

FOR A BETTER AFRICA, AFRICAN WOMEN ARE NEEDED (An insight into women participation in Government)

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Abstract: *Women represent half the population of Africa; this study examines the role of African women in government and in the sustenance of democracy in Africa. It elicited their challenges, experiences and contributions to the democratic process. Strategies that can assist women realize their political leadership potentials were proffered. Although they are considered internationally as one of the main pillars of economic development, they have suffered from an unjust social heritage in addition to discriminatory practices both in terms of gender equality in government and societal ranking. African women experience some of the worst conditions of living in the world. Not surprisingly, efforts aimed at addressing this phenomenon and designing a roadmap for development in Africa have not only stimulated interesting scholarly debates but also have informed different developmental approaches on women over the years. Therefore, we seek to address the issue of African women's role in government and economic development. To overcome these problems, the study recommended amongst others, the development of electoral reforms that promote equitable representation of women and respect for due process. Empowerment of women by ensuring their access to credit facilities was proffered. The study concluded that the institutionalization of varieties of special mechanisms is most needed in increasing women's participation in government for a better Africa.*

Key Words: *African Women, Politics, Gender Inequality, Governance, and Economic Empowerment.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

This paper appraises African women's contribution to the development of the continent, and puts them in the proper historical perspective alongside their counterparts in other parts of the world. Women's involvement in politics varies throughout the world and their participation in politics and the democratic process has become an integral part of contemporary discourse on development and governance. In spite of the clamor for women's political empowerment by international organizations, research consistently shows that in many parts of the world women still linger on the fringes of political realm and their participation in government structures and the democratic process remains low. Therefore, African women suffer from social and economic insecurity, living under severe psychological and economic pressures as a result of bearing the brunt of family affairs. The social and economic role of women in the African continent differs from country to country or from region to region. The role of women in North African countries differs from East and West Africa, as well as from Central and South Africa, although women in their content and entity do not change, and by following the various African mechanisms and measures. On the subject of women, the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa, annexed to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights adopted by the General Assembly of Heads of State and Government of the African Union, stated at its second ordinary summit in the Mozambican capital of Maputo that women have full The Protocol urged States parties to take all appropriate measures to integrate a gender perspective into national development planning processes, to ensure the participation of women at all levels in the formulation and implementation of development policies and programs, and to implement and evaluate such policies and programs.

The widespread feeling among some of the region's leading women's organisations is that the political, economic and cultural environment is not always conducive to the substantial and efficient participation of women, as well as to the formulation of the issues affecting them. The introduction of gender quotas did not necessarily result in the adoption of gender-responsive policies; nor did they result in the modification of the socio-economic status of women at all levels of society. The institutionalization of achievements, and the transformation of power relations within institutions and political systems in order to make them more gender responsive, are issues central to the question of women's political activeness in the region. The same applies to the topics of culture and traditions, which have a

significant impact on the participation of women, while the lack of access and control of resources, as well as insufficient economic power are key factors in the exclusion of women from the political arena.

There is still much social and institutional neglect of members of the female gender in many parts of Africa with the net effect that they continue to be poorer, work longer hours, receive less effective medical attention, die more during childbirth than their peers elsewhere, and experience less access to education, political power, and employment. Bearing these in mind, this article offers a review of the literature on the major approaches on women and development in Africa. Its major objective is to demonstrate the extent to which the scholarly environment has achieved a bit of success in providing a foundation for the establishment of institutional mechanisms for women empowerment, and how the resultant mechanisms have not been well implemented in Africa as a result of institutional and societal constraints. As a consequence in several parts of the world, electoral quotas became part of women's movements' agendas for political change and the number of women participating in national legislatures has undoubtedly increased. However, experiences of women's participation in parliaments have shown that merely relying on getting women into government through election processes is not enough to change conditions of gender inequality, especially when gender inequality is deeply rooted in the private sphere. To foster governance that actively promotes gender equality, what is needed is a far more conscious attempt by women in the state to set an agenda for change and to follow through with policy impacts, as well as for the development of stronger accountability mechanisms and processes between state and civil society.

