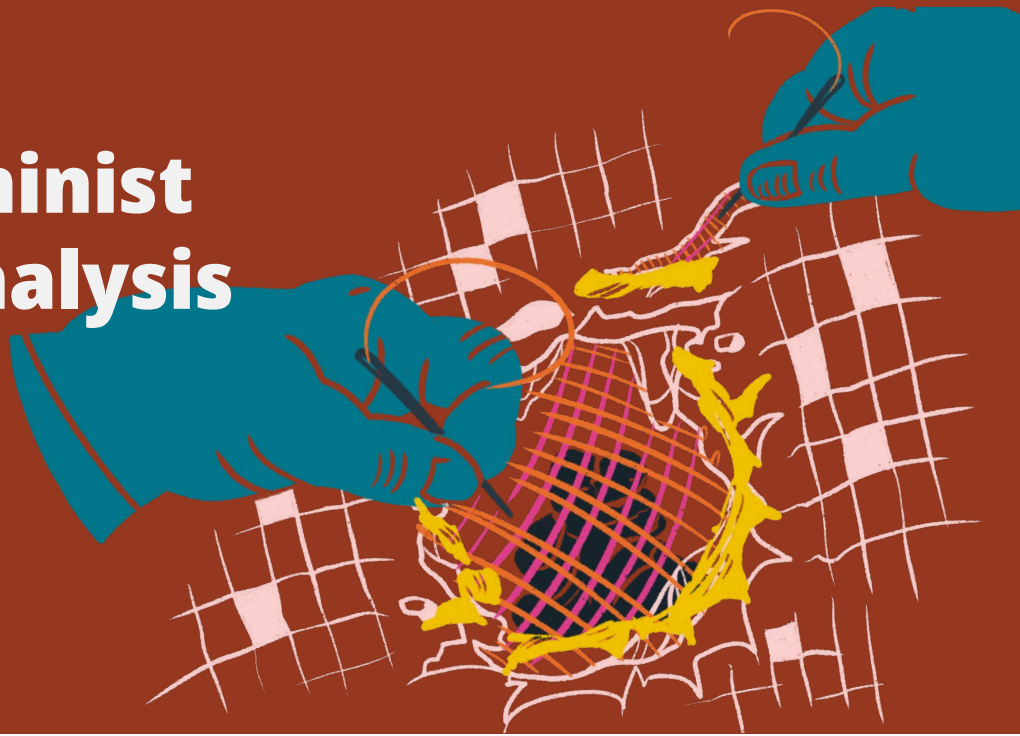
This would ensure that the design and implementation of debt servicing solutions are accessible, democratic, human rights-based and rejects any discriminatory measures that threaten the full development and advancement of women;

51 Asia-Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). (2023). *Development Justice Now! Feminist Demands for Financing for Development*. <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/APWLD-Briefer-on-FfD-2023.pdf>

52 Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development. (2023). *UN Special Rapporteur on freedom of opinion and expression to the UN Human Rights Council: Freedom of opinion and expression and sustainable development – Why voice matters*. <https://apwld.org/un-special-rapporteur-on-freedom-of-opinion-and-expression-to-the-un-human-rights-council-freedom-of-opinion-and-expression-and-sustainable-development-why-voice-matters/>

53 Pamintuan, M. (2023). *Strengthening Feminist Movements for Trade & Economic Justice: WITCH FPAR Regional Report*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/WITCH_FPAR-REPORT.pdf Based on the work of Pakistan Kissan Mazdoor Tehreek (PKMT), Women Studies and Resource Center (WSRC), Gabriela Youth and Sisters Garden (SG).

Labour and IFIs—a Feminist Political Analysis



Imperialism takes multiple forms, but at its core lies the hyper-concentration of political and economic power. This dynamic drives the export of capital, monopoly of markets, resource extraction and the systematic appropriation of value created from both paid and unpaid labour.

In the contemporary global economy, imperialist extraction operates by being embedded within ‘free-market’ mechanisms, foreign investment regimes and the governance structures that shape global trade and finance. These are facilitated by International Financial Institutions (IFIs) such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. They continue to promote privatisation, deregulation and trade liberalisation as the key to economic development, perpetuating structural inequalities to the immense benefit of Global North countries and on the backs of people—especially women—from the Global South. These mechanisms function through exploitative processes that are often obscured by the narratives of competitiveness or

efficiency, yet it unfolds in the everyday lives of women in factories, households, plantations, supply chains, digital platforms and other workplaces predominantly located in the Global South. To analyse how this operates, we examine the structure of global supply chains: how production is organised and who controls production, how labour is disciplined and segmented and how value and profits are distributed unevenly across different actors within the chain.

Match And Motive—Labour Migration Meets The Free Market

IFIs have been strengthening their role in the global migration landscape. For instance, the World Bank’s role has grown from a limited focus on remittances to a comprehensive, development-oriented approach in migration, where it positions migration as the key driver to poverty reduction and global economic

growth.¹ The 2023 World Development Report proposed an integrated migration framework drawn from labour economics and international laws, resting on a 'match and motive' matrix that focuses on two factors: how closely migrants' skills and attributes match the needs of destination countries and what motives underlie their movements.^{2,3} This framework sees migrants and refugees as economic assets or commodities to 'serve as a force for growth and shared prosperity in all countries', narrowing the focus on economic rather than rights-based outcomes.⁴

This framework of seeing migrant labour as commodity risks further excluding and neglecting already marginalised groups, including women. By focusing primarily on financial outcomes, the social, cultural and political cost of migration is overlooked. For example, while the WTO's General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) Mode 4 promotes the temporary movement of service providers, the emphasis on temporary labour mobility in global economic governance can hinder integration into host societies.⁵ It also limits the rights of workers as migrant workers often

face restricted access to labour protections, social security benefits, family reunification and the freedom to change employers. This benefits employers by having access to cheap, flexible labour without long-term rights for the migrant workers.⁶ Women migrants also face multiple hidden costs. Data from the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (IMWU) between 2020 and 2025 show a few patterns of hidden costs: First, the mandatory placement process and lack of transparent financing, traps migrants in debt, loan manipulation, marked up placement feed and administrative costs. Second, the enormous emotional cost of long-term family separation borne by migrants and the families left behind. Lastly, the costs of discrimination stemming from special treatment of migrant domestic workers such as the inability to change jobs, no breaks, no holidays and the obligation to live in the employer's home, has led to their systematic exploitation and keeps them vulnerable.⁷ In addition, the World Bank Group's private sector arm, the International Financial Corporation (IFC), focuses more on securing profit margins for its corporate partners, at the expense of workers' rights and the provision of fair, living wages.

Another commonly used framework to govern labour migration are Bilateral Labour Migration Agreements (BLMAs). These are negotiated and legally binding government-to-government frameworks that first originated after World War II to meet the demand for low-skilled labour to rebuild Europe. Today, BLMAs are promoted by financial institutions such as the World Bank,

1 World Bank. (2019). *Leveraging Economic Migration for Development: A Briefing for the World Bank Board*. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/461021574155945177/pdf/Leveraging-Economic-Migration-for-Development-A-Briefing-for-the-World-Bank-Board.pdf>

2 World Bank Group. (2023). *World Development Report 2023: Migrants, Refugees and Societies*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/publication/wdr2023>

3 World Bank Group. (2023, December 11). *Global Migration in the 21st Century: Navigating the Impact of Climate Change, Conflict, and Demographic Shifts*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2023/12/11/global-migration-in-the-21st-century-navigating-the-impact-of-climate-change-conflict-and-demographic-shifts>

4 Mazzilli, C., Hagen-Zanker, J. & Murray, H. (2023, May 19). *What role will the World Bank play in migration management?*. ODI Global. <https://odi.org/en/insights/migration-can-be-a-source-of-prosperity-all-countries-but-only-when-it-benefits-migrants-themselves/#:~:text=How%20to%20ensure%20the%20benefits,gained%20and%20distributed%20more%20fairly>

5 Bhatnagar, P. (2014). *ILO Decent Work Across Borders Migration Notes - GATS Mode 4: Movement of Natural Persons and Protection of Migrant Workers' Rights*. International Labour Organisation. <https://www.ilo.org/publications/gats-mode-4-movement-natural-persons-and-protection-migrant-workers-rights>

6 World Bank. (2004). *Migration and Development: The Role of the World Bank*. United Nations. https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/sites/www.un.org/development/desa/pd/files/unpd-cm3-2004_10_p11_worldbank.pdf

7 The Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (IMWU) and the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). (2022). *Organising Indonesian Migrant Domestic Workers in Hong Kong to Combat Overcharging and Illegal Collection of Agency Fees*. APWLD. <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/IMWU-INDONESIA-final.pdf>

claiming transformative economic gains for migrants and the wider economy across decades.⁸ BLMAs are used widely throughout the Asia and the Pacific region and ingrained as a national strategy in origin countries such as Bangladesh, Pakistan and the Philippines.⁹

However, in practice, BLMAs offer inadequate worker protections, gender-blindness and prioritise the interests of destination countries, often leading to precarious, low-wage employment for labour migrants from Global South countries.¹⁰ Migrant workers face extreme vulnerability and human rights abuses in their countries of destination. For example, South Asian migrants in low-skilled sectors in West Asia or the Middle-East face systemic exploitation and precarity. Restrictive labour laws shift rights enforcement from the state to private actors, making workers vulnerable to exploitative practices such as wage theft, violence and abuse, contract substitution, unpaid wages and forced repatriation.¹¹

The World Bank still plays a key role in the global remittances landscape as well through data tracking, technical assistance and policy setting, such as its leading role

in the Financing Facility for Remittances.¹² Remittances serve as a form of extraction that reinforces the dependence of developing countries on exporting workers, while the Global North benefits from a cheap, flexible workforce. From Asia and the Pacific, India, Philippines, China, Pakistan and Bangladesh are the top recipients of remittances, though smaller nations like Tonga, Samoa and Nepal have much higher remittance inflows when measured as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).¹³ For example, remittances accounted for 26 per cent of Nepal's GDP in 2023, with over 2 million

12 Financing Facility for Remittances is a multi-donor facility established in 2006 which aims to maximise the impact of domestic and international remittances on sustainable development and promoting diaspora engagement in migrants' countries of origin. | Financing Facility for Remittances. (n.d.). Homepage. <https://ffremittances.org/>

13 UNDP Regional Bureau for Asia and the Pacific. (2025, January). *Beyond borders: How remittances are reshaping Asia-Pacific economies (Policy Paper)*. UNDP. <https://www.undp.org/asia-pacific/publications/beyond-borders-how-remittances-are-reshaping-asia-pacific-economies>



From Asia and the Pacific, India, Philippines, China, Pakistan and Bangladesh are the top recipients of remittances, though smaller nations like Tonga, Samoa and Nepal have much higher remittance inflows when measured as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP).



