

The Forgotten and Underrated Factor in Poverty Reduction: Women Empowerment in Enterprises, Farms, and Governance in Africa

By

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INTRODUCTION

For over two decades now, a consensus seems to have gradually formed in terms of accounting for Africa's poverty levels with regards to the role women and man can play in reducing the same. Despite this confluence in academic, political, and socio-economic thought, it was hoped that gender equality, through gender mainstreaming, would henceforth form a key cornerstone in the struggle against poverty in all its forms across policy-making and policy implementation in 21st century Africa. However, emerging is a worrying cross-sectional overview that in terms of ensuring fighting poverty, it is highly possible that gender equality was only embraced as tokenism and not as a robust tool to move Africa forward. This paper attempts to show the link between gender inequality and low productivity levels on farms and enterprises as well as weak development policies. Central to the argument is that despite calls for gender mainstreaming, the catchy language of gender equality has merely remained at the rhetorical level usually louder during election campaigns and other selected politically motivated posturing. African leaders have continued to treat the crisis confronting the continent within the limiting confines of a combination of numerous internal and external economic, political and financial factors. While these factors have undoubtedly played a role, I wish to expose that the unattended gender inequalities in agriculture, enterprises as well as governance are as deadly and continue to wreck havoc and throwing spanners into the poverty-reduction works.

Because of their acknowledged traditional marginalised status, the important dimensions of meaningful women empowerment in Africa must include economic, social, physical and psychological empowerment. Women's general well being in Africa cannot be divorced from the well being of the household, including the level of food security. This whole discussion, hereunder, though proving the case for women empowerment, has to be contextualised within the whole gender gamut of typical African societies where patriarchal values and attitudes still dominate both public and private life. Gender inequality in general and women's history in Africa is essentially the long story of women's discrimination, their subordination and segregation spanning pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times.

For conceptualization purposes, it is well to note that the term gender should not be misconstrued to refer to women alone. The entire concept of gender needs to be understood as a crosscutting and socio-cultural variable. Gender refers to what is expected in a man or woman, boy or girl and this has been invariably used to determine the gender systems of many societies. Gender, therefore, refers to both men and women and most importantly, the relations between them. Celebrated gender scholar, Ruth Meena defined it as "the socio-cultural construction of men and women in a given historical context. Gender assigns men and women different roles and responsibilities, power position, rights and privileges...Gender is learnt through the socialization process and culture of a given society".¹ The same views are shared by Chinkin, who however adds that, "unlike sex, which refers to the biological and physical characteristics, gender roles depend on a particular socio-economic, political and cultural context".²

One can, however, turn to de Bruyn, who comprehensively defines gender as:

the widely shared expectations and norms within a society about appropriate male and female behavior, characteristics and roles, which ascribe to men and women differential access to power, including productive resources and decision-making authority.

¹ R. Meena, "Conceptual Issues Of Gender in Southern Africa", in I. Mandaza (ed) Governance And Human Development In Southern Africa: Selected Essays, SAPES Trust, Harare, 1998, p119

² C.C.Chinkin, "Gender Management System Series: Gender Mainstreaming in legal and constitutional Affairs: A reference Manual for Governments and the Stakeholders, Commonwealth Secretariat, London, 2001", p11

Gender roles vary over time and by class, caste, religion, ethnicity and age.³

Armed with this important contextual and operational understanding, it is clear from the foregoing, therefore, that the term gender does not refer to women alone. By the same token, as germane phrases, neither gender mainstreaming nor gender equality equal women empowerment. However, the empowerment of women in the African context is an essential pre-requisite to eradicating current gender inequalities.

Whilst gender equality does not translate to developing separate and abstract women's projects within work programmes or even women's components within existing activities, the case for Africa is that women have traditionally been marginalised and genuine and deliberate steps must be taken to make them active participants and not passive recipients of development policies from their male counterparts for it has basically been a "man's world". Policy-makers, government officials, economists, commentators, among other colorful professionals are fond of blaming Africa's condition on high-sounding economic bottlenecks including, but not limited to poor market access, armed conflict, brain drain, an unfair world trade regime, sanctions (Zimbabwe), and globalisation among others. In analyzing the contributions of women in agricultural production, reproductive roles, enterprises and indeed in the face of the HIV/AIDS pandemic vis-à-vis gender inequality, this discussion will attempt to show that poverty in Africa has also been exacerbated by the marginalisation of women in decision-making processes in virtually all areas of development which has made it difficult to achieve meaningful economic progress.

