

**ISSUES OF POLITICS, ECONOMIC ACTIVITIES AND WOMEN EDUCATION AS THEY
RELATE TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA**

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Abstract

This study explained the concept of sustainable development and argued that the desire to develop the world sustainably will continue to elude the people until they factor in contemporary issues of human rights, politics, economic and education of women into the plan. It further argued that gender sensitivity and inclusion of women into sustainable development is not sentimental, but an only meaningful realistic approach to creating programmes that will live beyond the initiators because not only is the half of the African population women, but an enduring group that provide that needed stability that the development plan needs. The trend of Politics, Economic Activities and Women Education and sustainable development issues in Africa have being of great concern to the continent for many years and it will continue to be because the challenges are still present. The under-representation of women in politics all over the African nations is hindering the growth and development of the states. There is an abated poverty among the women which can be traced to the cultural beliefs which is depriving women of opportunities that could improve on their income growth. The need for women to be economically stable is crucial because the implication is development that can be sustainable for the family in particular and the continent at large. This study looks at the importance of women education and the ramification for development.

Key words: Sustainable development, Women, Politics, Education, Africa, Poverty

Introduction: The Concept Sustainable Development

Sustainable development simply asks for a plan that factors in longevity of the new systems developed and simultaneously preserving the natural habitat of man, animal and plant. UNDP, (*Human Development Report 1996*) argues that human development is expanding the choices for all people in society and they are at the centre of the development process, especially, the poor and vulnerable. Also it means "protection of the life opportunities of future generations...and...the natural systems on which all life depends" Therefore, the central purpose of development is the creation of an enabling environment in which all can enjoy long, healthy and creative lives. According to this Report, there are five aspects to sustainable human development that are affecting the lives of the poor and vulnerable. The first is *Empowerment* which calls for the expansion of men and women's capabilities and choices increases their ability to exercise those choices free of hunger, want and deprivation. This is followed by *Co-operation*, calling for sense of belonging, well-being and people working together and interacting. *Equity*, creating more capabilities and opportunities for all to access income and education. *Sustainability* which argues that the needs of today's generation must be met without compromising the right of future generations to be free of poverty and deprivation and to exercise their basic capabilities. And finally, *Security* which is concerned with the security of livelihood; freedom from threats, such as disease or repression and from sudden harmful disruptions in their lives. So, the desire to develop the world sustainably will continue to elude the people until they factor in contemporary issues of human rights, politics, economic and education of women into

the plan. The argument for gender sensitivity and inclusion of women into sustainable development is not sentimental, but an only meaningful realistic approach to creating programmes that will live beyond the initiators because not only is the half of the African population women, but an enduring group that provide that needed stability that the development plan needs. Gender concept simply means societal role assignments which is not biology and therefore subject to change due of societal demands. And what this means is that development that is relevant is the one that captures the realities in the society, and we all know today, the efforts of women in the sustenance of the society can never be overemphasized and therefore gender sensibility is a must. This article is arguing that improved political socio-economic conditions of the women of Africa will help sustain the desired development.

History of Women and Politics in Africa

Women's political participation refers to their ability to participate equally with men in all aspects of public and political life. Politics as they say is a game but notwithstanding women also have the right to participate in the politics of the nation even though they play a major role in the life of every man as it is said "behind every successful man is a woman". In Nigeria for instance, women constitute not less than 60% of voters. Stability, peace, and national prosperity can only be achieved when all the groups are properly represented – women, men, majority as well as minority groups. Most traditional cultures of non-western societies do not encourage the participation of women in political activities and this has caused a great imbalance in the political stratum of the society. A very good illustration can be sighted in the *bashingantahe* of Burundi. The exclusion of women in the judicial process was a big disadvantage to the institution although it was later decided that women be allowed to participate for better representation and proper judgment.