8 Shrestha, M., Adhikari, S. & Kaila, H.K. (2025, February 11). *Unlocking migration's potential: Five key insights on Bilateral Labor Agreements (BLAs)*. World Bank Blogs. <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/developmenttalk/unlocking-migration-s-potential-five-key-insights-on-bilateral-labor-agreements>

9 Leighton, M. (2024). *Overview of methods for state collaboration on African migration beyond the continent*. World Bank. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099036312042510336/pdf/IDU-d2b635eb-4de0-4ae5-bfa7-a8eb929a0d51.pdf>

10 Migrant Forum in Asia. (2014). *Bilateral labor agreements (BLAs) and Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs)*. https://mfasia.org/migrantforumasia/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/policybrief_bilaterals_winter2014.pdf

11 Mustaqeem, M. (2025). *South Asian migrant workers and the challenges of Gulf migration regimes: Advocating for a regional alliance*. *Journal of World Affairs: Voice of the Global South*, 1(2). Sage Journals. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/29769442251350945>

people abroad.¹⁴ There are no main sources of gender-disaggregated data and statistics on remittances and very little is known about the comparative value of the remittances sent by migrant women and men. **However, according to UN Women, the average remittance amount for migrant women is the same as or even greater than that of migrant men. With migrant women generally earning less than migrant men for most sample countries, this means they are remitting a greater proportion of their wages than men.**¹⁵

In addition, remittances also pose a challenge for migrant workers, due to high transaction fees and limited access to formal banking.¹⁶ Undocumented migrants in particular face regulatory and legal barriers due to lack of access to safe, 'formal' financial channels. The World Bank's work in remittances focuses on formalising, digitising as well as de-risking financial channels.^{17,18} However, these efforts may increase costs and hinder access for migrants or recipients lacking digital literacy or formal identification, while also cutting off small-scale remittance channels. It has been found that digital remittances have yet to effectively reach underserved segments, particularly women, who face barriers to

accessing and utilising these services due to factors such as limited digital literacy, high transaction costs, overly complex onboarding processes, limited in-person customer service, inadequate tracking information, limited control over choosing the provider and safety and trust issues in the use of services.¹⁹

The Perils Of Global Supply Chains

The logic of economic restructuring imposed by IFIs through SAPs and other loan conditionalities has been to drive Global South economies into a neoliberal state, effectively setting the stage for modern exploitation. Global supply chains ensure value is generated in peripheral economies, while profits are concentrated in corporate centres in the Global North. Labour is also exploited at the national level when production is outsourced to countries in Asia and the Pacific where wages are low and governments offer 'incentives' such as weak or poorly enforced labour regulations, often as a result of IFI-mandated deregulation. However, large transnational corporations in the Global North retain control over design, technology, branding and market access of what is produced. This strategic positioning allows them to control prices, production timelines and compliance standards across the supply chain. This systematically and persistently reproduces and exacerbates global inequality. Within this IFI-engineered structure, women workers occupy the most precarious position. They are recruited based on gendered stereotypes that portray them as more 'docile', meticulous and more accepting of lower wages. These assumptions justify the employment of women workers in low-paid, precarious and labour-intensive sectors.

14 International Organization for Migration. (2024, June 14). *Nepal on the right track to achieve cost-effective remittance transfers*. IOM Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific. <https://roasiapacific.iom.int/news/nepal-right-track-achieve-cost-effective-remittance-transfers>

15 UN Women. [2020]. *Policy Brief: Migrant Women and Remittances: Exploring the Data from Selected Countries*. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2020/Policy-brief-Migrant-women-and-remittances-Exploring-the-data-from-selected-countries-en.pdf>

16 KNOMAD. (2023). *Leveraging Diaspora Finances For Private Capital Mobilization: Migration and Development Brief 39*. World Bank Group. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099740408142422676/pdf/IDU-84dfd61b-e135-4242-a202-3728b2e8fa86.pdf>

17 Bank for International Settlements and The World Bank. (2007). *Committee on Payment and Settlement Systems: General principles for International Remittance Services*. World Bank. <https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/894291468313541470/pdf/IBArchive-3ac23bbb-f3c0-4386-9b9a-a03703e1bb61.pdf>

18 Remittance Prices Worldwide. (n.d.). *About Us*. <https://remittanceprices.worldbank.org/about-remittance-prices-worldwide>

19 Ogba, U., Kamau, J., Gravesteyn, R., Hossain, M. & Lober, S. (2024). *Bridging the Digital Divide: Gender insights on remittance access, usage, and financial health*. Migrant Money. <https://migrantmoney.uncdf.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Gender-Insights-on-Remittance-Access-Usage-and-Financial-Health.pdf>

While women's paid labour generates profit in formal production, their unpaid reproductive labour ensures the daily and generational reproduction of the workforce at no cost to capital. Global capitalism systematically relies on a gendered division of labour to profiteer. In this sense, the imperialist economic system depends on both exploited paid labour and unrecognised work of social reproduction by women.

Neoliberal Policies Drive Women Into Irregular Migration Pathways

The logic of economic restructuring imposed by IFIs through SAPs and loan conditionalities is to drive economies into neoliberalism. This includes restrictions and barriers imposed in the name of formalising labour or regularising migration. This continues to force women into unsafe and irregular migration pathways. This heightens the vulnerabilities of women migrants to Gender-Based Violence (GBV), wage theft, rights violations and exploitation—whether in transit, at the workplace or upon return. Limited access to information, resources and knowledge on safe migration, compounded by language barriers, further increases this vulnerability. In addition,

migrants' dependency on employers or spouses for legal identity or residency status creates significant barriers to accessing basic and essential services, decent work, safe living conditions and social and legal protections, especially for those who are undocumented or working in the informal sector.

For example, domestic workers in Taiwan do not have labour insurance and are not covered under the Labour Insurance Act, while the manufacturing workers who are covered by the Act, are not informed about their right to labour insurance and so, fail to claim it.²⁰ Meanwhile, Filipino migrant workers pay a mandatory contribution to PhilHealth, the national healthcare coverage programme in the Philippines, but this does not cover their medical expenses abroad.²¹

20 Serve the People Association. (2024). *The Journey of Filipino Women Migrant Workers Advocating for Lump-Sum Old-Age Benefits in Taiwan*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/TAIWAN.pdf> Based on the FPAR Report Developed by Serve the People Association and Factory Workers Association in Taiwan.

21 Migrante International. (2024). *Breaking the Cycle: Why Returned Women Migrant Workers in Rizal Need Sustainable Reintegration*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/PHILIPPINES.pdf>

Marriage Migration: Cases From The Ground

Marriage migration is not merely an individual or romantic choice, but a structural outcome of patriarchy, neoliberal labour export regimes, demographic shifts and global care inequalities. Labour export policies often channel women into temporary and precarious migrant worker schemes—such as domestic work, care work and entertainment visas with high risk of exploitation and debt bondage. Marriage migration may also offer women opportunities to improve their living conditions and economic status, as findings on pull factors in APWLD's multicountry research on marriage migration shows.²²

22 Hsia, H.-C. (2026). *Seeking Justice for Women Marriage Migrants in Asia: Realities, Structural and Legal Hurdles*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/APWLD-Multi-Country-Research-Marriage-Migrants-2026.pdf>. Based on the Multicountry Research reports on Marriage Migration of Family Frontiers in Malaysia, GABRIELA in the Philippines, the Korea Center for United Nations Human Rights Policy (KOCUN) in South Korea, Keluarga Besar Buruht Migran Indonesia (KABAR BUMI) in Indonesia and TransAsia Sisters Association, Taiwan (TASAT).

In South Korea, marriage migration is driven by rural depopulation and the difficulties rural men face in finding local spouses.²³ Local governments and private brokers then began arranging overseas marriage trips, initially targeting Korean-Chinese communities, but soon expanding to Vietnam, the Philippines, Cambodia and other Southeast Asian countries. This also happened in Taiwan, when rural and working-class men facing economic decline and fewer marriage prospects, increasingly sought wives from Southeast Asia (Indonesia, Vietnam, the Philippines, Thailand and Cambodia) and the People's Republic of China, often through commercial matchmaking agencies.²⁴ In this situation, marriage migrants function as both reproductive labourers and cheap workers, where they also provide unpaid domestic labour, childbearing and elder care, thereby reproducing the labour force, while also entering low-wage employment themselves. Meanwhile, women migrants' remittances and the fees extracted by recruitment and travel agencies to ease fiscal pressures at home, is built on their bodies and unrecognised labour.

23 Korea Center for United Nations Human Rights Policy (KOCUN). (2025) *Women Marriage Migrants in South Korea: Identifying challenges and support needed in all migration stages*. [Unpublished.]

24 TransAsia Sisters Association (TASAT). (2025) *Laws and Policies Affecting Rights and Welfare of Older women marriage migrants in Taiwan*. [Unpublished].

