

African Women Worst Affected by Global Economic Crisis

Kudzai Makombe interviews MWILA CHIGAGA, ILO Regional Senior Gender Specialist

ADDIS ABABA, May 6 (IPS) - The global financial crisis is on everyone's lips. With first hand reports of job losses, house foreclosures and citizens living on credit card debt, the impact of the crisis on the individual worker in the developed world is clear. In Africa, there have been threats of closures and retrenchments in the Zambian copper mines and Botswana's diamond mines, amongst others. But the impact on the individual citizen and African women in particular, given the existing gender inequalities, has not been well documented.

Kudzai Makombe spoke to Mwila Chigaga, the regional senior gender specialist at the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) African headquarters in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia about the ILO's perspective of the financial crisis' affect on Africa's labour sector and women in particular and some of the policy responses that African governments should consider to lessen the impact of the crisis on their citizens.

IPS: How does the crisis affect Africa differently from the industrialised North?

Mwila Chigaga: I have to begin by saying the picture is not yet fully unfolded because this crisis is taking on a life of its own. When we look at Africa we have to go back to the situation that existed before the crisis. Everyone knows that in Africa we did have a deep economic crisis already and we are grappling with issues of economic growth, poverty, HIV and AIDS and gender inequality and discrimination. So all these have an impact on how the crisis unfolds.

In Africa, the formal sector is very, very small. The informal sector on the other hand is huge. When we talk about the geography of gender inequality in Africa, it is important to point out that it is not uniform. We have northern Africa where there are very few women participating in the labour market - whether formal or informal - before the crisis. Then we have West Africa where we have a huge number of women participating in the informal sector of the labour market. But you will find that in West Africa, the numbers of men who are in the informal sector are also much larger than the numbers of men in this sector in southern Africa. All these have a bearing on how we see the impact of the financial crisis.

IPS: What are some of the policy responses that African governments should be making to cushion the impact of the crisis on both men and women?

MC: The biggest challenge is that most African governments don't have the fiscus. We just don't have the sort of reserves, resources to invest in the sort of stimulus packages for example like the developed countries are doing. But if we divide these policy responses into short-term and long term, we might be able to get somewhere.

In the short term we need to target the impact of the financial crisis at the household, at the individual level. If people don't have a job, people need to be given some sort of impact. I'm looking at a situation where governments consider some sort of social protection. Some form of cash transfers. These don't necessarily have to be in cash. For example, we know that the majority of women are in the agricultural sector. Governments could therefore consider putting in place some sort of affirmative action programme so that women get access to subsidised farm inputs like seed and fertiliser so that we have continuity in terms of food production because in Africa, once this economic crisis is coupled with the food crisis, the impact will be devastating.

IPS: Given that, as you mentioned, Africa was already undergoing an economic crisis, how can we tell whether the impact we are experiencing now is the result of that crisis or the current global financial crisis?

MC: A lot of people are saying because Africa is less integrated in the global financial markets, we should have more cushioning. But if you look at the political economy of Africa, we have little foreign direct investment - but it is improving - we are dependent on ODA (overseas direct investment) and we are commodity-exporting economies. So you find that the interplay between this means we are naturally going to be affected. But at the same time we don't have institutionalised social protection. We don't have unemployment benefits, we don't have health insurance. So when the breadwinner loses an income there is no resort because they are the last resort.

IPS: If no action is taken in Africa, what are the immediate and long-term effects that we can expect?

MC: Everyone is talking about achievement of the Millennium Development Goal targets. We are obviously going to see difficulties in implementation. My worry is that if you look at Africa, we have not historically gender mainstreamed. We have not prioritised gender equality issues and we have not taken into account the triple roles of women - their productive, reproductive and caregiving roles. One of the impacts of the crisis will be at the individual family household level and you find that a lot of women are outside the net. Government is not able to capture them. This is going to have a telling effect at household level in terms of children malnutrition, children dropping out of school, and these are going to be the worst manifestations of the crisis in Africa.

IPS: You raised affirmative action for women in the agriculture sector as a key policy response. Why agriculture and why women?

MC: We need to look at where we can score quick wins, quick harvests, where we can create jobs in Africa. Agriculture is the sector where we can create jobs. Up to now, if we remove the developed economies, about 70-80 percent of women are in the agricultural sector. In the short term, if we want to preserve jobs and we want to create jobs, we need to go where the women are and to work with them in their comfort zone where they are already working.

IPS: How is the global financial crisis likely to increase the incidence of gender-based violence?

MC: It is devastating when a male household breadwinner loses his work. There are feelings of hopelessness and our patriarchy system says a man is supposed to be the breadwinner. The tendency is to take out the frustration on the partner.

If you look at the way we live in society, women are very adaptable. They will find ways of making money. In desperate times, women have a coping mechanism due to our caregiving role so we are equipped for that. Men do not have that mechanism so we will begin to see that frustration coming out and manifesting itself in terms of violence in the home. (END/2009)