It is important to know that this marginalisation of women in politics is global problem as UNIFEM (2000) argues that, in both the North and South, women remain unequal to men in terms of employment opportunities, access to resources and representation. Despite an obvious presence as citizens, women stay under-represented in governing structures. With only a few exceptions, there is a marked absence of women in local decision-making processes. Women's movements that had once been dominated by organizations engaged in "developmental" activities involving income-generation, welfare concerns, and home making skills, were now witnessing the emergence of organizations that lobbied for women's political leadership, pressed for legislative and constitutional changes, and conducted civic education. The Tanzania Gender Networking Programme held a conference in 1999 on Gender and Political Empowerment, bringing together women activists and members of parliament from throughout Africa. These kinds of concerns would not have been raised in similar Africa-wide Conferences in the 1980s, although, they had been brief concerns around the time of independence when women were being introduced to the concepts of citizenship and modern electoral politics. In the 1990s women began to form political parties on their own, partly because existing parties in the multiparty context had not adequately addressed women's concerns. In many cases women had a different political vision that was not accommodated in existing parties; and in some cases, the women wanted to build more broad-based multi-ethnic and multi-religious constituencies than was impossible with existing parties. Dr. Inonge Mbikusita-Lewanika started the National Party in Zambia in 1991; Margaret Dongo began the Zimbabwe Union of Democrats in 1999; while in Lesotho, Limakatso Ntakatsane formed the party, Kopanang Basotho. Likewise in the 1990s Charity Ngilu and Dr. Wangari Maathai headed parties in Kenya; Ruth Rolland-Jeanne-Marie led a party in Central African Republic and Amália de Vitoria Pereira led an Angolan party. In Zambia, Kenya and several other countries, the reluctance of political parties to take steps to increase women's representation has led to serious discussions of the need to form a party led by women with broad based male and female constituencies.

Although rarely mentioned in studies of democratization in Africa, women's movements actively sought to participate in the political reform movements of the 1990s and in many cases found themselves the only group defying repression by the authorities. Like student, worker, human rights, and other such movements, they openly resisted corruption and repressive regimes through public demonstrations and other militant action. In Kenya, in the early 1990s women were at the forefront of protests defending imprisoned

human rights activists and found themselves in violent clashes with police. In Mali, thousands of demonstrating women and children were shot at by forces of President Moussa Traoré in a series of events that led to his downfall. Similarly, in Mauritania, police beat women protesters, injuring 40 in a human rights demonstration in August 1991. Over 150 women had staged a sit-down strike outside a paramilitary police base in Nouakchott, demanding an independent inquiry into the disappearance of hundreds of Hal-Pulaar black Mauritians who disappeared after being arrested following an alleged coup attempt 1990. Amnesty International reported that as many as 339 political prisoners were killed by Mauritanian authorities between November 1990 and March 1991. In Sierra Leone, women were the only group that openly defied soldiers as they demonstrated to demand that free elections be held when rumours began to circulate that the military might postpone the February 1996 elections (Bangura 1996 in Ruth Rubio-Marín, Pablo De Greiff, Alexander Mayer-Rieckh 2006). In Conakry, Guinea, women organized a sit-in in front of the presidential palace in a support of a 1990 general strike of workers and student demonstrations, and to protest the economic crisis which they blamed on the country's leadership.

And finally, in Niger, several thousand women demonstrated in protest of the exclusion of women representatives in the preparatory commission charged with organizing the national conference in 1991 (only one woman was included out of 68 delegates). The women marched from the national assembly to the prime minister's office, carrying banners that read: "Down with the national conference without women!" "Stop injustice!" and "Equal rights!" In the end, five women were added to the delegate list of the national conference that was part of an ill-fated democratization process.

Overall Status of Women in Africa

African

women have always been active in agriculture, trade, and other economic pursuits, but most of them are in the informal labour force. In 1985, women's shares in African labour forces ranged from 17 per cent, in Mali, to 49 per cent in Mozambique and Tanzania (World Bank, 1989). African women are guardians of their children's welfare and have explicit responsibility to provide for them materially. They are the household managers, providing food, nutrition, water, of women's groups and cooperatives which give loans and other help). Women end up working twice as long as men, 15 to 18 hours a day, but often earn only one tenth as much. With such workloads, women often age prematurely. Harrison correctly observes that: 'Women's burdens - heavy throughout the third world - are enough to break a camel's back in much of Africa' (Harrison 1983).

Female education affects family health and nutrition, agricultural productivity, and fertility, yet there is a wide gender gap in education. Lack of resources and pressures on time and energies put enormous constraints on the ability of women to maintain their own health and nutrition as well as that of their children. As a result, women are less well equipped than men to take advantage of the better income-earning opportunities that have emerged in Africa. Although food and nutrition are women's prime concerns in Africa, and they are the principal participants in agriculture, independent farming by women has been relatively neglected. Women's family labour contribution has increased but goes unpaid. In industry and trade, women have been confined to small-scale operations in the informal sector; however vibrant these operations are and despite the trading empires built up by the most successful female entrepreneurs, women's average incomes are relatively low. Women are also handicapped in access to formal sector jobs by their lower educational attainments.

