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ITUC-AFRICA STATEMENT ON THE OCCASION OF AFRICAN WOMEN DAY 2020

On the occasion of the fifty-eight anniversary of the international day of African women, the African Regional Organisation of the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC-Africa www.ituc-africa.org) commends the courage and determination of all African girls and women as we stand with them in their various struggles for equality and social justice. The historic role played by women in Africa is testimony to their capacity to effect and lead change on the continent.

African women continue to be the backbone of our economies as farmers, traders, nurses, teachers, entrepreneurs, doctors, trade unionists, scientists and leaders in many other sectors. However, since the early 1980s, with the implementation of structural adjustment policies in Africa, the feminization of poverty has become a trap in many countries. In this context, the vicious circle is becoming wider as girls' and women's conditions are getting more precarious and dire.

ITUC-Africa notes that as COVID-19 continues to spread in Africa, women and girls continue to be among the most vulnerable groups exposed to the negative impacts of the pandemic. Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls. Women and girls are disproportionately affected by lockdowns and this is resulting in reduced access to income generation and health services. As countries' responses were focusing on curbing the spread of COVID-19, essential services such as access to sexual and reproductive health services were disrupted. A recent analysis published in the Lancet Global Health suggests that a reduction in maternal health services of between just 9.8-18.5% could lead to as many as 12,200 additional maternal deaths over six months in low- and middle-income countries.

Further, it is worth noting that the same Lancet Global Health Report indicates that women account for around 40% of COVID-19 cases in Africa. This ranges from 35% in some countries to over 55% in South Africa. The coronavirus pandemic has exposed and intensified gender inequality in Africa. Women in Africa are also overrepresented at the front lines of the response to the pandemic. Over 60 per cent of Africa's health workforce and essential social service providers are female. Again, additional care needs arose from school closures as a result of the lockdowns and restrictions. Also, elderly relatives who need to be specially taken care of means that women have to provide even more care services at home while still working, mainly because of entrenched traditional norms on gender roles in many African countries.

Equally disturbing and unacceptable is the fact that economic hardship due to COVID-19 is also greater for women in Africa according to a recent World Bank report. Informal workers, most of whom are women, represent more than 90% of the labour force in sub-Saharan Africa. Informal sector jobs are particularly at risk during the pandemic. Many women have to work harder than before while earning even less than they normally would.

The organised African working-class is concerned that women were subjected to a higher risk of gender-based violence in the wake of the COVID-19 outbreak and subsequent lockdowns that were imposed. A recent study by the UN Women found that reports of violence against women, particularly domestic violence, have increased in several countries as security, health, and financial worries create tensions and strains accentuated by the cramped and confined living conditions of lockdown.

As we commemorate the African Women's Day, ITUC-Africa calls on our governments at the different tiers of governance and all stakeholders to take appropriate measures to ensure women's social and economic empowerment and to address the intersecting disadvantages and discriminatory practices and policies that inhibit women's access to social and economic rights. In particular, we urge our governments to ensure that the informal economy workers are included in policies and programmes engineered by the government to mitigate the economic impacts of the pandemic.

On our part as organised labour, ITUC-Africa and its affiliates shall continue to advocate for the implementation of the African Union (AU) Agenda 2063, and for the ratification of all instruments that advance women empowerment and gender equality. It is in this vein that we call on our governments to ratify and domesticate without further delay ILO Convention 190 on violence and harassment.

Once again, we salute the fine spirit of resilience, commitment and sacrifice of African women. We urge them to continue the struggles to reclaim their right and to attainment their potentials. We pledge the support of the African trade union movement to the cause of Women's struggles.

Viva African women, viva!

Happy African Women Day!



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