As far back as the 1980s decade, it had already been realized and recognized that women in traditional agricultural settings contributed more to food production and family earnings in skilled labour and entrepreneurship than is generally known or accepted.⁴ Resource economists and development experts recognize the enormous contribution women make to food production on the farms as well as its marketing in Africa. Women and girls toil long hours in the fields, tend domestic livestock and vegetable gardens, pick fruit, gather fuelwood, prepare and cook food. Women work long hours than men: an average thirteen hours more each week in Africa and in Uganda, they work more than twice as

³ M de Bruyn, "A Gender-Based Approach to advancing Women's Social Status and Position", in *Advancing Women's Status: Gender, Society and Development. Women and Men Together*, Royal Tropical Institute, Amsterdam, 1995, pp11-20

⁴ Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), *Women In Developing Agriculture*, UNFAO, Rome, 1985, 1

long, fifty hours per week compared to men's twenty-three hours.⁵ This should be sufficiently enough to show that women are crucial in poverty reduction in Africa. Yet most countries do little to encourage women farmers;

Agricultural investment and technical assistance policies assume that recipients are men, and landholding and inheritance practices are biased in their favour⁶

Women are frequently offered little support since they are not in control of the relevant political and economic structures and institutions. Unless women are placed at the center of efforts to increase food production, vital opportunities to meet Africa's present and future needs as well as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will surely be missed.

Governments have indirectly (or unknowingly) lowered productivity in agriculture as they drag their feet when it comes to awarding women land rights, despite the fact that they are at the forefront of food production. As food producers and food providers, women ought to have equal access to education and training, extension services, technologies and credit as well as equal rights to land tenure and inheritance. Despite severe constraints, women provide much of the food grown for home consumption in Africa but because the bulk of their production is in the "informal sector" (e.g. urban subsistence agriculture) it is thus excluded from food production statistics. Much of this food comes from shrinking and fragmented farmsteads, backyard gardens, even abandoned lots in the middle of cities.⁷ Women and land constitute a significant, actually very serious food security issue in Africa. However, because of gender inequalities on farms, most of the tasks women do are not defined as work, as they are not assigned monetary value.

This is also true with regards to women's vital enterprises ... they are not accounted for in the national statistics. The contribution of women in the GNP of their respective countries is not recognized.⁸ One notes that in Africa, when it comes to their participation in the formal sector, women employment is lower than that of their male counterparts. Even at the top levels of employment, there are still few

⁵ UNFPA, "Food for the Future: Women, Population and Food Security", UNFPA, New York, 2001, 6

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ *ibid*

⁸ R. Meena, "Gender Research/ Studies in Southern Africa: An Overview" in R. Meena (ed), Gender in Southern Africa: Conceptual and Theoretical Issues, SAPES, Harare, 1992, p14

highly educated women in fields such as law, politics, medicine, engineering and other professions. Of these few, most of them are from prominent families and hardly represent the possibility of upward mobility for a brilliant girl from the ordinary background⁹. Accordingly, R. Meena's prediction that the problem of malnutrition in most of rural Africa will continue unless issues of gender inequity in access to factors of production are adequately addressed has turned out to be true.

Despite being the critical mass in food production, in much of Africa, women are practically barred from inheriting property. Even when there are no males left in the immediate family, the land often passes by custom to a male relative. The systematic neglect of women farmers has marginalised their activities and contributed to the 'feminization of poverty'. It should therefore not come as a surprise that the gender inequality in agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa is partly responsible for the failure to increase food production in line with population growth.

Although African women produce 80-90% of all food consumed...
and comprise 60% of the agriculture labour forces, they receive less
than 1% of the total credit available to agriculture.¹⁰

It therefore stands to reason that the perpetuation of gender inequality in African agriculture is silently responsible for the food insecurity making the goal of poverty reduction and economic advancement a mammoth task.

Sustainable development takes a gender-based approach, in which development planning is sensitive and takes into consideration gender roles, relationships and gender practices.¹¹ Only gender equality will strengthen governance and result in effective development policies. According to N. Zakharova, there is considerable evidence that the labour intensive food production practices of women tend to be more environmentally sound and could...both increase food production and protect the resource base. In Nigeria, agricultural extension workers made extra efforts to reach to women farmers, with the result that yields on small farmsteads are beginning to show some improvement. In Kenya, the government began to officially work with rural women's groups, as it had been realised that indeed more farmers

⁹ J.I. Guyor, "Women's Role In Development", in R.J. Borg and J.S Whitaker (eds), Strategies for African Development, University of California Press, London, 1986, p397

¹⁰ UNFPA, "Food for the Future: Women, Population and Food Security", p7

¹¹ East and South African Management Institute, "Mainstreaming Gender in Development Planning and Project Management", Mombasa, 1998, p6

could be reached this way, at half the cost!. This strategy has paid off as Kenyan women did not only come to be part of the Kenya's National Social Conservation programme, but

Since the mid-1980s, women have terraced more than 360 000 small farms, or 40% of the country's total. Rural collectivities run by women are now getting bank loans and agricultural extension services¹²

The notion, therefore, that gender equity results in effective development policies is true, as examples of the foregoing have shown. In fact, since women produce most of the food consumed throughout Africa, it has been convincingly argued that issues related to environmentally sustainable land use are often central to their lives.

