

**FEMINIST** →

**ACTION NEXUS**

for Economic and Climate Justice

# A FEMINIST ANALYSIS OF THE TRIPLE CRISIS:

## Climate Change, Debt, and COVID-19 in Zimbabwe and Kenya

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### INTRODUCTION

This brief focuses on Zimbabwean and Kenyan examples as illustrative of the impacts of three interlinked crises in the African region. The chosen issues of climate change, the COVID-19 pandemic and sovereign debt stem from a neoliberal economic system that works in cooperation with systems of oppression. This brief uses an intersectional feminist approach to understand this dynamic as well as advocate for systemic and long-term solutions.

The context for this brief is the commitment of feminist movements who are part of the *Feminist Action Nexus for Economic and Climate Justice* (“*Action Nexus*”) to develop more resources and materials for popular education and legal advocacy that advance a comprehensive feminist agenda. This feminist agenda is not a separate or new initiative, but a well-articulated one that

draws on the work of feminist movements over generations. Our 2021 **Blueprint for Feminist Economic Justice**, a central piece that anchors the Action Nexus, acknowledges how our work mutually reinforces and reaffirms feminist agendas of over five decades and connects movements—including, but not limited to, trade justice, debt justice, and a **Feminist Decolonial Global Green New Deal**. More resources as well as a summary seven key demands of our work can be found on the Action Nexus webpage.<sup>1</sup>

A feminist analysis of the climate and debt crisis within the context of the pandemic is necessary to shine a light on the impacts of the injustices that neoliberal economic policies have on the lives and well-being of women and girls across Africa. It identifies and exposes the normalised and invisible configurations of structural injustice. The foreign debt that African countries are servicing has a direct impact on the full enjoyment of women’s human rights.

## I. AFRICA'S OVERLAPPING CRISES

Many countries in Africa have dual economies: the modern economies and the traditional economies, which are often referred to as the “people’s economies.” Monetised economies are primarily urban economies that are cash-based and where people trade within the market economy. Rural economies, still dominant on the continent and supporting approximately 60 percent of its inhabitants,<sup>2</sup> are dependent on subsistence agriculture and largely operate outside of the formal market. Their operations are regarded as informal, and they are principally designed to meet the needs of households. These rural economies are often led by women, who work on the land to produce food to sustain the lives of millions of Africans. Many women living in rural areas work to produce enough for consumption and sell the surplus to pay for essentials such as clothing, school fees, and healthcare.

Africa has historically faced an unjust debt burden, similar to many postcolonial nations. Aside from the effects of the Washington Consensus and structural adjustment policies that prevented investment in public infrastructure, tertiary education and other sectors,<sup>3</sup> France created the CFA Franc system ‘centralising’ currency in West African countries that require them to deposit more than half of their foreign currency reserves into the French treasury.<sup>4</sup> These sums are double the aid that France provides to sub-Saharan Africa.<sup>5</sup>

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1 [Feminist Action Nexus for Economic and Climate Justice](#).

2 Mariam Saleh on Statista. [Urbanization rate in Africa in 2021, by country](#).

3 Alan Hirsch and Carlos Lopes for *Africa Development / Afrique et Développement*. [Post-colonial African Economic Development in Historical Perspective](#). (2020).

4 Ndongo Samba Sylla. [The CFA Franc: French Monetary Imperialism in Africa](#). (2017).

5 Interview of Ndongo Samba Sylla and Fanny Pigeaud for *Jacobin Magazine*. [How France Continues to Dominate Its Former Colonies in Africa](#). (2021)



Repaying unsustainable debt and remaining entrapped in colonial era arrangements that prevent them from investing in public goods means that most countries in Africa, like much of the Global South, are unable to truly address the challenges brought by climate change. While governments devote resources to paying off foreign debts, climate change is impoverishing African people, who are forced to shoulder this burden on their own. This burden is not evenly distributed: women carry the disproportionate impacts of both the climate crisis and the debt crisis. When disaster events occur (with increasing frequency due to climate change), women lose their livelihoods—with negligible or no compensation for their losses. It is against this background that this paper calls for justice for Africans, through unconditional cancellation of all colonial debts and in solidarity with similar calls across the Global South.

The COVID-19 pandemic adds another layer to Africa's climate and debt crises. These intersecting crises laid bare the patterns of disadvantages, inequalities, and marginalisation. Governments across the continent are struggling to address the climate crisis, the pandemic, and the debt crisis as separate challenges, without addressing how they are mutually reinforcing and exacerbating social and economic inequalities.



