

Gender and development in Sub-Saharan Africa

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Gender refers to “social attributes and opportunities associated with being male and female”. These attributes, opportunities and relationships are socially constructed and are learned through socialization. They are context/ time-specific and changeable. Gender defines power relations in society and determines what is expected, allowed and valued in a woman or a man in a given context (UN 2006). Promoting gender equality is an important part of the development strategy that seeks to enable people, both women and men, to diminish their poverty and improve the standard of living.

Women are a cornerstone of African economic development. Approximately one-third of all rural households in Sub-Saharan Africa are headed by women (Africa and ...2005: 115). Women provide circa 70 per cent of agricultural labour and they produce circa 90 per cent of all food. Thus, women’s economic rate ranks highest in the world, compared to other regions, with the value of 61.9. However women employ mostly the

informal sector or they occupy low-skill work (Women and African...2010)

In Sub-Saharan Africa there exist several common issues, which raise concern for women in the whole region. Issues such as: female genital mutilation, the current HIV/AIDS pandemic affecting young women, bride price / early marriages, polygamy, exclusion of women from land ownership, and existing patriarchal systems.

Polygamy and female genital mutilation are still pervasive in many African countries, and FMG remains prevalent especially in rural areas and among illiterate women (www.wikigender.org/index.php/women...). In addition, it is unfortunate that some communities practicing FGM appreciate the nexus between the practice and the increase in new HIV infections especially among the girls and women who have gone through FGM (Wold Vision 2007).

When discussing about gender issues and gender and development context in Sub-Saharan Africa, cultural differences in gender roles can highlight the ways in which gender norms are socially constructed. Many studies have shown that women in Sub-Saharan Africa are more disadvantages than in any other region in the world. Research findings also from i.e. North Africa have also revealed that an African continent entails set of obstacles that prevent

women from enjoying the full range of political, civil, economic, and legal rights, although some positive development trends have been seen happening during recent years (Kelly 2010).

In many African societies and in different production systems (i.e. agricultural/pastoral) traditional roles imposed on men and women affect deeply the different aspect of gender equality and role of gender. A great deal of this situation arises from the acceptance of gender discrimination at an early age, which is also based on the traditional roles and cultural beliefs imposed on men and women. These kinds of ideas are based on that gender has a lot to do the way women and men position themselves in the society (Simonen 2009: 29, Longwe 2000: 26).

Poverty rate and low per capita GDP have also a profound impact on women's lives in Africa. This will affect women's lives by making for women reduced chances of getting good education and/or achieve higher-education; lower education level means also higher illiteracy among women than men in Sub-Saharan Africa. Generally it is known that general literacy is an important determinant of health. Africa has the literacy rate with wide disparities. For example, South Africa and Zimbabwe have a literacy rate close to 80%, while in some of the poorest countries, such as in Niger and Burkina

Faso from West Africa, only 10% of women can read and write (www.heapro.oxfordjournals.org...). In Sub-Saharan Africa the situation of women in domains such as i.e. education and health disparities are still persisting and gaps are widening particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa.

This year the 2010 Human Development Report presented the **Gender Inequality Index (GII)**, which is a new measure index to illuminate differences in the distribution of achievements between women and men. The losses in achievements such as reproductive health, empowerment and labor due to gender inequality range from 17 percent to 85 percent, larger losses are found in Arab States and South Asia (www.hdr.undp.org..) Among indicators such as maternal mortality rates and women's representation in parliaments, the GII shows that: Gender inequality varies tremendously across estimated 138 countries in the world.

The 10 **least** gender-equal countries (in descending order) are Cameroon, Côte d'Ivoire, Liberia, Central African Republic, Papua New Guinea, Afghanistan, Mali, Niger, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Yemen, with an average GII of 0.79. Seven of these countries are situated in Sub-saharan Africa. Human Development Report 2010 indicates that countries with unequal distribution of human development also experience high inequality

between women and men. It also states that countries with high gender inequality experience unequal distribution of human development. Countries doing very poorly in both gender inequality and human rights categories include the Central African Republic and Mozambique from Sub-Saharan Africa (Human development report 2010, UNDP).

