

# Just transition in South Africa: the case for a gender just approach

## OVERVIEW

This policy brief makes the case for a gender just transition in South Africa. It does so by: a) explaining why a gender just transition is vital by discussing the gendered impact of climate change; b) locating South African women within the broader society and within the economy; and c) providing a brief idea of what a gender just transition would look like.

## INTRODUCTION

All things considered, women perform the bulk of the work that takes place globally. However, women remain underrepresented in the mainstream formal economy, often relegated to administrative and other low-skilled and low-pay work.

Given the climate crisis and the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change's warning that countries had, in 2018, 12 years to limit global warming to 1.5°C (compared to the pre-industrial era), the transition to a green economy is a matter of urgency, and steps are required to fast-track both policymaking and implementation. The move to a green economy has been hailed as an opportunity to correct existing structural problems that have led to the exclusion of women (among others) in the economy (ILO, 2015: 3).

However, the structural failures of the traditional economy, as they relate to the representation of women in paid employment and leadership roles as well as access to resources, will not automatically be fixed by simply shifting to a green economy. For instance, women are also underrepresented in emerging green industries. Of the estimated 11.5 million jobs in the global renewable energy sector

In 2019, only about 32% were held by women (IRENA, 2020).

Rather, there should be active steps to ensure the inclusion of women<sup>1</sup> in a just transition to a green economy. This is to say, the shift to a green economy requires a gender just approach to address structural failures that are part of the present economy. Furthermore, a just transition should take an intersectional feminist perspective<sup>2</sup> that not only considers those in paid employment, but also: a) ensures that those not in paid employment have the opportunity to gain paid work; b) recognises, values and addresses the burden of unpaid care work that mainly falls on women and limits their participation in paid economic activities; and c) ensures access to new technologies (such as renewable energy) along with access to other basic services.

Samantha Smith (2017: 1) writes that a just transition aims to ensure “*environmental sustainability as well as decent work, social inclusion and poverty eradication*”. The Climate Justice Alliance (CJA, n.d.) stresses that the transition to new energy sources (as part of the broader transition to a green economy) should be equitable and clear on what historical harms have been done to both the environment and people, and address those harms, while changing prevailing power dynamics. Some definitions mainly focus on workers. While this is necessary and relevant, such definitions fail to address the needs of those who have been excluded from the paid (in)formal economy, the majority of whom are women in poor and low-income communities. Therefore, a just transition should expand beyond employer and employee relationships to include those excluded and disadvantaged in the economy as it currently exists, and also

<sup>1</sup> Although this policy brief paper speaks to the experiences of women, the author acknowledges the non-binary nature of gender, as well as the economic exclusion experienced by those who are sexual and gender minorities.

<sup>2</sup> An intersectional feminist perspective means recognising that there are various inequalities (e.g. access to services, access to employment, disability, race, gender and sexuality) that intersect and compound the level of inequality experienced by certain groups, and thus policy responses need to address the various kinds of inequality to address broader structural inequality. See UN Women, 2020.

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address the non-economic impacts of the climate crisis and associated policy responses.

Furthermore, the just transition is about both outcomes and process. It should recognise the unpaid care work that is mainly performed by women, include women in the paid (green) economy, and ensure that women are represented in the policy discussions and other decision-making processes relating to the shift to a green economy. This inclusion is not only about recognising the existence of women within society, but also acknowledging that women play a significant role in providing care work within their communities (i.e. providing food, energy, and water for instance) and thus form the backbone of the paid economy through this social reproduction.

## **THE NEED FOR A GENDER JUST TRANSITION**

### **Women and climate change: assessing the impacts**

By some estimates, roughly 61% of those killed by cyclone Nargis in Myanmar in 2008 were women (Rijsberman and Solvang, 2020), while an estimated half a million women were affected by cyclone Idai in 2019 (primarily in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Malawi), 75 000 of whom were pregnant (GFW, 2019). Admittedly, women are not a homogeneous group, with some women holding more power than others, and therefore able to adapt to or mitigate the impact of climate change. Overall though, due to societal norms and entrenched power dynamics that favour men, the impact of climate change is gendered such that women are more vulnerable than men.

