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Feminist Just Recovery

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Feminist Just Recovery

Background to Africa's Challenges

Africa is the second largest continent in the world, covering 30,370,000 square kilometres, and hosting an estimated population of 1,308,064,000. The continent is home to the longest river in the whole world, the Nile which stretches from Sudan to the Mediterranean Sea.¹ Together with Asia, Africa's forecast indicates a high positive population growth in the following decades. However, in terms of economic development, Africa is still lagging behind. The challenge that Africa is facing currently is to counter the model that is advanced by international financial institutions that the global system of development brings universal economic growth.² In this research proposal we look at the impact of this global development model on peasants and workers in Africa and consider an alternative development model. Africa continues to supply the world economy with more than half of the diamonds, platinum, cobalt and over a third of strategic minerals such as vanadium, yet the continent is still mired in extreme poverty.

How are we to explain the persistence of poverty in Africa, given its abundance of natural resources? Despite the extraction and export of natural resources several countries in the dominant model have little to show in economic and human development terms. African countries are trapped in this perverse state of affairs which is often referred to as the "resource curse" or the "paradox of plenty".³ For some analysts, the negative impact of this extractive model can be addressed through proper natural resource governance, conservative economic policies, increasing transparency and the participation of civil in an oversight role, as well as more social investment in communities where extraction is taking place. Environmental degradation is viewed as the inevitable cost of development. In this research project, we will examine this approach for its analytical and historical validity.

In most African countries, after some economic reforms and years of austerity, the promise of economic growth and prosperity has yet to be materialize. Not only does the economy stagnate, it is going through veritable underdevelopment with a triple crisis in water, energy and food (The WEF NEXUS) which has been worsened by years of drought due to climate change. As the global demand for raw materials continues to increase, Africa and the Global South generally, is going through a process of re-primarisation which has resulted in:

- loss of land for the majority of peasants and working class populations
- loss of food sovereignty which is associated with the large-scale export of grain as more land has been taken over for biofuel production, commercial livestock feed production and mineral extraction.

Dispossession of land and territories has created a new form of dependency and domination amongst the rural populations. Coupled with climate induced disasters cyclones, flash floods and droughts, the situation in Africa has resulted in socio-environmental conflicts linked to disputes over land and common

¹ <https://www.thoughtco.com/continents-ranked-by-size-and-population-4163436>

² Bush, R. (2008) Africa and Globalisation, Leeds African Studies Bulletin70 (2008), pp47-52

³ https://www.tni.org/files/download/beyonddevelopment_extractivism.pdf

goods. Women, as food producers, caregivers and as part of the working-class continue to carry this burden of climate-induced disasters, and at the moment, the burden of the social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. Conflicts over land and other natural resources have intensified in Africa due to climate change and women are often at the centre of such conflict because most of African women's livelihoods are tied to the land. The socio-environmental conflicts currently taking place in Africa have ignited thought-provoking political and theoretical problems, and created divisions among some African critical thinkers.

African Women and the 'Twin Crisis'

Africa and the whole world is devastated by the climate crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic. Both the pandemic and climate change impacts women differently and the impacts of both are felt much more severely by women in the Global South, particularly women in Africa. These crises have increased the already existing gender disparities in access to resources that can enable women to bounce back after a crisis. Across Africa, 40% of the COVID-19 cases (ranging from 35% in some of the countries, and South Africa leading with 55%) are women⁴ and the World Health Organisation stated how the lockdown regulations heavily impacted on African women's access to health care services. In countries such as Zimbabwe, women failed to have access to adequate sexual and reproductive health services as health facilities were bloated with COVID-19 cases such that less women were able to access services such as having caesarean births resulting in a drop of 42% between the period of January and April 2020 when comparing to the same period in 2019⁵.

