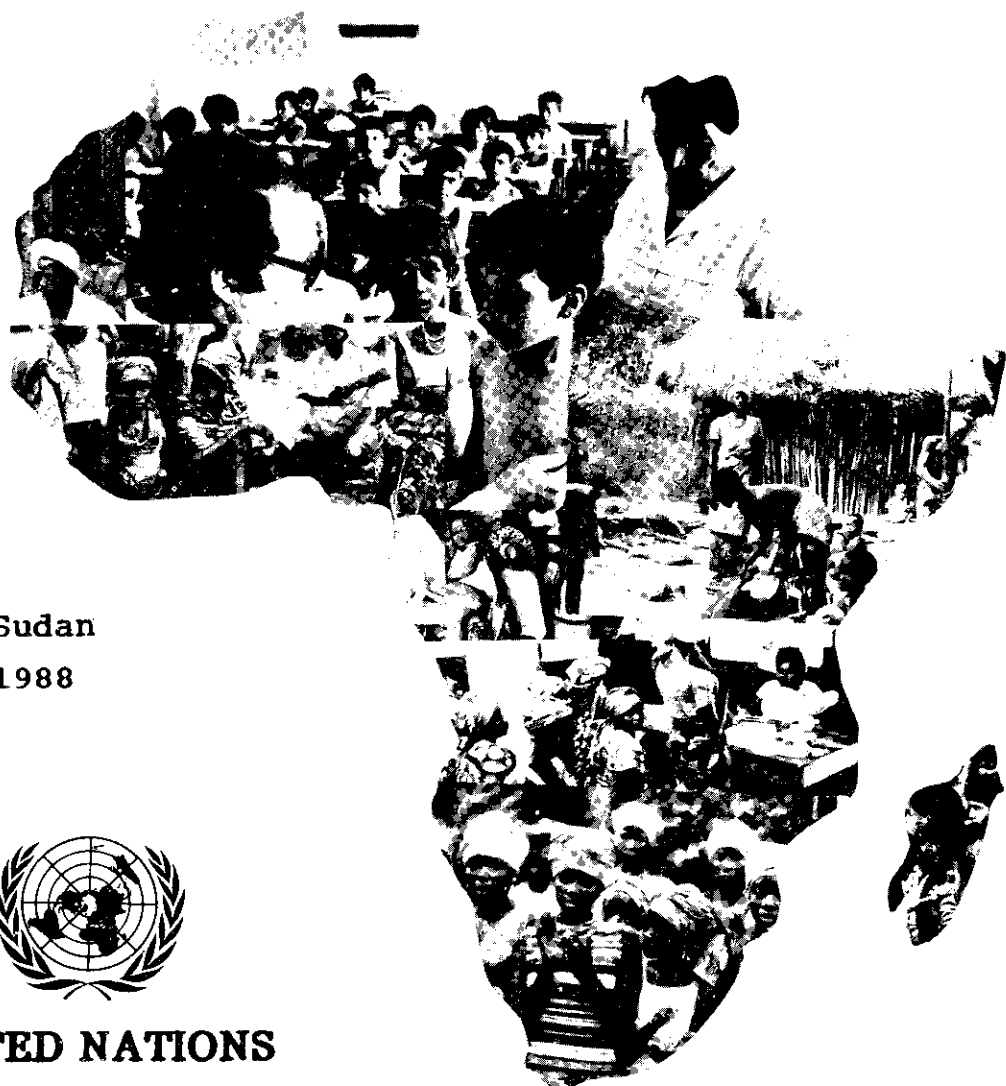


INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE HUMAN DIMENSION OF AFRICA'S ECONOMIC RECOVERY AND DEVELOPMENT

THE IMPACT OF THE ECONOMIC CRISIS ON
WOMEN WORKERS IN AFRICA

by

International Labour Organisation



Khartoum, Sudan

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A. OVERVIEW OF THE SITUATION OF AFRICAN WOMEN WORKERS

1. Women in Africa have always played an important role in the production of goods and services. The nature and significance of their participation in economic activity have, however, undergone major qualitative and quantitative changes during the last decades. According to the latest ILO estimates and projections, nearly 75 million of Africa's 279 million women were registered as economically active in 1985. This number represented nearly 27 per cent of the continent's total female population and 35 per cent of the total economically active population. The proportion of the female labour force in 1980 was as follows: 46.6 per cent in industry; 40.3 per cent in agriculture; 30.5 per cent in the services sector. In comparison with 1970, there was a slight decrease in agriculture and a slight increase in the other two sectors. ^{1/}

