

A review of the African region

B+15

Over the last 15 years since the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) was adopted, progress in African women's position has on the whole been regrettably slow, with a huge and persistent gap between commitments and actual action. The state of insecurity, the longstanding conflicts, combined with other factors like the food and energy crises and the global economic and financial crisis, are all working against the pace of progress. However, the creation of the gender-equality entity in the United Nations provides new hope, as it promises to work closely with African Governments and citizens to centralize the Beijing agenda.

To date fifty-one African countries have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), which is the international women's bill of rights, while Somalia and Sudan are still holding back their ratification.¹ During the period of 2000-2009, a number of legislative developments took place in the continent with the implementation of gender-sensitive laws and constitutional provisions in several African countries like Uganda and South Africa. There were judicial decisions that invoked the provisions of CEDAW at the national level in countries like Botswana for example. Many governments in Africa, including Uganda, Zambia, Tanzania, Nigeria and Ghana, developed national gender policies and action plans.²

The African Women's Rights Protocol³ came into force in 2005, two years after its adoption, which is a record achievement compared to other Protocols and human rights instruments adopted by the African Union (AU). The Protocol influenced modifications in laws in several countries and judicial rulings upheld the responsibility of the state as the primary duty bearers in the protection and fulfilment of women's rights. In 2008 a landmark judgment was delivered by a court in Zambia in favour of a school-age girl child who was defiled by her teacher. And there is enthusiasm behind the 2009 resolution by the AU summit to declare the decade for women in Africa from 2010-2020.

Gender equity: progress on paper, a standstill on the ground

Despite the advances in legislation geared towards gender equity and judicial process it is important to note that African women expressed their disappointment to governments in Africa for being very quick to sign onto human rights instruments and endorsing different policies at the international and regional levels but extremely slow in delivering on their commitments.

Women's NGOs in Africa met in November 2009 in The Gambia for the African regional conference on Beijing +15. Ms Norah Matovu Wing, Executive Director of The African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) said "The change achieved in the political, social, economic status and situation of African women cannot be denied. However the concern is that those enjoying these benefits remain a minority."⁴

The Africa NGO Shadow Report on the Beijing +15 found that "the many practical steps taken over the last five years are a drop in the ocean when assessed against the many promises made by African governments on the fundamental issue of achieving gender equality, equity and women's empowerment. In short, African leaders are falling far short of the expectations of African women."⁵

As for political participation, African countries have not yet achieved BPFA's minimum target of 30% participation in leadership and decision making positions. As of June 2009 the percentage of women in parliament in sub-Saharan Africa was 18.6% and less than 10% in Northern Africa.⁶

Maternal mortality rates in the region continue to be unacceptably high, quality health services are still lacking, and there are widespread issues with drug shortages and barriers to accessing medication, and family planning services as well as information. Challenges were experienced in the HIV/AIDS pandemic responses which resulted in serious gender discrimination and violations of women's rights, particularly inheritance rights.

Current care strategies for HIV/AIDS have failed to address or reduce the double burden that is shouldered by women caring for sick relatives and contributing to the household income. "The slow process of integrating family planning with HIV services in most countries continues to lead to preventable deaths of many women and loss of millions of dollars that could be saved if there was political will to address this gap."⁷

On one level, state policies already reflect some elements of "gender equality" frameworks but on the

whole, these stop short of fully addressing issues of women's empowerment and in particular, sexual and reproductive health and rights.

The global economic crisis and the effect on gender equality in Africa

The global economic and financial crisis reached Africa through various channels of transmission. The impacts of the crisis are expected to be felt in stock markets, banking sectors and in the reduction of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), while real sector impacts are to be experienced in shortfalls in remittances, trade, tourism and aid.⁸

Donor countries reviewed their priorities to focus more on bailing out their own financial institutions and leading economic giants through financial stimulus packages. The first people to lose jobs in the formal sector in Africa have been those at the lower levels, and the majority of these are women.

Typically, it is the survivalist sectors of the informal economy that grow in times of crises and it is in these spaces that women are predominantly located. Feminist economists have repeatedly noted that gendered impacts of the global crisis were raised under a political context that impinges upon the time burdens of women and forces women to absorb additional care burdens as market-based services or public services become less accessible. This context also includes higher unemployment rates for women and/or an increase in women's marginalization towards the informal sector, and potentially a worsening of working conditions.⁹

The coping strategies adopted by most African countries to respond to the global financial and economic crisis do not correspond with the needs of women who are already overburdened by the care economy.

As for the food crisis – which preceded the financial crisis – there is a recognition that it is a result of many years of neglect of the agricultural sector. Ms Zo Randriamaro from Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) points out that "as far as the African region is concerned, hunger

1 CEDAW, List of ratifications. < treaties.un.org/Pages/ViewDetails.aspx?src=TREATY&mtmsg_no=IV-8&chapter=4%E2%8C%A9=en >

2 Norah Matovu Winyi, "The Beijing Platform for Action: What has it delivered to African women?", Pambazuka Issue 458 (2009-11-18), < www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/60350 >

3 African Union, Full text of the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa (pdf), < www.africa-union.org/root/au/Documents/Treaties/Text/Protocol%20on%20the%20Rights%20of%20Women.pdf >

4 "African Women NGO Review Beijing +15", Foroyaa online, < www.foroyaa.gm/modules/news/article.php?storyid=3913 >

5 FEMNET, "Africa NGO Shadow Report on Beijing + 15", page 10. < www.femnet.or.ke/news.asp?ProgrammeID=1 >

6 International Parliamentary Union (IPU), fact sheet.

7 "Africa NGO Shadow Report on Beijing + 15", page 9.

8 C.G. Ackah et al (2009); Global Financial Crisis Discussion Series, Paper 5 (Ghana, Overseas Development Institute (ODI).