In a study on the gendered impacts of natural disasters, Neumayer and Plümper (2007: 552) find that natural disasters decrease women's life expectancy more than they do men's by killing more women than men, or killing women at a younger age than men. Neumayer and Plümper (2007: 551) further find that women's increased vulnerability is not the consequence of biological differences, but rather the consequence of women's socio-economic status.

The bio-physical impacts of climate change are already increasing the amount of time women spend performing unpaid care work – which includes childcare and the provision of food, water and energy for the family – while limiting the amount of time

women are able to spend on seeking or perform paid employment. For instance, Halton (2018) writes that, with 90% of Lake Chad having disappeared since the 1960s, women have to walk longer distances to collect water. Moreover, the co-ordinator for the Association of Indigenous Women and People of Chad (cited by Halton, 2018) noted that during dry seasons men leave their homes to seek employment in other areas, leaving women to care for the community.

Besides the increase in unpaid care work due to climate change, communities also face displacement resulting from severe weather conditions, which leaves women vulnerable to violence. The Global Fund for Women (GFW, 2019) for instance notes that cyclone Idai disproportionately impacted women, young girls and LGBTQ+ people through increased sexual violence, unsafe labour, and not being able to access medical care.

The economic impact and the personal violence suffered by (displaced) women should not be thought of as separate problems; nor should women's unpaid care work and their underrepresentation in the economy. Rather, these issues represent structural failures that should be part of the just transition conversation.

An attempt to separate women's underrepresentation in the paid economy and the unpaid care work they perform would be a failure to recognise that this work offers society the labour it needs, at the expense of women's paid economic participation.

Further, it would be a failure to recognise that women's unemployment or underemployment means women often lack the resources necessary to adapt to climate change impacts. This is to say, unpaid care work limits women's ability to gain paid employment, which in turn limits the kinds of resources women need to adapt to climate change impacts. As such, a failure to address women's underrepresentation in the paid economy will continue to entrench existing power dynamics, thus creating an unjust transition.

### **Locating South African women within society**

There are no biological differences that prevent women from performing the same work as men, and receiving payment that is on the same level. Nevertheless, the extractive economy, built on colonial need for cheap labour, has centred the idea of men as the workers and women as caregivers.

As such, women are overrepresented in care-related sectors (see Graph 1 and Graph 2 on page 4), often with low or no pay. This impacts on women's economic outcomes, including income, ownership of resources and power of decision-making outside of, and in some cases, within the home. Thus, women are often financially dependent on men, which increases their vulnerability to climate change and the resulting impacts.

In 2019, in South Africa, about 50% of those living in women-headed homes depended on remittances and grants for income, compared to 23% of those living in households headed by men. Further, those living in men-headed households are more likely to live off income from salaries, businesses and pensions (75%), compared to only 48% for those in women-headed households. Disaggregated by gender and race, around 53% of those living in black<sup>3</sup> women-headed households lived off grants and remittances, compared to 11% of those in white women-headed households, and 3% of those in white men-headed homes. In addition, only about 45% of those living in black women-headed households lived off income from salaries, from businesses and pensions, compared to 85% for those in white women-headed households and 93% of those living in white men-headed households (Stats SA, 2020).

Further, South Africa's spatial development continues to be a good indicator for socio-economic inequalities. There are significant differences in the geographical location of those living in women-headed households and those living in households headed by men, with even larger differences between black women-headed households and women of other races, as well as men of all racial groups. Based on data from Statistics SA (2020), about 41% of those living in women-headed homes lived in traditional formal areas in 2019, while 56% lived in urban formal areas. In contrast, about 25% of those in men-headed households lived in traditional areas, compared to 71% living in urban areas. Broken down by gender and race, the data show that 47% of those living in black women-headed homes lived in traditional areas, compared to 0.6% for those in coloured women-headed households, and none<sup>4</sup> for Indian/Asian and white women-headed households. Last, about 33% of those living in black men-headed households lived in traditional areas, compared to 1.1% for those in coloured men-headed households and 0.1% for Indian/Asian and white men-headed households.