## **THE CLIMATE CRISIS AND THE HEALTH OF PEOPLE AND ECOSYSTEMS IN AFRICA**

2019 was one of the warmest years recorded in Africa,<sup>6</sup> and this trend continues across the continent as extreme weather conditions are experienced in all subregions. The continent is warming at a much faster rate than previously anticipated.<sup>7</sup> Predictions are giving indications of increased and continued warming with a decrease in rainfall patterns in North and Southern Africa and increased rainfall in the Sahel region.<sup>8</sup> Most regions on the continent are expected to go beyond 2°C warming above pre-industrial levels by the end of this century. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC)'s 5th Assessment report states that temperatures on the continent have already risen beyond 1°C since 1901, a period which has also been characterised by hot temperatures and heatwaves. Sea levels have risen, reaching 5 millimetres per year in most of the oceanic areas that surround Africa, and this has gone above 5 millimetres in the South-Western Indian Ocean, areas covering Madagascar eastwards beyond Mauritius. This is above the average global level rise of between 3 and 4 millimetres per annum.<sup>9</sup>

The climatic conditions across Africa continue to shift, and weather patterns are becoming unpredictable, causing disruptions in the local food systems and upsetting the lives and

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<sup>6</sup> Mongabay. [In Africa, temperatures rise, but adaptation lags on West's funding failure](#). (2022).

<sup>7</sup> Dan Shepherd for *African Renewal*. [Global warming: severe consequences for Africa](#). (December 2018-March 2019).

<sup>8</sup> UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). [Climate Change Is an Increasing Threat to Africa](#). (2020).

<sup>9</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). [Fifth Assessment Report](#). (2014).

livelihoods of women in particular. Countries such as Senegal, Madagascar, and Mauritius are substantially affected by climate change, which disproportionately burdens women working in fisheries and subsistence production. In Senegal, the rising sea level has encroached human habitats, destroying homes in areas such as the coastal city of Bargny, where women are carrying the burden of rebuilding their homes, livelihoods, and community infrastructure. An estimated 56 percent of the coastlines in Senegal, Togo, Benin, and Côte d'Ivoire have been eroded, and this is likely to worsen in the future.<sup>10</sup>

The IPCC projects that Africa is likely to face reduced crop productivity resulting from increased heat and drought, pest and disease damage, and floods, which will seriously threaten food security and livelihoods at individual, national, and regional levels.<sup>11</sup> People's health is also threatened, as warmer temperatures and changes in rainfall patterns expand habitat suitability for biting insects and the transmission of vector-borne diseases like dengue fever, malaria, and yellow fever.<sup>12</sup> For reference, in 2017, an estimated 93 percent of global malaria deaths occurred in Africa.<sup>13</sup>

## **B. COVID-19**

The outbreak of COVID-19 has affected economies, regional integration, social cohesion, and health systems severely across Africa. The impacts are long-term and immense for historically marginalised communities. While feminists and social justice movements have deeper and more transformative demands, even focusing on the global and regional development agendas reveals enormous setbacks, from the African Union (AU)'s Agenda 2063,<sup>14</sup> the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)<sup>15</sup> to other development agendas.<sup>16</sup>

To avert the impacts of the pandemic, AU member states have adopted a strategy that is targeted at avoiding severe illness and loss of life and reducing social and economic disruptions. This strategy was further strengthened by establishment of the Coronavirus Relief Fund, which is aimed at mitigating the negative socio-economic impacts of the virus, strengthening the capacity of the continent in dealing with public health emergencies, and supporting procurement and distribution of medical equipment to address the pandemic.<sup>17</sup> Most African countries put in place

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<sup>10</sup> World Bank. [West Africa's Coast: Losing Over \\$3.8 Billion a Year to Erosion, Flooding and Pollution](#). (2019).

<sup>11</sup> Boko, M., I. Niang, A. Nyong, C. Vogel, A. Githeko, M. Medany, B. Osman-Elasha, R. Tabo and P. Yanda, [2007: Africa. Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability](#). Contribution of Working Group II to the Fourth Assessment Report of the IPCC, M.L. Parry, O.F. Canziani, J.P. Palutikof, P.J. van der Linden and C.E. Hanson, Eds., Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK, 433-467.