Big Tech And Its Impacts On 'Gig' Workers

Neoliberalism has risen together with the expansion of the digital economy. Digital systems are built around market-driven ideas like efficiency, competition and deregulation, and carry existing inequalities while also introducing new ways to control and disenfranchise workers.

In the world of work, digitalisation has pushed many jobs away from stable, formal employment into informal and insecure arrangements. Workers often face low wages, unclear job status and little to no social protection. At the same time, digital

systems, often driven by algorithms, are used to monitor performance and discipline workers, even though these systems are rarely transparent. Ranking systems push workers to compete with each other instead of working together. This creates a more individualistic environment and makes collective resistance and solidarity-building much more difficult.



Women's Labour Rights In An Era Of Digitalisation

Over two years between 2023 and 2025, APWLD and partner organisations²⁵ working with grassroots women from India, Indonesia, Cambodia, Thailand, Philippines and South Korea, researched the impact of digitalisation on women's labour. Some of their key findings were:

In India's construction industry, automation has reduced the need for manual labour. But opportunities for training and skill development to use these machines are not available to women workers. Consequently, women workers are more vulnerable to losing their jobs, based on self-fulfilling assumptions that they are less capable of operating machines.²⁶ Women workers in the garment industry in Indonesia are facing a similar situation of increasing uncertainty as automation expands.

In Cambodia and Thailand, partners noted that food delivery and ride-hailing companies use algorithms to control which workers get jobs, how much they earn and whether they stay on the platform. Simultaneously, workers are expected to cover work-related costs, like fuel, internet data and safety gear.

In South Korea, a single bad rating can reduce a worker's chances of getting future jobs, directly affecting their income. This leaves workers with meagre control over their own work and income. Although they receive wages, many domestic workers lack proper legal protection, access to social security, fair wages and safe working conditions. Long working hours without overtime pay, along with low social recognition of their work, further highlight the multiple layers of vulnerability they face.²⁷ In practice, women domestic workers are also increasingly subject to digital forms of work organisation. They are often expected to be constantly available and responsive through mobile applications or messaging platforms, while agencies use job-matching systems and rating mechanisms to monitor and control their performance. These systems operate with limited transparency and accountability, reinforcing unequal power relations between workers and employers. In the Philippines, logistics workers are closely tracked through mobile applications and GPS or a Global Positioning System connected to their pay and schedules. Their performance is

25 Partners in the Feminist Participatory Action Research (2023 to 2025) were Aajeevika Bureau (India), Cambodian Food and Service Workers' Federation – CFSWF (Cambodia), Development Society (Bangladesh), Gabungan Serikat Buruh Indonesia – GSBI (Indonesia), Filipino Nurses United – FNU (Philippines), Just Economy and Labour Institute – JELI (Thailand) with the Southern Riders Association (SRA), Korea Domestic Workers' Union – KDWU (Republic of Korea) and the Nonoy Librado Development Foundation (Philippines).

26 Radhakrishnan, V. B. (2025). *Women's Labour Rights in an Era of Digitalisation*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Womens-Labour-Rights-in-an-Era-of-Digitalisation-WOW-FPAR-Regional-Analysis.pdf> Based on the Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPARs) by Aajeevika Bureau (India), Cambodian Food and Service Workers' Federation – CFSWF (Cambodia), Development Society (Bangladesh), Gabungan Serikat Buruh Indonesia – GSBI (Indonesia), Filipino Nurses United – FNU (Philippines), Just Economy and Labour Institute – JELI (Thailand) with the Southern Riders Association (SRA), Korea Domestic Workers' Union – KDWU (Republic of Korea) and the Nonoy Librado Development Foundation (Philippines).

27 Radhakrishnan, V. B. (2025). *Women's Labour Rights in an Era of Digitalisation*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Womens-Labour-Rights-in-an-Era-of-Digitalisation-WOW-FPAR-Regional-Analysis.pdf> Based on the Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPARs) by Aajeevika Bureau (India), Cambodian Food and Service Workers' Federation – CFSWF (Cambodia), Development Society (Bangladesh), Gabungan Serikat Buruh Indonesia – GSBI (Indonesia), Filipino Nurses United – FNU (Philippines), Just Economy and Labour Institute – JELI (Thailand) with the Southern Riders Association (SRA), Korea Domestic Workers' Union – KDWU (Republic of Korea) and the Nonoy Librado Development Foundation (Philippines).

monitored in real time, so even small mistakes or short breaks can reduce their income. What is clear is that technology is not just helping organise work, it is also being used to closely monitor and control workers, impinging on their human rights.

Source: APWLD's Feminist Participatory Action Research on Women's Rights in an Era of Digitalisation.²⁸

28 Radhakrishnan, V. B. (2025). *Women's Labour Rights in an Era of Digitalisation*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Womens-Labour-Rights-in-an-Era-of-Digitalisation-WOW-FPAR-Regional-Analysis.pdf> Based on the Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPARs) by Aajeevika Bureau (India), Cambodian Food and Service Workers' Federation – CFSWF (Cambodia), Development Society (Bangladesh), Gabungan Serikat Buruh Indonesia – GSBI (Indonesia), Filipino Nurses United – FNU (Philippines), Just Economy and Labour Institute – JELI (Thailand) with the Southern Riders Association (SRA), Korea Domestic Workers' Union – KDWU (Republic of Korea) and the Nonoy Librado Development Foundation (Philippines).

Informality And Women's Invisible Labour

The World Bank views the informal sector as a disease that needs to be cured, framing informality as a cause of economic weakness rather than a symptom of structural conditions that leave workers with no other options. According to the World Bank, high informality undermines policy efforts to manage crises like the COVID-19 pandemic and results in weaker development outcomes due to less tax revenue.²⁹ Their 2020 report on informality included policy recommendations focusing on the abolishment of informality, instead of improving the livelihoods and security of the most vulnerable workers.³⁰

Women workers do not only face unstable working conditions due to informality and digital control but also continue to carry the burden of domestic work that is systematically and widely unrecognised

as economic activity. Work such as caring for children, for the sick and for family members, maintaining the household and providing emotional support is generally not considered productive labour and receives no economic compensation. From a feminist perspective, this is closely linked to social norms that assign care work primarily to women within the household. Consequently, this is treated as a private matter rather than a public concern, even though care work plays a key role in reproducing labour within the capitalist system.

The unequal distribution of care work is linked to lower formal labour force participation among women. In the Asia and the Pacific region, around 52 per cent of women outside the labour force cite caregiving responsibilities as the main reason for not working.³¹ In this context, a system that places greater value on productive labour and disregards reproductive labour contributes to highly vulnerable work conditions for paid domestic workers. This reality is reflected in case stories of marriage migrant women, where

29 World Bank Group. (2021, May 11). *Widespread Informality Likely to Slow Recovery from COVID-19 in Developing Economies*. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/05/11/widespread-informality-likely-to-slow-recovery-from-covid-19-in-developing-economies>

30 Ohnson, F. & Yu, S. (Eds.). (2022). *The Long Shadow of Informality*. The World Bank. <https://thedocs.worldbank.org/en/doc/37511318c092e6fd4ca3c60f0af0bea3-0350012021/original/Informal-economy-full-report.pdf>

31 International Labour Organisation. (2024, October 29). *Unpaid care work prevents 708 million women from participating in the labour market*. <https://www.ilo.org/resource/news/unpaid-care-work-prevents-708-million-women-participating-labour-market>



In the Asia and the Pacific region, around 52% of women outside the labour force cite caregiving responsibilities as the main reason for not working.



women are expected to perform unpaid caregiving and household labour within their marital homes while also engaging in income-generating activities under precarious conditions, with their domestic contributions remaining unrecognised and uncompensated.³²

The neoliberal policies and governance facilitated by IFIs, that promote liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation, has worsened the situation faced by women migrants. The agenda to eliminate informal work and push governments to focus on 'skilled' labour in the formal sector leaves the rights of women workers in the informal sector unprotected.

Feminist Resistance And Alternatives

Women workers across the region are fighting back against exploitative working conditions, responding through solidarity

with each other and collective action, from protests to negotiations. Efforts to expand political education among women workers are also growing, alongside stronger organising and sustained collective mobilisation.

In Thailand, women ride-hailing drivers organised under the Southern Riders Association Thailand (SRAT) and Just Economy and Labor Institute (JELI) have documented the various forms of exploitation they face. Their advocacy has expanded to include critical input on the proposed Platform Economy Bill, which is seen as potentially weakening worker protections. This engagement has been accompanied by mobilisation and public actions across different spaces that has helped expand strategic networks. The alliance has built partnerships with the Foundation for the Promotion of Social Equality, which provides legal support through a network of volunteer lawyers. This support includes direct assistance for women drivers facing sexual harassment and other human rights violations.

In Dhaka, Bangladesh, women workers recognised that automation negatively affected their basic rights, particularly wages and job security, while also limiting

32 Hsia, H.-C. (2026). *Seeking Justice for Women Marriage Migrants in Asia: Realities, Structural and Legal Hurdles*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (AP-WLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/AP-WLD-Multi-Country-Research-Marriage-Migrants-2026.pdf> Based on the Multicountry Research reports on Marriage Migration of Family Frontiers in Malaysia, GABRIELA in the Philippines, the Korea Center for United Nations Human Rights Policy (KOCUN) in South Korea, Keluarga Besar Buruht Migran Indonesia (KABAR BUMI) in Indonesia and TransAsia Sisters Association, Taiwan (TASAT).

opportunities to improve their skills and knowledge. They realised that their positions could easily be replaced due to limited access to machine operation skills. In response, women workers organised by the Development Society held a roundtable discussion with policymakers and labour rights advocates. This initiative ensured that the voices of women garment workers remained part of national policy discussions. The dialogue produced concrete recommendations, including support for a just transition to automation through guaranteed retraining and upskilling for affected women workers; the creation of a jointly-funded social protection and reskilling fund supported by employers and the government; and the expansion of collective bargaining rights to address automation-related issues while strengthening women's leadership in workplace structures. As one woman garment worker said, *'This was the first time I saw policymakers listening directly to women from the factory floor. It gave us courage'*.

