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Agenda item 3

**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,  
political, economic, social and cultural rights,  
including the right to development**

### **Written statement\* submitted by Edmund Rice International Limited, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[31 May 2021]

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\* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



## Poverty, Women and Social Security in South Africa

### Introduction

Poverty is an ever-present concern, as well as an underlying contributor for the most prevalent forms of injustice in South Africa. Despite 27 years of “freedom”, most of the Rainbow Nation do not experience the supposed economic liberation that was promised after decades of the Apartheid system. In 2019, the World Bank officially declared South Africa the most unequal country in the world.<sup>1</sup>

It was estimated that 55% of South Africans live in poverty, while 25% experience food insecurity. This has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown, and, as a result, the World Bank, in their 2021 report, now estimate that poverty has increased to 60% in South Africa.<sup>2</sup> Many citizens suddenly faced decreased salaries, job insecurity, a lack of economic opportunities, or even sudden unemployment. It is estimated that around two million women lost their jobs since Covid-19 first hit South Africa, with women of colour being the most adversely affected group.<sup>3</sup>

### Women and Poverty

As South Africa is such a complex and diverse country, it stands to reason that South African women would share that complexity. Women still face the disproportionate burden of poverty, non-monetised care work, and limited access to education and labour opportunities in Africa.<sup>4</sup> Statistically, women-headed households in South Africa are poorer than male-headed households.<sup>5</sup> Women are also facing worrying levels of discrimination when they enter the workplace. This is not a new concern, however, it is concerning that women are still battling a widespread wage gap, as well as a lack of access to work opportunities. Women have to carry the weight of the patriarchal perception that they are considered less valuable in the labour market.<sup>6</sup>

The burden of poverty, non-monetised care work, and the lack of quality education are frequently connected. Families facing severe poverty (especially women-headed households with limited employment opportunities) often need to decide whom to send to school, and often it is the girl child that is chosen to stay at home and help the family.<sup>7</sup> Thus, the cycle of South African women in poverty, having diminished access to education and carrying the weight of non-monetised care work, continues. Therefore, gender equality

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<sup>1</sup> Scott, K. (2019). “South Africa is the World’s Most Unequal Country. 25 Years of Freedom Have Failed to Bridge the Divide”. CNN. Available: <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/05/07/africa/south-africa-elections-inequality-intl/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> World Bank. (2021). “Poverty and Equity Brief: South Africa”. Available: [https://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/poverty/987B9C90-CB9F-4D93-AE8C-750588BF00QA/AM2020/Global\\_POVEQ\\_ZAF.pdf](https://databank.worldbank.org/data/download/poverty/987B9C90-CB9F-4D93-AE8C-750588BF00QA/AM2020/Global_POVEQ_ZAF.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> Nkanjeni, U. (2020). “Two Million Women Have Lost Their Jobs Since Covid-19 Hit South Africa”. Times Live. Available: <https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-07-16-two-million-women-have-lost-their-jobs-since-covid-19-hit-sa>.

<sup>4</sup> Chiwara, L. (2017). “Situating the Maputo Protocol in Key Issues: Changing the narrative for women in Africa” in AU “Women’s Rights in Africa”. Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights 20 [https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/WomensRightsinAfrica\\_singlepages.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Women/WRGS/WomensRightsinAfrica_singlepages.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> African Monitor. (2019). “Poverty on the Rise in SA with Women and Children Mostly Affected”. Available: <https://www.africanmonitor.org/801-2/#:~:text=Statistics%20reveal%20that%20female%2Dheaded,the%20most%20vulnerable%20to%20poverty>.

<sup>6</sup> Cheteni, P, Khamfula, Y & Mah, G. (2019). “Gender and Poverty in South African Rural Areas”. 5:1 Congent Social Sciences Journal. 2.

<sup>7</sup> Mutume, G. (2005). “African women battle for equality”. African Renewal. <https://www.un.org/africarenewal/magazine/july-2005/african-women-battle-equality>.

and poverty in Africa is a complex issue that cannot be solved without understanding the intersecting issues faced by African women.<sup>8</sup> Non-monetised care work entails unrecognised hours of activities such as the care of other family members, cooking, cleaning, and childcare.<sup>9</sup> Women of colour, in poorer communities, are the main contributors to the non-monetised care economy. Women in these roles earn very little or do not earn a salary at all, and thus cannot contribute to social security mechanisms, such as pension and retirement schemes.