(a) Women in agriculture

2. Taking the continent as a whole, the proportion of the labour force in agriculture is higher in the case of women than that of men. This applies to all the countries of West Africa (except Ghana, Burkina Faso and Togo), of East Africa (except Reunion) and of Central Africa (except Angola and Equatorial Guinea), as well as to three countries in southern Africa (Botswana, Lesotho and Swaziland). In North Africa, the low proportion of women working in agriculture is due to the underestimation of the number of women occupied as family workers in agricultural activities.

3. The proportion of women working on their own account varies greatly from country to country, from a negligible percentage to the majority. In some countries the majority of self-employed women are in the agricultural sector as is the case for men; in others, the majority of active women are recorded as being in "unpaid family work". The proportion of the female labour force in the latter category is greater than that of the male labour force everywhere. Unpaid family workers are mainly found labouring on farms.

4. Recent developments have resulted, however, in making women's agricultural work more and more difficult to accomplish. Changes in crop patterns, deforestation, desertification and population pressures are limiting women's access to land. While modern technology often enables African men to cultivate larger amounts of land, the workload of women usually increases as a consequence. They continue to weed the land, to harvest and to carry water without the benefits of technological innovations.

5. Consideration of these points could result in major changes in planning for agricultural production if the objective of food self-sufficiency is to be reached in the not too distant future. There is still, for example, insufficient information on the real extent and the exact nature of women's involvement in food production. Statistical data often exclude various aspects of women's agricultural labour and fail to provide concrete information about the tasks performed by them. This situation represents a formidable obstacle to the adjustment of related development planning. Another barrier is the low social status of women, which results in the devaluation of labour performed by them and leads to the assignment of inadequate development resources to women's sphere of activity, in spite of the fact that their labour is vital for the community.

(b) Women as industrial workers

6. The proportion of women workers in the industrial and service sectors has risen slightly in recent years. There are, however, enormous differences between countries within the region and in some the proportion of active women in industry is higher than the proportion of active men, while in others less than 2 per cent of active women are employed in industry.

Women find jobs in industries such as food processing and packaging, tobacco manufacturing, and garment making, partly because of their alleged agility and manual dexterity. However, employment is often on a precarious basis (daily paid, temporary and seasonal work), and there is a tendency to prefer women workers who are mainly illiterate, unskilled and non-unionized. These industries in most cases provide lowly paid insecure jobs which many women are forced to accept in order to obtain cash income to maintain themselves and their dependants.

8. Technological and scientific progress has already had a strong impact on employment patterns and affects education and training systems in existing African national institutions. Serious questions have arisen in terms of how best to ensure that workers can take advantage of up-to-date scientific knowledge and technological advances and, at the same time, to protect their employment from the negative effects of these developments.

(c) Women in the services sector

9. While in industrialized countries the services sector is clearly dominated by women, in Africa the great movement of workers in general, and women in particular, into the services sector has just begun.

10. The number of women working in offices and commerce varies from country to country. In developing countries, secretaries and teachers fall under occupational categories still carried out by both men and women. There is, however, a trend for these occupations to become more feminized. This is true of secondary-level teachers in Africa, where the number of women occupying such posts rose from 25 to 33 per cent between 1975 and 1980.^{2/} Community, social and health services in many countries show a high concentration of women since welfare services are considered to be a female sphere of activity. But even in these occupations women hold jobs in the lower echelons, while the higher echelons are almost exclusively occupied by men. This is particularly true of the health sector where women are usually employed as nurses, etc., but not as hospital managers, surgeons, technicians or researchers. More often than not clearly perceivable occupational segregation between women and men is usually to the disadvantage of women.