In Davao, Philippines, political education, facilitated through the Nonoy Librado Development Foundation, Inc. (NLDFI), has become a key element in strengthening women workers' belief that solidarity is their main source of power in resisting exploitation. Women warehouse workers emphasise solidarity as their first line of defense, supporting each other in navigating insecure working conditions. As one worker shared, *'We really help each other because we can only depend on one another. If one of us has a problem, we help her in any way we can'*. These everyday practices of solidarity are not spontaneous acts, but conscious collective strategies to confront exploitation, maintain dignity and demand the right to decent work in increasingly digitalised workplaces. Building on this shared experience, workers are now seeking

to formalise their efforts through the formation of an association. One worker explained that such an organisation would help collectivise mutual support, improve access to government assistance and strengthen their ability to communicate demands to management.

In Cambodia, gig workers, especially women, are increasingly aware that organising is a key foundation of the working class struggle. Given the relatively weak organisational base of gig workers compared to those in formal sectors, collective action and sustained struggle remain essential. One initiative has been to build networks not only in Phnom Penh but also online across different regions of Cambodia. This approach allows workers to connect, share experiences and strengthen their ability to advocate directly with employers, reducing the isolation and vulnerability they previously faced. Meanwhile, women migrant workers and marriage migrants have expanded their advocacy campaign in established rights based movements for structural reform of migration policies and governance.

In Taiwan, women migrant workers have taken various initiatives to address the obstacles to claiming old-age labour insurance benefits using rights-based education as a critical strategy.³³ Women were supported to educate themselves and their peers about their labour rights, including old-age benefits. They embraced technology and used social media platforms to disseminate information, share stories, connect with their community and reach a broader audience. These women migrant workers have emerged as leaders and are

33 Serve the People Association. (2024). *The Journey of Filipino Women Migrant Workers Advocating for Lump-Sum Old-Age Benefits in Taiwan*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/TAIWAN.pdf> Based on the FPAR Report Developed by Serve the People Association and Factory Workers Association in Taiwan.

currently, leading several unions including the National Domestic Workers Union (NDWU), Factory Workers Association Taiwan (FWAT) organised by Serve the People Association (SPA), Domestic Caretakers' Union (DCU), the newly founded Asus Group Labour Union (AGLU) and Askey Labour Union (ALU). These new women-led unions, AGLU and ALU, won the strike vote and had several mediation meetings with the company hosted by the Ministry of Labour. Women marriage migrants in Taiwan together with migrant rights organisation, TransAsia Sisters Association Taiwan (TASAT), works through the Alliance of Human Rights Legislation for Immigrants and Migrants (AHLIM), which unites migrant associations, feminist groups, labour unions and legal advocates to press for reforms in welfare and immigration law.³⁴

In the Philippines, returned women migrant workers filled out forms collectively to claim benefits and engaged in dialogues with different government authorities to communicate their needs and continue their campaign to enact a local comprehensive reintegration policy.³⁵ Women marriage migrants in the Philippines are also integrated into women's collectives and grassroots feminist organisations, combining community organising, shelter referrals and political education, enabling returnee women to break isolation and reframe their experiences of abandonment or abuse as

part of broader struggles against gendered migration regimes. In addition, together with GABRIELA, they also filed cases under the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act against recruiters who arranged sham marriages as a cover for forced domestic work. These legal actions expose the blurred line between marriage migration and labour trafficking and demonstrate how women and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) pursue criminal accountability for intermediaries, not just civil remedies. By naming and challenging the intermediaries that profit from their vulnerability, they transform individual grievances into collective demands for structural reform in the governance of marriage migration. In Malaysia, Family Frontiers shows how collaboration with the Association of Women Lawyers and the migrant workers' organisation anchors marriage migrants' concerns within legal and labour rights struggles. Through coalition-building that bridges sectors and borders, they expand the reach of marriage migrants' campaigns by embedding them in established rights-based movements. By linking with feminist, labour, legal and migrant rights movements and by building infrastructures that extend across national boundaries, women marriage migrants amplify their voices and transform individual struggles into collective claims for justice and equality.

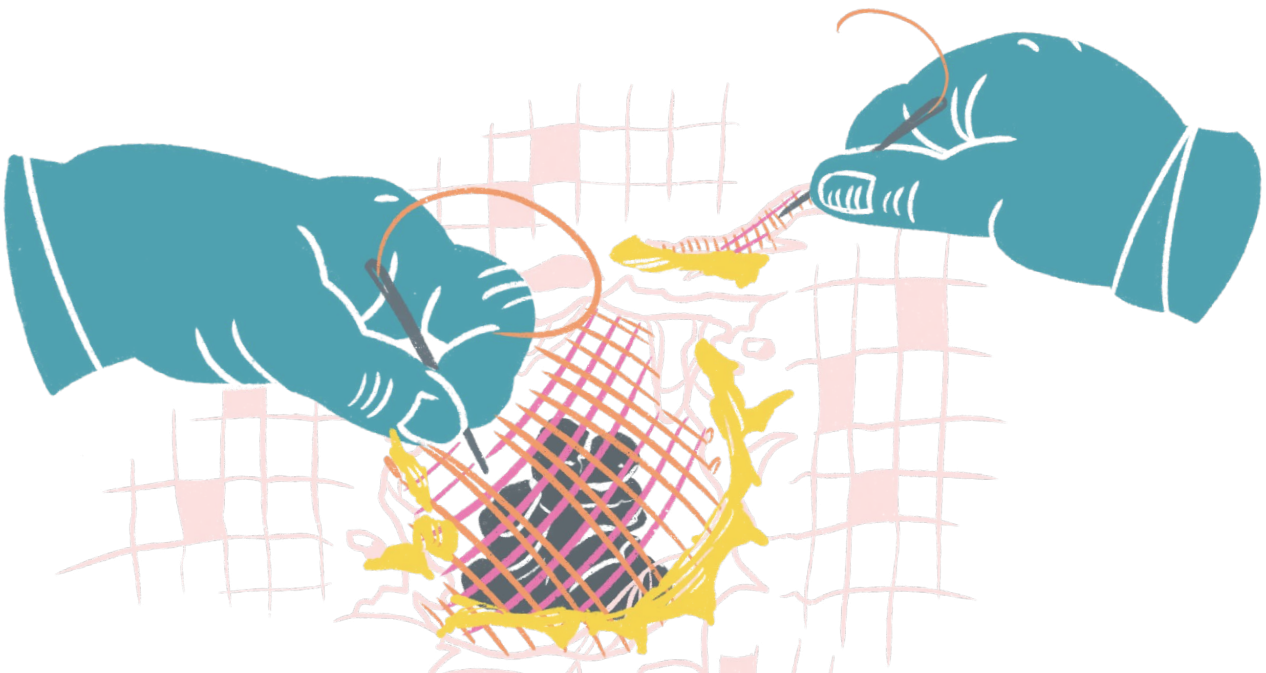
34 Hsia, H.-C. (2026). *Seeking Justice for Women Marriage Migrants in Asia: Realities, Structural and Legal Hurdles*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/APWLD-Multi-Country-Research-Marriage-Migrants-2026.pdf> Based on the Multicountry Research reports on Marriage Migration of Family Frontiers in Malaysia, GABRIELA in the Philippines, the Korea Center for United Nations Human Rights Policy (KOCUN) in South Korea, Keluarga Besar Buruht Migran Indonesia (KABAR BUMI) in Indonesia and TransAsia Sisters Association, Taiwan (TASAT).

35 Migrante International. (2024). *Breaking the Cycle: Why Returned Women Migrant Workers in Rizal Need Sustainable Reintegration*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/PHILIPPINES.pdf>

Feminist Demands And Recommendations

APWLD alongside other feminist movements and civil society organisations have been resisting labour exploitation by IFIs and World Bank through their neoliberal policies that include the flexibilisation of labour and the viewing of workers as economic assets or commodities. Feminist demands for labour rights are clear:

- IFIs must stop financing and promoting digital projects that reinforce precarious work, deepen exploitation, labour flexibilisation and the misclassification of workers;
- All investments in the digital economy must comply with binding international human rights, labour rights and gender equality standards, supported by strong, transparent and enforceable accountability mechanisms that center the voices of women workers;
- Governments must decisively redirect public resources away from subsidising profit-driven platform expansion and technologies corporations. Instead, public resources must be used to support the development of universal social protection systems and social infrastructure that guarantee dignity, security, and rights for all workers. Economic growth must not be built on the exploitation of women's labour, rights and lives;
- IFIs must stop their intervention into the labour and migration landscape through technical assistance and policy setting in the name of formalising labour or regularising migration. This imposes restrictions and barriers that force women into unsafe and irregular migration pathways;
- IFIs must be held accountable for the exploitation of natural resources in the name of investment for development, which creates adverse drivers such as land and resources grabbing that impoverish people and force them to leave their country of origin; and
- IFIs must be held accountable for promoting cheap, flexible, temporary labour schemes which only benefit employers and are against the long-term rights of migrant workers, particularly women, preventing them from integrating into host societies.



CHAPTER 7

Freedom of Expression, Freedom of Association and IFIs



Freedom of Expression, which is the right to express oneself freely, to speak and be heard without restraint, and Freedom of Association, which is the right to work collectively organise as a group, are fundamental to peoples' enjoyment of their human rights.

