

WOMEN ARE MORE VULNERABLE TO HIGH COST OF BASIC COMMODITIES, SAYS JCTR

Zambia joined the world in celebrating the centenary of International Women's Day on March 8th 2011 under the theme, 'equal access to education, training and science and technology: Pathway to decent work for women'. As highlighted by the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) in its' article to commemorate the event, women continue to face barriers in various socio-economic issues.

Looking specifically at two of the various variables in the theme, education and employment, impressive progress has been made on girls' access to primary education. Of the 97% Net Enrolment Ratio (NER) as recorded in the 2008 Millennium Development Goal Progress Report for Zambia, the ratio of girls to boys in primary school improved from 0.9 in 1990 to 0.97 in 2006. However, during this same period, a decline in the ratio was noted in secondary school from 0.92 to 0.73. This disproportionate access to secondary education was partly attributed to limited household income adversely affecting the female's secondary school completion rate.

Gender discrepancies are greater when it comes to employment and decision making positions for women. According to the Sixth National Development Plan (SNDP) to be implemented over a 5 year period (2011 to 2015), only 21% of the women are in formal employment. "Generally, women in Zambia work in informal arrangements and casual employment, which are likely to be low-paying and insecure as they are outside the regulatory powers of the Government", says Ms. Miniva Chibuye, Social Conditions Programme Manager at JCTR. By 2015, the Government expects to increase this figure to 30% of the entire labour force, which is still low. This might be one of the reasons for the low participation of women in decision making positions in the public sector, currently at 16%.

The effects of low income levels are worsened by high prices of basic commodities. Due to insecure incomes, female headed households, especially the 'already poor' in urban areas, suffer a larger drop in welfare than male headed households.

The cost of living as measured by the JCTR's *Basic Needs Basket (BNB)* in February 2011 for an average family of six was K2,982,350. This showed a reduction of K36,750 from K3,019,100 in January 2011. The downward adjustment was influenced by reduced average prices in basic food items. Major reductions were observed in the cost of Kapenta and Fish. Other reductions were observed in mealie-meal, beans, eggs, vegetables and tomato prices. Specifically, mealie meal reduced by K900 from K51,700 to K50,800. However, dairy products such as meat and milk increased in cost. Other minor increases were recorded in cooking oil and onion. The cost of bread, sugar, salt and tea leaves remained the same. Therefore, the nominal cost of basic food commodities for an average family of six in Lusaka reduced from K956,700 in January to K919,950 in February. However, the cost of essential non-food items such as electricity, charcoal and water was constant.

Despite the observed reduction in some basic needs, the cost of living is still high and unaffordable for many households, especially those that are female headed. Furthermore, with the increase in the cost of fuel, the cost of basic commodities featured on the *BNB* is expected to rise proportionately. The March *BNB* will therefore provide an indication of the impact of the rise in the cost of fuel. Furthermore, this *BNB* will be more indicative of the changes in living conditions arising from the preliminary Central Statistics Office (CSO) survey.

According to JCTR, female headed households already vulnerable to poverty will be hardest hit if the cost of basic commodities remains high. JCTR therefore hopes that this year's theme will be effectively implemented by the Government in order to lift women and subsequently most households out of poverty.

Undoubtedly, gender discrepancies currently experienced in secondary school participation and access to decent jobs must be responded to. Specifically, women must be encouraged to participate more in higher education, science and technology training. Coupled with this, commensurate investment in industries to absorb these skills should be made if women's equal access to full employment and decent work is to be realised.

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