Factors Militating Against Women in Politics and Decision Making

Politics and decision making have been closely guarded as men's privileged area, with the male dominated party structure and their insensitivity towards importance of women's involvement in political process. The gender insensitive masculine political culture of the region has made it difficult for women politicians to firmly establish themselves in decision making positions. Violence against women politicians has been stanching women's political growth and discouraging women to enter in political discourses. Violence against women in politics is another factor that makes it difficult for women to participate fully. Studies on women and politics have suggested a variety of possible explanations for the paucity of women

leaders and the marginalization of women in politics, including electoral systems, party systems, gender-role socialization, women's movement and political culture of violence. The status of violence against African women politicians remains a scantily explored area, and available literature on the subject mostly consists of bits of isolated studies touching only some aspect of the issue.

The intensely competitive world of men dominated politics, their patriarchal mindset and masculine model of political system, is in itself a major obstacle to women's political participation. In Africa, politics ensures status and is a lucrative source of income and power over which men desire to control. The reluctance of political parties to nominate women candidates is a crucial factor, denying women's participation in governance. Character assassination has been used intentionally and unintentionally by men, women and society as a tool to violate women politicians, forcing many women politicians to quit their political career.

The Ugandan constitution of 1994 states that a minimum of 15 per cent of persons elected to parliament and the constituent assembly are to be women. One in nine Local Government Council seats are allocated to women (Mukibi, 2000: 59). But women in parliament did not assume their increased presence would get women's issues on the government agenda. A national 'Women's Caucus' of women, youth, disabled and workers representatives, was formed to represent issues of common concern (Mukibi, 2000: 59). The constitution was rewritten in gender-neutral language as a result and equality legislation enacted. The strength of women at national level had an impact on local level politics. The 'Women's Caucus' negotiated for women to hold at least a third of the seats in local councils (Mukibi, 2000: 60). The caucus also established an organization Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE) that undertakes capacity building and training for other women wishing to become involved in decision-making processes on an ongoing basis (Mukibi, 2000: 61).

Human Rights of Women Relating to Economic Activities

The Millennium Development Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (MDG.3) is recognized not only as a goal in itself but also as an essential step for achieving all other goals. Paragraph 58 of the World Summit Outcome Document of 2005 articulates the resolution of the world leaders to eliminate pervasive gender discriminations in primary and secondary education, property and housing rights, access to reproductive health, access to labor markets, sustainable employment, and labor protection, and representation in government decision-making bodies as well as elimination of all forms of violence against women and the girl child. There is compelling evidence that gender equality and empowerment of women are instrumental for achieving other MDGs – Universal Primary Education (MDG.2), lower under-five mortality (MDG4) improved maternal health (MDG5) and lower likelihood of contracting HIV/AIDS (MDG.6) recognition that gender equality is the key in achieving other MDGs (UN Millennium Project, 2005).

Over the last three decades, gender issues and women's empowerment have received greater visibility and attention on global, regional, and country level development agendas resulting in modest and uneven attainments in most regions in general, and in Sub Sahara Africa (SSA) in particular. There are now more girls in primary and secondary schools compared to the situation of three decades ago. Countries like Botswana, Lesotho, Mauritius, Namibia, Rwanda, Swaziland and Zimbabwe have either reached or are likely to attain gender parity at primary level by 2015. At secondary level, Algeria, Botswana, Lesotho Libya, Namibia, Rwanda and Tunisia have closed the gender gap at secondary education level or are likely to attain it by 2015. Currently, six African countries have attained 30% and above (Beijing goal) representation of women in 4 national parliaments (Rwanda 48.8%, Mozambique 34.8%, South Africa 32.8 %, Burundi, 30.5 %, United Republic of Tanzania, 30.4% and Uganda 29.8 %). Women's participation in politics has gained modestly in Namibia 26.9 percent, Tunisia (22.8 %), Eritrea 22%, Senegal 22.0 % and Ethiopia 21.9 %.

Progress has also been attained in policy and legal reforms and institutional arrangements at both the regional and country levels. Some countries formulated gender policies, revising family laws or adopting new ones, revision of legal frameworks and setting up institutional structures to facilitate advancing their gender equality agendas. In some countries, new and revised constitutions make provisions for women's equal rights.