But these are often under threat in our region as authoritarian governments find many and diverse ways to suppress dissent, from internet shutdowns to violence. These rights have also come under threat in countries where International Financial Institutions (IFIs) operate and are linked to the policies they put in place as conditionalities for the loans they extend. The Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs) and austerity measures that are hallmarks of their policies that worsen inequality and poverty, have been met with peoples' protests that are in turn shut down, often brutally and in violation of peoples' rights to expression and association. Recent youth-led nationwide protests in countries like Bangladesh in 2024 and Nepal and Indonesia in 2025, saw internet shutdowns at the peak of peoples' movements against corruption. These protests were also

violently suppressed. Generations of elitist, autocratic governance have been validated and enabled through resources that global and regional financial institutions provide to states. The protests in South Asia for instance, were linked to economic distress, growing public frustration over tough economic austerity measures coupled with widespread dissatisfaction over corruption and the political elite.^{1,2}

Governments have also harshly stamped down on protests that are against private corporations. In September 2025, India's Ministry of Information and Broadcasting ordered the removal of over 130 YouTube and Instagram posts against Adani Enterprises, India's largest conglomerate,³ in order

- 1 Bajpae, C. (2026). *South Asia's Gen Z Revolutions now face difficult realities*. Chatham House. <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2026/06/south-asias-gen-z-revolutions-now-face-difficult-realities>
- 2 EAF Editors. (2025, 22 September). *Nepal is the latest of Asia's unfinished revolutions that keep politics stuck in a loop*. East Asia Forum. <https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/09/22/nepal-is-the-latest-of-asias-unfinished-revolutions-that-keep-politics-stuck-in-a-loop/>
- 3 Committee to Protect Journalists. (2025). *Indian government uses court order to censor reporting on Adani Enterprises*. <https://cpj.org/2025/09/indian-government-uses-court-order-to-censor-reporting-on-adani-enterprises/>

to protect the business tycoon from the increasing criticisms over exploitation of natural resources and community wellbeing. Many of Adani's powerplants have caused air and water pollution damaging the health of many people in the villages. Residents of Motia village are getting 'boils' from bathing in the village ponds after the powerplant was built in the area.⁴ Despite this background, in December 2025, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and India signed agreements on five loans worth over USD2.2 billion for development projects in the country.⁵ The Asia and the Pacific region receives money for development projects like these but questioning who the development is for is severely restricted through narrative control and government support.

Critics have noted IFIs' history of supporting authoritarian regimes to ensure compliance with its policies,⁶ no matter the way it is enforced or how human rights, including the rights to freedom of expression and association, are impacted. The UN Independent Expert on Foreign Debt and Human Rights examined the effects of public debt, structural adjustment, fiscal consolidation and other economic reform policies on the realisation of human rights and emphasised the importance of conducting human rights impact assessments of economic reforms. He also emphasised the principle of indivisibility of human rights and called for all human rights to be protected,

including social, economic and cultural rights, which includes the Freedom of Expression, Assembly and Association.⁷

How Governments Use Anti-Terror And Cybercrime Laws To Silence Dissent

Across Asia and the Pacific, anti-terrorism and cybercrime laws have been wielded by governments to suppress free expression, shut down civic organising and criminalise dissent. These laws are often framed as tools to protect national security or curb online harm. In practice, they are regularly turned against journalists, activists and Women Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs).

The scale of the problem is vast. **In 2023, people were arrested for online expression in 55 out of 70 countries covered by Freedom House's Freedom on the Net report, which ranked Burma/Myanmar among the worst.**⁸ According to Amnesty International's 2024 regional overview, governments in Bangladesh, Malaysia, Pakistan and Thailand also deployed new online restrictions to undermine political opposition ahead of elections.⁹ **As of 2025, Burma/Myanmar and China were next to Israel as among the world's three worst offenders in putting journalists behind bars.**¹⁰

4 Minj, N. (2025, May 20). *Near Adani's Jharkhand power plant, villages still struggle for basic health, education*. Scroll.in. <https://scroll.in/article/1082030/near-adanis-jharkhand-power-plant-villages-still-struggle-for-basic-health-education>

5 Reuters. (2025, December 16). *India, ADB agree loans worth over \$2.2 billion for development projects*. <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/india-adb-agree-loans-worth-over-22-billion-development-projects-2025-12-15/>

6 Cottiero, C. & Schneider, C.A. (2025, January 23). *International Financial Institutions and the Promotion of Autocratic Resilience*. Cambridge University Press on behalf of the IO Foundation. Volume 80, Issue 1. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818325101276>

7 United Nations Human Rights Council. (2019). *Visit to Sri Lanka: Report of the Independent Expert on the effects of foreign debt and other related international financial obligations of States on the full enjoyment of all human rights, particularly economic, social and cultural rights, on his visit to Sri Lanka*. (A/HRC/40/57/Add.2). United Nations. <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/40/57/Add.2>

8 Funk, A., Shahbaz, A. & Vesteinsson, K. (2023). *Freedom on the Net 2023: The Repressive Power of Artificial Intelligence*. Freedom House. <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-net/2023/repressive-power-artificial-intelligence>

9 Amnesty International. (n.d.). *Asia And The Pacific 2025*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/asia-and-the-pacific/report-asia-and-the-pacific/>

10 Getz, A. (2025, January 16). *In record year, China, Israel, and Myanmar are world's leading jailers of journalists*. Committee to Protect Journalists. <https://cpj.org/special-reports/in-record-year-china-israel-and-myanmar-are-worlds-leading-jailers-of-journalists/>

Vague laws have real consequences. A core problem is that many cybercrime laws are written so broadly that almost any act of dissent can be criminalised. Thailand's Computer-Related Crime Act (CCA), particularly Sections 12 and 14, leaves it to authorities to decide what content is 'likely to cause damage to the public', with severe punishments of up to 10 years of imprisonment.¹¹ Vietnam's Law on Cybersecurity (2019) punishes content that 'distorts history' or spreads 'false information'—terms so vague they can cover any criticism of the government. Sri Lanka's Online Safety Act (2024) is no different, which 'created a framework for expanded censorship, the evisceration of privacy, mass surveillance and authoritarian control' couched in the language of protecting women and children.¹² In Pakistan, the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act (PECA) was enacted without meaningful public consultation. It criminalises sharing information that 'supports an accused'—meaning that simply calling for the release of a political prisoner could be prosecuted. Civil society has documented how PECA's vague language targets WHRDs who speak out online about gender and sexuality rights. Burma/Myanmar's draft Cybersecurity Bill gives the military (Tatmadaw) sweeping powers to order internet service providers to remove any content deemed to disrupt 'unity', and to shut down online platforms entirely—with no requirement for a court order.¹³

Bangladesh offered a clear example of consequences of a vague law. Its Digital Security Act (DSA) was used to arrest

hundreds of journalists, activists and critics after it was passed in 2018. When it was replaced by the Cyber Security Act (CSA) in 2023, civil society condemned it as a rebranding exercise, where the same repressive offences use a different name.

Taken together, these laws share a pattern of having broad definitions, weak judicial oversight and deliberate use against the very people they should protect. These risks make the internet more dangerous, especially for women.

Attacks On Women Labour Organisers, Human Rights Defenders And Journalists

IFIs heavily drive infrastructure, energy and financial sector projects in Asia and the Pacific. These funds often flow through private intermediaries, prioritising privatisation, deregulation and labour flexibility in large economies. This very capital-focused model sidelines accountability for violations of human rights, both through the process of implementation and in resistance against it. Women trade union activists, journalists and human rights defenders in Asia and the Pacific face threats that are physical, digital and legal and these threats are getting worse. Repressive laws and unchecked violence combine to create a climate where speaking truth is treated as a crime. **A 2023 survey by Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation of 458 WHRDs found that three in four had been targeted with threats or harassment. In 58 per cent of cases, governments or state authorities were identified as the primary actor behind those threats.**¹⁴

11 Human Rights Watch. (2016, December 21). *Thailand: Cyber Crime Act Tightens Internet Control*. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/12/21/thailand-cyber-crime-act-tightens-internet-control>

12 Hattotuwa, S. (2025, March 3). *Sri Lanka's Online Safety Act: A year in review, and framework for reform*. Global Network Initiative. <https://globalnetworkinitiative.org/sri-lankas-online-safety-act-a-year-in-review-and-framework-for-reform/>

13 Amnesty International. (2025, January 24). *Pakistan: Authorities pass bill with sweeping controls on social media*. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2025/01/pakistan-authorities-pass-bill-with-sweeping-controls-on-social-media/>

14 Pruthi, C. & Zillén, E. (2023). *Hope and Resistance Go Together: The State of Women Human Rights Defenders 2023*. The Kvinna till Kvinna Foundation. <https://kvinna.tillkvinna.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/The-Kvinna-till-Kvinna-Foundation-The-state-of-women-human-rights-defenders-2023.pdf>



Lives Under Threat

WHRDs and labour activists have been facing heightened risks when organising for their rights.

In Burma/Myanmar following the military coup in 2021, military crackdown on unions intensified. The Vice president of the Solidarity Trade Union of Myanmar (STUM) that organises garment workers (who are primarily women) seeking fair wages, was arrested in July 2025 for organising protests and publicly denouncing wage theft, unsafe conditions and union-busting in the garment sector.¹⁵ Earlier, in 2021, she had already been imprisoned under Section 505(a) of Burma/Myanmar's Penal Code (related to 'incitement' and anti-state speech) for her role in anti-coup mobilisation, which is part of the same pattern of criminalising labour rights protest. It has been a common motive amongst the states in the region to repress dissent to maintain 'investment-friendly' environments.

IFIs such as the World Bank have long supported infrastructure development in the Philippines, including major port and logistics projects. On 3 May 2022, women workers' and labour rights organiser Elizabeth 'Loi' Magbanua and fellow unionist Alipio 'Ador' Juat were abducted after a meeting in Valenzuela City, shortly after leaving a gathering of labour organisers active in the port and logistics sector. Loi, a full-time organiser with the national labour center Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU) and associated with women workers' formations, was a prominent WHRD who campaigned for decent working conditions for port workers. Her partner, Ruth Manglalan—an LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender) activist and long-time organiser in women's and labour-rights movements—has since campaigned tirelessly to locate her.