<sup>12</sup> Rocklöv, J., Dubrow, R. [Climate change: an enduring challenge for vector-borne disease prevention and control](#). *Nat Immunol* 21, 479-483. (2020).

<sup>13</sup> World Health Organization (WHO). [The "World malaria report" at a glance](#). (2019).

<sup>14</sup> See more on the African Union's [Agenda 2063](#).

<sup>15</sup> See more on the 17 [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs).

<sup>16</sup> African Union Development Agency (AUDA-NEPAD). [African Union COVID-19 / Occupational Safety and Health: Guidelines Series](#). (2020).

<sup>17</sup> See more on the African Union's [COVID-19 Response Fund](#).

lockdowns, compulsory testing of suspected cases, and contact tracing as they contain the spread of COVID-19. For workers in the informal sector, which is made up largely of women, staying at home would mean loss of livelihood without any support system or safety net. In addition, informal settlements in many countries are habitually overcrowded, it not being unusual for eight people to share one room—meaning it is impossible to physically distance. Most governments militarised the high-density residential areas as a way of controlling movement and enforcing compliance. However, this did not result in compliance but violence.<sup>18</sup>

In response to the pandemic, the Pan-African Parliament is urging its members to make sure that AU member states allocate enough funding for their healthcare systems so that they can respond to the demands imposed by the pandemic, noting that inadequate healthcare facilities impede the continent's COVID response.<sup>19</sup>

## **DEBT AND THE COLONIAL LEGACY**

Africa is contending with huge debt that keeps ballooning because of high interest rates. Sub-Saharan Africa's debt, for example, was sitting at USD 702.4 billion in 2020, up from USD 380.9 billion in 2012.<sup>20</sup> The climate and debt crises that Africa is facing cannot be separated from the increased poverty levels across the continent, which have devastating effects on peasant and Indigenous women whose lives are tied to the land as food producers and custodians of the environment.

As mentioned above, European colonisers saddled African countries with debt and predatory systems of finance in the process of attaining independence. The Cold War period, between 1947 and 1991, saw African countries receiving enormous loans from the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and from the Global North in general.<sup>21</sup> These loans came with conditionalities that limited social spending and required implementation of neoliberal economic policies to create a presumably conducive environment for foreign investment to come in.<sup>22</sup> Conditionalities would often require doing business with the lending countries: For example, Mali would be given a loan of one million CFA Francs so that it could purchase goods from the lending country. This kind of “tied aid” rewarded corrupt governments, both in the receiving countries and the lending countries, and put foreign investment ahead of the well-being of African people.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Al Jazeera. [UN raises alarm about police brutality in COVID-19 lockdowns](#). (2020).

<sup>19</sup> African Union. [African Parliamentarians aim for increased health budgets amid COVID-19 pandemic](#). (2020).

<sup>20</sup> Danny Bradlow & Magalie Masamba. [Debt distress in Africa: biggest problems, and ways forward](#). The Conversation. (2022).

<sup>21</sup> Alan Hirsch and Carlos Lopes for *Africa Development / Afrique et Développement*. [Post-colonial African Economic Development in Historical Perspective](#). (2020).

<sup>22</sup> Ibid

<sup>23</sup> Ibid

This resulted in increased poverty in most African countries, as these loans had to be paid back, and women became the collateral damage for such debts, being forced to shoulder the debts through their unpaid care work. When governments are in a debt crisis, they are unable to truly invest in and provide public services such as healthcare, provision of water and energy, education, and other essential services. Due to gendered care roles, poor women take over the provision of such services, sustaining the lives of their families and communities. However, their contributions are unaccounted for, unpaid, invisibilised, and taken for granted because society normalises women doing household and care work for free.

Both climate change and the pandemic had an impact on the continent's debt situation. To address the losses and damages<sup>24</sup> suffered because of climate-induced disasters, most African countries had to borrow. Similarly, to respond to and recover from the pandemic, Africa still had to borrow. In cases where additional borrowing was not possible, some countries had to suspend debt repayments so that resources could be channelled towards addressing the pandemic. The suspension of debt repayments, however, attracted exorbitant interest rates that bled Africa's economies further.

## **WOMEN'S HUMAN RIGHTS AND THE DEBT BURDEN**

Women have carried the unjust burden of the debt crisis and climate change from the industrial period to date. The experiences of Black African women during the colonial period must be understood within the context of the capital accumulation process that was taking place then. The mode of production introduced by the colonial administration did not support subsistence production systems by the indigenes. African women are largely involved in the subsistence economies and colonialism's violence on the Indigenous Peoples' food systems translates to violence against women. The needs of Africa's indigenes were suppressed.

