



**HOW HAVE IFIS  
RESPONDED  
TO THE COVID-19  
PANDEMIC?**



# ITF

**THE INTERNATIONAL TRANSPORT WORKERS' FEDERATION (ITF) IS A DEMOCRATIC, AFFILIATE-LED FEDERATION OF TRANSPORT WORKERS' UNIONS RECOGNISED AS THE WORLD'S LEADING TRANSPORT AUTHORITY. WE FIGHT PASSIONATELY TO IMPROVE WORKING LIVES; CONNECTING TRADE UNIONS AND WORKERS' NETWORKS FROM 147 COUNTRIES TO SECURE RIGHTS, EQUALITY AND JUSTICE FOR THEIR MEMBERS. WE ARE THE VOICE OF THE ALMOST-20 MILLION WOMEN AND MEN WHO MOVE THE WORLD.**

Cover photo: Dominika Werdecka-Latarska, Poland,  
Painting Inspector

# HOW HAVE IFIS RESPONDED TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC?

International Financial Institutions (IFIs) have taken a prominent role in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. In March 2020 the World Bank Group announced a [\\$14 billion package of fast-track financing](#) to assist countries and companies respond to the crisis, scaled-up its lending commitments, and has made \$20 billion available for vaccine acquisition and distribution. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) offered emergency loans without the usual conditionality, cancelled loan repayments from low-income countries, and [loosened restrictions](#) on country borrowing limits.

Reflecting the 'Maximising Finance for Development' (MfD) agenda, the majority of the World Bank Group's fast-track financing is being channelled through its private sector arm, the IFC, which in turn is mostly being disbursed through financial intermediaries (FIs) such as private banks rather than directly invested by the IFC itself.

There is no doubt that governments and companies in developing countries need financial support to respond to the pandemic in the short-term and rebuild their economies once the crisis is contained. However, there is [widespread concern](#) that the current IFI response disproportionately favours the private sector over supporting public responses to the crisis, while much of the emergency IMF lending was provided with an understanding that countries would return to [austerity](#) in the medium-term. In the absence of adequate debt relief initiatives, including a refusal by the World Bank to join the IMF in cancelling repayments owed by low-income countries,

further IFI lending can have a limited impact and has been criticised for not providing enough in grants that do not have to be repaid. While IFIs have been supportive of fiscal stimulus and public investment, it remains unclear if the old IFI recipes have disappeared, or if just around the corner is more labour market deregulation, attacks on collective bargaining, suppression of minimum wages and public employment, austerity, and catering to a speculative and unregulated private financial sector.

Responding to these problems, the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF) and other Global Unions have issued a statement calling for IFIs to 'turn the page on the failed policies of austerity, deregulation, and market fundamentalism' and support a job rich recovery including debt cancellation for poor countries and investment in public services.

The full statement can be read here: [Support Recovery through Public Investment for Quality Jobs, Not More Harmful Austerity](#) (ITUC/Global unions. 2020)

The Global Unions have also produced four annual/Spring IFI meeting statements since the onset of the pandemic. In addition to the statement in October 2020, there have been statements in [April 2020](#), [April 2021](#) and [October 2021](#).

On the IMF, the ITUC released [Reforming the IMF for a resilient recovery](#) in March 2021.

# WOMEN WORKERS AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

*“Policies and public health efforts have not addressed the gendered impacts of disease outbreaks. The response to coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) appears no different. We are not aware of any gender analysis of the outbreak by global health institutions or governments in affected countries or in preparedness phases. Recognising the extent to which disease outbreaks affect women and men differently is a fundamental step to understanding the primary and secondary effects of a health emergency on different individuals and communities, and for creating effective, equitable policies and interventions.”*

**Clare Wenham et al, 2020, COVID-19: *The Gendered Impacts of the Outbreak*. The Lancet (p. 846)**

Past experience shows that women and women workers are disproportionately negatively affected by health crises such as pandemics and by austerity policies. This is because they are over-represented in frontline health and customer service work and are therefore more exposed to infection. They are also often more vulnerable due to their over-representation in the most precarious jobs and in the informal economy. Given their socially prescribed unequal care burden it is also women who tend to care for the sick during health crises, and fill care gaps when public services are cut, often sacrificing their ability to undertake paid work in doing so.