The Philippine Supreme Court issued a Writ of Amparo¹⁶ and a temporary protection order for Magbanua and her family in August 2022. The Court of Appeals later made this a permanent protection order, directing top military officials to account for her disappearance. Despite these orders, state authorities, including the Armed Forces Headquarters at Camp Aguinaldo, have repeatedly denied any knowledge of Loi's whereabouts, effectively blocking access to information and search efforts.¹⁷ Loi remains missing and her case has become emblematic of 'red-tagging', enforced disappearances and the systematic silencing of WHRDs and labour activists in the Philippines.

15 Business and Human Rights Centre. (2025, July 31). *Myanmar: Union leader and five other labour rights defenders arrested under unknown charges; NGOs call for their immediate and unconditional release*. <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/myanmar-union-leader-and-five-other-labour-rights-defenders-arrested-under-unknown-charges-ngos-call-for-their-immediate-and-unconditional-release/>

16 According to Respicio & Co., 'The Writ of Amparo is an extraordinary protective remedy in Philippine remedial law designed to safeguard and enforce the constitutional rights to life, liberty, and security.' | Respicio & Co. (2025, January 25). *Writ of Amparo* [A.M. No. 07-9-12-SC] | SPECIAL PROCEEDINGS. <https://www.respicio.ph/bar/2025/remedial-law-legal-ethics-legal-forms/special-proceedings/writ-of-amparo-am-no-07-9-12-sc>

17 Guda, K.R.A. (2023, March 31). *Women human rights defenders: Defiant, hopeful, sure of their place in struggle*. PhilStar Global. <https://www.philstar.com/news-commentary/2023/03/31/2256550/women-human-rights-defenders-defiant-hopeful-sure-their-place-struggle>

Similarly, WHRDs protesting the loss of ancestral land, forests and waterways in the course of arbitrarily imposed development projects have faced systematic repression in the region. Women organising community-based associations who defend land, food security and cultural rights continue to face red-tagging, surveillance and threats to their families, even as project proponents present the projects as ‘inclusive’ or ‘sustainable’. Their experiences resonate with APWLD’s broader critique of IFI-driven privatisation and infrastructure models that entrench gender and class-based harm, particularly in climate-vulnerable areas of Asia and the Pacific and expose how ‘green’ development agendas can become tools of dispossession rather than justice.

For environmental and land defenders, the stakes are lethal. Between 2012 and 2023, 352 defenders were killed across Asia and the Pacific.¹⁸ **A 2024 Global Witness report covering India, Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam documented 341 land and environmental defenders arrested or detained in 344 separate incidents between 2018 and 2024.**¹⁹ In 81 per cent of those cases, defenders were held in pre-trial detention for more than a week—meaning they were imprisoned before any finding of guilt.

Reporting Under Risk

Journalists are also human rights defenders who are increasingly under attack and this is especially true for women journalists. As governments implement controversial economic reforms, infrastructure projects

and austerity measures, journalists play a critical role in documenting their impacts on women and affected communities. In many countries in the region, reporting on corruption, public debt, privatisation, land dispossession, environmental harm and protests against these reforms places journalists, particularly women, at heightened risk of retaliation by states and powerful economic actors.

Women are severely underrepresented in media leadership across the region—a structural failure with real safety consequences. In 2025, only 27 per cent of 171 top editors across 240 media brands globally are women, even though women make up 40 per cent of journalists.²⁰ Without women in decision-making roles, gender-sensitive reporting and safe workplace policies are undermined.

Apart from lagging behind in terms of representation in key leadership roles, the situation of women journalists in Asia and the Pacific is marked by significant challenges related to threats and harassment, both online and offline. Women journalists face risks, including physical and sexual violence, online abuse, gender-based discrimination and targeted threats, often exacerbated by the political and social environment in which they work.

The violence is escalating. **In 2023, Reporters Without Borders found that six of the eight longest sentences handed to journalists globally went to women—most of them from China, Burma/Myanmar**

18 Global Witness. (2023). *Standing firm: The Land and Environmental Defenders on the frontlines of the climate crisis*. <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/standing-firm/>

19 Global Witness. (2023). *Standing firm: The Land and Environmental Defenders on the frontlines of the climate crisis*. <https://globalwitness.org/en/campaigns/land-and-environmental-defenders/standing-firm/>

20 Arguedas, A.R., Mukherjee, M. & Nielsen, R. K. (2025, April 6). *Women and leadership in the news media 2025: Evidence from 12 markets*. Reuters Institute and the University of Oxford. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/women-and-leadership-news-media-2025-evidence-12-markets>

and Vietnam.²¹ Between January and April 2024, 57 women journalists were detained, arrested or imprisoned.²² As of April 2024, 92 women journalists are behind bars globally, with some facing death sentences.²³ Meanwhile, online abuse is endemic. A 2020 UNESCO report found that 73 per cent of women journalists have experienced online harassment, with 20 per cent facing it regularly.²⁴

Women who report on politics, human rights or corruption are targeted with threats of sexual violence, doxxing (the publishing of private personal information to incite harm) and sustained hate speech campaigns. The result: women self-censor, leave social media and drop entire subjects—an outcome that serves those in power without requiring a single arrest.

For instance, APWLD media fellow and journalist Lady Ann Salem was arrested in 2021 on fabricated charges of illegal possession of firearms and explosives. Though charges were dismissed and confirmed on appeal in 2023, surveillance of Lady Ann and her family continues to this day. Frenchie Mae Cumpio, editor of an alternative media outlet in Visayas, Philippines, remains incarcerated despite a court ruling in her favour. Both women are victims of 'red-tagging', where critics are

falsely branded as communist terrorists in the Philippines, exposing them to arrest, asset freezes and violence. The same tactic has been used to shut down media outlets Bulatlat, PinoyWeekly, Rappler and ABS-CBN. Meanwhile, in Burma/Myanmar, since the 2021 military coup, the junta has revoked media licences, ordered arrests and tortured journalists. Many have fled to neighbouring countries, leaving their families behind. Visa restrictions in countries like Thailand prevent them from practising journalism professionally, pushing many into unpaid 'citizen journalist' roles with no legal protection. Self-censorship is now widespread among those who remain.

The dangers extend far beyond the newsroom.

Digital surveillance amplifies every physical risk. Spyware—including Pegasus, which India has been identified as deploying against journalists and activists—does not only violate privacy. It also enables physical harassment by handing authorities information about a defender's movements, contacts and communications. Defenders report avoiding phone contact with community members for fear of surveillance, effectively shutting down their organising work without a single prosecution.

The psychological toll of this sustained pressure is severe and underreported. Many defenders reduce their activities, abandon social media or withdraw from their communities entirely. UN Women has documented that women with public-facing roles—politicians, peacebuilders, journalists and defenders—face a compounding layer of risk from online attacks designed specifically to

21 Reporters Without Borders. (2023). *779 journalists were jailed in 2023, 547 will spend New Year's Eve in prison*. <https://rsf.org/en/779-journalists-were-jailed-2023-547-will-spend-new-year-s-eve-prison>

22 Women Press Freedom. (2024, May 3). *On World Press Freedom Day, Explore the Data of Women Journalists Behind Bars*. <https://www.womeninjournalism.org/analyses/on-world-press-freedom-day-explore-the-data-of-women-journalists-behind-bars>

23 Women Press Freedom. (2024, May 3). *On World Press Freedom Day, Explore the Data of Women Journalists Behind Bars*. <https://www.womeninjournalism.org/analyses/on-world-press-freedom-day-explore-the-data-of-women-journalists-behind-bars>

24 Posetti, J., Aboulez, N., Bontcheva, K., Harrison, J. & Waisbord, S. (2020). *Online violence against women journalists: a global snapshot of incidence and impacts*. UNESCO. <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000375136>

drive them out of public life.^{25,26} The pattern across these cases is strikingly consistent. Law, surveillance and violence are deployed together to silence those who speak. Addressing this requires more than awareness, as it demands gender-responsive digital security protections, repeal of overbroad security laws and real accountability for states and corporations that weaponise the legal system against defenders.

Feminist Resistance And Alternatives

Despite the constant risk and pressure, feminist and broader social movements have continued to organise, resist and fight back and there are various wins that prove resistance is not only possible, but powerful even in contexts where repression is deeply entrenched.

For instance, in Fiji, civil society has devoted years of advocacy effort to help bring an end to the Media Industry Development Act.²⁷ This law has been used to control and suppress press freedom for over 13 years. Due to pressure by civil society, the law was repealed by the newly elected government, revitalising media freedom and democratic expression in the country. In Mongolia, decades of advocacy produced a landmark result. Mongolia has become the first country in Asia to adopt a law specifically

recognising and legally protecting human rights defenders.