The source of income also serves as an indicator of the level of vulnerability, with those living off grants

and remittances more likely to be low income, and therefore more vulnerable, compared to those who receive income through salaries, businesses and pensions. However, receiving a salary, although a stable source of income, does not always indicate resilience. Women, and in particular black women, are vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, but are also less likely to have the resources necessary to adapt. Low levels of employment, location away from major sources of employment, as well as high susceptibility to unpaid care work are major contributors to vulnerability.

## WOMEN'S LOCATION IN THE ECONOMY

Women cannot transition from jobs they do not have; nor can they get paid employment at the same level as men when they still carry the burden of unpaid care work, largely on their own. Catalyst (2021) writes that only 41 million men perform unpaid care work on a full-time basis globally, compared to 606 million women. Put differently, whereas about 2% of men aged 15 to 64 perform unpaid care work full-time, about 25% of the 2.5 billion women globally aged 15 to 64 perform unpaid care work on a full-time basis. This means a quarter of the working-age population of women is excluded from paid economic activity in a society where income, and not well-being, is considered an important indicator of economic progress, as encapsulated in the way in which gross domestic product (GDP) is measured.

Furthermore, disasters exacerbate the differences in economic opportunity, as can be seen in women's experiences of heightened job losses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Madgavkar, et al. (2021) note that although women accounted for about 39% of those employed before the pandemic, they accounted for about 54% of job losses as a result of the pandemic. The authors further note that this will likely lead to a US\$1 trillion loss in global GDP by 2030, an impact that would have likely been lower if women's job losses were in line with those of men. These job losses are not because women's jobs are not necessary; rather the losses are the consequence of increased unpaid care work that falls to women, more so in times of disasters (not discounting women's overrepresentation in sectors affected by responses to the pandemic, such as tourism and informal trade).

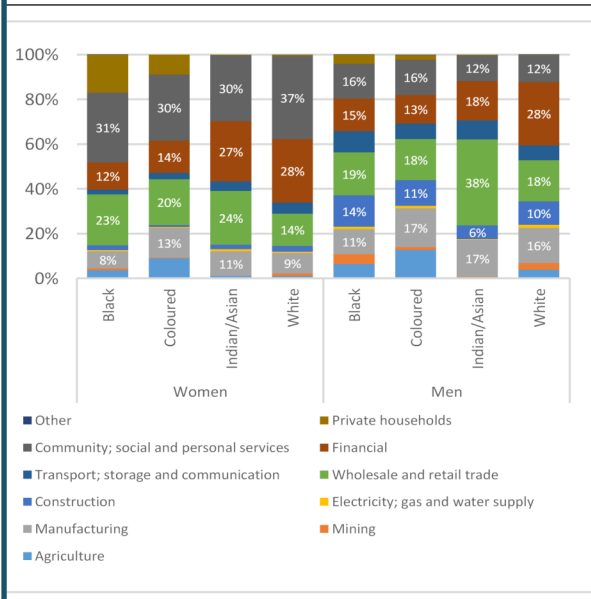
Care work cannot go undone given its necessity for families, communities and the broader economy. As Catriona McLean (2020) notes, unpaid care work closes spending gaps in sectors such as education and health. Thus, any just transition discussions must consider carefully the value and necessity of care work, and how to account for it in a green economy. In the *Time to care: unpaid and underpaid care work and the global inequality crisis* report for Oxfam, Coffey, et al. (2020: 7) assessed the value of women's unpaid care work around at least US\$10.8 trillion<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> African.

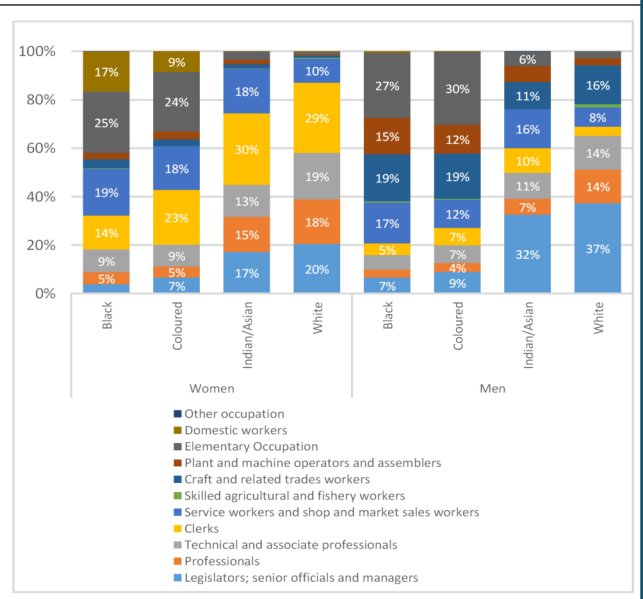
<sup>4</sup> This is based on survey data from Statistics South Africa, and should not be taken to mean that absolutely no Indian/Asian/white people live in traditional areas.