(d) Women in the informal sector

11. Although insufficient information is available, it is estimated that in some African cities 50-60 per cent of the labour force may be found in this sector, the majority of whom are women.^{3/} Informal labour is widespread

in both urban and rural areas and extends to all economic sectors. Its real impact on development is not yet fully understood and the importance of informal labour for women's income opportunities is not adequately accounted for. It is clear that it represents both opportunities and dangers for workers. Much more work needs to be devoted to the establishment of an adequate data base on women and men in the informal sector including types of work performed, incomes, legal coverage, social security, work conditions, links with the formal sector, possibilities for the introduction of improved technologies, training and the formation of co-operatives and trade unions in order to foster the development of appropriate and effective policy measures, to improve employment opportunities and conditions for women in the informal sector.

B. WOMEN'S ACCESS TO VOCATIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

12. In spite of the fact that women's participation in economic activity and the income derived from it is essential for Africa's development, women's access to vocational education and training remains limited. Socialization processes, insufficient and often inaccessible educational and training facilities, mothers' need for their daughters' household or agricultural labour and high school drop-out rates are among the contributing factors.

13. In most cases, formal sector employment has not increased, which means increasing unemployment for school-leavers. Indeed in many countries the number of civil servants is being cut back and at the same time development expenditures and private investment are being curtailed, leading to drastic decreases in labour demand. At a time when the demand for jobs is increasing as the numbers of school leavers rise and ruralurban migration continues, the urban employment market is actually shrinking. Furthermore, there is widespread evidence of inequality between the sexes in the modern sector of urban employment in which higher levels of schooling and training are required, for girls continue to have less access than boys to schooling at every level especially the higher grades. Moreover, they drop out of school more frequently, often because of the financial situation of the family.

14. One of the major obstacles to the achievement of equal access of women to vocational, technical and managerial training is the prevailing assumption that programmes of assistance directed to the population in general do reach men and women on an equal basis. On the contrary, such programmes often exclude the participation of women by virtue of not planning for their inclusion. To further aggravate the problem of unequal access, most vocational training for women is not linked to national manpower planning and in fact takes place outside of mainstream training programmes.

15. Available evidence indicates that there is a general tendency to concentrate on home, family and traditional female fields in the provision of non-formal education and training programmes for young women. There may be no legal obstacles to the access of girls and young women to vocational and technical opportunities such as exist to prepare them for the job market, but in practice a number of discrepancies exist in the distribution of

opportunities between girls and boys. Moreover, the so-called "female subjects" in which the girls predominate offer very limited economic possibilities and they are generally peripheral to the main development process. The segregation of training is often mirrored by the provision of separate training facilities for boys and girls. Even in some of the training institutions which are in theory co-educational, separate courses for boys and girls still exist. The options for girls are also restricted by the inadequate preparation they receive in the formal school system, so that their access to the so-called "male trades" in non-formal education programmes and in the labour market becomes very limited from the very beginning. A typical division of training is that boys have access to courses in carpentry, masonry and blacksmithing and girls to home economics, which offers limited employment opportunities. Girls' access to and interest in technical subjects may be very limited.

C. WOMEN UNDER APARTHEID

16. Black women workers in South Africa form the lowest echelon of the apartheid system. The particular viciousness of the oppression and discrimination they experience stems from the enforcement of more than 2,000 race laws. The South African Government has denationalized and deported hundreds of blacks, and limited their right to reside and work in urban areas. Over 57 per cent of black women, many of whom are sole breadwinners with children, are relegated to the Bantustans, where jobs are scarce, low paid and devoid of social benefits. The only jobs open to them are on white farms, often only seasonally, on construction sites and, occasionally, in the border industries. Some women, driven by poverty and starvation, defy the laws and go to the cities where survival is still possible. There, they are subject to pass raids, eviction and arrest under the influx control system. In 1983 more than 50,000 Black women were arrested under the pass laws. The numerous requirements to obtain permission to live and work in urban areas are impossible for most Black women to meet.