In Pakistan, a united front of CSOs successfully stopped dangerous amendments to the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act. This amendment would have further criminalised free speech and handed authorities additional powers to silence dissent and suppress movements against it. Aside from legislative changes, wins are happening through the courts too. In the Philippines, alternative media network, Bulatlat, challenged a government order which blocked access to their website. Refusing to be silenced by the state, Bulatlat questioned the constitutionality of the decision and filed a complaint for nullification of the order in July 2022.²⁸ After three years of trial, Bulatlat won the case against state censorship. The victory is significant not only because the restriction was suspended, but it was also a big win for press freedom and a landmark decision against the misuse of anti-terrorism rhetoric to censor independent media.²⁹

Despite different strategies and the diverse contexts of these movements, they share a common demand for accountability from duty bearers. IFIs operating in these countries, including the IMF, the World Bank as well as corporates, have created a system in which the interests of global capital take precedence over the rights of people. And the suppression of freedom of expression and freedom of association has become

25 Posetti, J., Hellmueller, L., Williams, K., Renaud, P., Aboulez, N. & Shabbir N; (2025). *Tipping Point: The chilling escalation of online violence against women in the public sphere*. UN Women. <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2025-12/tipping-point-the-chilling-escalation-of-violence-against-women-in-the-public-sphere-in-the-age-of-ai-en.pdf>

26 UN Women. (2025, December 9). *Seven in ten women human rights defenders, activists and journalists report online violence*. Press Release. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news-stories/press-release/2025/12/seven-in-ten-women-human-rights-defenders-activists-and-journalists-report-on-line-violence>

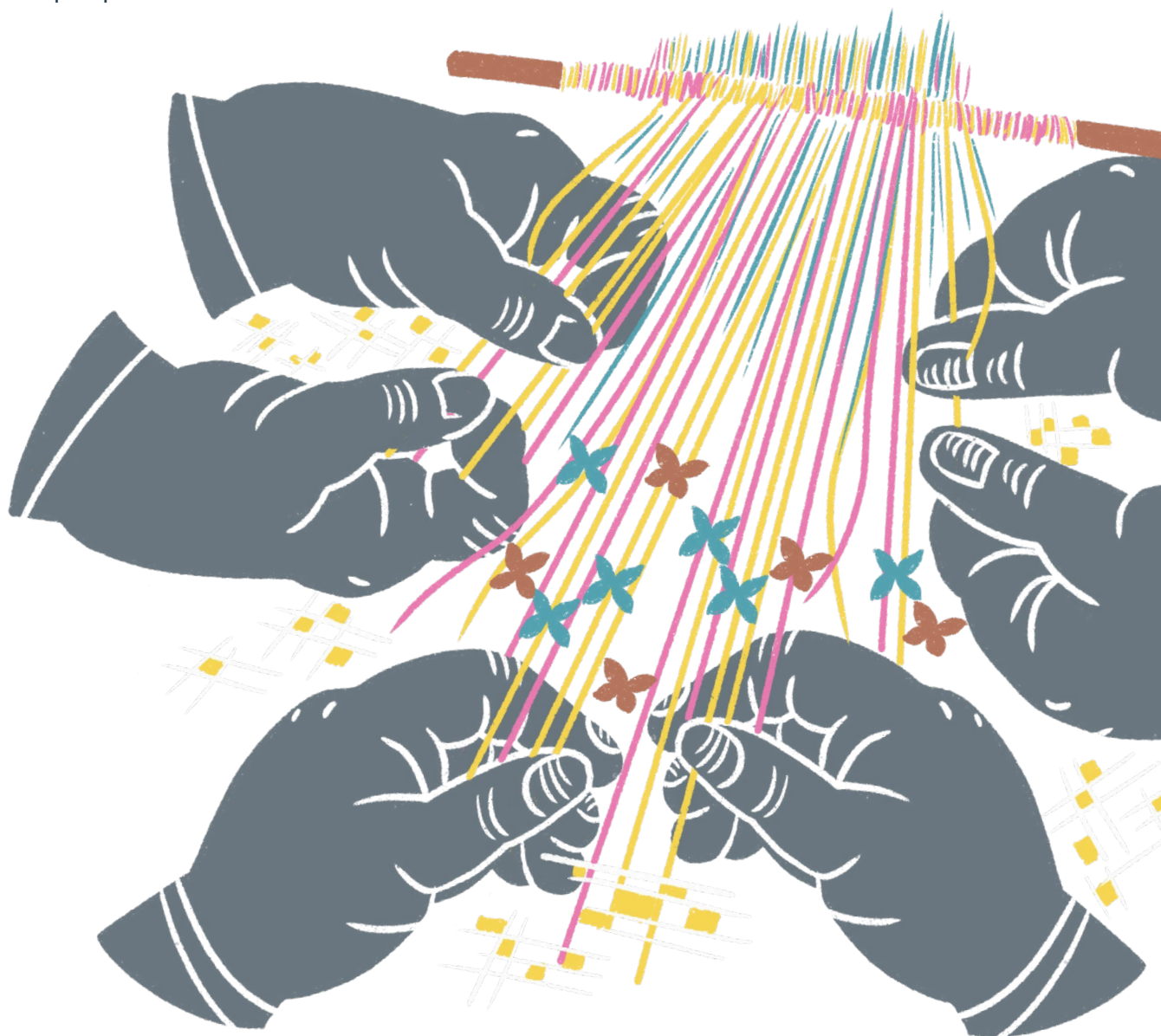
27 Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). (2025). *Documentation report of the APWLD Freedom of Association and Freedom of Expression Convening in 2025*. [Unpublished].

28 de Villa, K. (2025, November 27). *Court voids gov't order blocking Bulatlat news site*. Philippine Daily Inquirer. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/2146924/court-voids-govt-order-blocking-bulatlat-news-site>

29 Olea, R. V. (2024, April 6). *Timeline: The fight against web-site blocking in the Philippines*. Bulatlat. <https://www.bulatlat.com/2024/04/06/timeline-the-fight-against-web-site-blocking-in-the-philippines/#:~:text=Multimedia%20%7C%20Other%20Stories,Timeline:%20The%20fight%20against%20website%20blocking%20in%20the%20Philippines,the%20case%20against%20state%20censorship>

a structural feature to silence those who resist resource extraction and exploitative labour conditions, ultimately protecting IFIs, corporate interests and the imperial powers that back them, maximising their benefit.

Feminist demands are clear: IFIs must be held accountable to the people and the communities whose livelihoods are affected by the projects they finance. They must also be held accountable for their role in worsening the conditions under which freedom of expression and association are attacked. And above all, the dominant development model promoted by IFIs must undergo a fundamental shift towards one rooted in justice, dignity and equality for people.



Conclusion

The playbook of economic control by International Financial Institutions (IFIs), the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and corporations in the region is evident in the past 80 years, creating a system in which the interests of global capital take precedence over the rights of people. These interconnected mechanisms of control include:

- **Forcing the restructuring of economies into neoliberal frameworks** through Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs), loan conditionalities and market-driven financial borrowing instruments that extract resources and entrap countries in debt.
- **Wealth extraction by maintaining indebtedness at all levels**, with countries trapped into repayment of sovereign debt at high levels of interest, while austerity measures are imposed on countries to ensure repayment. These measures force cuts in social spending, transferring the burden of seeking public services onto individuals, forcing them to borrow to meet basic needs, raising living costs and keeping them poor.
- **Resource extraction under the guise of sustainable development projects and climate action** has, in reality, translated to land-grabs and dispossession, corporate takeover of coastal, forest and ocean resources and the loss of cultural practices of local and Indigenous communities. Fragile post-war economies are no exception as IFIs strategically insert themselves in these contexts, pushing for extractive industries, open markets and free trade.
- **The setting up of global supply chains to generate value in peripheral economies** in the Global South, while profits, design, technology, branding and market access for what is produced are concentrated in corporate centres of the Global North. This is maintained by restrictive and unfair trade practices and bilateral, plurilateral and regional trade agreements under the auspices of the WTO.
- **Dismantling of domestic market protections**, by integrating countries into the global trading system under the auspices of the WTO. Following accession to the WTO, countries align national policies with WTO rules to lower tariffs and eliminate non-tariff barriers. These national processes are reinforced by International Monetary Fund (IMF)-driven SAPs and related neoliberal reforms embedded into trade agreements.
- **The framing of labour informality as a weakness** instead of seeing it as a system of structural conditions that leave people with few choices, while simultaneously arguing for labour flexibilisation that leaves workers with low wages, unclear job status and little to no social protections. Investment in the digital economy under the rationalisation of efficiency and competitiveness, further heightens job precarity.

Women often bear disproportionate impacts of these policies. Cuts in social spending and public services as a result of policy measures increase the burden of care and budgetary management at a household level to stretch meagre resources. This is often transferred to women. It is women's reproductive labour that is often unrecognised and invisibilised in neoliberal economic frameworks. Creation of adverse drivers by policies of land and resource grabbing, austerity and increased debt burdens, impoverishes people, forcing many women into irregular migration pathways. As IFIs push for reform of collective land ownership into individual titling in some countries, women's control over land in already patriarchal societies weakens, increasing their dependency and unpaid work. Systematic displacement of communities from their lands increases risks faced by women in particular of Gender-Based Violence (GBV), loss of access to medical and social support services. All of these impacts, among many others, are made more complex by socio-economic class, identity, geography and other intersecting factors.

Compliance with these policies is enforced in several ways. For instance, many trade and investment agreements include Investor-State Dispute Settlements (ISDS) clauses, a mechanism administered by the World Bank Group that allows foreign corporations to sue host governments if national laws and policies negatively impact their expected profits. Threats of sanctions often prevent countries from reversing reforms, even if the livelihoods, social services and long-term development are threatened. As detailed elsewhere in this report, IFIs have also supported authoritarian regimes that suppress dissent against private sector-led projects and its impacts, no matter the way it is enforced or the impact on human rights. IFIs have turned a blind eye to governments wielding laws such as anti-terror and cybercrime laws against Women

Human Rights Defenders (WHRDs) including journalists, resulting in arbitrary arrests, detention and disappearances; to corrupt regimes embezzling development funds, to actively funding programmes that have led to increased militarised control of populations and the displacement and genocide of Indigenous groups, as long as rich natural resources are extracted.

And yet, there is a glaring lack of accountability for this economic violence perpetrated over the past eight decades or their culpability in the violation of human rights. In 2026, the World Bank reversed a three decade hardline stance that rejected industrial policy, which are state-led efforts to shape what its economy produces.¹ The World Bank long-called this policy a costly failure but, in a recent report, admitted that this advice had not aged well.² Despite the admission of error, the Bank faces little consequence for the impacts of its policies on people and communities over that time.

Solidarity, A First Line Of Defense

Women and their communities have not been passive observers of this violence, organising to resist, fight back and restore their human rights. They have adopted approaches that use existing laws to file for rights, advocate for law reform and challenge the legality or constitutionality of legislation in courts. Through rights-based political education, communities are working together to claim their legal benefits on a range of issues and resist exploitation. Women have stood at the frontlines of protest to defend their lands, oceans and resources.