The driving force of modern patriarchal, capitalist economies is the advancement of violent technologies that includes arms—which resulted in Europe violently colonising the world since the 15th century. This production model passed on fortune and privilege to European settlers in Africa and the Global South, and passed on injustices to the generation of Indigenous populations, particularly women. The continent also inherited colonial debt and the climate crisis, whose origins can be traced back to the industrial revolution, and the growth of global capitalism. Currently women and Indigenous Peoples are custodians to an estimated 80 percent of the world's biodiversity<sup>25</sup> because their lives depend on the health of ecosystems.

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<sup>24</sup> UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). [Introduction to loss and damage](#).

<sup>25</sup> World Bank. [Indigenous Women Leaders Persevere Amid a Changing Climate](#). (2022).

The 6th IPCC report acknowledges the role of colonialism in driving the climate crisis. It should be noted that one of the ways that capitalism managed to penetrate the African continent was through destroying the local economies and bringing economic models that were and continue to be alien to Africa. When the local production processes were destroyed, African people had to work for colonial settlers for survival, and the impacts of all these processes were gendered. Working for the colonial regimes was not out of the willingness of the native, but from coercion through the introduction of taxes and the monetisation of their subsistence economies. European settlers destroyed women's farming systems found in their colonies. Appropriation of land by the European settlers resulted in women losing their right to land use and the colonial administrators introducing land reforms based on the European belief that men are the producers,<sup>26</sup> as in the patriarchal *breadwinners* concept.

Women continue to suffer from gender-based violence, which intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic. The United Nations Article of the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women states that “violence against women means any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion, or arbitrary deprivation of liberty whether occurring in public or private life.”<sup>27</sup> We cannot be blind to the fact that women are also subjected to structural violence in their public life due to their position on the social structure that results in sexism, discrimination, and other acts of violence. Structural violence emanates from political and economic deprivation of a class, in this case, African women. The overall principle behind structural violence is inequality, due largely to the way power is distributed. The injustices that African women face with regards to climate change and debt constitute structural violence that needs to be addressed urgently.

Several African countries, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa, are persistently ranked as having the greatest poverty<sup>28</sup> and lowest GDP.<sup>29</sup> These countries spend hundreds of millions annually to service foreign debts, while their populations fail to have access to basic healthcare, clean water, decent housing, clean and affordable energy and other basic human needs.<sup>30</sup>

Due to the huge debt burden, most African countries are not able to invest in social expenditure, including in public goods, services and infrastructure, and social protection systems, all of which could benefit women and marginalised communities and thereby realise human rights. State parties to these multilateral international agreements are under obligation to guarantee basic human rights for all. However, the continuous demands for poor states in Africa to use their scarce resource to service debts, instead of improving basic social services, makes the

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<sup>26</sup> Lourdes Benería and Gita Sen. [Accumulation, Reproduction, and “Women’s Role in Economic Development”](#): Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society 7 (1981): 279 - 298.

<sup>27</sup> UN Women. [A brief overview of the United Nations and violence against women](#).

<sup>28</sup> World Bank. [Poverty headcount ratio at national poverty lines \(% of population\)](#). (2023).

<sup>29</sup> International Monetary Fund. [GDP, current prices](#). (2023).

<sup>30</sup> Okeke, Chris N. [The Debt Burden: An African Perspective](#). The International Lawyer 35, no. 4 (2001): 1489–1505.



international community accomplices in violating the human rights of African people<sup>31</sup>— particularly African women who subsidise social services through their unpaid labour. African countries are facing a devastating and unjust debt burden while they are disproportionately affected by climate change. The human impact of the debt payments is massive. According to the United Nations Development Programme’s Human Development Report, if severely indebted nations keep the money dedicated to foreign debts repayments, Africa alone would have had the ability to save the lives of approximately 21 million children by 2000,<sup>32</sup> improve maternal health care and provide other social services to sustain life. Foreign debt continues to rise, and not because of continuous borrowing, but because of high interest rates and debt servicing charges, such that it appears to be morally unjustifiable for African countries to continue dedicating their lean resource to debt services while the poor people on the continent continue suffering.<sup>33</sup> This is particularly so when the Global North countries, who are responsible for contributions to the Green Climate Fund, are not delivering on their commitments to climate finance, or heeding the call for reparations by Global South countries.