17. Over 3 million people, or approximately 25 per cent, are now estimated to be unemployed in South Africa, with Blacks, women foremost, by far the largest proportion. Available data are incomplete because hundreds of underemployed or unemployed women fail to register with the unemployment office for fear or deportation to the homelands. Black women dominate the poverty group. The economic crisis and increase in rents, food and transportation have exacerbated their plight. Racial discrimination affects their economic position by restricting not only their access to the urban areas, but also to education and training.

18. Wage-seeking Black women in South Africa have little choice but to take on menial jobs as unskilled or semi-skilled workers in the domestic or agricultural sectors. Black women work on farms for extremely low wages, or merely in exchange for a small patch of land to cultivate. Farmers prefer to hire women because they can pay them the least and exploit their children as free labour. Although there has been an increase of Black women working in industry, their number is still small. Many women employed in this sector

work in the border industry near or inside the Bantustans. These industries are exempt from wage agreements that apply in the rest of South Africa. The participation rate of women in industry differs considerably according to the enforced division and stratification of racial groups. Employment in the commercial sector has also increased, but Black women occupy only the most menial positions.

19. Domestic workers, among the most exploited groups, suffer from isolation, low wages and lack of unionization. They are not permitted to have their husbands or children stay with them. They take care of their employer's children while their own suffer from malnutrition and lack of attention in the homelands. The number of homeland Africans falling below the minimum living level has soared to close to 9 million. The territory of Lebowa alone reports that half of its 600,000 children are malnourished due not to drought, but to apartheid, relocation, unemployment and dispossession of land. The number of working hours is unspecified. Domestic workers have no annual increment, no annual holiday, no social security, no contract, no sickness benefits or dependants' allowances.^{4/}

D. THE IMPACT OF THE CRISIS ON WOMEN

20. Women are often portrayed among the first victims of economic crisis and the negative impact of the crisis in Africa on the condition of women is obvious. Two other aspects which are less well recognized are that the socio-economic condition of women contributes to the crisis, and that women represent an important potential for economic recovery and development.

21. The economic and social contribution of women is not marginal to Africa's development. African women perform on average two-thirds of agricultural labour and in certain countries their contribution may reach 90 per cent. An everincreasing number of women enter service and industrial occupations and more women than men earn their living by informal sector activities.

22. Women's income from formal or informal employment or self-employment, as well as their income-substituting activities such as subsistence farming or fuel collection, represent an economic necessity in most households. It is recognized that the poorer the family, the more important woman's income becomes. The economic crisis on the one hand has further accentuated the need for women's income, and has made it more difficult on the other. The rapid increase in male and female unemployment and the overall degradation of the already low living standards increase the family's dependence on the economic contribution of women. Because of their declining purchasing power, women have to work harder to grow food or to collect fuel, and because of this increasing workload they have less time to engage in generating cash income for the family.

23. As a result of the traditional division of responsibilities between women and men, women's loss of income and increased workload has disastrous consequences for the family. Since men and women have differential income expenditures, household consumption patterns reflect the proportional contribution of men and women to total expenditure and not simply the absolute level of pooled income. Since women's income is spent on the satisfaction of basic needs such as food, the loss of women's income directly threatens the physical well-being of the family. The same is true for women's increased workload. When rural women have to spend a disproportionately high percentage of their time on fuel and water collection, they have less time to grow, prepare and preserve food, and nutritional levels tend to decline.

24. The economic crisis has diminished employment opportunities for both sexes but especially for women. The resulting impoverishment of women and of those households which depend largely or exclusively on their income has further increased social inequities, reduced the purchasing power of a large number of households, augmented women's workload and contributed to their further marginalization. It is now increasingly recognized that the impoverishment of large segments of society retards development and that increased equity contributes to the acceleration of economic growth.

25. It can therefore be said that women's low productivity in economic activity, the insufficient attention of development planning to women's sphere of activity, the further marginalization and impoverishment of women and in most cases the accelerated growth of the population contribute to the economic crisis.