Ensuring women's economic empowerment and access to control over resources will also have an impact of risen human development issues in Sub-Saharan Africa. International human rights instruments make some obligations to ensure that African women and men enjoy both the same rights (de jure and de facto rights). Such as the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights and the International Covenant of Civic and Political Rights (Lindstrom 2001: 3)..

Most fundamental convention is the CEDAW Convention and it's General Recommendations made by the CEDAW Committee and it's Article 1 of the African Charter. Another one is the African Charter adopted in 1981 and it's article 18(3), which states that *" State shall ensure the elimination of every discrimination against women and also ensure the protection of the rights of the women... stipulated in international declarations and conventions"* (www1.umn.edu/humanrts/...).

In addition, some of the Sub-Saharan African countries have their own national gender policies to promote gender equality. Countries such as i.e. Tanzania, Kenya, Namibia and South Africa have their national gender policies (Simonen 2009). Kenya has also proposed Equality Bill, year 2000, that would recognize equal pay for equal work and antidiscrimination requirements. Furthermore in all Sub-Saharan African countries gender-responsive budget initiatives can be instrumental in promoting change in budget policies and thus have a positive impact on gender equality in many African countries (UN 2009).

Gender policies have been usually framed in notions of 'gender equality' and 'the empowerment of women', and in order to set out to support women by increasing opportunities for i.e. employment, education, health and improving other basic socio-economic conditions (Tvedten & Paulo & Montserrat 2008/13, 5).

Furthermore national gender policies have often led to special legislation, which have been drafted to ensure adequate representation of women in municipal organs such as local councils (Simonen 2009). Simonen (2009) established in her study that that binding legislative measures are needed in Sub-saharan African countries' in order to ensure i.e. the representation of both sexes at local governments and promotion gender equality in different country levels.

Studies done by the IMF and World Bank, among others, suggest that countries, like in Sub-Saharan Africa, should implement economic and social policies that address and rectify gender inequality because reduced gender inequality leads to over all higher rates of economic growth (Dennis & Zuckermann 2006).

Finally taken this into account, additional solution for changed gender policies in Sub-Saharan Africa could be found from the comment of Zambian researcher Longwe (2000: 28) who expresses herself that “ *The struggle for women’s empowerment is not merely about pushing ourselves into positions of power.... it is equally about using these positions of power to release African women from their present subordination and servitude*”. This would mean ending the discriminatory practices for women in access to credit, technology, skills, and land. At country levels the most important act would be to mainstream a gender perspective for both women and men in legislation, policies and different programmes in, all areas and all levels (UN Doc 1997).

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Appendix:

Millenium development goals (MDG's) were adopted in September 2000 by the 189 United Nations member countries. The Millenium Declaration have had eight goals, the MDG's by 2015 to

- 1) Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
 - Reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than a dollar a day.
 - Reduce by half the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.
- 2) Achieve universal primary education
 - Ensure that all boys and girls complete a full course of primary schooling.
- 3) Promote gender equality and empower women
 - Eliminate disparity in primary and secondary education preferably by 2005, and at all levels by 2015.
- 4) Reduce child mortality
 - Reduce by two thirds the mortality rate among children under five.
- 5) Improve maternal health
 - Reduce by two thirds the maternal mortality ration.
- 6) Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases
 - Halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS
 - Halt and begin to reverse the

incidence of malaria and other major diseases.

7) Ensure environmental sustainability

- Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes; reverse loss of environmental resources.
- Reduce by half the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water.
- Achieve significant improvement in lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers, by 2020.

8) Develop a global partnership for development

- Develop further an open trading and financial system that is rules-based, predictable and non-discriminatory, includes a commitment to good governance, poverty reduction
- nationally and internationally
- Address the least developed countries' special needs. This includes tariff- and quota-free access for their exports; enhanced debt relief for heavily indebted poor countries; cancellation of official bilateral debt; and more generous official development assistance for countries committed to poverty reduction.
- Address the special needs of landlocked and small island developing states.
- Deal comprehensively with

developing countries' debt problems through national and international measures to make debt sustainable in the long term.

- In cooperation with developing countries, develop decent and productive work for youth.
- In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries.
- In cooperation with the private sector, make available the benefits of new technologies - especially information and communications technologies.