**Maat for Peace’s Response to Questionnaire on Women’s and Girls’ Human Security in the Context of Poverty and Inequality**

**Introduction:**

Due to poverty and deeply entrenched inequalities, women and girls in South Africa suffer on multiple fronts and face persistent risks to their human security. From missing out on job opportunities with decent pay and benefits to missing out on attending school and receiving a good education, South African women remain trapped in the poverty cycle. The following report discusses the different risks and barriers women and girls living in poverty face as well as policies and practices that perpetuate these risks followed by several recommendations.

**Risk of sexual violence:**

As in several other countries around the world, there is an obvious link between economically vulnerable women and gender-based violence. In South Africa, economic insecurity is both a root cause and a driving force behind gender-based violence, which disproportionately affects women. Women in South Africa are more likely to be unemployed than men, which makes them more prone to abuse because they are unable to live independent social and economic lives free from the constraints and dominance of their male partners. According to statistics from the year 2020, the prevalence of physical and sexual violence declined with quintiles of wealth, i.e., the higher the wealth and/or income, the less likely gender-based violence is to occur. Six Eastern Cape cities made up the majority of the top 10 list of sexual offences capitals in the first quarter of 2022. According to reports, poverty played a major role in the acts of violence that occurred in these six towns since they are located in communities that have long experienced oppression, poverty, and where they are poor or no services.

**A barrier to socio-economic rights of women and girls:**

One of the conditions that poses as a barrier to the economic and social rights of women and girls is working in the informal labor market. Of all working women in South Africa, around 12% work as domestic workers who are considered a vulnerable sub-group. It is exceedingly challenging to ensure that the sector adheres to regulatory frameworks because this form of job takes place in people's homes with very little monitoring, leaving these women with little to no safety nets. Access to maternity protection benefits, particularly cash payments during maternity leave, is difficult for domestic employees. Women experience wage loss during their maternity leave due to flaws in the law and employers' refusal to follow applicable regulations. Being denied this right has a negative impact on the health of the female employee and her newborn because when women are not given some form of income replacement, such as cash payments, while on maternity leave, they are unable to utilise the available leave period fully and frequently return to work earlier than is advised. This is due to a weak alignment within the government as the National Department of Employment and Labor which is in charge of labor law, including maternity protection regulations, and the National Department of Health, which carries out health policy, some of which is relevant for maternity protection, do not have clear communication channels or coordination between one another.

**Ongoing phenomena or threats and their impacts on women and girls:**

*Covid-19 Pandemic*

Girls and young women who drop out of school are more likely to have low earning potential, long-term unemployment, and a worse socioeconomic level, which has serious long-term effects. Dropping out also exposes them to high-risk traditions such as forced or early marriage. Prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, females from low-income households who attended underfunded schools with subpar academic achievement were more likely to drop out. In March 2020, the government imposed a strict lockdown during which all schools and universities were closed as the pandemic finally reached South Africa. The move to online education worsened already-existing disparities in which poorer communities frequently struggle to access quick, dependable, and reasonably priced internet. More than half of the young women who had already begun their education were unable to finish it. Girls from the poorest homes with a lack of mobile service or dependable internet connection and those who faced food insecurity were more likely to have their schooling disrupted. Limited access to the internet was also due to the high prices of data which many could not afford.

When it came to employment, women also faced several hardships as a result of the pandemic. The position of women in South Africa was already concerning before the crisis. Women were more likely to be in lower-paid jobs or unemployed than men, while the poverty rate for women was 17 percentage points higher than it is for men. The pandemic caused more negative effects to industries that depended on female labor which led to women earning less than their male counterparts. As a result, the crisis led to female-headed households being poorer and more vulnerable than male-headed households. The losses in income formed a surge in the poverty index by one percentage point more for women than for men, resulting in a poverty rate which is greater for houses where females are the breadwinner by 50 to 55% compared to that of male headed households.

*Climate Change*

In South Africa, where women make up 60% to 80% of the agricultural work force, climate change has had a disproportionately negative impact. Women are most affected by the effects of the climate crisis due to their differential labor duties, economic marginalization, and political exclusion. This problem of unequal representation and authority also occurs when it comes to drafting climate policy that will address their concerns. While all people who live or work in South Africa are affected by the effects of climate change, Black women and women who are poor or have unstable employment are especially at danger of bearing the brunt of the problem. Gendered social norms and inequalities have resulted in women holding positions that are easily affected by climate change such as water collection and smallholder farming. These are the types of jobs that directly impacted by droughts and other natural disasters. For these women, failed harvests hinder their right to food as they limit the availability of fresh, nutritious food for their themselves and their families and also impede on their economic rights as they limit income for expenses such as children’s school uniforms and educational supplies.

**Example of a practice that differentiates on the basis of gender:**

When it comes to owning property, women struggle to receive the same rights as men due to discriminatory policies and practices. For a woman to be able to earn a stable income, accumulate wealth and exercise self-determination that supports her social and economic empowerment, she must be able to own, inherit and control land and property. Very little to none of the South African government’s various agricultural programs have made women a primary goal to work on. Gender equality is not emphasized in the plan for land redistribution, land tenure reform nor land restitution. The fact that women own only 13% of farms and agricultural land while men own 71% is more evidence that this is indeed a discriminatory tendency.