Gender Equality and Economic Development: Progress and Challenges

Women's empowerment is another term that needs clarification. Women's economic and political empowerment was adopted as one of the strategies for advancing the agenda of gender equality at the IV UN Conference on Women in 1995. The term empowerment has different meanings depending on the socio-economic, political and cultural context in which it is presented. Overall empowerment can be perceived as a process or as outcome/goal and can take place at different levels (individual and community). In discussing the relation between empowerment and poverty reduction, World Bank defines empowerment as the expansion of freedom of choice and actions and increasing one's authority and control over the resources and decisions that affects one's life (World Bank, 2001). Similarly, Kabeer (2001) sees women's empowerment as a process through which women gain the ability to take ownership and control of their lives. Key elements here are the expansion of choices and the ability to make strategic life choices (N. Kabeer, 2001 cited in DAW, 2001). Although the process of empowerment depends on women themselves involving consciousness raising, participation, and organizing themselves, it can also be facilitated through education, capacity building, training and other measures. Change has to happen in the structures and legal frameworks (family laws, property rights, etc) in order to make the self-transformation process of empowerment sustainable (Kabeer, 2001, and World Bank 2001).

Gender and Poverty

Although there is an overall agreement on the notion that men and women experience poverty differently, linking gender and poverty is a complex matter that has increasingly become the focus of analysis. The challenge of measurements methodology aside, there is ample empirical evidence that establishes the linkage between gender inequality and poverty. Cagatay (1998) argues that from a human poverty or capabilities (education and health) perspective, women are poorer in most societies. There are fundamental gender inequalities in access to and control over productive assets such as land, labour and credits, earned income as well as gender biases in the labour market that form the ground for women's enhanced vulnerability to poverty. Women's high illiteracy rate, lack of decision-making power over their fertility and early marriage of girls limit their chances of coming out of poverty. In addition, due to the disproportionate gender division of labour in the household and their increased responsibilities for domestic and productive work, women tend to be more time poor. Others argue that poverty is also related to the type of employment in which people are engaged, and the majority of the poor are in informal employment. In addition, Chen, et. Al (2002) argue that there is a closer correlation between gender, informal employment and poverty which has not been adequately explored. Women's economic empowerment is recognized as one means for reducing poverty and economic growth. Women play a significant role in African economies and are highly represented in the micro and small enterprises sub-sector. The majority of them are engaged in small income generating self-employment in agriculture and non-agricultural activities with low prospect for growth. Since women's economic well-being is linked to the development of the sectors and sub-sectors in which they operate, the following part of the paper is devoted to examining women's role in Medium Size Enterprises (MSE) and assessing the challenges and opportunities for promoting women's economic empowerment through developing the MSE.

Why and How Can Women Transform Political Leadership for Sustainable Development?

From the ancient Chinese, Indian and Greek philosophers down to the modern ones, the well-known proponents of both traditional and transformative politics have all been men. The practice of politics is also defined primarily by men. So why should women now get involved in transforming politics? Why not leave it to men as they have done before? While many arguments can be put forward as to why women need to

be active in transforming politics and leadership, I shall focus here on three major arguments. Women need to be engaged in transformative politics to promote:

- Common good
- Sustainable development
- People's, particularly women's empowerment

Women can no longer afford to be bystanders and victims of many dimensions of human insecurity--financial, political, health, personal--generated by the current state of political and governance patterns. In the last decade we have witnessed financial volatility and economic insecurity sweep through Africa which resulted in sudden loss of jobs and income, dismantling of social protection, and cut backs on education and health budget. Poor people, particularly women, bore a disproportionate burden of adjustment to the crisis. Unless women take part in local, national and global decision-making processes and structures and influence policies, they would continue to suffer as victims. Women need to redefine politics and governance and prioritize these inequities and insecurities in the political agenda. Women's participation is also necessary for sustainable development. Chronic environmental degradation threatens everybody, but more particularly it undercuts the livelihood of the poor. The consumption gap between the rich and the poor and between North and South is making the current pattern of growth increasingly unsustainable. Again, as citizens, women cannot afford to be helpless spectators of this silent crisis. To halt this process, women need to make their presence felt in politics.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the human status of women as it relates to politics, economic activities employment and the workplace, marriage (legal and traditional) and education reveal efforts at various levels that is responding to the challenges at hand more in paper than in reality. And because gender is a social construct, there is a need to deconstruct gender to factor in the need for sustainable development if we are serious about longevity of the global society that need the effective inclusion of the women contribution. Even though we have noticed some improvements in all the areas, we know that there will be fast track development in the area of education and good governance, if more women are empowered, this will go a long way in improving on the human rights promotion of the women which will in turn promote gender and sustainable development.

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