The impact of COVID-19 has been no different and women workers have been disproportionately hard hit by the pandemic and its economic fallout. Across the world women are losing jobs at a rate 1.8 times higher than their male counterparts, while levels of domestic violence have surged by an average of 20% in countries where women have had to stay at home due to COVID-19 related restrictions.<sup>1</sup>

In the transport industry, women are over-represented in transport sectors that have been severely hit, including the cruise and civil aviation sectors. Women also occupy the most precarious jobs in the informal transport industry where a lack of access to social protection means that they are faced with the impossible choice of working in unsafe conditions or losing their income entirely. Occupational gender-based segregation

across the transport industry means that women are concentrated in frontline customer-facing and cleaning jobs, which combined with the inadequate provision of personal protective equipment (PPE) has left them particularly exposed to infection.

Without concerted effort to address these disproportionate gendered impacts, the COVID-19 pandemic and its aftermath risk exacerbating pre-existing gender inequalities, reversing women's hard-won gains and setting back the fight for gender equality in the transport industry. This is why the ITF has issued a set of key demands to governments, employers and investors, including IFIs, calling for responses to COVID-19 pandemic to be gender-responsive. The demands include:

1. Women on all decision-making bodies
2. Income and social protection
3. Access to sanitation and appropriate PPE
4. Secure work
5. Care before profit
6. End violence and harassment against women
7. New technology to benefit women workers
8. Gender impact assessments
9. Gender-responsive economic stimulus

See ITF. 2020. [\*Women transport workers' rights and COVID-19\*](#)

<sup>1</sup> IFC (2020), **COVID-19 and Gender Equality: Six Actions for the Private Sector**

# SAFEGUARDS AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

## KEEPING TRACK OF COVID-19 RELATED PROJECTS

[World Bank Group's 'Operational Response to COVID-19 – Projects List'](#) and [interactive map](#)

The World Bank Group has published a list of projects that have been approved as part of its COVID-19 response as well as those which receive COVID-19 funding through the 'restructuring, redeployment, and reallocation of existing resources'. The list is complemented by an interactive map, both of which can be found online:

COVID-19 Projects list:

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/about/what-we-do/brief/world-bank-group-operational-response-covid-19-coronavirus-projects-list>

Interactive map:

<https://maps.worldbank.org/> (click 'Covid-19 response')

[The Bank Information Centre \(BIC\) World Bank COVID-19 Project Repository](#)

The BIC has created a database which tracks COVID-19 related World Bank projects:

<https://bankinformationcenter.org/en-us/update/how-is-bic-tracking-the-world-banks-covid-19-projects/>

As explored in depth in the ITF trade union guide on 'The Labour and Gender Related Safeguard Frameworks of International Financial Institutions (IFIs)', IFI safeguards set out a number of protections which apply to workers employed directly or indirectly by a borrower and – to a lesser extent - those engaged in a borrower's supply chain as well as to workers whose jobs are negatively impacted by IFI-financed projects. These safeguards offer a number of entry points for women workers to demand a more gender responsive approach from IFIs and their borrowers both during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. For example, the IFC requires that borrowers take into account 'specific threats to women' when designing measures to secure a safe and healthy workplace for workers.

The IFC has also published a (non-mandatory) [COVID-19 and Gender Equality](#) 'Guidance Note' to inform its borrowers 'about how to recover resiliently and inclusively from the effects of COVID-19', including the recommendation that companies 'retain female employees during and after the crisis'. The Guidance Note highlights the value of companies consulting with 'workers and their representatives' as a mechanism for avoiding unnecessary dismissals and layoffs resulting from the pandemic.

However, despite the formal existence of protective safeguard provisions and IFI issued guidance, there is concern amongst trade unions and other civil society organisations that IFI safeguards and due diligence procedures are being poorly implemented during the COVID-19 crisis as a result of rushed loan disbursements and limitations on conventional forms of stakeholder engagement due to social distancing requirements. The heavy use of financial intermediaries (FIs) by the IFC also poses [challenges for accountability](#), as there is often a lack of transparency about where funds disbursed by FIs actually end up, making it difficult for workers to know whether their employer has received IFC financing (and therefore safeguards apply) as well as for the implementation of safeguards in IFC-financed projects to be monitored more generally.

These accountability concerns, combined with unprecedented levels of IFI lending and the risk that the COVID-19 crisis and its aftermath will exacerbate gender inequality, means that now more than ever there is a compelling need for women workers and their trade unions to understand and strategically engage with IFI safeguards in order to protect the rights of women workers and hold employers and IFIs to account

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