Food security in Africa from a feminist lens

By Leonida Odongo

Food security, a topical subject in a global cost of living crisis marred by rising inflation, is a gendered issue. The continued prevalance of patriarchy means that the control of natural resources like land, the basis of food production, is held predominantly by men. As protests in Kenya against the high cost of living – characterised by high inflation and rising cost of food – took the streets in July, the persistent gendered division of labour and ownership must be acknowledged and addressed in the context of colonial and post-colonial realities.

This article illustrates the central role the World Bank and IMF have played in creating such conditions through historical structural adjustment programmes and current austerity-focused loan conditionalities.

Kenya, like most countries in Africa, is patriarchal. This means that control of natural resources like land, the basis of food production, is held by men. Despite a progressive constitution that speaks of equality, women continue to suffer when it comes to property ownership. Only 1 per cent of women own land titles in their name, and only 5 per cent of women own property jointly with their husbands. 72 per cent of Kenya's population lives in rural areas, and most of them are women.

The gendered inequities are multi-fold. Compared to men, women cannot easily access credit facilities because they do not have collateral, since family land titles are usually in their husband's name and are bequeathed along male lineage, while women are actively prevented from and socially punished for accessing land. Access to information about food production and training opportunities is also gendered, as women lack time due to tilling and responsibility for domestic chores. Power determines who produces what and when. In many households, men control cash crops and higher-value livestock, and despite women undertaking the bulk of the agricultural work, men control the proceeds from sales. Women have been subjected to Gender-Based Violence (GBV) when selling farm products without their husbands' approval, or are forced to engage in transactional sex to access limited natural resources due to climate change.

Cost of living crisis aggravated by IMF-backed tax reforms

In addition to these structural land access inequalities, women are now feeling the heat of the rising cost of living. The prices of basic commodities such as sugar, cooking oil and wheat have soared since the war in Ukraine started. This has been aggravated by a dependency on imports, despite an abundance of arable land, and resulted in waves of protests in early 2023, with nutrition levels and calorie intake deteriorating across families, and many informal food vendors - often women - having to shut down due to rising input costs.

We cannot talk about food inequality among men and women in Kenya without analysing the history of land during the colonial and post-colonial periods. The creation of native reserves – settlements set aside for Africans during British colonialism – meant that subsistence farming in Africa in general, and in Kenya in particular, suffered. Slavery in Kenya's coastal region also adversely affected local agriculture, as able-bodied people were shipped off. During the era of colonialism, the Swynnerton Plan was presented as a blue print for the 'modernisation' of African agriculture and allocated £7 million for this purpose. It also introduced land consolidation, which resulted in land being in the hands of a few people.[1] Title deeds were also issued. This led to landlessness for those who lost land in the consolidation process, whose target was fertile land. A new crop of 'progressive' farmers, who could be offered credit by the British colonial administration and were allowed to grow cash crops, emerged. The objective of the Swynnerton plan was to create 600,000 efficient African farmers.[2] However, this increased land inequality and affected food production. The loss of land meant the inability to produce food, and those who lost land migrated to other less arable land.[3]

The Finance Act of 2023 has introduced new taxes and increased Value Added Tax (VAT) from 8 to 16 per cent on petroleum products excluding Liquified Petroleum Gas. The Act is aligned with BWIs conditionalities as preconditions for loans. It also adds further woes to an already delicate situation, particularly with the increased VAT affecting household food budgets and women, who survive from hand to mouth. The increased VAT directly impacts the transport and industries sector and the purchasing power of Kenyans, which determines food consumption within households. In Kenya, the experience has been that whenever petroleum prices rise, food costs also rise. While tax increases, salaries and wages often remain constant.

Food security undermined by an unequal economic system

The introduction of cashcrop economies and land titles has resulted in individualised land ownership and land appreciation. During independence, land redistribution did not take place and huge tracts of land were taken over by the elite,[4] rendering millions to landlessness and squatterdom.

African women continue to suffer from the negative impacts of structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) brought about by the Bretton Woods Institutions (BWIs) – the World Bank and the IMF – in the 1980s and 1990s. In their wake in Kenya, services that were provided by the state to farmers, such as agricultural extension and subsidies, came to a grinding halt due to imposed austerity measures. Market liberalisation policies resulted in the dumping of finished products from Europe and other parts of the world, destroying infant industries and inflicting job losses which directly impacted people's purchasing power. The IMF and World Bank conditions attached to loans resulted in workforce retrenchment, job losses and job insecurity for millions of workers, plunging them into economic uncertainty and deepening poverty. Government services were replaced by the private sector under public-private partnerships (PPPs), or wholly private ownership.[5] Basic commodities necessary for survival, such as water, were privatised, adding to the burden on poor communities.

Additionally, the BWIs played an important role in the expansion of debt on the continent. Kenya's external debt keeps ballooning, which makes life more difficult for Kenyans due to high taxes in addition to interest rates. The Financial Year 2022/2023 (dated 30th June 2023) indicates that the public debt burden stands at $70.75 billion.[6] The country's debt and interest burdens hit 72.6 per cent of GDP and around 28 per cent of revenue by 2023, up from 65 per cent in 2020.[7] The revenue for the same period was $14.4 billion.[8] Rising debt means more taxation, which is often accompanied by BWIs-mandated austerity measures, such as reduced expenditures on education[9] and trimming of the civil service workforce.[10] In the case of Kenya, a press release by the Treasury cited a Kshs 300 billion budget cut commitment.[11] The triple burden of taxation and rising cost of goods and services often falls on women, who are responsible for household food consumption and nutrition. It also means cuts are made to public spending on essential social services as governments must prioritise debt repayments over social investments. In Kenya, debt service expenses have increased from $6.8 billion in 2021/22 to $10.4 billion in the financial year 2022/23. Furthermore, this is projected to rise to $14.4 billion in 2024/25.[12]

Debt inhibits food sovereignty because instead of ensuring they have adequate food, countries are forced to grapple with raising domestic revenues and cutting public spending to pay off debts, often denominated in foreign currencies. As noted by the Institute of Social Accountability (TISA), Kenya is not earning enough foreign income from exports and remittances, hence, it cannot manage its import bill, debt repayments and interest payments.[13] Inadequate income results in Kenya having to borrow more as the only revenue to increase access to foreign resources, thus leading to a debt trap. TISA pointed out that the more Kenya's public debt exists in foreign currency, the more it exerts pressure on the exchange rate, making imported goods expensive and out of reach for most Kenyans.

There is a need for a radical shift in addressing food insecurity, tackling this using a feminist lens. This will help resolve the deep-rooted challenges existing in Kenya and Africa's food systems. Food is a social phenomenon, and addressing a social issue with a neoliberal business model perpetuates the oppression of already marginalised groups, particularly women and girls. The country needs genuine land reform, which addresses the situation of the landless and squatters, because without land there is no food, and without food, there is no life.

Photo: Haki Nawiri Afrika

Women tilling land in Eastern Kenya.

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5 IMF, idem 17 July 2023, accessed 18 September 2023.

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8 J. Amboko, "KRA collects Sh2.17 trillion, misses annual revenue target by Sh107 billion", idem 15 July 2023.

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13 The Institute of Social Accountability, idem 2023, accessed 18 September 2023.