

The World Financial Meltdown: What Now for African Women?

Monday 3 August 2009, by [ERVIN Hilary](#), [MURITHI Caroline Muthoni](#) (Date first published: June 2009).

As the global economic crisis takes its toll on Africa's fiscal revenues and household incomes, Hilary N. Ervin & Caroline Muthoni Muriithi fear that the continent's achievements in human rights and development may be reversed, worsening the condition of women already struggling against an 'entrenched patriarchy'. Despite embracing commitments to gender equity on paper, Ervin and Muriithi say many countries lack the funding and resources to implement policies and legislation. Programmes focused on women, largely funded by multi-lateral donors, are likely to decline as aid dries up the authors warn, while at a domestic level many households will prioritise the education and welfare of sons over daughters, with 'long-term consequences for overall development'. Calling for the ratification and implementation of the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, Ervin and Muriithi suggest that 'investment in women's livelihoods, particularly in African economies,' should be 'a central focus of governments' economic recovery policies'.

Today the global community faces widespread economic turmoil, which has implications of considerable scope for the inclusion and promotion of human rights in general and women's rights in particular. In 2007-2008, many African countries enjoyed relative economic growth and increased investor confidence like never before. Sound economic policies were an important factor, as was the favourable external environment and increased external support in the form of debt relief and higher inflows. [1] However at the end of 2007, the world experienced an increase in commodity prices like fuel and food, followed by the global financial crisis. This crisis has seen commodity prices drop with negative effects on export earnings and the external current account, fiscal revenues, and household incomes. [2] Some African countries have seen a fall in equity markets, capital flow reversals, and pressure from exchange markets. [3] Remittances to Africa are also projected to decline by 4.4 per cent [4], and foreign aid, if the precedent set by the Scandinavian financial crisis of the 1990's [5] is any measure, will likely decline as well.

It is feared that the current crisis will result in reversal in achievements made under the Millennium Developments Goals (MDGs) and human rights in Africa. The slowdown in growth will likely deepen the deprivation of the poor and of the large number of people clustered just above the poverty line, who are particularly vulnerable to economic volatility and temporary slowdowns. [6] This is particularly true for African women who for a long time have been the face of poverty in Africa. In Africa many women are already struggling daily against an entrenched patriarchy, enforced through formal and informal social, cultural, political and economic practices. They often face rampant sexual and psychological abuse, which is further exacerbated by the numerous conflicts on the continent. For example mass rape of women and girls in the Congo and Darfur, which subsequently contributes to the increase in levels of HIV/AIDS in Africa and further endangering the health of women on the continent. Women continue to bear the burden of feeding the continent. They constitute 70-80 per cent of the agricultural labour force, yet they have limited access and control over land and the produce they grow; no access to credit and agricultural inputs and are never involved in decision making processes. Women continue to face various forms of harmful cultural

practices such as female genital mutilation, early marriage, and other forms of slavery and bondage that leave them vulnerable to abuse and health complications.

Women rights advocates across the continent have fought long and hard to ensure that their governments adopt and implement laws and policies that seek to remedy the injustices faced by women. As a result funding for women-centred programming varies considerably across Africa, but with limited resources being invested in the implementation of women's rights. Though on paper many countries have embraced broad commitments to gender equity and female empowerment, including the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA) [PDF]; the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women ('The Protocol') and commitments under the Millennium Development Goals, funding for the financial and human resources necessary to bring laws and policies into action has thus far been negligible [7]. With the current crisis, this negligible funding may result in no funding at all.

The current financial crisis has amounted to a decline in household income, meaning the reallocation of scarce resources towards boys' welfare and education. In times of economic crisis, the rate of child mortality among girls has been shown to increase, while the percentage of girls enrolled in primary education rapidly declines. [8] This could also mean a drop in the gains made on girl child education, with parents choosing to invest in education of boys and removing girls from school due to high cost of living and education. The crisis also has far-reaching effects on women's ability to assert and demand their individual rights within the current economic context, especially when they are forced to rely on their husband and male relatives for money. Women are mostly likely to have jobs in the informal sectors of the economy with virtually no job security. They are also the first to get laid off as they are often less skilled than their male counterparts. [9] This will increase the vulnerability of women and make them susceptible to human rights violations such as trafficking, prostitution and domestic violence to mention a few. When basic survival is a daily concern, the overall rights agenda takes a back seat, and with many African nations struggling to feed their people social welfare programmes become a mere luxury. The International Labour Organization recently released a report on the Global Employment Trends for Women, which reconfirms the reality of gender inequality in the global labour market in terms of access, freedom of occupational choice, participation rates and levels of unemployment. [10] Couple this with contractions in the market, reduction in remittances and a decrease in micro-lending and you have dire consequences for women, a reversal of the progress made towards gender equity over the past decade and long-term consequences for overall development.

