

Press Release

8th March 2022

HIGH COST OF LIVING EXPOSING THE VULNERABILITY OF WOMEN AND CHILDREN.

The cost of living as measured by the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) Basic Needs and Nutrition Basket for Lusaka stood at K9, 305.38 for the month of February 2022, a K256.13 increase in comparison to the January, 2022 basket that stood at K9, 049.25. The upward movement in the basket is attributed to increased prices of some selected items. Of note, total food cost increased by a large margin moving from K3, 421.79 to K3, 768.35, a K346.56 increase. Particularly, 4kg of onions moved from K62.73 (K15.68/perKg) to K118.20 (29.55/perKg), a K55.47 increase, 1kg of kapenta moved from K244.34 to K271.52, a K27.18 increase, 4kg rice moved from K79.43 to K89.56, a K10.13 increase. Additionally, the nonfood but essential item section also recorded increases as the price of two 90Kg bag of charcoal which moved from K791.48 to K813.33, a K21.85 increase. Price decreases were however recorded in some items. Two 25Kg bags of mealie meal (Roller) reduced by K14.64 from K220.28 to K205.64, 3.6 litres of cooking oil also reduced by K7.00 from K166.63 to K159.63.

The February 2022 basket shows sustained upward price movements in the prices of essential items likely on account of a number of factors. Firstly, the first quarter of the year is a lean season and food prices tend to go up. Secondly, the instability in fuel pump prices has continued to have an impact on the cost of living. Pump prices for both petrol and diesel were recently adjusted upwards by over K2. Furthermore, on 22nd February, 2022 the Ministry of Agriculture announced the importation ban on onions and potatoes on the premise of supporting local production and local farmers. Evidently, this has yet again affected the price of onions on the market as local supply appears to be at variance with the demand of the commodity.

This state of affairs comes in the wake of the commemoration of a key calendar day; the international women's day which falls on Tuesday, 8th March. This year's theme is dubbed "*Gender Equality Today for a Sustainable Tomorrow.*" JCTR joins the rest of the world in commemorating this critical day and adds its voice in calling the nation to reflect and act accordingly in so far as safeguarding and enhancing the lives of women is concerned. Undeniably, gender equality is critical for social equity.

Women account for about 51% of the Zambian population and represent over 50% of the nation's poor.¹ Some progress with regards gender equality has been seen over the years indicated by reduced infant mortality, participation in the labor force and decision making, increased literacy and increased years of schooling among others. However, women's socio economic status remains vulnerable. Additionally, a number of indicators remain way below desired targets. In as much as the nation desires economic growth, the plight of women and children must not be undermined. Maternal mortality in 2017-2019 stood at a high of 252 deaths per 100000 live births, an increase from 111 deaths in 2015-16, women also bear the larger burden of gender-based violence and notable inequalities on the political participation landscape. Following the general election of 2021, the imbalance gaps have widened with a proportion of female representation reducing to 14percent, from 19 percent female representation recorded in the 2016 general elections.

Of serious concern is the retrogression in promoting gender equality and equity witnessed in the overhauling of the Ministry of Gender in 2021 and the slow reconstruction and operationalization of the gender machinery in Zambia. This sad reality has culminated in little or no ministerial representation of gender at the cabinet level and inadequate institutional framework for promoting gender equality and guaranteeing sustainable development and economic growth.

Today, at the backdrop of an incessant increase in the cost of living, women and young girls remain severely affected. Not only do women struggle with securing formal employment, but also with securing employment with good working conditions such as a living wage and adequate social protection benefits. Employment with good working conditions is a critical shock absorber especially to rises in the cost of living. But over 67.8% of the population employed in the formal sector are male while women only represent 32.3%. The picture is the same even in the informal sector as employment stands at 60.2% and 39.8% for men and women respectively².

The Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR) therefore, expresses deep concern on the status of women in Zambia. Evidently, the rising cost of living poses negative consequences on the welfare of women and children.

On the occasion of this year's women's day, JCTR therefore recommends that;

¹ According to the Ministry of Gender National Gender Statistics in 2016, the total population was projected at 15, 9333,883 of which 49.5 were men. From this you will note that across all regions (rural/urban), the population for women was higher. In the same vein, at national level poverty levels among female headed households was about 56.7%.

² https://www.ilo.org/asia/media-centre/news/WCMS_800222/lang--en/index.htm

1. Government re-establishes the Ministry of Gender or ensures a ministerial representation of gender at cabinet level. It is a moral imperative and social justice concern for the government to address the plight of women and young girls in order to attain sustainable development.
2. Prioritise and speed up the transformation of the agriculture sector from a net importer to a regional supplier of various commodities. Agriculture is a sector on which a majority of women depend. The sector has however been unable to support the nation's poverty eradication agenda as it remains rudimentary.
3. ERB to revert to 90 day pump price review cycles as opposed to 30 day review cycles to aid in stabilizing the pump price of fuel
4. Government through the Ministry of Local Government and Rural Development to actualise earmarked support to women empowerment through the Constituency Development Fund.
5. Government through the Teaching Service Commission to ensure gender responsiveness in the planned teacher and health professionals recruitment

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