



Investing In People for Social and Economic Justice

WEEKEND READER

Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development

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The International Women's Day: Do Zimbabwean women have anything to celebrate in face of a national debt crisis?



International Women's Day

#EachforEqual

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Introduction

The gendered implications of the Zimbabwean debt crisis on the socio-economic wellbeing of women cannot be overemphasised. The Southern African country's ballooning external debt staggering at USD8 billion as at 30 September 2019 as presented in the 2020 National Budget is continuously constraining the government's effort in promoting gender equality and uplifting the socio-economic wellbeing of women. The cost of servicing the debt and the debt conditionalities is disproportionality borne by women when in actual sense the funds borrowed would have rarely spent in ways that advance women's rights. This is fuelled by the diversion of monetary resources from the provision of public services to servicing debt. It is women who go out of their way and fill the gap in providing services that could have been provided for by the government. It is against this background that the Zimbabwe Coalition on Debt and Development joins the rest of the world in commemorating the International Women's Day to highlight the plight of the Zimbabwean women in

face of a looming debt crisis and call for debt justice.

Women's rights guaranteed by law but not respected in practice.

Zimbabwe has made commitments and ratified several regional and international laws which call for the promotion of women's rights and gender equality. These include the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against women, the SADC Gender Protocol and the Beijing Platform for Action of 1995. The Constitution of Zimbabwe which is the supreme law of the land also provides for the rights of women and measures that can be taken to ensure that the socioeconomic wellbeing of women is improved. In addition to Chapter 4 which sets out the Bill of Rights, Section 80 (1) explicitly provides that every woman has full and equal dignity of the person with men and this includes equal opportunities in political, economic and social activities. This was also complimented by the formulation of policies which seek to foster gender equality for instance the National Gender Policy. Despite the existence of the legal frameworks protecting the rights of women, Zimbabwe's debt crisis is abrogating women's rights left, right and cen-

tre as they continue to be marginalised from and shunned from participating in economic governance processes by their gender roles.

Opportunity-Cost for debt repayment: Implications on women

The unsustainable debt continues diverting resources meant for public service delivery in Zimbabwe and this has increased the burden of women who are forced to carry unremunerated care tasks including looking for alternative sources of power and water in face of massive power cuts and acute water shortages. The deliberate cut of government public expenditure and diversion of public funds from public investment therefore threatens the realization of women's rights. Juxtaposing the amount of monetary resources towards debt servicing with government expenditure on social service delivery and fulfilling the rights of citizens and women in particular provides one with a vivid picture of how debt affects the socio-economic wellbeing of women. In the 2020 national budget, the government allocated ZWL\$4,9 billion towards loan repayment which is more than double resources allocated to the Ministry of Public Service, Labour and Social Welfare of ZWL\$2.4 billion. Equally the funds allocated for the loan repayment constitute 74% of the health budget. In the absence of the huge debt burden, the ZWL\$4.9 billion would transform the social services sector and women's burden of unremunerated care work can be reduced.

Funds allocated towards debt servicing could have gone a long way in resuscitating the ailing health sector which was allocated paltry 10% which way below the Abuja Declaration threshold of 15%. Consequently, sexual and reproductive health care has become highly unaffordable for the majority of poor women. The death of a pregnant woman at Parirenyatwa Hospital due to alleged negligence

late last year following the longstanding impasse between the government and medical practitioners is a case in point. The emergence of a midwife in Mbare, Harare who helped stranded women deliver in the midst of a strike by health practitioners brings to light the plight of Zimbabwean women in the context of a national debt crisis.

The impact of austerity measures on women

The austerity measures launched under the Transitional Stabilization Programme (TSP) in 2018 by the government with a deliberate cut in social spending and an increase in taxes for example the 2% tax and privatization of basic social services has seen women paying the highest price. According to a 2019 research on the Impact of Indebtedness on Human Rights in Zimbabwe conducted by the African Forum and Network on Debt and Development (AFRODAD) and ZIMCODD, the austerity programme bears resemblance to international financial institutions inspired reforms to bring fiscal balance for the government to raise funds for the repayment of some of the debt that Zimbabwe owes to international financial institutions. Banekas and Lumina (2019) have argued that the imposition of structural adjustment programs on debtor states is far from solving the complex problem of sovereign debt, in fact it exacerbates the debt, damages the state's economic sovereignty, injures the entrenched rights of peoples and worsens the borrower's economic situation. Austerity measures manifest through the worsening poor social service delivery where government is failing to provide for example basic clean and portable water for citizens and it is women who are hardest hit as they go out of their way and look for alternative sources of water to ensure that their families have enough water for domestic purposes, thus increasing the burden of unpaid

care work by women who lose productive time they would have spent engaging in paid work.

Conclusion

It is worrying to note that the disproportionate impact of debt servicing and conditionalities that comes with it is largely felt by citizens particularly women, when in actual sense the funds borrowed would have been rarely spent in ways that upholds human development and the rights of women in particular. It is evident from the above that the debt crisis remains at the core of some of the threats impacting the full realization and enjoyment of women's rights in Zimbabwe. Efforts towards the progressive realisation of women's rights and attainment of sustainable development should be coupled with the scrutinization of fiscal policies and national decisions with gender lenses with women's interests being at the centre. Without a sustainable debt management framework as proposed by ZIMCODD, the huge debt will continue to impact negatively on women's rights and the attainment of gender equality.

Recommendations

- Debt policies need to be evaluated and restructured to ensure that they serve the best interests of women's rights.

- All processes of borrowing should be anchored on accountability and transparency in consultation with all stakeholders specifically women rights organisations.

- Prior to borrowing, gender assessment impact should be carried out to measure the extent to which the use of monetary resource borrowed would have advanced the needs and interests of women especially marginalized groups.