<sup>5</sup> The methodology for this calculation can be found here: <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/620928/rr-time-to-care-methodology-200120-en.pdf>

**Graph 1: Employment by industry, gender and race in South Africa, 2019**



**Graph 2: Employment by occupation, gender and race in South Africa, 2019**



Source: Author, calculated from the labour market dynamics survey data downloaded from <http://www.statssa.gov.za/> in February 2021.

annually, or about 12% of 2019 global GDP. The work is, however, not valued as it relates to GDP or household income. This is a good illustration of the way in which GDP fails to account for economic value added within the home, and further highlights the need to move beyond measuring economic value only in income terms. Debates about how to account for unpaid care work are ongoing, but the provision of a universal basic income (UBI) could be the first step in integrating this into existing pension programmes, which have proven to decrease poverty among low- and no-income households, and would help reduce women’s vulnerability. UBI would guarantee unconditional transfers from the state to citizens, and has been used in various countries, including Kenya – although (this was provided by a charity and not the state (Matthews, 2016) and in Finland as part of a pilot (Matthews, 2015).

Globally, women’s labour force participation stood at 48.7% in 2019, down from 50.9% in 1990. In contrast, men’s labour force participation stood at 74.7% in 2019, down from 80.2% in 1990 (Catalyst, 2021). The trend is similar in South Africa, where women’s labour force participation is lower than that of men. Between 2010 and 2019, women’s labour force participation increased from an average of 48.4% to 53.4%, before falling to 48.7% in 2020, mainly as a consequence of the COVID-19 crisis. Over the same period, men’s labour force participation increased from 63.3% to 65.8%, before falling to 60.7% in 2020.

Further, the data show stark differences when disaggregated by race. While black people’s labour

participation increased between 2010 and 2019, it remained below that of coloured, Indian/Asian and white people, and in 2020 had fallen back to 2010 levels.

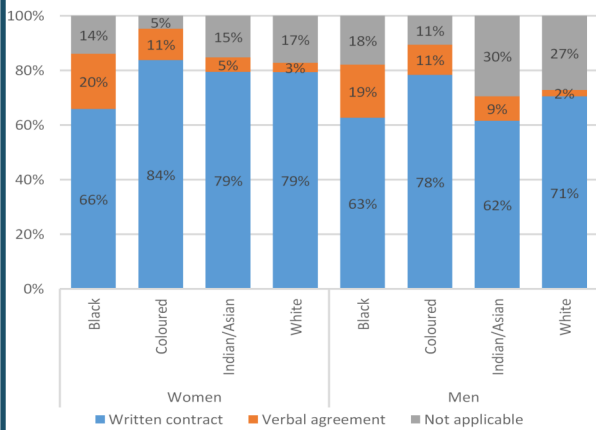
In addition, while this varies across countries, women earn about 22% less than men in median monthly wages, barely exist in top leadership positions, and account for only 29% of senior jobs globally. In South Africa, the gaps in earnings are both gendered and racialised. For instance, Statistics SA (2019: 61-62) notes that, between 2011 and 2015, black South Africans earned far less than other racial groups, while at the same time women<sup>6</sup> earned about 30% less than men for the same work. These factors – coupled with the responsibility of unpaid care work – result in women being excluded from decision-making spaces and processes, restricted in the advancement of their careers, unable to access social benefits like pensions, and being more vulnerable to poverty.