With industrialised (i.e. donor) nations reallocating funds towards domestic sources and economic stimulus packages, many programmes dependent on foreign aid in Africa and other developing areas will no longer be able to operate or will face significant programme reductions. A decrease in funding for women specific programming will result in further marginalisation of their rights and self-efficacy. As we are aware, many women based initiatives in Africa are funded through multilateral aid agencies and country foreign aid programmes from wealthy donors. The inclusion of women-centred programmes and social funding in many national budgets of African countries is negligible and as such, a large percentage of women who are currently benefiting from externally funded projects will no longer be able to access services as donor governments continue cutting aid in favour of investment at home.

This is why full ratification and implementation of the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa is so vital to both the empowerment and status of African women as well as economic recovery across the continent. The protocol does not only spell out the rights of women but clearly guides state parties on their obligations in ensuring that the rights provided are adequately implemented. Article 26 (2) calls on state parties not only to adopt measures stated in the protocol but also to ensure that it provides budgetary and other resources for the full and effective implementation of the protocol.

The protocol is bold in providing for a number of human rights for women such as: A call for the elimination of Female Genital Mutilation, the rights of widows; the rights of women to property and inheritance; calling on states to invest in social programmes for women; the right to food security and housing; a right to sustainable development; the prevention of early marriage for girls; and sexual and reproductive health rights among others.

For example, the fact that the Kenyan government has yet to ratify the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa is indicative of the culture of male dominance that dictates many social and cultural practices in the nation. In Kenya reproductive health is not a government priority and provision of services are extremely limited with respect to family planning and maternal health. In a nation where 1 in every 39 [11] women is at risk of maternal mortality during her lifetime and an estimated 30-50 per cent [12] of those deaths are attributable to unsafe abortions and resulting complications, a reduction in external programme funding translates to an even higher mortality rate. Beyond direct funding for health services, a reduction of aid targeted towards community programmes and women's initiatives that aim to educate women on their reproductive and family planning options will result in an increase in number of unwanted pregnancies, abortions and ultimately mortality rates among the population, not to mention other continuous violations of women's rights. This is just but one example of how fluctuations in the market will, can and do affect the implementation and realisation of women's rights in any context. Unfortunately, for women in Africa the battle to level the playing field is still being fought. It is clear that many African nations did not invest resources to fund social welfare programmes prior to the global crisis and the impacts felt locally further complicate respective government's financial capacities now.

WAY FORWARD

Sound policy choices now, which adequately account for women, will have both short-term and long-term positive impacts on development and economic sustainability – for example the inclusion of women in national budgets and all investment policies. This again necessitates the ratification and implementation of the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa.

Though there are rapidly evolving and increasing challenges facing the global community, the current upheaval in the economy does offer a unique opportunity for the insertion of a women's rights and equality agenda. History demonstrates [13] that investment in women's economic security and their place within the workforce helped pull the United States out of the Great Depression and aided the stabilisation of the Latin American economies during the regional economic crisis of the 1990s. However, a focus on the massive wealth of resource available on the continent and responsible adjustments that focus on the human development and specifically women's socio-economic empowerment is important during this period of economic turmoil.

Addressing gender specific issues of the economic crisis at the 53rd United Nations session Sakiko Fukuda-Parr points out that 'global governance needs to provide for safeguards against such downside risks that threaten the security of human lives'. Investment in women's livelihoods, particularly in African economies, should be a central focus of governments' economic recovery policies. In any society the status of women has an effect on the overall level of national development and level of freedom enjoyed by the people as a whole. Accounting for women's rights and development of inclusive policies and practices now will help both to stabilise many economies in Africa feeling the heat of the current global crisis and to reposition African countries on the world's stage.

P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] See, *Impact of the Global Financial Crisis on Sub-Saharan Africa*, p. 3 , 2009 (International Monetary Fund).

[2] Id.

[3] Id., p.4.

[4] Ratha, Dilip. Remittances Expected to Fall by 5-8% in 2009. World Bank.
peoplemove.worldbank.org/en/content/remittances-expected-to-fall-by-5-to-8-percent-in-2009.

[5] Rodman, David. History Says Financial Crisis Will Suppress Aid. Global Development: Views from the Center.
blogs.cgdev.org/globaldevelopment/2...

[6] Shimelse Ali, Impact of Financial Crisis on Africa, International Economic Bulletin, April 2009, viewed at _ www.carnegieendowment.org/publicati...

[7] See, African Center for Gender and Social Development. Financing Gender Equity and the Empowerment of Women in Africa. United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). Transcript Published December 2007.

[8] Buvinic, Mayra. *Emerging Issue: The Gender Perspective of the Financial Crisis*. Interactive Expert Panel. March 2009.

[9] Id., p.3.

[10] International Labor Organization. Global Employment Trends for Women. International Labor Organization. March 2009.

[11] UNICEF. Kenya Statistics. _ www.unicef.org/infobycountry/kenya_...

[12] Mulama, Joyce. *Break the Silence on Abortion*. Health Kenya. IPS. August 30th, 2009.

[13] Commission on the Status of Women. Governments Must Focus on Women as Economic Agents During Global Financial Crisis if Their Disproportionate Suffering is to be Averted. United Nations Economic and Social Council. May 5th, 2009. _ www.un.org/News/Press/docs/2009/wom...