Women in pre-colonial Africa like their counterparts the world over, largely participated in political, economic and social activities at the level which opportunities in their societies permitted them. But some women rose to positions of political, economic and social relevance from which they provided Leadership not only to their fellow women, but also the common run of men. For example, In Nigeria, there are several examples. For instance, during the reign of Oba Esigie of Benin his mother, Queen Idia organised series of successful war exploits in defense of the throne for her son. In fact, during the war with Ida she sent men from Uselu captained by her head slave, who fought bravely, and killed the general of the Ida army. Consequently, Oba Esigie abolished the ritual killing of Queen-Mother during the coronation ceremony of her son, the heir apparent. Again, In Angola, Queen Warridor Nzinga of the Jugas resisted Portuguese incursion into her territory. It was after her death that they took over Angola. In Ghana, Yaa-Asantewa (1863-1923) fought against the British invasion of her territory. However, she finally gave her life in a bid to save her people. In Dahomey (Benin Republic), the Amazon (female soldiers) fought bravely and alongside male soldiers in defence of their country. In Zimbabwe, the priestess/spirit-medium Mbueja Nehenda mobilized her people and fought the British when the Shona were invaded. She was executed by hanging by the British for resisting imperial authority. The above examples point to the non anti-feminist picture of many indigenous African groups as opposed to the painted by anti-feminist and non-African writers. The reality is that some women broke through traditional barriers to attain positions which enabled them influence policy decisions. However, many women belonged to the common classes.

2. Why women's participation in decision-making in Africa is important ? :

Women's participation in decision-making is not only advantageous for women themselves, but for development and democracy in general. The agreed conclusions on "the equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes" adopted by the fiftieth session of the Commission on the Status of Women assert "that without the active participation of women and the incorporation of women's perspectives at all levels of decision-making, the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved, and that women's equal participation is a necessary condition for women's and girls' interests to be taken into account and is needed in order to strengthen democracy and promote its proper functioning." Christine Gisuku Njeru from Kenya provided a specific example of women legislators acting on behalf of other women: "It was not until a woman (nominated member Hon. Njoki Ndungu) moved the House that a Sexual Offences Law was finally enacted in 2006." Rwanda provides another example, where a gender-based violence bill was introduced into the parliament in August 2006 only after women were elected to nearly 50 per cent of seats in the lower house. 31. Some participants pointed out those women have a different approach, a more consultative or cooperative leadership style. Participant John Peter Amara from Sierra Leone alluded to this different approach: "Nations that exclude women from decision-making or are content with low levels of participation by women are not only unwisely and unnecessarily depriving themselves of a rich reservoir of talent, experience and wisdom, they are also missing out on the qualitatively different approach that women bring to the decision-making process." There was no consensus on this point, however. Some participants argued that women are not qualitatively different; once they achieve national-level leadership posts, they govern and act as men. Others felt that women politicians too easily forgot their roots and their female constituents. Kavulani Lukalo writing from the UK about Kenya warned, "Unless women politicians are ready and willing to make their presence felt ... they become part of an elitist social class." One argument suggests that women must be represented in numbers large enough to achieve critical mass in order to have an impact on the institutions in which they serve. If women are present in large numbers, they will be

able to have an impact and govern differently. For others, women's participation is a matter of human rights. As Marie Louise Pambu from Democratic Republic of the Congo put it, *"Every citizen has the right to enjoy fundamental rights and fulfill responsibilities ... how I hope that one day women will create a vital space for their leadership, which is in fact a duty of citizens!"* She cites the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women and Security Council Resolution 1325 (2000) on women, peace and security to support her case that women have a right to participate in the leadership of her country.

In spite of these obstacles some African women influenced political affairs. For example, Madam Tinubu of Lagos and Abeokuta and Omu Okwei of Ossomari (Nigeria) influenced political affairs as a result of the great economic importance of their wealth. But Ahebi Ugbabe of Ogruke in Enugu-Ezike, Nsukka, was made a warrant chief by the Britain Colonial administration in Nigeria, As a member of the Native court, her role precisely was to arbitrate in all the disputes between women and not to act in the capacity of men. In spite of everything, some African women participated actively in the modern nationalist movement which culminated in political independence. For instance, Constance A. Cummings-John of Sierra Leone was elected to the Free town Municipal Council in 1938 in a colonial governing body, under the auspices of the West African Youth League which she was one of the founders. She was also the first general secretary of the league of colored people in Sierra Leone. In 1951, with her network of leading market women she established the Sierra Leone Women's Movement which played a leading role in the struggle for self-government.