Graph 1 shows employment in South Africa by industry, gender and race for 2019 while Graph 2 shows employment by occupation, gender and race for the same year. The data indicate that about 45% of women were employed in community, social and personal services, and private households in 2019, compared to 18% of men. The data also show that about 25% of women were employed in manufacturing, construction and financial services in 2019, compared to about 42% for men. Further, whereas Indian/Asian and white men (32% and 37% respectively) were more likely to be employed as senior official and managers, only about 4% of black women and about 7% of coloured women were employed as senior officials and managers. Indian/Asian and white women fare better, at 17% and 20% respec-

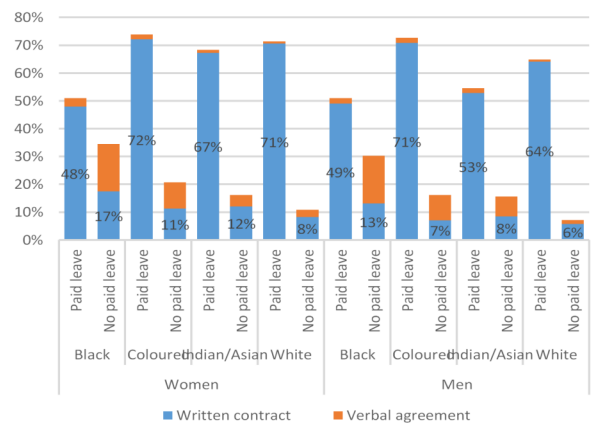
<sup>6</sup> Statistics South Africa disaggregates by sex rather than gender. For the purposes of this brief, this data are read as though the two terms were used interchangeably.



**Graph 3: Employment by contract type, gender and race, 2019**



**Graph 4: Access to paid leave by employment contract type, 2019**



Source: Author, calculated from the labour market dynamics survey data downloaded from <http://www.statssa.gov.za/> in May 2021.

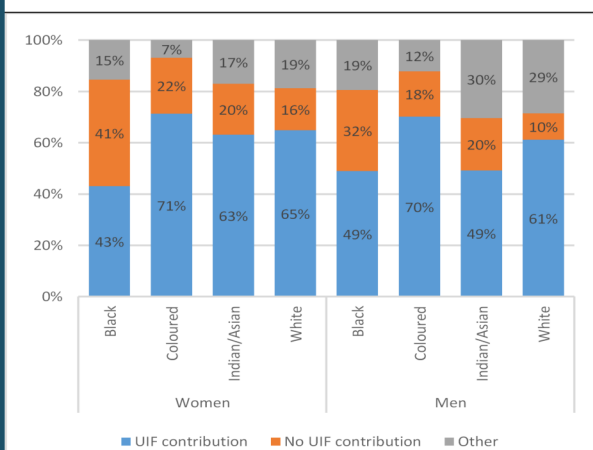
On its own, employment does not wholly eliminate vulnerability. Rather, there are certain protections provided by decent employment that go a long way to reducing vulnerability. This, for instance, includes access to written employment contracts, which provide legal protection for workers and make their work less precarious; access to paid leave, which is a legal requirement; and making contributions towards unemployment insurance and a pension or retirement annuity.

Unemployment insurance and pension fund contributions are important in that they are a form of financial resource that enables workers who have lost or retired from their jobs to continue sustaining their livelihoods. However, these benefits are only available to some workers, highlighting the need for decent jobs, and not just jobs. These benefits are also only available to those who have had formal jobs. Those not in formal employment generally lack such benefits, which leaves them more vulnerable because they have no financial resources, either from salaries, or from a pension and unemployment insurance.

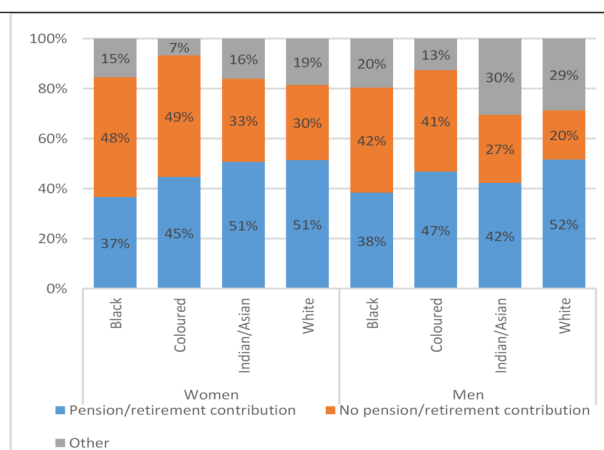
Graph 3 shows the proportion of those who are employed based on the type of employment contract they have. Graph 4 shows workers' access to paid leave based on the kind of employment contract they have, disaggregated by both gender and race. The data show that most employees have a written contract, although black women and black men are more likely than the other racial groups to have a verbal agreement rather than a written contract. The data also show that although workers in South Africa generally have access to paid leave, black women and black men are more likely than those of other racial groups to not have paid leave, regardless of whether they have a written contract or verbal agreement (see Graph 4).