The state's land redistribution program suffered from a lack of transparency for years due to unclear land allocation regulations and the infrequent publication of beneficiary statistics. But between February and December 2020, the government disclosed data on the number of individuals who had benefited from the government’s state land lease and disposal policy (SLLDP). Instead of giving beneficiaries full ownership rights over the property that has been redistributed, the government just gave them leases. In 2020, there were 544 recipients of benefits from the program, however only 116 of them were women, making up only 30.5% of all recipients. When the data is considered through a split down per hectare allocation, the distribution becomes even more disparate because it shows that men obtained 82% of the land allotted while women only received 17.2% of the total hectares. 83% of the women who received benefits from the SLLDP in 2020 were members of collectives, which implies they did not have individual land leases but rather were a part of groups that also included men. In comparison, 50% of the male beneficiaries were awarded the land as individuals. This indicates that, for the most part, women under the strategy only profited from land redistribution if men also benefited. Additionally, it implies that without the consent and cooperation of men, women are unable to use the land.

**Particular group most at risk:**

Retired women, who already faced a heavy load of poverty, were a particular group of women who were most at risk when the pandemic struck. Despite having access to state pensions, retirees lived on less than 16% of their pre-retirement salaries, which made them three times more likely to experience poverty with women in the retiree group enduring the most hardship. The economic inequality that women retirees endure prior to retirement, where they make up the majority of low-paid workers and frequently experience unequal employment opportunities while managing family care obligations, is another disadvantage. Retired women who are divorced or single fare worse than married women, according to research. In addition, compared to retired women of other races, black women reported having higher views of poverty. This underlines once more the fact that gender prejudice is pervasive in many employment policies and practices, which substantially disadvantages many women in their ability to participate in the labor force and, as a result, leads to inadequate retirement savings and income security. Greater participation of women in policymaking is essential to alleviate gendered poverty because the underrepresentation of women in decision-making slows the development of gender-neutral legislation.

**Advancing women’s’ and girls’ socioeconomic human security:**

The Western Cape government worked on securing the socioeconomic rights of women and girls through different initiatives and programs. The Masakh’iSizwe Bursary Program prioritizes women, youth, students with disabilities and learners from rural communities when awarding bursaries. The Women Entrepreneurial Fund (WEF)was established by the Industrial Development Corporation (IDC) to support access to entrepreneurial funds for women business owners. Although this initiative does not directly affect women and girls living in poverty as it targets women who already own businesses but it could have an indirect effect on women and girls living in poverty because by helping the female business owners grow their businesses, they could employ other women and girls and help them generate a stable income and elevate them from poverty. A third initiative was the Sanitary Dignity Project through which the Department of Social Development rolled-out an R23 million project to female learners across the Province. The project will cover 222 schools and approximately lift 90,000 female learners from period poverty which will allow girls and young women to regularly attend school.

**Recommendations:**

The lack of education is both a cause and a result of poverty and so measures dedicated to the improvements of girls’ and young women’s access to education is crucial. The shift to online education during Covid-19 stopped the educational journey of many girls living in poverty as they either lacked the necessary devices such as laptops and smartphones or basic internet connection. Given that mobile data in South Africa is expensive, it’s important that the government and private sector jointly consider strategies to address these costs. Free learning resources and materials need to be made available on a variety of devices and software applications to counter the unreliable internet access if it persists. Online learning needs to also be mobile-friendly as not every learner will have an access to a computer so they can use smartphones instead.

To allow women the time to seek jobs and consequently generate income and elevate themselves from poverty, child care financial assistance should be offered. Collaboration with local nonprofit organizations and individual child care providers to offer fee assistance or scholarships would be one way as would offering discounts to families that enroll siblings together. Collaboration with the private sector companies to offer child care onsite for employees’ children is another relevant recommendation.

What is repeatedly seen in countries where gender-based discrimination is prevalent is that women are always sidelined and are vastly underrepresented in decision-making processes. Women make up half of society and they should have a regular voice when it comes to taking general decisions that would affect the whole society but also in areas that pertain to them. Maat recommends setting strict quotas in decision-making bodies such as the parliament and ministries to be regularly monitored by a national equality committee. Setting gendered quotas in the private sector is equally important and could be monitored by the same committee. A periodic review of laws related to property ownership and land redistribution, in South Africa’s case, is urgently needed with a clear emphasis on gender equality through consultations with civil society organizations and relevant international bodies.

Maat’s main recommendation to advance women’s and girls’ socioeconomic human security would be to work on eliminating the discriminatory power structures that still operate in communities and households, particularly in rural communities that do not promote the economic and social rights of women and girls. South Africa has very advanced gender equality laws but simply creating them is not enough, it’s the implementation that matters but is unfortunately not achieved properly due to these persistent discriminatory power structures. Eliminating them will not happen overnight, it is a long-term process that will pass over generations but it is better to start now than later.

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