Gender inequalities indeed increase poverty as failure to give prominence to women responsibilities at the expense of men's results in wrong or unsustainable policies. Men tend to produce crops for cash, or hire out their labour. Much of the cash is not used to buy food for the household but is largely spent on pleasurable errands like liquor and friends. As earlier on alluded to, the bulk of the work on food produced for family and local consumption falls on women. In sub-Saharan Africa, women grow and sell 80 – 90% of this food.¹³ As of 2001, the UNFPA stated that if women's work in and around the house were monetized, the International Labour Organisation (ILO) reckons their collective contribution to the world economy would easily top \$4 trillion per year.¹⁴ A study by Z. Bader in Zanzibar revealed that after a land reform following the revolution in Zanzibar and Pemba which ended the feudal system, land was essentially distributed to the "family patriarch" and women never participated in the decisions leading to land reform. This resulted in the tendency to over-emphasize cash crop production (cloves) because men control cash income from the sales of cash crops.¹⁵ This automatically leads to low food crops vital for the household's consumption needs in a predominantly and essentially non-cash rural economy.

The development process in much of Africa has been based on what McFadden aptly considers to be a sexist definition of development. It is therefore not surprising that most countries' economies have been on a freefall especially after the introduction of the disastrous Structural Adjustment Programmes

¹² UNFPA, "Food for the Future: Women, Population and Food Security", p12

¹³ *ibid*, 6

¹⁴ *ibid*

¹⁵ R. Meena, "Gender Research/ Studies in Southern Africa: An Overview", p14

(SAPs) from the 1980s, which even led to an insurmountable increase of the burden on women who had to devise ways of sustaining families in the face of worsening economic situations especially in countries like Zambia and Zimbabwe. Yet this was a wonderful opportunity at awakening to the importance of involving women and men's concerns in development planning which would subsequently increase the prospects of engendering national budgets. Women have at worst been sidelined from conceiving development models and restricted to playing a rather subdued, peripheral and trivial role. On its part,

Empowerment that results in women owning means of production (land, skills, capital, entrepreneurship) can therefore be effected through targeted budgetary allocations and this will surely reduce poverty¹⁶

For the budget to become an instrument of fighting the scourge that is poverty, it must be restructured towards a more developmental role. And development cannot thrive in an environment that wastes more than half of its human resource base without any meaningful avenues to provide its intellectual input in the efforts of conceptualizing poverty reduction models.

Engendering governance, which results in both women and men sharing key decision-making roles, is a must if the fight against poverty in Africa is to score significant points. This discussion has already alluded to the fact that women are the backbone of agriculture production yet their usefulness in poverty alleviation seems to be trivialized by politicians. All this is a result of gender inequality in governance where women are not meaningfully represented in key decision-making positions. Those women who happen to be in the top echelons of political leadership have largely let their folk down, as they are basically co-opted in political window-dressing manouvres, with the apparent and inevitable consequence that those women largely serve the interests of the men who appointed them. This explains why development policies, despite the existence of some mixture of the sexes in the highest offices of states and nations continue to be gender- blind in the 21st Century resulting in difficulties in fighting poverty.

¹⁶ G. Kanyenze, "Engendering Budgets in the Zimbabwean Context" in D. Bundlender (ed), Engendering Budgets: The Southern African Experience, UNIFEM, Harare, 1999, p39

Most Gender ministries however named, especially in countries still ruled by ex-liberation war political parties continue to be located within the ambit of ruling political parties' "Women's Leagues". To that end, poor, depoliticised, illiterate rural women, whose class interests are hardly represented by the middle-class women who make up most of female representatives at both local and national government levels, continue to sing the blues. They are under tremendous stress throughout their lives because no one seems to pay attention to, or, understand their specific interests, problems and challenges. For example,

The cycle of frequent pregnancies and increasing child-care demands diminish their capacity to pay attention to nutrition, sanitation and hygiene or take advantage of rural development programmes...¹⁷

As Morna et al (1992) noted, when women are too exhausted (or ill) to work well, food production suffers, contributing to malnutrition and hunger. The opportunity to boost women's efficiency in production of goods and services for household consumption through spirited and genuine improvement of women's health and nutrition is being missed everyday as the 2015 MDG dream beckons.