Most countries in Africa do not have social safety nets, instead, women end up carrying the load that governments are unable to carry. This is due to the gender roles that are prescribed to women. Women's household burden increased drastically during the COVID-19 pandemic as they carry the additional burden of child-care, child education and other household duties that have to be undertaken when families are forced to stay at home in order to contain the spread of the virus. Women had to subsidize a lot of the work that the governments must do such as the provision of social services, as the governments put in regulations that are gender blind. In regions such as Africa where the majority of women work in the informal and less formal sectors, the governments imposed COVID-19 regulations were again blind to the need for having gender lenses to the regulations. The definitions of what constitutes essential services leave out women as food producers, caregivers and informal workers. Therefore, women's work was destroyed in ways that impoverished the women as their informal workplaces were destroyed in order to allow society to 'physically distance' from each other. Most women's stalls were destroyed and labelled 'COVID-19 super-spreaders' as the people's markets where women can afford to occupy for business are often quite crowded because their products and goods are quite lowly priced as

⁴ https://reliefweb.int/report/world/who-concerned-over-covid-19-impact-women-girls-africa?gclid=CjwKCAjwn8SLBhAyEiwAHNTJbdfWtNyZCT77n2Xy06P6oL1aVztWOawhQamnuhBXdEoVaRDdU_gPFxoCw5QQAvD_BwE

⁵ Ibid4

most women do not factor in their labour costs when they calculate the selling prices of their goods. This makes their products affordable to the majority of the poor people.

Impact of the COVID-19 Regulations on Women's Livelihoods

However, governments were blind to the fact that most women's incomes are tied to the informal sector, and closed down the women's markets without any rescue packages that are dedicated to the revival and rehabilitation of women's livelihoods and small businesses. The increase in carework was accompanied by increases in violence against women at the domestic level. This violence, which appears to be largely inter-personal violence should not be separated from the systemic injustice that women face. This systemic injustice constitutes structural violence against women which is quite a challenge to address as it results in harm but it does not have a clearly identifiable perpetrator as it is hidden in laws, cultures and beliefs which normalize the injustice, making it appear standard and natural. That women carry the household and carework burden has been normalized and naturalized by society yet there is nothing natural and normal about gender roles which take away women's productive time to unpaid social reproductive work. The climate-induced disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic increase women's burden in ways that impoverish women further. The structural forms of violence during the pandemic originate from political and economic deprivation of women as a social class. The general formula behind structural violence is the inequality and the uneven distribution of power in society that is created from the unequal power relations that exist.

The relegation of issues pertaining to, particularly within the cultural and legal institutions, has proved to be harmful to women and this harm became quite visible during the pandemic which came in the midst of a climate crisis.

COVID-19 made Visible Gender Inequalities

Covid-19 is a global shock wave that hit society suddenly whilst at the same time opening up and making visible the gross inequalities that the Feminist movements have always exposed, struggling against, building Feminist narratives around, as well as disseminating the same information and knowledge about structural violence and systemic injustices for several decades. It is known that the short-term and expected long-term social and economic impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic are uneven and disproportionately distributed. This is mainly due to the glaring inequalities which governments have neglected to take note of or seek to understand their extent and gravity as well as the critical need for taking some radical action to address the injustices in order to save women from unfair and unequal treatment.

The Personal is Political

The resemblances of what happened and what continues to happen during this COVID-19 pandemic and the Feminist discourses over the past years are not coincidental, as the artificial divide between interpersonal violence which takes place within the private sphere or the family institution, and the structural violence which is perpetuated within the public sphere and is

largely invisible has been challenged and deconstructed. The violence that continues to intensify within the family institutions is a manifestation of the systemic injustices that are perfected in laws and cultures that women continue to experience.

The restrictions within the private sphere have kept back women in subordinate and subjugated positions, deprived them of their bodily autonomy, diminished their life chances, leaving them exposed to all manifestations of violence and oppression without any legal or societal recourse because both the laws and the dominant thinking is patriarchal. The climate crisis and COVID-19 brought to the open that the family is not a safe haven as often society is made to believe but is an arena of power contestations and the intra-household gender relations which are actually unequal power relations that are informed by patriarchal norms that are cemented by the existing legal frameworks and reproduced by the social and legal institutions.