## II. CASE STUDIES

### A. COLONIAL DEBT, DROUGHTS, AND STRUCTURAL ADJUSTMENT: THE CASE OF ZIMBABWE

Zimbabwe is one of the countries in Africa that is both disaster-prone and in a debt crisis. Zimbabwe’s debt is rooted in the country’s colonial history of a white supremacist government that borrowed to expand and strengthen its military power during the country’s liberation war against colonialism and white settler colonial rule. Southern Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe) went against United Nations-imposed sanctions by waging an unjust war against native people. The white settler administration took a debt that, upon the country’s attainment of independence in 1980, amounted to USD 700 million.<sup>34</sup> This debt was handed over to the new independent government of Zimbabwe. This resulted in the people of Zimbabwe inheriting a debt from the colonial administration, which did not benefit them in any way as it had been used to violate their rights under British colonial rule. The people of Zimbabwe are forced to pay back a debt that they were not party to acquiring and that was used to fund an unjust war that led to loss of the lives of their kith and kin. The colonial debt continues to impoverish the lives of all people in this country, which is vulnerable to climate-induced disaster.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO). [The Looming Debt Crisis in Eastern and Southern Africa: What it Means for Social Sector Investments and Children](#). (2021).

<sup>33</sup> Judith Tyson. [Rising interest rates are threatening debt sustainability in Africa](#). ODI. (2022).

<sup>34</sup> Nick Dearden. [The West owes Zimbabwe a future](#). Al Jazeera. (2017).



Upon attainment of independence, the new government of Zimbabwe had to continue borrowing to prevent the country's destabilisation from the apartheid administration, which was still in South Africa and supported by governments such as Britain.<sup>35</sup> It is most unfortunate that countries in the region that were supporting the human rights of other African peoples during the time that they were under white settler regimes are still stuck in debt to the same countries that colonised them. These same countries unjustly benefited from colonial occupation through extraction of the continent's resources, which includes labour, mineral wealth, land, forests, wildlife, and water.

Zimbabwe has faced climate-induced droughts in the 1980s and early 1990s, particularly the devastating drought of 1992. There is evidence from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) reports that attributes climate change to the industrial revolution.<sup>36</sup> Global North countries were the primary drivers and beneficiaries of the industrial revolution while countries in the Global South, including Africa, were at the receiving end of its negative effects, from resource extraction to pollution and climate disasters. The current plight of the African peoples is inseparable from colonial histories that were largely driven by the expansion of the industrialisation processes in Europe and the growth of the global system of accumulation.

The response of neoliberal capitalism to the debt crisis centres on increasing taxation on everyday people in ways that makes protecting capital the priority. While there have been calls by civil society organisations and movements across the world for debt cancellation for countries in the Global South, particularly for Africa—especially as a response to the climate crisis and the pandemic—International Financial Institutions (IFIs) such as the World Bank and the IMF continue recommending neoliberal economic blueprints that push countries to put in place austerity measures. For example, during the drought of 1992, and coupled by several other factors, the government of Zimbabwe was unable to meet its debt obligations. The recommendations of the World Bank and IMF in the context of this climate crisis was to extend loans on condition that the country adopt neoliberal economic policies through implementation of the Economic Structural Adjustment Programme (ESAP).<sup>37</sup>

This implies that the government had to cut expenditure through laying off multitudes of its workers, liberalise trade, remove government subsidies, introduce user fees, and privatise public services, amongst other measures. This resulted in extreme impoverishment of the people of Zimbabwe who were already devastated by the drought. Instead of the government cushioning its people from the impacts of the drought that was ravaging the country and killed more than a million cattle,<sup>38</sup> they went ahead and cut public service expenditure. This

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid 9

<sup>36</sup> Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). [1.3.1 Human Influence on the Climate System, Third Assessment Report](#). (2001).

<sup>37</sup> Rupak Chattopadhyay for *Review of African Political Economy*. [Zimbabwe: Structural Adjustment, Destitution & Food Insecurity](#). (2000).

<sup>38</sup> Jeffrey Moyo. [Zimbabweans struggle amid worst drought in memory](#). Anadolu Agency. (2019).

made women carry the burden of, for example, their own maternal health care, antenatal and postnatal care, their reproductive health, and indeed care for the families and communities through their unpaid labour.

