

Financial crisis hits all women

By Rosemary Okello

As the impact of the financial crisis continues to reverberate across the globe, delegates from North and South meeting in New York for the Beijing +15 review say that women are carrying a disproportionate burden of the costs.

A parallel meeting organised by Social Watch called "Eyes on Gender: regional perspectives on the impact of the financial crisis" revealed that across regions poverty and unemployment have increased among women. Yet, according to participants, government responses to the crisis tend to focus on male dominated sectors like the car industry and construction sector.

"Women have been ignored when it comes to issues dealing with economics and finances. Their views are never consulted and yet they are the ones who bear the brunt of the negative impact," said Emily Sikazwe, of Social Watch Zambia and Women for Change.

Giving an African perspective on how the financial crisis has affected women, Sikazwe said women in her village believe that the men created the mess and have to deal with it. However, she emphasised that women need to be part of the solution: "We want to be at the table, under the table and near the table. This time round the men will not fix the financial crisis without us," said Sikazwe. "The IMF and World Bank should not tell us what to do."

Cecilia Alemany from the Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) said that the economic and financial crisis has shown once again that "there is need for a cohesive response in dealing with the financial crisis which is gender focused since the devastating effect is the increase in poverty and inequality among women."

Alemany pointed out that although the crisis affects women in the North and



Financial crisis pinches the pockets of women in Zambia

Photo: Derrick Sinyala

South alike, the women in developing world have always lived under a financial crisis: "Maybe this time round women from the North can learn from the South on how to live in a financial crisis," she said.

Alemany noted that cross cutting issues include unemployment, access to food, increased in violence against women and the situation of migrant workers. Developing countries are also affected by declines in remittances from relatives living abroad.

A report by Social Watch titled: Beijing and Beyond; Putting gender economics at the forefront, 15 years later after the Fourth World Conference on Women indicates that reactions to the crisis have involved cutbacks in financing social services, such as health care, child care, social protection and education in many countries.

These cuts have contributed to increasing risk of feminisation of poverty. The report predicts that women will enter into the post crisis with a heavier burden of unpaid work in a family and more difficult access to decent jobs and social services.

The Social Watch report indicates that both national and international responses to the global crisis present gender-blind, "business as usual" approaches including a further deregulation and liberalisation of markets and trade as solutions to dilute the crisis.

Speaking at the Global NGO forum that preceded the Beijing +15 review, Executive Director of the Centre for Global Leadership Radhika Balakrishnan said it is "time for us to strategise about the underlying problems; someone has captured the state and we have to recapture the institutions of the state."

US evangelists blamed for Ugandan anti-gay law

By Deepa Bhookhun

The Ugandan government's anti-gay law, known locally as the "kill the gays" law, has been heavily influenced by right wing evangelicals in the United States, according to activists at the Beijing Plus 15 review.

Rev Kapaya Koama from Zambia recounted during a panel session on religion and sexual orientation what happened at a conference he attended in Uganda last March that eventually made way for the anti-gay law.

Right wing Christians from the US "told Ugandans that the gay movement will take over the world as it has already taken over the United States, the United Nations and Brazil where all non gays have had to flee fearing for their lives and that Brazil has now become the gay headquarters," he said.

"They told Ugandans that the gay movement has now decided to take over Uganda. A week after the conference, there was a call for government to pass a law to ban homosexuality. The conference was on the 17th of March and on the 22nd of April, they introduced the 'kill the gays law in Parliament', Koama added.

Ugandan MP David Bahati is the driving force behind the bill. Author of "The Family" Jeff Sharlet - also on this week's panel - met Bahati while researching his book.

"The Family" is the name of an American evangelical group founded in 1935 that believe that they have been chosen by God to spread a conservative message that includes an anti-gay discourse.

Sharlet says "The Family" is very influential in the United States and has privileged relationships with the US administration. Over the years, adds the author, the group has managed to

infiltrate other governments throughout the world, especially African ones and has convinced them to embrace their peculiar view of religion.

The writer explains that although Bahati admits to being close to "The Family", he denies that his friends pushed him to introduce the bill. "But that's the way 'The Family' works. Once their brainwashing is done, they don't need to ask for anything. And when I asked members of 'The Family' how they have managed to gain such influence in Africa, they say that the very fact that they're white and American helps; Africans welcome them and listen to them", claims Sharlet.

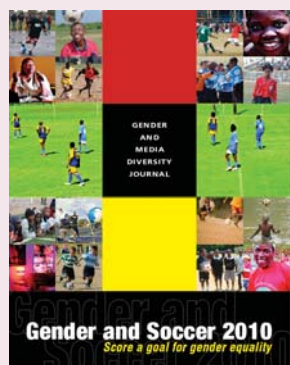
This law is being passed in Uganda despite the fact that the gay community there is very small, says Val Kalende, a lesbian and gay rights activist, who regularly endangers her own life by speaking up. She said that a group of five lawyers are currently working on a lawsuit that they intend on bring if the Ugandan government goes ahead with the bill.

Jodi Jacobson, journalist and consultant at the United Nations Foundation says she is troubled by the way "conservatives and evangelists have infiltrated" the government, the media and the laws. She charges that the Obama administration has not only failed to stop the infiltration but that it is getting worse.

Anthropologist Jennifer Horn said the West had exported this intolerance to homosexuality to Africa. "Africa doesn't have one culture but thousands of different cultures. Some believe in homosexuality and some don't. So contrary to what some people say, 'Africa hasn't imported homosexuality from the West; what Africa has imported is the intolerance to homosexuality'".

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UN chief backs reform plan

By Rosemary Okello

UN Secretary General Ban-Ki Moon yesterday pledged to lead by example in the struggle for gender equality by establishing a strong entity within the world body to champion women's rights. The promise to establish this body by September follows a four year campaign that has gained momentum during the Beijing +15 review.

Scores of women queued for up to three hours yesterday to get into the official commemoration of International Women's Day (IWD) to press home their Gender Equality Architecture Reform (GEAR) campaign that aims to get the seven disparate gender agencies and units within the UN consolidated into one strong body with a budget of \$1 billion annually.

They made it clear that this year's IWD theme - Equal rights, equal opportunity; Progress for All - will be lost if the UN fails to pass a resolution by the time of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) review meeting in September calling for the establishment of a UN agency for women.

Speaking at the event, Ban-Ki Moon said "It is my duty to make sure that gender equality and women's empowerment are fundamental to the very identity of the United Nations. That is why I have made women's empowerment a priority and we hope soon to have a dynamic entity for gender equality and women's empowerment within the United Nations system."

Amidst ululation from women clapping and waving GEAR fliers, the Secretary General informed the gathering that the

United Nations must lead the fight on gender quality by example and adopt a resolution on the new entity without delay.

When the women gave him a standing ovation, he said, "thank you very much for your support. I hope the Ambassadors who are present will have heard this strong support."

To show that it is not business as usual at the UN, he told the gathering that the since he took over as the Secretary General, there are more women in senior United Nations posts than at any time in the history of the organisation.

"Overall, the number of women in senior posts at the rank of Deputy Secretary General, Under Secretary and Assistant Secretary General has increased by 40% during the last three years," he said.

However, he cautioned that this is not enough and that he takes seriously the General

Assembly mandate for gender parity throughout the United Nations System.



Gear up, UN secretary general told!

Photo: Rosemary Okello