As they are the largest food producers, it should not be difficult to fathom that there is an important, actually vital nexus between women's reproductive rights and poverty reduction in Africa. Gender inequality as manifested in national plans, and moreso specifically financial considerations, are very defective as they ignore labour that is involved in producing human life. To that end, the concept of democracy will only assume true and dynamic significance when political parties and national legislation are decided upon jointly by men and women with equitable regard for the interests and aptitudes of both halves of the (African) population.¹⁸

In much of Africa, women find themselves the *de facto* heads of households for much of the year due to high male mobility within and without national borders in search of employment opportunities or the so-called "greener pastures". The economic malaise in Zimbabwe, for example, has displaced many men in the productive age group to seek wage labour in mainly neighbouring South Africa, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia and Swaziland. Women have thus ventured into enterprises and are active participants in

¹⁷ UNFPA, "Food for the Future: Women, Population and Food Security", p14

¹⁸ M. Chidzonga, "The Impact of Constitutional and Parliamentary Reforms on the Making of an Engendered Budget", in D. Budlender (ed), Engendering Budgets: The Southern African Experience, UNIFEM, Harare, 1999, p42

informal trading such as cross-border trade, “forex dealing”, and formation of women’s clubs, selling wares among various other forms of survival. Another significant statistic is that there is a general increase in female-headed and child-headed households (headed mainly by girls) in Africa. By the turn of the century, already

22% of sub-Saharan African households (were) women-headed. In some parts of West Africa up to 60% of all households are headed by women... The percentage of women’s heads of households seems to be rising¹⁹

Recent research on women-headed households has markedly revealed improved household diets, especially for children under-five. In Rwanda, female-headed households consume 377 more calories/person/day when compared to male-headed households; in the Gambia, they add 322 more calories/day to family diets.²⁰ Research has also shown that female-dominated households in Kenya have significantly lowered incidences of diarrhoea among pre-schoolers than children from male-dominated households. This is ample evidence that women should be given so much support in their various entrepreneurial activities because their contribution to household and ultimately national nutrition is of national importance. Gender inequalities, therefore, only serve to reduce their effectiveness, lowering prospects not only of reducing poverty, economic progress or weakening of a country’s governance, but probably more fatally, ineffectiveness of development policies. Given the previous failure of models, which have ignored women’s perspectives, it is irrational to continue marginalizing these perspectives in development thought in the 21st Century.

In the face of the catastrophe that is HIV/AIDS, gender inequalities in governance have the crude and fatal potential to negatively affect the effectiveness of sub-Saharan Africa’s development policies. In Zimbabwe for instance, the public health delivery system is collapsing such that it has joined its patients in the intensive care unit owing, but not limited to critical shortages of drugs and personnel as well as very low morale among the available human resource. Consequently, Home-Based Care (HBC) has increasingly become the only viable alternative, and in this regard, the burden has shifted from the state to women. Because their socially sanctioned role is of a mother and homemaker, women dominate home-based care; they take care of their ailing sons, daughters, sisters, brothers, husbands, aunts,

¹⁹ UNFPA, “Food for the Future: Women, Population and Food Security”, p14

²⁰ *ibid*

cousins, granddaughters and grandsons. Indeed, Ezilyn Sibanda has correctly noted that as in all situations of crises, wars, (and) civil strife e.t.c women tend to bear the brunt of social destabilization.²¹ In Africa, AIDS is no longer a health issue alone but now a development one as it is wrecking havoc on African economies but because of gender inequality epitomized in governance, governments have dithered in integrating women into the mainstream of HIV/AIDS management, yet the social responsibility of women has increased markedly not only in view of the pandemic, but the collapsing social fabric of society. States must work to ensure women's equal participation in all facets of the response to the pandemic at the local, regional, national and international levels.²²

This discussion concludes that since women are active and most importantly key players in the development process in general and poverty reduction in particular, gender inequalities on farms, enterprises and governance will surely have negative repercussions on progress. There are enough lessons already that general economic empowerment minus deliberate and strategic women empowerment is not sufficient in lowering incidences of poverty. A people-oriented poverty-reduction strategy will have to take much greater note of the role of women. Africa can hardly achieve the Millennium Development Goals so long as part of its important economic players are marginalised and suffer discrimination. Political authorities will do well to move beyond rhetoric. It is vital to recognize, appreciate and meaningfully encourage, and not to overlook the important role women play in development. Their involvement should start from the policy formulation stages right through to monitoring and evaluation processes. The saying goes, "When you empower a woman, you empower communities; when you empower men, you empower individuals".

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²¹ E. Sibanda, "AIDS in Zimbabwe: Crisis in Rural Development", in P. McFadden (ed), Southern African Feminist Review (SAFERE), Vol. 3 No. 1, SAPES, Harare, 1998, p37

²² UNIFEM, Turning the Tide: CEDAW and the Gender Dimensions of the HIV/AIDS Pandemic, New York, 2001, p30

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