3. Challenges and priorities for African women leaders :

Often, the leadership function focuses on prioritizing, in the face of limited resources. For this reason, women leaders in Africa need to focus on priority areas likely to impact women's participation in the Vision 2063 process. A key goal here should be: "Achieving gender parity in education". The active participation of women in the AU Vision 2063 requires renewed effort to deal with the factors that discourage girls from education. The strong patriarchal cultures in many countries make women subordinate to men making it impossible for them to participate in public life, leadership and decision making. In many Countries the Political arena is largely dominated by Men contrary to the Universal Declaration on Democracy and the Beijing platform for action. Women struggle to feed families owing to prescribed Gender roles so most of them don't wish to add more responsibility.

- **Lack of Supervision of Productive Resources such as Land and Property** Although accurate data are lacking, but it is estimated that women own less than 2% of land in Africa. It is clear that the lack of a commercial building or farm is a major impediment to women's economic progress. In many areas, women are robbed of land as a result of custom. For example, in Uganda, while women are allowed to own land that grows and receive their wages directly, the reality is quite different. When their husbands die or after divorce, most lose their property, Then, to her husband's husband, as custom takes precedence over the law and many women are robbed of the right to own land, although 80% of Ugandan women are agricultural workers, only 7% own their land. Which is considered an unfair challenge to women in Africa.
- **The Absence of Peace and Security** As peace and security are the basic conditions that all people aspire to and deserve to have because everyone is looking forward to happiness and better quality of life free from poverty and humiliation, but during the last three decades, the Eid of African countries suffered from the absence of internal peace, where Millions of Africans have been victims of persecution practiced by states and their rulers, as well as flagrant violations of human rights and frequent civil wars. And the transformation of human and material resources into wars and internal security, which has prevented attention to development and issues of equality between men and women in many African countries, which negatively affected the social and economic situation of women in Africa.

4. Role of women in light of the challenges and opportunities. :

Given the above challenges and opportunities, women leaders need to re-think their approach to leadership and governance. There are opportunities for faster transformation once new approaches to issues like gender equality, women empowerment are considered. The need to define the role of men in the process of the AU Vision 2063 should be given the urgency it deserves. Although Women remain significantly underrepresented in the different leadership positions, it's important to look beyond the numbers and focus on what women Leaders can actually accomplish while in those positions and how they can make a positive impact. What identifies us as women Leaders is not the lack of challenges but the capacity to address such challenges and Addressing the gaps that hinder full participation is key, The AWPS(**African women progress scorecard**) measures government policy performance regarding women's advancement and empowerment and tracks government progress in ratifying, implementing and monitoring relevant conventions and documents on gender equality and women's rights including CEDAW; the Women's Protocol of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights, the BPFA and the ICPD. The AWPS is composed of four blocs:

women's rights, social power 'capabilities', economic power 'opportunities' and political power 'agency'. The scoring for each indicator is done on a three-point scale: **0** for a zero performance, **1** for a poor to fair performance and **2** for a good to excellent performance.

4.1 Opportunities for African women Leaders: Using a neglected opportunity to partner with men, an overarching theme of AU vision 2063 is the need to promote inclusive development in all areas, principally referring to equal participation based on gender. However, whereas the AU Vision 2063 has strong statements on how women and youth should participate in the process, there is no specific mention on how men will participate in the plan. This is a weakness that needs correction in future versions of the plan. Neglecting direct mention of the role of men in the plan may be a result of what some may see as a radical feminist approach to development, where gender conflict has more often than not been used as a strategy instead of promoting gender unanimity. Helping men to embrace gender equality as an important aspect of the development process needs to be brought at the centre of every development effort. It would cost less, if men became champions of women's emancipation with the African family setting. African women have not been able to benefit from investment and the expansion of trade in agricultural products due to the obstacles faced in terms of limited access to productive resources (land, credit, transport, extension services etc). This paper looks specifically at investment and trade policies in the context of the overarching theme of the meeting: 'Investment for Growth and Development'. Women produce up to 80% of basic food stuffs – but a survey of credit schemes in 5 African countries found that they received less than 10% of the credit given to male small-holders. It has been calculated that agricultural productivity could increase by up to 20% if women's access to such resources as land, seed and fertilizer were equal to men's.