E. WOMEN: AN IMPORTANT POTENTIAL FOR ECONOMIC RECOVERY AND DEVELOPMENT

26. The important role of women in food production is a particularly crucial factor in finding a solution to the crisis. Many African countries use a large part of their foreign exchange to import basic food items because, in spite of the importance attached to food self-sufficiency, national food deficits are often increasing. The efforts made to solve the problems are frequently inadequate because certain key aspects of the food crisis have received inadequate consideration.

27. Two-thirds of Africa's agricultural labour is accomplished by women. If more agricultural development efforts were concentrated on those who actually work the land, the situation could be improved. The first step is therefore to understand the importance of women in food production and to recognize that development efforts do not have the same impact on women and men. Moreover, the negative effect of certain developments on women may counterbalance the positive impact on men. Therefore, development policies and programmes have to be targeted to the specific groups they want to reach. Concerning food production, much of the agricultural development effort has to be targeted to women.

28. Women need first of all equal access to land. The solution to the food crisis therefore requires structural and policy changes enabling women to have access to the most important means of food production: land. Women also need training, technologies, credit and access to markets. If food security is to be achieved, all obstacles have to be removed which hinder women from attaining these. All adjustment policies have to be re-examined in order to make sure that they do not further diminish women's possibilities to produce and preserve food. Even if women were to have access to all the above, but due to overwork could not make use of these opportunities, Africa's food production would suffer. This means that increased development resources should be devoted to women's spheres of activity, e.g., provision of water or fuel, and that women's income-earning possibilities should be considerably improved through a variety of measures. The question could be raised as to how all this could be accomplished at a time when resources are scarce. Yet economic recovery requires certain investments and the success of these investments will depend on whether or not the right priorities have been chosen.

29. In order to foster the full integration of women in Africa's economic and social development, efforts should be made to promote the effective application of those international labour conventions and recommendations which aim at creating a social environment conducive to economic development, and in particular the implementation of the principles contained in ILO conventions, such as No. 111: Discrimination (Employment and Occupation), 1958; No. 100: Equal Remuneration, 1951; No. 156: Workers with Family Responsibilities, 1981; and No. 103: Maternity Protection (Revised), 1952; and those contained in Recommendation No. 150: Human Resources Development, 1975.

30. Regarding technical co-operation, projects are often designed and implemented without the participation of women. Consequently, their condition may not only remain unchanged, but even deteriorate. Serious efforts are required to change the status quo and to promote the full participation of women in development both as agents and beneficiaries.

31. The Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies, adopted in 1985, made concrete recommendations as to which policy and programme measures are needed to promote women's self-reliance and full integration in the development effort. The resolution on equal opportunities and equal treatment for men and women in employment, adopted by the seventy-first session of the International Labour Conference in 1985, outlines a series of measures to be taken at the national and international levels with a view to ameliorating the condition of working

women (see annex I)*. Both documents advocate a pattern of development promoting just and equitable growth on the basis of justice and equality in international economic relations so as to bring about a significant improvement in the status of women while at the same time enhancing their effective contribution to development and peace. The implementation of the recommendations contained in this resolution would certainly contribute to Africa's socio-economic development. ILO, for its part, has undertaken a variety of activities in favour of working women. As regards the years to come, ILO has developed a "Plan of Action on Equality of Opportunity and Treatment of Men and Women in Employment" which will form the basis for its activities with a view to implementing the recommendations of the Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies and those of the ILO resolution (see annex II)*.

* Submitted under separate cover

Footnotes

1/ ILO, Economically active population estimates and projections, 1950-2025, vol. V, third edition (Geneva), 1986.

2/ ILO, Equal opportunities and equal treatment for men and women in employment, Report VII, International Labour Conference, seventy-first session, Geneva 1985, p.14.

3/ Kathleen Newland, Women, men and the division of labour (Worldwatch Paper 37), May 1980, p.14.

4/ Brigalia Bam, "Black women under apartheid, in Women at Work, 2/1985 (Geneva, ILO), pp. 27-28.