## The Significance of Social Security

The Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights (“Special Rapporteur”) is recommending the establishment of a global fund for social protection as a means to diminish the gap currently faced by low-income countries in providing social security for its citizens.<sup>10</sup> This would have a significantly positive effect on women living in poverty in South Africa, as there would be increased access to social security benefits.

An increased access to social security will contribute to overall poverty reduction in low-income countries. South Africa observed a temporary reduction in its overall level of poverty in the early 2000s, which was largely due to social security investments.<sup>11</sup> The Special Rapporteur noted several global, long-term benefits to social security investment, which include food security, children’s increased school attendance, and economic stimulation to name a few.<sup>12</sup>

## Concerns for South Africa

The Special Rapporteur is recommending a system through which donor countries can provide multi-year financial support to low-income countries, in order to assist them with the establishment of minimum levels of social protection for its citizens.<sup>13</sup> It is optimistically noted, that this suggestion is based on a model which encourages a natural growth cycle of social security capacity within low-income countries, instead of a dependency of low-income countries on donor countries.<sup>14</sup> However, this needs to be carefully monitored to ensure that the exploitation of low-income countries by donor countries does not develop, as the world has witnessed with past aid relationships.<sup>15</sup>

The governance of the global fund for social protection is another area for concern. The Special Rapporteur has suggested five bodies which form part of the governance team ensuring accountability and management.<sup>16</sup> However, one of South Africa’s more prevalent issues is persistent corruption, especially among top country officials, ministers, companies, and even our former president. It is estimated that South Africa has lost around 1 trillion rand (about 70 billion US dollars) to corruption, money that should have gone to alleviating

<sup>8</sup> Doubell, L. (2020). “The Allocation of Resources for the Realisation of Women’s Rights: An Analysis of Article 26(2) of the Maputo Protocol”. LLM Thesis: Stellenbosch University. 42.

<sup>9</sup> Marphatia, A & Moussié, R (2013). “A Question of Gender Justice: Exploring the Linkages Between Women’s Unpaid Care Work, Education, and Gender Equality”. 33. *International Journal of Educational Development* 85.

<sup>10</sup> Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, Olivier De Schutter, for the Forty-Seventh Session of the Human Rights Council to be held 21 June – 9 July 2021. (22 April 2021). “Global Fund for Social Protection: International Solidarity in the Service of Poverty Eradication”. UN Doc: A/HRC/47/36. Page 4.

<sup>11</sup> Cheteni, P, Khamfula, Y & Mah, G. (2019). “Gender and Poverty in South African Rural Areas”. 5:1 *Congent Social Sciences Journal*. 2.

<sup>12</sup> Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights. Page 9.

<sup>13</sup> Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights. Page 6.

<sup>14</sup> Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights. Page 13.

<sup>15</sup> Carbonnier, S & Sumner, A. (2012). “Reframing Aid in a World Where the Poor Live in Emerging Economies”. 3. *International Development Policy*.

<sup>16</sup> Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights. Page 18.

widespread poverty and inequality.<sup>17</sup> Thus, part of this plan by the Special Rapporteur needs to include the capacity-building of monitoring and evaluation bodies who will contribute to the suggested accountability mechanisms, as well as the punishment of states for the maladministration of these funds.

Poverty is an underlying cause and effect of global injustice. We are currently failing our most vulnerable groups, especially women of colour from poorer communities. These are all issues which the international community has noted and attempted to address, and we look forward to a future where they will no longer be necessary concerns.

Edmund Rice International and The Justice Desk: South Africa therefore recommend the following:

I. The Human Rights Council is requested to approve and prioritise the suggestion tabled by the Special Rapporteur, with the following concerns at the forefront:

- a. The provision of training to non-governmental and community based organisations in the significance, development and local implementation of social security and protection.
- b. To allocate resources to non-governmental and community based organisations who can assist in the implementation and monitoring of a global fund for social security.
- c. Wider recognition and the payment for work rendered by women partaking in the non-monetised care economy who desperately need access to social security.
- d. An established plan for social protection investments which would protect low-income countries from exploitation from donor countries, as well as provide recourse for any such exploitation.
- e. The provision and capacity-building of strong accountability mechanisms, as well as governance bodies to monitor implementation and curb corruption.

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The Justice Desk, South Africa, NGO(s) without consultative status, also share the views expressed in this statement.

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<sup>17</sup> SABC News. (2019). "Corruption has Cost SA Close to R1 Trillion: Ramaphosa". Available: <https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/corruption-has-cost-sa-close-to-r1-trillion-ramaphosa/>.