5. Ways to contribute to improving the socio-economic status of women in Africa and their economic empowerment

1. Reviewing legal and environmental frameworks and preparing programs that facilitate access to loans, financing and support for women in small and micro enterprises and the informal sector through special programs, as well as by encouraging strong linkages from the industrial sector and reviewing and harmonizing licensing procedures for formal sector projects.

2. Building a women's coalition to visit educated women, organizing workshops and lectures to raise awareness about the importance of women's role and participation in national activities.

3. To increase women's economic opportunities by expanding women's fields of work in the sense of making markets a place for women's success at the policy level, and enabling women to compete strongly in markets in terms of the ability to define strategic options and resources, the human capacity factor is the fundamental concept of the development process. The economic opportunity available to women is not limited to their capacity, but is commensurate with and supportive of these capabilities for the benefit of all.

4. Increasing the participation of women in decision-making and economic policy-making positions. The effectiveness of their participation gives them the opportunity to influence the decisions taken in their favor. The result is likely to be achieved when a large number of women attend. In shaping the country's policies, albeit with a limited role that changes social perceptions of women's decision-making capacity, encourages further initiatives and establishes women's cooperatives, giving women more opportunities to do business outside the home.

5. Establish competitive programs in Africa, namely East Africa, West Africa, North Africa and South Africa, to ensure gender mainstreaming in key policy areas such as investment, trade, employment, skills, entrepreneurship and conflict-affected economies.

6. The promotion of the participation and promotion of African women in business federations is an important platform for advocacy. Trade unions are at the crossroads of three key mechanisms for improving women's business opportunities: the provision and exchange of information and knowledge, particularly on economic rights, Advocacy for reforms educates and influences decision-makers, builds partnerships among stakeholders to share experiences and strategies, and maximizes women's voices in policy-making.

Therefore, promoting women's business federations is crucial, so that to assist its members in improving business practices, improving performance and playing a more active role in policy dialogue and lobbying for reforms. Therefore, in order to achieve sustainable development and poverty eradication in Africa, all government policies and the private sector in African countries must recognize the role of women in development and economic life by providing legal mechanisms and gender equality on the ground and ending the state of marginalization suffered by African women. Therefore, the fact that African women participate in the development of the continent requires their participation in activities and the management of resources, as well as in training workshops, to be allowed and encouraged to establish

associations and federations to ensure their opportunities for economic empowerment and access to the world of work and private enterprises through which Make African women a role in development.

6. CONCLUSION:

The inequality between men and women, whether in the educational, social, economic, administrative and political aspects, and social traditions and customs are the strongest obstacles to the economic emancipation of African women. They give weight to economic growth in many African countries. To support African women, an approach that involves systematic education for girls, combating forced labor and access to health care and social protection. In pushing an agenda for the promotion of gender equality and women empowerment, there is a need for caution with respect to ensuring that as a region, Africa does not engage in the proverbial quagmire of ‘throwing away the baby with the bath water’. There is an emerging and growing evidence that, historically, African women were strongly involved in economic activities while still being able to manage their homes effectively. Women represent the heartbeat of the family in Africa. Thus, the importance of their role in the family must be better understood, appreciated, recognized and anchored as a desirable and differentiating feature of the African family -- rather than abandoned. It is important to underscore that what obtains and even works effectively in other societies, most especially in the West, may not be completely ideal, applicable or even relevant in the African societal context.

7. RECOMMENDATION:

African governments should do more to actively promote women’s political participation. Existing policy commitments –such as the Beijing Platform for Action, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women, Security Council Resolution 1325, and the African Union’s Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa– must be implemented. Governments should implement: gender responsive budgets and develop mechanisms to hold all sectors accountable for addressing gender equality issues; establish independent observers (or an office of the “ombudsperson”) to monitor all departments to ensure that gender mainstreaming is implemented; establish quotas of at least 30 per cent in all decision-making positions; ensure that policies designed to promote women’s participation include accountability measures; and make investments in girls’ education beyond primary school. There is need for full involvement of African women in an all-inclusive governance in order to join hands with other women like Dr. Ngozi Okonjo Iweala (Nigeria), Bonang Matheba (South Africa), Graca Machel (South Africa), Aya Chebbi (Tunisia) with African women involvement in government, Africa will rise and be great again. For African women are ready to develop and advance Africa to greater heights.

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