

PRESS STATEMENT

8 March 2024



Statement on the commemoration of International Women's Day

As the world commemorates International Women's Day on the 8th of March under the theme: Inspire Inclusion, the Southern African People's Solidarity Network (SAPSN) celebrates the many women from the continent and specifically those in Southern Africa. SAPSN recognises the countless women entrepreneurs, farmers, and laborers, migrant workers, informal and cross border traders who continue to drive Southern Africa's economies at the household and community level. Their hard work and ingenuity are essential for progress. However, their potential is severely limited by the weight of unsustainable debt that most governments in the region are facing. This is amidst the harsh austerity measures that have significant impact on women and girls among other vulnerable groups caused by different intersectionality.

The Network believes that debt distress disproportionately impacts women's access to credit, investment, and essential services. This hinders their ability to start and grow businesses, invest in their families' well-being, and contribute fully to the economy while worsening the care burden. To date a number of countries in Southern Africa have been classified by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank as being in debt distress with Malawi, Mozambique, Zambia and Zimbabwe being most affected. Mozambique continues to grapple with its debt burden with its debt to GDP ratio hovering over the 90%.¹ As of September 2022, Malawi's total public debt stood at approximately K7.3 trillion (Malawian Kwacha), which represents an increase from K6.38 trillion in March 2022.² The debt situation continues to weak service delivery and undermine government expenditure. Zambia's appetite for borrowing has further weakened social protection programs, that are critical in strengthening women's rights. Over the past five years, the public and publicly guaranteed debt has steadily increased, rising from USD 13.12 billion (50.9% of GDP) in 2017 to USD 26.16 billion (125.3% of GDP) in 2021.³ Therefore, managing debt sustainability remains a critical concern if the Southern African region is to effectively inspire women in economic governance.

Addressing the debt burden from international lenders specifically requires a multi-pronged approach by governments, focusing on negotiation, domestic policy changes, and international cooperation. The Network therefore calls upon leaders in the region to:

Negotiate with Lenders on Debt Restructuring: Governments in the region need to work with international lenders to restructure existing debt. This could involve extending repayment periods, lowering interest rates, or offering debt-for-equity swaps, where debt is exchanged for ownership shares in state-owned assets.

Focus on Gender-Sensitive Clauses that Feminize the Debt Narrative: During negotiations with lenders, there is need to push for inclusion of clauses that specifically address the impact of debt on women. This could involve allocating a portion of debt relief funds towards social programs that benefit women, such as differentiated tax systems to benefit women led enterprises, education, healthcare, and childcare.

1. <https://www.fitchratings.com/research/sovereigns/mozambique-07-11-2022>

2. <https://mwnation.com/imf-positive-on-malawi-debt-status/>

3. [https://www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/MGD/INFFSept2022/Zambia Debt - Maryann Lumba Nkunika-Lwandamina En.pdf](https://www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/MGD/INFFSept2022/Zambia%20Debt%20-%20Maryann%20Lumba%20Nkunika-Lwandamina%20En.pdf)

Promote Debt Transparency: This involves advocating for greater transparency in international lending practices; including the disclosure of terms and conditions of loans, how the borrowed funds are used, and the expected impact on vulnerable populations, like women and children.

Promote Women's Economic Participation: Implementing policies that encourage women's participation in the formal economy is key in lifting the burdens of debt. The drive towards this should include measures such as reducing gender pay gaps, increasing access to childcare, and promoting flexible work arrangements.

Supporting Women-Led Businesses: Offer tax breaks, grants, and preferential procurement policies for women-owned businesses. This provides them with a financial advantage and allows them to compete more effectively in the market.

Focus on Gender Equality in International Development: A push for the inclusion of gender equality goals in international development frameworks is essential for the liberation of women in Southern Africa. This ensures that international aid programs prioritize empowering women and mitigating the negative impacts of debt on their well-being.

By undertaking a combination of these key approaches, SAPSN believes that governments can tackle the debt burden issues and create a more equitable economic environment that fosters the inclusion of women's welfare and long-term economic development. To quote Gloria Steinem, "The story of women's struggle for equality belongs to no single feminist nor to any one organization but to the collective efforts of all who care about human rights.

WOMANDLA!! WOMAN POWER!!

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SAPSN is a membership-based network of national movements and people driven initiatives for social and economic justice in the SADC region.