



Gender & Trade Network for Africa

## **Report on the Africa Social Forum**

**December 10 -14, Lusaka Zambia**

**“Another Afrika is Possible”**

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## **Introduction**

The Africa Social Forum took place in Lusaka against the backdrop of prevailing global resistance to the neo liberal agenda and scepticism of the merits of hoping that the existing social, political and economic structures will tip the balance in favour of Southern interests. The World Social Forum as a movement, is a response to the World Economic Forum [WEF] where politicians and captains of industry meet to discuss chart their global agenda. Although a few activist and prominent entertainers such as Bono and Sharon Stone have been given platforms at WEF their impact is not significant nor do they carry the voices and aspirations of the majority of dispossessed, marginalised and exploited people of the developing world.

At the time of writing the Economic Partnership Agreement [EPA], which has all encompassing implications economic and developmental for Africa, Asia and the Pacific are being coercively endorsed by the North. The preparations for the World Trade Organisation Sixth Ministerial in Hong Kong, December 2005 are well under way. Judging from the increasingly profiled experiences in Seattle and Cancun it will be highly contested battle between a pro - people, social development agenda and a neo liberal, market driven programme.

Further more the situation in Darfur, the border war between Eritrea and Ethiopia, the spectre of the recent holocaust across the Great Lakes region and the Zimbabwe issue underscore the contradictions and complexities of nationhood, sovereignty and the Afrikan identity and all that flows from this identity socially, politically, structurally and culturally.

Given this moment in history the Zambia meeting was timely indeed.

## **Themes**

The Gender and Trade Network for Africa [GENTA] participated at many ASF events and convened four teach-ins on:

- Gender and Trade
- Why women must resist EPA [session as part of Africa Trade Network]
- The Global Week of Action
- Pan Africanism in the era of Globalisation

### Gender and Trade

The session dealt with the areas of Intellectual Property [TRIPS], General Agreement on Trade in Services [GATS] and the Agreement on Agriculture.

The objective of the session was to illustrate the extent to which trade agreements are not gender neutral nor the consequences and effects flowing from them. Another issue that women in Africa need to engage with critically pertains to Intellectual Property Rights because they are the primary custodians of this knowledge.

Up to 90% of pharmaceutical remedies and drugs have their origins in indigenous knowledge and yet many of us have not benefited in any way from the exploitation or use of this knowledge. Foreigners are contesting ownership to the patent Rooibos tea in this country. African potato is another example. There are stories abound of traditional healers being arrested by North American Multi Nationals for preparing the remedies they and their forbearers have prepared for generations because the healers used patented plants and herbs. This affects women's ability to exchange and cross-pollinate seeds thus impacting on food sovereignty.

Privatisation and deregulation through Free Trade Agreements are shrinking the role of the state and leaving women and other citizens with a very limited space in which to hold state players to account. It is difficult to perceive how the GATS benefit the South when education, water, health care and other public services are being privatised and while governments, under different guises of Structural Adjustment Programmes [SAPs], are being told to reduce public spending. Children are walking up to twelve hours a day to and from school through rain and sun on empty stomachs, in this country. How will they learn and truly excel?

Women are forced to walk up to 23 km to give birth at clinics or to deliver at home or in fields sometimes with no assistance -what hope is there for safe maternal care?

Water is being privatised and pre paid metres are on the increase despite broad community disapproval. How will HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases be contained with such poor sanitation?

#### Economic Partnership Agreements

The assumption that liberalization of trade as well as other neo liberal domestic policies can address social development is problematic. In an era of market led economies and export driven production there are two casualties among many that affect women. The first relates to labour rights. Where the local market is driven by overseas consumption patterns, the pressure to produce quickly gives rise to cost cutting in wages and in basic health and safety standards seen in Export Processing Zones [EPZs]. Women are normally placed in the lowest paid jobs with poor benefits and precarious conditions of service often with no protective clothing for example. As a result women are often exposed to pesticides, toxic chemicals, to fumes in factories and suffer miscarriages, lung disease, skin cancer and even burn alive in factories which have no exit access from sunset to sunrise. The factories in Lenasia, parts of the Free State and in Lesotho among others have reported tragic incidents and the pattern is replicated across Africa. Gender segregation in the workplace will only enforce gender oppression as women get stuck in poorly paid jobs with insecure tenure. This is the contention presented by GENTA at this session.

#### The Global Week of Action-the BIG IDEA

GENTA hosted a teach in to share the 'Big Idea' with colleagues, development workers and other participants. The original notion of the global week of action was suggested at a seminar in Mumbai in January 2004. The objective of the Global Week of Action is to change lives across the globe by engaging in various activities and campaigns from 10 April - 16 April 2005. This is neither a new campaign nor an alternative to existing networks but rather the synergy of ongoing efforts, work and ideals. The aims of the Big Idea are :

1. Challenging the myth of free trade
2. Putting forward the alternative
3. Telling the stories
4. Putting pressure on governments
5. Show the scale of global movement
6. Movement building and strengthening campaigns

There were various suggestions made to make the events and campaign interesting, educational and memorable to the public. These included festivals, trade tribunals, church services, drama and plays, votes for justice etc.

#### Pan Africanism in the era of Globalisation

This session was a robust attempt to realign the current progressive spaces with the liberation ideology of many heroes of the continent such as Nkrumah, Lumumba and Cabral. The context with which they wrote and led was the pre-colonial dispensation into independence era and yet many of their struggles and insights remain relevant and astoundingly prescient. The session urged participants to critically examine political alternatives to globalisation particularly given the prevailing move towards a uni-polar world. The session posed questions about what pan Africanism means in the 21<sup>st</sup> century particularly in the light of neo-liberalism. It was noted that the menace of imperialism and neo colonialism articulated in pan Africanism is today heightened by the symbiotic interchange between economic and political interests as market led, global capital marches at an astounding pace. What does it mean for African people to integrate into the global economy? The pressure for Africa to become a united power player in global debates is increasing and not all observers are convinced that the African Union and Pan African Parliament are strong and authentic conduits for internationally propelling a pro Africa agenda. It is essential for Africa to push for alternative governance and structural models. The meeting resolved to continue the debate at the World Social Forum especially towards and at the WSF in Kenya, 2007. Also resolved to start a list serve where to debate issues.

### In Brief

GENTA participated and supported several other events including the Courts of Women where we made an input on resistance as well as being on the panel of Wise Elders. Several GENTA delegates gave testimony at the tribunals. In addition GENTA participated in the EPA activities as well as leading the closing March. Several community-based organisations were able to participate at the Africa Social Forum through GENTA's mass mobilisation.

Though there were some logistical challenges in terms of the overall organisation of the forum, we believe that GENTA made a positive contribution to the event and a significant one to the broader Social Forum Movement.