## **B. THE LOCUST INVASION, DEBT, AND COVID-19: THE CASE OF KENYA**

Kenya is another African country trapped in debt while its people struggle through climate-induced disasters. It is unclear whether the country inherited a colonial debt or not, but there are indications that financial infrastructure was commercial, revolving around land ownership and agriculture and heavily focused on a system of accumulation that spilled over to the postcolonial era. By the time the final years of colonial rule were settling in, there was so much capital flight that the new government's strategy involved attracting foreign investment. British banks dominated financial infrastructure and did not provide much credit to Africans and specifically Kenyans. The commercialised financial sector dominated postcolonial Kenya crashed in the 1980s pushing the government into structural adjustment loans and policies. These came with conditions like austerity and led to the debt and dependence that the country finds itself in to date.<sup>39</sup>

COVID-19 came at a time when East Africa was struggling to control a locust invasion that covered farms in rural Kenya from December 2019 and was described as the worst in 70 years.<sup>40</sup> The desert locusts, *Schistocerca gregaria*, are considered the world's most devastating pest and can multiply 20-fold in just three months. They have the potential to reach 80 million square kilometres, and can consume 2g of vegetation each day, equivalent to food for 35,000 people a day.<sup>41</sup> The locust invasion compounded the country's food crisis, as the country had been experiencing food shortages due to prolonged droughts because of the climate crisis. The pandemic and the locust invasion were both taking place in Kenya amid a debt situation that was worsening prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Borrowing related to the pandemic alone amounted to USD 2.9 billion in 2020, and in January 2021, Kenya suspended debt repayment amounting to USD 514 million in response to the pandemic.<sup>42</sup>

From research carried out by the International Network for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR-Net) in 2021, Kenya's foreign debt increased from USD 29.9 million by the end of September 2019 to USD 33.7 million by the end of September, 2020. Moreover, the government of Kenya proposed relying on fiscal consolidation plans that included reducing public spending to manage the escalating debt, which in turn would have impacts on basic public services like health and education. Kenya's public debt ceiling is KES 9 trillion (USD 69.9 billion), yet as of June

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<sup>39</sup> Nick Bernards. [Colonial Financial Infrastructures and Kenya's Uneven Fintech Boom](#). Antipode, 54: 708-728. (2022).

<sup>40</sup> David Njagi. [The Biblical locust plagues of 2020](#). BBC. (2020).

<sup>41</sup> Ibid 15

<sup>42</sup> James Anyanzwa. [Despite pandemic recovery, Kenya's debt set to rise again](#). The East African. (2022).

2021, the debt portfolio stood at KES 7.7 trillion (USD 59.8 billion).<sup>43</sup> To finance the deficit, the government aims to borrow externally and domestically.

The government notes that public debt remains sustainable, yet they have had to change the law myriad times allowing the treasury to surpass borrowing limits. The IMF recently elevated Kenya's debt distress from medium to high,<sup>44</sup> which came with its own austerity measures and taxation of basic commodities.

Estimates showed that the effects of climate change are expected to cause economic losses of 4.4 percent of Kenya's GDP by 2030.<sup>45</sup> The country relies on sectors like agriculture, tourism, water, energy, wildlife, and health, all of which were heavily affected by the pandemic, the locust invasion, and severe drought. The debt crisis and subsequent austerity measures adopted meant that there were severe challenges on public service delivery during and after the pandemic, including health, education, and transportation. A total of 1.7 million Kenyans lost their jobs in 2020, 63 percent of whom were young people.<sup>46</sup> Estimates also show that 2 million Kenyans were pushed into poverty during the pandemic.<sup>47</sup> Households are borrowing to access public goods like health, education, and housing.

This year, the government offered subsidies to oil companies to deal with rising costs of the commodity in the country as a result of the war in Ukraine, yet at the same time increased the cost of liquefied petroleum gas by reintroducing value-added tax (VAT) to the commodity. This measure pushed Kenyan people further into poverty while increasing the disproportionate impacts of women and girls, who resorted to using polluting and inefficient fuels to cook, negatively impacting their health and well-being.<sup>48</sup> This year the government even had to offer subsidies for maize flour, which is the country's staple food, due to the ongoing food shortages. The country is facing acute food shortages pushing food prices high thereby threatening the health and nutrition of pregnant women and children. The free maternal services that the government had instituted are now facing uncertainty as is free education, with directives on removing subsidies for these already coming from the new regime that was recently elected into power.