Towards a Feminist Just Recovery

A COVID-19 recovery plan should take into consideration the unequal power relations that exist in society and put in place mechanisms to address them so that women do not continue to carry the unjust burden of the devastating impacts of the pandemic. The patriarchal legacy always comes into full play when there is a pandemic or a crisis such as the climate change-induced disasters and the COVID-19 pandemic as women's vulnerabilities, and household and carework burden increases exponentially within a system that does not protect women, and guarantee their rights. A fair and just Feminist Recovery plan should be comprehensive and offer a shift from rationalizing patriarchy. A just Feminist recovery should centre the needs of women and other vulnerable members of society, ensuring that their needs are met in ways that close the gender gap.

As previously mentioned that the climate-induced disasters that Africa as a continent continues to face have increased the vulnerabilities of women and the COVID-19 pandemic has added another layer of vulnerabilities, therefore a Feminist just recovery should take on board the continent's vulnerabilities to the climate crisis. The COVID-19 pandemic should not be treated in isolation from the other disasters that are taking place within the region but the recovery plans should acknowledge and seek to address the climate crisis and the impending debt crisis which disproportionately affect women. Women often have to carry the burden of systemic failures, particularly when governments fail to provide adequate social services. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic when the health facilities were congested, women ended up taking care of the people that the health system could not absorb. Women nursed the sick and fragile members of society without due recognition and appreciation from institutions of government, and even the social institutions. Women's labour and contributions to society are unappreciated, undervalued and taken for granted. If the recovery plan does not recognize the contributions that women are making to the continuation of life in society and does not seek to redistribute the burden, there is the likelihood that the gender gap will widen instead of closing. For example, women's livelihoods were destroyed as a result of the lockdown measures and the majority of

women do not have the resources to rebuild their livelihoods. If the rescue packages that the governments are putting in place fail to cater for the less formal and informal operations that are run by women, then women will be pushed further into the periphery of peripheries. The just recovery plan should not reproduce the existing gender inequalities. In other words, the recovery plan should not go back to what is currently considered normal because the 'normal' is hinged on the exploitation of women's labour and subjugation of women's bodies. Structural violence is normalised and therefore, this 'normal' is the origin of the crisis. Society should roll back and work towards the achievement of justice - climate justice, gender justice, environmental and economic justice in ways that support the construction and strengthening of women's right to self-determination and bodily autonomy.

The Feminist Demands

The following are some of what should be included in a Feminist Just recovery plan that has to be adopted by governments to ensure that the recovery plans do not increase the already existing gender disparities:

Rescue packages - should be made readily available and accessible to women for the revival of their livelihoods. Access to these funds should be done in ways that are user friendly and presented in a format and language that women can be able to understand.

Recognition of the informal sector/women's economies – the recovery plans should acknowledge and recognise the informal sector and the women's markets as legitimate workplaces. If the need arises for the informal sector operations to be registered, the processes should be less bureaucratic, inexpensive and not restrictive for the women living on the margins of society.

Value of women's labour – women's contributions to society through their unpaid carework and household work should be recognised and given value. Women's unpaid work within, for example, the health services, provision of water and fuel for cooking and heating, educating children and looking after the elderly members of society should be valued, recognised and fairly compensated.

Redistribution of carework – women should be freed from part of the carework and other reproductive work, and that work should be redistributed to other members of society in ways that are just and equitable. This should allow women to also participate in productive work.

Gender-just climate responses – governments should recognise and appreciate that women are disproportionately affected by climate change, therefore the reconstruction after climate induced disasters such as droughts and floods which have become more frequent and more intense, should centre women's needs and aspirations. Disaster responses should restore women's livelihoods and lives in ways that are informed by principles of justice and protection of women's human rights.

Dismantle Patriarchy – Recovery plans should move away from being male-centric by way of assuming that women and men have the same needs and that these needs can be addressed by the same framework. Society has internalised patriarchy as it is perfected in the laws, policies, culture, belief system and all areas of life, such that in order for change to be realised, there should be deliberate efforts to centre women's needs.