Graph 5 and Graph 6 show the proportion of workers who make contributions towards unemployment insurance and towards a pension or retirement annuity. Black women in particular are least likely to contribute towards unemployment insurance (43% for black women compared to 63% for white women) and pension funds (37% for black women compared to 51% for white and Indian/Asian women).

**Graph 5: UIF contribution by gender and race, 2019**



**Graph 6: Pension/retirement annuity contribution by gender and race, 2019**



Source: Author, calculated from the labour market dynamics survey data downloaded from <http://www.statssa.gov.za/> in May 2021.

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## WHAT DOES A GENDER JUST TRANSITION LOOK LIKE?

Given the structural characteristics, the status quo will not change unless it is intentionally challenged and changed. Women's economic exclusion, lack of power and the resulting exclusion from decision-making will not change simply by moving to more sustainable production processes and using renewable energy. Rather, steps must be taken, and processes put in place to ensure that women are not left behind by the transition. The transition must therefore be gender just. Moreover, transition to a green economy should not be done in a way that ignores those who are currently unemployed (most of whom are women), and should address the structural problems that make women almost solely responsible for unpaid care work. As noted, women's increased representation among the employed requires changes in time-use patterns, which will only take place if there are changes in the distribution of care work. Strengthening and enforcing anti-discrimination legislation such as the Employment Equity Act, No 55 of 1998 and affirmative action policies such as Broad-Based Black Economic Empowerment are also necessary. For instance, the Employment Equity Act prohibits discrimination on the basis of family responsibility, and yet, women's exclusion from participation in the paid economy due to unpaid care work such as child and family care is as much a form of discrimination as it is the result of failure by the state to provide certain basic services that would enable women to participate in paid employment.

Although research to date has provided different results based on differing research designs, the general view is that access to affordable childcare produces positive outcomes for women's employment. For instance, Diaz and Rodriguez-Chamussy (2013: 8) find an "intimate relationship" between reliable and affordable non-parental care and women's labour force participation. Further, Martinez and Peticar (2017) note that the provision of afterschool programmes for school-age children increased women's labour force participation by 7%, and increased women's employment by 5% in Chile. In South Africa, this could be achieved by improving and expanding existing early childhood development programmes and improving on the existing subsidy provided to care centres for early childhood development programmes for children who fall within the means test. Further, companies could provide childcare services for their employees as part of the

employment benefits. For example, Nestl's Maternity Protection Policy notes that providing on-site childcare or assisting employees with referrals is good practice and, as at 2018, provided this benefit in South Africa, albeit only at its head office (BusinessTech, 2018). Other necessary changes include the provision of private breast-feeding facilities for instance, as has been done in the case of smoking facilities in public and private buildings.

Further, due to women's overrepresentation among the unemployed and among those performing unpaid care work, a gender just transition requires actionable plans to train women in technical fields in which they have historically been underrepresented. This means moving beyond only hiring women for administrative work within green industries, to the technical work that includes policy design as well as product design, manufacturing and maintenance, for instance.

As noted by Sustain Labour (2009), green jobs have been concentrated in technical fields in which women are underrepresented, necessitating training to ensure inclusivity. Using existing programmes, the state could incentivise businesses to train women in technical fields, hire those women, promote them and pay them equal wages. Moreover, the state must change the structure of its incentives to ensure equitable access for women. Such a change must address historical failure to create industrial and business capacity for women, which has sometimes resulted in women not getting access to funding, or failing to meet contractual obligations. This can be done through additional training programmes and through access to mentorship programmes.

