

50.50: OPINION

We need a feminist economic alternative to Sunak and Hunt's plans

OPINION: Prioritising profit over people has disproportionately affected women and girls. It shouldn't be this way

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Chancellor Jeremy Hunt leaves 11 Downing Street to deliver his autumn statement, 17 November 2022 | PA Images / Alamy Stock Photo

As Rishi Sunak's chancellor Jeremy Hunt sets out his autumn statement to try to salvage the damage done to the UK's economy by his predecessor, it's worth remembering the global pain inflicted by Sunak himself when he was in Hunt's job.

Almost exactly two years ago, Sunak stood in front of Parliament and announced a decision to tear up the government's legally binding decision to spend 0.7% of the UK's gross national income on official development assistance (ODA) – that is, international aid.

The decision made an estimated £4.6bn dent in international development and humanitarian work on education and health, affecting commitments to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, the Green Climate Fund, the Adaptation Fund and other country-specific investments in Bangladesh and Syria – to name just a few.

The impact on women and girls has been especially huge – with gains on gender equality made prior to the pandemic suffering setbacks globally.

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It is impossible to understand the meaning of these ODA cuts without returning to Brexit.

Brexit was not simply a vote about the UK leaving the European Union. Underpinning the Leave campaign was a racialised, class-based, ultra-nationalist logic that can be likened to Trump's America First political campaign.

Brexit relied on whipping up a race-based nationalist fervour among the economically disenfranchised that positioned ethnicity – in this case, whiteness – as under threat. The need for policies that secured both the physical, legal, financial and metaphorical territory of whiteness was sold as the basis of saving Britain.

A trio of contradictions

Populist nationalist policies such as those we are witnessing in England are intentionally contradictory. Three contradictions are worth highlighting.

The first is a claim to nationalism as a basis to protect the most marginalised in the society from the 'other': foreigners, migrants, racialised and gender minorities. Positioning other forces as the problem – rather than implementing just and equitable economic programmes – externalises how race, gender and class are hardwired into the structure of our societies.

Gender becomes central to resolving nationalist anxieties, through greater regulation of birth or marriage, which is partly why the backlash against the rights of gender minorities has gained support in England. Whiteness and proximity to whiteness becomes a running feature, with the protection of a version of 'national purity' from 'the other' seen in migration policies such as the government's Rwanda plan, or the racism denialism in the report by the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities.

The second contradiction is policies based on trickle-down economics, which protect the rich while placing the burden of securing affordable public goods and services on the economically and socially marginalised through high taxation regimes and privatisation. It's alarming that poverty is barely mentioned in the UK's updated international development strategy, meaning that profit once again takes priority over people.

When key services are priced out of the reach of many, societies lean on the gendered organisation of labour to cushion government failure

Across Africa, the impact of the old and dangerous strategy of privatisation has seen public education and health services gutted. The World Bank and International Monetary Fund-induced structural adjustment programmes of the 1990s required African governments (among other things) to divest from higher education and to privatise health and education, as a condition for getting loans. These programmes are still alive and kicking.

The idea that 'efficient' privatised services enhance equitable access has been shown to be false. When key services are priced out of the reach of many, societies lean on the gendered organisation of labour to cushion government failure. From providing education in the home to unpaid domestic care – often alongside formal and informal work – women and girls take on extra labour that widens gender inequality.

In 2021, along with colleagues at Just Associates, we examined feminist movements' responses to Covid across sections of Africa, finding women and girls took on a disproportionate burden of care. These findings mirror feminist analysis of the 2008 global financial crisis.

The third contradiction is a claim to a global 'family' of interconnected states with mutually beneficial and equitable partnerships. The free-market economy is undergirded by protectionist and hostile trade, migration and intellectual property policies in the Global North. We were reminded of this through vaccine and medical nationalism around Covid, which, as Africans, we were already familiar with due to the Ebola and HIV/AIDS crises.

The extractive nature of the global economic system has been sufficiently analysed by feminist scholars. Action Aid's 2020 analysis of how mainstream macroeconomic policies miss the mark shows that systemic discrimination is sustained through an emphasis on the individual rather than collective good, privatisation to the detriment of equitable access, and an unspoken reliance on social reproduction.

What next?

Systemic change is needed, which means a political and ideological commitment to equity. This is fundamentally a conversation about transforming and redistributing

power. Feminist movements have led the charge in proposing alternatives, while models explored by governments in the Global South have also shown that other worlds are possible.

First, governments must lead from the front. Uruguay's Integrated National Care System is coordinating policies for all those with care needs, notably young children, the elderly and people living with disabilities. The care system is explicit on the need to redistribute unpaid care and domestic work between women and men.

Second, we must reclaim public goods and services from the clutches of privatisation and austerity. The NHS was founded to ensure equitable healthcare for all in the UK – today, it is in crisis. Stretched to capacity, the health service's acute workforce shortages make it a walking billboard for the negative impact of cuts to public services and racialised migration policies that limit access to international workers.

Reclaiming public goods and services requires maximising public financing by reforming the global public tax system, with greater corporate accountability – as called for by feminists – as a binding treaty.

Finally, Covid, more than any other pandemic, re-emphasised global responsibility. Our challenges are global; our responses must be based on shared but differentiated global responsibility.

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