Kenya's market is privatised, monopolistic and imperfect, and an instrument of political control and exploitation, which makes it highly volatile. This is a colonial legacy.

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<sup>43</sup> African Development Bank. [Policy Note: Public Debt Dynamics in Kenya](#). (2021).

<sup>44</sup> Ibid

<sup>45</sup> African Development Bank. [Climate Change Impacts on Africa's Economic Growth](#). (2020)

<sup>46</sup> Business Daily Africa. [1.7M jobs lost during Covid-19 lockdown](#). (2020).

<sup>47</sup> World Bank. [Kenya Economic Update: COVID-19 Erodes Progress in Poverty Reduction in Kenya, Increases Number of Poor Citizens](#). (2020).

<sup>48</sup> CLEAN Air Africa, et al. [COP26 and SDG7 goals under threat: 16% VAT on LPG reverses progress made in clean cooking adoption in Kenya](#). (2022)

### III. FEMINIST RECOMMENDATIONS

The above analysis gives an indication of the inequalities faced by women, particularly peasant and Indigenous women, demonstrating that governments in Africa must take measures to address the social and legal protections that are inherently discriminatory and increase women's vulnerability to the climate crisis. However, it is also apparent that it is impossible for women in Africa to have gender justice without climate justice and debt justice. The origins of African women as a social class can be traced back to their colonial role as native women, with no citizen rights. The role of African women was below the subsistence minimum of every social class. This was perpetrated by the power structure then; however, the structural features of capitalism, racism and patriarchy continue to exist to this day, perpetuating the same power inequalities. The subservient role associated with African women in the household has accompanied them to their public life. Thus, the women remain marginalised in public life. This power imbalance can only be challenged by having more women participating in the public arena and working against the structural dynamics promoting inequality.

As rightfully noted by a United Nations women's human rights mechanism, the Working Group on discrimination against women and girls, "there has been a systemic failure to properly integrate the biological function of reproduction and the gendered function of unpaid caring into macroeconomic policy in a holistic, effective and coherent way, to ensure that reproduction and caring go hand-in-hand with the overall economic empowerment of women."<sup>49</sup> Governments should therefore take the necessary steps to recognise, remunerate and redistribute women's social reproduction role, where the care and socialisation of children and the care of the elderly and the infirm is considered work. This is particularly critical as climate-induced disasters are intensifying and women continue to carry the loss and damage that emanates from the disasters. Invisibilising this work is violence against women, by allowing them to be impoverished and devastated by disasters, which should be mitigated instead by the states and the Global North countries whose historical emission have been observed to be causing the climate crisis.

Economic policy choices are political choices, which governments do not exercise with an equal level of authority and freedom globally. What individual governments can do in response to a crisis depends largely on how much independence and flexibility they have. Governments must make macroeconomic policy decisions that respond to the needs of their people rather than external pressures. Their effectiveness also depends on what they determine as priorities, as well as their capacity for good governance, management, and prevailing levels of corruption in

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<sup>49</sup> The Center for Women's Global Leadership (CWGL). [Covid-19 Feminist Recovery Plan to Achieve Substantive Gender Equality](#). Rutgers University. (2021).

addition to the strength of their own national legal frameworks. The current situation in most African countries does not favour women, and this should be addressed through a clear political agenda. Governments across Africa should not be cowed into accepting neoliberal economic blueprints such as austerity, which put the interest of capital over the well-being of the people. This is particularly so when the continent is faced with uncertainty due to the ongoing extreme weather conditions.

Governments should undertake actions that seek to address the root causes and historical liabilities for the present debt and climate crisis. Women's rights to take part in and influence decision-making and implement policies to guarantee a just and equitable transition should be guaranteed. However, most initiatives currently under consideration represent false solutions, like the debt-for-climate swaps and market-oriented solutions such as green bonds and nature-performance bonds. These will not result in fair outcomes and instead have the potential to add to the debt burden of African countries while they continue to deal with the impacts of climate change.

Feminist analysis has shown how debt, the pandemic, and the climate crisis have proven to be devastating to the well-being of women across Africa, meting violence on a scale that has not been seen before. The real solutions to dealing with the triple crisis therefore lies in the leadership and participation of women in decision-making along these three realms. In order to achieve gender justice, there is a need to create gender-responsive policies centred on concepts of human rights while addressing unpaid care work. African states must reject all austerity measures imposed by multilateral banks while creating nuanced social protection measures that are aligned to the lived realities of women on the continent.