However, beyond simply training women in new skills, there must be structural changes in the gender segmentation of science and technology industries and other technical fields. Gender segmentation in different sectors is not always the result of women's lack of skills or experience. Instead, social norms and stereotypes often mean that women pursue care-related sectors, and when women pursue Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields, they often face gender-based discrimination and lack of upward mobility within the work environment (Thornton, 2019). Women's entry into STEM fields should be encouraged during primary education. In addition, women who already have the skills and qualifications would benefit from state-set targets and quotas, with extensive monitoring to ensure implementation. Although quotas can be useful, success depends on state institutions getting the policy right. On their own, quotas in STEM fields

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*The transition to a green economy requires taking active measures to include women in the paid economy, as well as recognising the value of the unpaid care work they perform. Recognising unpaid care work could mean, for instance, the introduction of a basic income grant.*

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would not be enough to address the structural failures. Rather, men must also be encouraged (through quotas if necessary) to enter humanities-related industries. This would serve to rebalance the distribution of care work, including paid care work where women account for the highest share of those who are employed. It would also ensure that a diversity of experiences and voices are represented in any policy discussions.

In addition, the conceptualisation of employment in the just transition must not be only about green jobs, but should be clear on its inclusion of all jobs that are not directly dirty or extractive. These jobs include many of the jobs that exist at present, but which current framing of the green economy makes seem as though they would cease to exist. Any meaningful conversation on a just transition must map out how women's representation within these jobs, and within green jobs, will be improved to avoid recreating existing structural inequalities. The aim should be the creation of decent work that provides meaningful benefits and social protections for all workers, and particularly for women, to enable them to adapt to or mitigate the impact of climate change and related policy responses. However, the continued disjunction of government's green economy interventions, as seen in the South African Economic Reconstruction and Recovery Plan, raises concerns. Separating the green economy from the actual economy fragments the country's climate response from funding priorities and places the just transition on the back-end, thus increasing the possibility that resources to implement a gender just transition will be insufficient.

Framed differently, the economic reconstruction and recovery plan (which was created in response to the COVID-19 pandemic) could have provided a platform to pilot the gender just transition. This could have taken the form of increased public investment in basic services like childcare, while greatly pushing for more women to enter the labour force through the various projects to be implemented as part of the recovery plan. The recovery plan is particularly important because the gender just transition requires significant and consistent investment in underdeveloped areas across the country, such as townships and rural areas where women, most of whom are black and have low or no income, are likely to be located.

Last, women cannot be expected to construct a gender just transition when they lack power and resources. However, women cannot be excluded from

discussions and other just transition-related processes. The state must be tasked with the responsibility of driving the process, accompanied by extensive consultation with communities, women and women's groups, business, labour and other relevant stakeholders. Consultation must not be done on the basis of who has economic power, but must rather be done with the aim to understand how policy would impact communities, and what kind of resources those communities need to adapt. Similarly, women's role within the just transition would be clarifying what resources are necessary for transitioning, and holding the state accountable for the provision of those resources.

## CONCLUSION

Adapting to, or mitigating, climate change impacts and impacts from related policy responses requires resources that are largely gained through participation in formal employment and access to wealth. Women are underrepresented in the paid labour force and overrepresented in unpaid care work. This leaves them without the necessary resources for survival.

Thus, the transition to a green economy requires taking active measures to include women in the paid economy, as well as recognising the value of the unpaid care work they perform. Recognising unpaid care work could mean, for instance, the introduction of a basic income grant, as suggested. However, this does not imply that basic services such as childcare should not be provided as a means to reduce unpaid care work. Instead, these can go hand-in-hand.

In addition, the state must play a driving role in the just transition. This means addressing structural inequities in the way public funding is provided to organisations. These funds can also be used as an incentive for organisations to train and hire women. Beyond that, the transition must be accompanied by structural changes in the gender-segmentation of sectors, with quotas used when necessary to correct imbalances that serve to entrench inequality. Given South Africa's structural inequalities, the success of a gender just transition depends on the state, business, labour, communities and other stakeholders being included in the policy discussions on equal footing. If the conversation is controlled by those with power, those without any power will not benefit, and existing inequalities will be made worse. Discussions on a gender just transition must begin now.

*The success of a gender just transition depends on the state, business, labour, communities and other stakeholders being included in the policy discussions on equal footing. If the conversation is controlled by those with power, those without any power will not benefit, and existing inequalities will be made worse.*

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