1 Karma, R. (2026, April 16). *A Pillar of the Economics Establishment Admits That It Was Wrong*. The Atlantic. <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/2026/04/world-bank-industrial-policy/686820/>

2 Fernandes, A. M. & Reed, T. (2026). *Industrial Policy for Development*. International Bank for Reconstruction and Development and The World Bank. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/b98ce474-f652-4b58-8c74-a65210da7d4c/content>

The biggest wins in this struggle have come from communities working together. Climate Watch Thailand (CWT) and local women's groups joined forces to disrupt and cease the construction of the Thepha coal-fired power plant, forming a movement called the 'Deep South Pattani Women Watching Climate'. The Ban Pred Nai community, also in Thailand, resisted the imposition of carbon markets to restore community management of a shared mangrove forest. Coalition building has helped anchor the concerns of marriage migrants within broader legal and labour rights struggles and rights-based movements in the region. A united front of CSOs in Pakistan successfully stopped dangerous amendments to the Prevention of Electronic Crimes Act, that would have further criminalised free speech. And there are many others.

Development Justice For All

Over the past eight decades, 'development' has been deployed as both a promise and a threat. It is invoked to justify sweeping economic reforms, even as it obscures the structural violence embedded within them. Ensuring Development Justice for all means that the dominant development model promoted by IFIs needs to undergo a fundamental shift towards one that is rooted in justice, dignity and equality for people. Equally, IFIs need to be held accountable to the people and communities whose livelihoods are affected by the projects they finance.

Therefore, together with our members, we demand:

Shut Down the IMF and

World Bank!

Development Justice Now!

Further Reading

Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). (2026). *Resist and Fight Back! Exposing Over 80 Years of Economic Colonialism by the IMF and World Bank*. <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/IMF-WB-Primer-2026.pdf>

Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). (2022). *ISDS vs Women's Human Rights*. https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/07_APWLD_ISDS-vs-Right_English_Final-Online-Ver.pdf

Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). (2023). *Development Justice Now! Feminist Demands for Financing for Development*. <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/APWLD-Briefer-on-FfD-2023.pdf>

Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). (2023). *Strengthening Women's Resistance to Systemic Barriers and Demanding Development Justice Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic*. <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/FDJ-Regional-Report-2020-2021.pdf>

Celestial, A. (2023). *False Solutions: Climate Colonialism and Tragedy of the Commons*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/FALSE-SOLUTIONS-BRIEFER-Final.pdf>

Centeno-Hach, A.L. (2024). *Womanifesto: Grassroots Women's Agenda for Change in Asia and the Pacific*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). [https://apwld.org/wp-content/](https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Final_-Womanifesto-RP_APWLD-Final-August-2024.pdf)

[uploads/2024/10/Final_-Womanifesto-RP_APWLD-Final-August-2024.pdf](https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Final_-Womanifesto-RP_APWLD-Final-August-2024.pdf) Based on the reports of Astitva Samajik Sansthan (Astitva), Blind Women Association Nepal (BWAN), Da Hawwa Lur, Dem Ololt, Jeepyah Civil Society Development Organization (JCSDO), Kilusan ng Manggagawang Kababaihan (Movement of Women Workers), Viluthu, Democracy Restoration Group, Association for Social and Human Awareness (ASHA), Korea Network of Organized Women, Mali Nmai Zup Women's Group (MNZ), Perkumpulan Nurani Perempuan (PNP), Powershift Nepal, Supporting People and Rebuilding Communities (SPaRC), Public Organisation 'Otifa' and URJA Trust.

Chakma, T., Busto, M. and Asia-Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). (2024). *OUR LAND & WATER: Our Life. Our Livelihood. Our Dignity. Regional Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPAR) Report*. APWLD. <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/LAND-FPAR-REPORT-1-17-2025.pdf> Based on the reports of Badabon Sangho, Sisterhood Network, Cambodian Volunteers for Society (CVS), Rumpun Perempuan dan Anak Riau (RUPARI), Public women's foundation 'JIPAR', Tavoyan Women's Union (TWU), Community Care for Emergency Responses and Rehabilitation (CCERR), National Indigenous Women's Forum (NIWF), Roots for Equity, Sangsan Anakot Yaowachon Development Project and Sabokahan Tomo Kamalitan (Unity of Lumad Women).

- Delos Reyes, E. (2025). *Invisible Food Producers: Women's Critical yet Hidden Role in Food Sovereignty*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/10/Final-Invisible-Food-Producers_Womens-hidden-yet-critical-role-in-food-sovereignty.pdf
- Guzman, R. (2025). *Another World is Possible. A Feminist world is Possible: Policy brief on Women's Human Rights, Macroeconomic Transformations and Development Justice*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/APWLD_Policy-Brief-on-Macroeconomic-Transformations.pdf
- Han, M. (2026). *Imagining a World Without Militarism: Grassroots Vision & Demands for Feminist Peace and Justice*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/APWLD-Multi-Country-Research-2025-Imagining-A-World-Without-Militarism-Grassroots-Visions-Demands-for-Feminist-Peace-Justice.pdf> Based on the multi-country research conducted by the Women's League of Burma (WLB), PEACEMOMO from South Korea, Women's public foundation 'JIPAR' from Kyrgyzstan and ELSHAM Papua from West Papua, and the discussions held during APWLD's series of Regional Convenings on Militarism and Feminist Peace and Justice in 2025.
- Hsia, H.-C. (2026). *Seeking Justice for Women Marriage Migrants in Asia: Realities, Structural and Legal Hurdles*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/APWLD-Multi-Country-Research-Marriage-Migrants-2026.pdf> Based on the Multicountry Research reports on Marriage Migration of Family Frontiers in Malaysia, GABRIELA in the Philippines, the Korea Center for United Nations Human Rights Policy (KOCUN) in South Korea, Keluarga Besar Buruht Migran Indonesia (KABAR BUMI) in Indonesia and TransAsia Sisters Association, Taiwan (TASAT).
- Lim, H. M. (2025). *REAL SOLUTIONS NOW! Women Lead Climate Action*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Real-Solutions-Now-Women-Lead-Climate-Action-APWLD-CJ-Regional-Analysis-2025.pdf> Based on the Feminist Participatory Action Research conducted by Badabon Sangho - Bangladesh, Berenda Perempuan - Indonesia, Kelompok Feminis Muda Sulewana (KFMS) - Indonesia, Women Leader Foundation (WLF) - Mongolia, Sama-samang Artistika para sa Kilusang Agraryo (SAKA) - Philippines, Sustainable Development Foundation (SDF) - Thailand.
- Marmo, E. (2024). *Resisting Corporate Capture of UN Multilateral Spaces: The Role of Civil Society in Dismantling Systems of Exploitation and Greed*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/APWLD_Briefing_Paper_Corporate_Capture.pdf

- Pamintuan, M. (2023). *Strengthening Women's Resistance to Systemic Barriers and Demanding Development Justice Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Asia-Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/FDJ-Regional-Report-2020-2021.pdf> Based on the reports of The Beijing-SDG 5 Facilitating Group, Beyond Beijing Committee, Centre for Sustainable Community Development, HomeNet Pakistan, Initiative for Right View, Perempuan AMAN Maluku Indonesia and Shyrak Association of Women with Disabilities.
- Pamintuan, M. (2025). *10 years of SDGs in Asia and the Pacific: A Feminist Analysis*. Asia-Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/10-Years-of-SDGs-in-Asia-and-Pacific_Digital_March2025.pdf
- Pamintuan, M. (2026). *Women's Rights on the Line : How women defend rights to the commons and at the workplace in Asia amidst neoliberalism and corporate capture*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/03/WITCH-FPAR-2025-1.pdf> Based on the FPAR reports from Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap (Kadamay, Philippines), Sentral Gerakan Buruh Nasional (SGBN, Indonesia), Sahita Institute (HINTS, Indonesia) and the Research Centre for Gender, Family, and Environment in Development (CGFED, Vietnam).
- Radhakrishnan, V. B. (2025). *Women's Labour Rights in an Era of Digitalisation*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Womens-Labour-Rights-in-an-Era-of-Digitalisation-WOW-FPAR-Regional-Analysis.pdf> Based on the Feminist Participatory Action Research (FPARs) by Aajeevika Bureau (India), Cambodian Food and Service Workers' Federation – CFSWF (Cambodia), Development Society (Bangladesh), Gabungan Serikat Buruh Indonesia – GSBI (Indonesia), Filipino Nurses United – FNU (Philippines), Just Economy and Labour Institute – JELI (Thailand) with the Southern Riders Association (SRA), Korea Domestic Workers' Union – KDWU (Republic of Korea) and the Nonoy Librado Development Foundation (Philippines).
- Riccoboni, G. (2024). *Silenced No More: Women Forging Peace, Demanding Justice*. Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/Peace-FPAR-Regional-Report-as-of-November-27-2024.pdf> Based on the work of Flower Aceh, Our Common Wealth 670, Indigenous Women League, SAMAKANA, Weaving Bonds Across Borders and Sri Vimukthi Fisher Women Organisation.
- Sayeed, A. T. (2023). *Unravel Neoliberal Trade: A Failed Solution to Food Sovereignty*. Asia-Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD). <https://apwld.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/UnravelNeoliberalTrade-APWLDFoodSovereigntyBriefer.pdf>



The Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD) is the region's leading network of feminist and women's rights organisations and individual activists. For over 35 years, we have been carrying out advocacy, activism and movement-building to advance women's human rights and Development Justice.

Illustrations by Gerimara Manuel
Design & Layout by Dapat Studio

Year of Publication: 2026



www.apwld.org



[@apwld_](https://www.instagram.com/apwld_)



[apwld.ngo](https://www.facebook.com/apwld.ngo)



[Asia Pacific Forum on Women,
Law and Development](https://www.youtube.com/AsiaPacificForumonWomenLawandDevelopment)



[@apwld](https://twitter.com/apwld)