9 Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), "Re-imagining Feminist Politics and Strategies in the Global South", DAWN Development debates. < www.dawnnet.org/resources-news.php?id=92 >

LEARNING FROM THE SOUTH AFRICAN EXPERIENCE OF “VOLUNTARY” WORK AS PUBLIC SERVICE

Women of the world work longer hours, have less labour market participation, are much more involved in unpaid work and have lower incomes than men. South Africa is no exception, and many women from the lower classes are involved in the job of caring for people living with HIV / AIDS but receive no remuneration for this, which is misnamed ‘voluntary work’.

In connection with a meeting of specialists organised by ECLAC in Mexico DF on 23 and 24 July 2009, entitled “*Analysis of the economic and financial crisis from the gender perspective: understanding its impact on poverty and women’s work*”, the Greek economist Rania Antonopoulos explained a programme developed in South Africa for women in voluntary jobs.^{1*}

For many years that country has had unemployment rates of around 40%, and although there was great economic growth in the post-Apartheid period, the market did not succeed in improving the jobs situation. Among

* See the presentation by economist Rania Antonopoulos “*Lessons learned from South Africa’s Public Job Creation Programme (EPWP)*”. <www.eclac.org/mujer/noticias/paginas/5/36595/RaniaAntonopoulos.pdf>

some groups the unemployment rate is over 70%. Many people grow up in homes where nobody has had a job for 15 or 20 years.

Antonopoulos said, “A proposal was made and the government adapted it. The government became the employer of last resort, the creator of employment for people engaged in “voluntary” work, which strictly speaking was not voluntary at all, for extremely poor households affected by HIV / AIDS. It was not a brilliant idea, it was an obvious idea.”

This unpaid work was changed into a public service, skills improved, and this meant an improvement in the service, and as a consequence these people are included in society not just as consumers but also as producers.

The programme also created multiplying demand, and a good part of the cost of the programme was recouped. Antonopoulos explained, “It does not cost as much as we thought and it creates new jobs thanks to the snowball effect that has occurred with the increase in demand in the country.” The economist believes that in times of crisis what is needed more than ever are new state institutions geared to job security. ■

and famines have been around for a very long time and yet, no one called it a crisis.”¹⁰

The food crisis did not happen in a vacuum, but in a food system which involves power relations among many actors with different interests and varying political and economic power: smallholder farms and families; governments and global corporations, as well as global trade rules and financial institutions. “Women account for an average of 70% of food production in Africa, but all of these agricultural policy issues are happening at the expense of women’s rights.”¹¹ For instance, West Africa’s shea nut collectors, processors and traders are predominantly women and among the poorest in their communities.¹² The dramatic reduction in shea prices on the international market is being felt within West Africa. Price declines in Ghana are estimated at 50% to 75% and women have observed the absence of shea buying companies in their communities.¹³

10 Zo Randriamaro, “Food Crisis and Sovereignty in Sub-Saharan Africa”, DAWN. <www.dawnnet.org/uploads/documents/PAPER_YVONNE_Environmental%20Education%20and%20Gender%20Justice_PEAS.pdf>

11 “Food Crisis and Sovereignty in Sub-Saharan Africa”.

12 Shea butter is used in Africa as a cooking lard, and also as a water proofing wax for hairdressing and candle-making.

13 Dzodzi Tsikata, “The Global Financial Crisis and Women in West Africa: Developing Impacts and the Implications of Policy Responses”, Association for Women’s Rights in Development (AWID). Brief 6 of “The crisis’ impact on women’s rights”.

Women still remain largely invisible in the formal economy, and women’s unpaid labour continues to be unrecognized and increasing as they are forced to shoulder the social and economic impact of macroeconomic policies. Despite all the policies and the resources invested in the processes of change over the last 15 years the status of rural and urban poor women did not change in many African countries.¹⁴

In addition, international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) continue to prescribe cutbacks for government spending in essential social services like education and the provision of healthcare as a condition for accessing concessional loans during these difficult times. This is likely to impact women’s social development gains. Additionally, safety net programmes such as cash transfers, food for work, public works, health insurance and basic free education – although more needed than ever – are subject to additional cuts if the expected cuts in Official Development Assistance (ODA) occur.¹⁵

14 “The Global Financial Crisis and Women in West Africa: Developing Impacts and the Implications of Policy Responses”.

15 Norah Matovu Winyi, “The Beijing Platform for Action: What has it delivered to African women?”, *Pambazuka Issue 458* (2009-11-18), <www.pambazuka.org/en/category/features/60350>.

African finance ministers called for a moratorium on debt servicing and the removal of aid conditionalities that prevent innovative solutions to the crisis. “This is an important call because the International Financial Institutions and bilateral donors have traditionally used debt and aid to leverage unpopular policies in Africa. The policy space promised to Africans whilst Europe and America focus on the global financial crisis is rapidly disappearing. Governments in Ghana, Nigeria and Burkina Faso, amongst others, are pursuing policies and austerity measures to reduce state spending under the tutelage of a resurgent IMF as chief doctor to countries suffering from the impacts of the crisis. This is paradoxical, given that the discussions in capitals of the North are about stimulus plans and astronomical bail-outs of companies accompanied by measures to cushion suffering families”¹⁶ Despite this paradox women’s organizations in the region expressed renewed expectations in the newly created gender-equality entity in the United Nations and hope that this entity will work closely with governments and citizens of Africa, particularly women, to centralise the Beijing agenda for equality, peace and development.¹⁷ ■

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16 “The Global Financial Crisis and Women in West Africa: Developing Impacts and the Implications of Policy Responses”, page 14.

17 “The Beijing Platform for Action: What has it delivered to African women?”.