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Gender Equality in Africa: An elusive goal and a persistent challenge

1. Introduction

Gender inequality permeates the very fabric of African society, with glaring evidence on all fronts of the political, economic, social and cultural aspects of life. Many of these occurrences are embedded in socio-cultural attitudes and practices that have evolved over the years. Addressing gender inequality has thus proved to be a challenge to many African member States, as it has involved challenging the deep rooted cultural stereotypes that typically, tend to relegate women to the lower echelons of society, regardless of what they may be contributing economically and politically. At the level of governments, it has involved interrogating the status quo to allocate space and resources for the ministries to be able to function effectively.

Several governments have availed themselves to gender mainstreaming, a commendable approach which has been a springboard for most countries to address the gender inequality. While true attainment of gender equality has been elusive, member States deserve to be commended for the efforts exerted, especially as evidenced by the national reports that informed the synthesis report of the Beijing +10 review and the adoption of the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa¹. With the AUC, especially the WGDD and the African women's networks and movements lobbying profusely for its adoption, the Protocol was adopted in Maputo on 11 July 2003 and has been currently signed by 43 African countries, out of which 21 have ratified the instrument.

This Protocol, hailed as an innovative instrument that seeks to move towards the goal of securing the indivisibility of women rights, also attempts to build on CEDAW by addressing gaps in the Convention, with a view to making human rights more relevant to African women. Nevertheless, most African countries are yet to fully domesticate the Protocol for the effective removal of gender inequality.

¹ Source : http://www.achpr.org/english/_info/women_en.html

ECA and AU have been collaborating on issues of Continental interests. During the CWD meeting in Dakar, Senegal in 2005, member States lauded this effort and encouraged the 2 institutions to find ways to further strengthen this collaboration. In recent years, this partnership has gained momentum, evidenced by the ECA and AU, and increasingly UNIFEM and other UN agencies having a presence on the ground, collectively defining programmes and arriving at joint strategies to tackle gender inequality.

2. Objective

This issues paper is prepared to serve as a basis for the steering of discussions during the Joint AU/ UNECA Conference of Ministers of Gender. It not only aims to restate priority concerns affecting African member States, but to also provide a foundation for effective debate at this Conference. It discusses some of the challenges already posited, portraying gender equality, and its elements as imperative issues requiring urgent attention by member States if countries are to make progress in meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), particularly MDG3 and other development frameworks. Member States will also be afforded an opportunity to define possible Continental strategic interventions.

The conference will reflect on what can be done to scale up gender mainstreaming in member States, in partnership with donors and UN agencies, especially those that are already on the ground.

3. Rationale

Issues being suggested in this paper for discussion have presented themselves as persistent challenges, as the theme suggests, and have been discussed and addressed over the years since the Beijing conference in 1995. However, there are emerging challenges which have arisen from corresponding emerging global challenges such as climate change. Failure to address these issues would perpetuate the already perceived low status of women as well as the marginalisation of issues affecting them. This Conference presents not only an opportunity to address these, but also to map out strategies with actionable deliverables that would assist the Continent to move forward.

Behind this idea is also the need to rationalise resources. The magnitude of the rationalisation and collaboration of AU and ECA resources can only mean better and timely service delivery to African member States. At the crux are issues

related to where the Continent has expressed it aspires to be in terms of human rights of women and other areas of development, hence the resonant call for regional integration. In the face of glaring gender inequalities, it is time to seek means to effectively redress the situation.

The two regional institutions viz. AU and ECA have thus teamed up to collectively address the challenge within the context of their mandates.

4. Challenges and Possible Issues for Discussion

Challenges facing Africa are many and varied. This section will make reference to these challenges and issues, in addition to proposing sets of questions that need to be addressed by the Conference in order to define the strategies for implementation. The challenges and the issues to be discussed will be discussed within the broader context of addressing the persistent gender inequality in Africa. Specifically, issues will centre around the following: (i) the AU Gender policy and its Programme of Action, (ii) the AU Women Gender in Development Directorate (WGDD) 5 year plan of Action, (iii) the African Women Trust Fund (iv), the Solemn Declaration (v) the review of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA) and (vi) Emerging challenges.

4.1. Draft AU Gender Policy

The vision of the AU of an integrated, prosperous, peaceful and people-driven Africa with clear-cut missions is challenged by the situation of African women. A proliferation of policy interventions and practical measures are testimony to this plight facing African women. The draft AU Gender Policy thus seeks to address itself to this challenge by building up on the already existing socio-developmental efforts on the ground.

The situation of African women poses as a major challenge to the African Union (AU). The Vision of the AU is that of an integrated, prosperous, peaceful and people-driven Africa with clear-cut missions among which is the promotion of rights and equality for all citizens. The transformation of the OAU to the AU has brought major break-through in the area of gender development and women empowerment. Under its Constitutive Act and its Statutes the AU has the mandate to ensure the mainstreaming of gender in all programmes and activities of the Union. As part of its efforts to fulfil this mandate, the AUC created a Women Gender and Development Directorate (WGDD) under the Office of the Chairperson of the AUC. The rationale behind this positioning of the Directorate is to create the impetus necessary in the process of mainstreaming gender and empowering women.

On their part, African governments have adopted gender mainstreaming as a strategy towards addressing gender equality. This effort has however failed to generate the requisite impetus with visible results. One reason for this has been the proliferation of policy pronouncements that have not been matched with desired resources to enable the state actors to efficiently drive the process. In addition, gender mainstreaming has been generally viewed as an add-on rather than an integral part of policy, planning and implementation processes at State level. The proposed AU gender policy will therefore seek to provide direction on this issue. To this end, member States will reflect upon the following:

- Q: How can the APRM and other related mechanisms be utilized to advance gender equality?*
- Q: How should governments better harness the WGDD to further expand on their national efforts towards realising gender equality?*
- Q: How can national machineries best exploit the momentum and willingness by HoS to make meaningful gains in gender equality?*
- Q: In the short term, how can the relationship with the RECs be harnessed to accelerate the realisation of quick-wins?*

4.2. African Review of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPFA)

The review of the BPFA provides a platform for member States and development actors to assess where the Continent is heading in addressing the 12 critical areas of concern, which were identified in 1995. This assessment necessitates that African governments openly assess themselves and chart a way forward characterised by past achievements, the way forward and emerging challenges. To this end, the following set of questions will serve as a basis for the interrogation:

- Q: Are the countries still using the Beijing Platform of Action as a framework of their work on Gender and Development?*
- Q: How best can member States be assisted to report on implementation of their Commitments?*
- Q: What role can RECs play in providing sub-regional perspectives and leadership towards implementation and reporting on the Commitments?*
- Q: What strategy can be adopted to ensure a collective genesis of initiatives throughout the Continent?*

5. Emerging and recurrent challenges

5.1. Climate change

The Eighth Ordinary Session of the AU (January 2007) called upon African governments to develop policies and strategies to combat climate change. This shows recognition at high level of the seriousness of this challenge. However, an effectively coordinated and gender- inclusive response is needed to address this issue. Most of Africa's economies are agriculture-driven, and thus there is a need to intensify efforts to rally behind this challenge, especially as it is the vulnerable groups e.g. women and children among others, who are likely to be severely affected, as sources of livelihood decline. While climate change is not really an axis around which problems of women in agriculture revolve, it exacerbates the already existing problems with which women are grappling, some of which are more structural than externally driven. The following are issues suggested for discussion:

- Q: What reflections have taken place at national level?*
- Q: What strategies can be adopted to strengthen the role of women in natural resource management in the areas of water, forestry and fishing?*
- Q: To what extent have the climate change strategies incorporated gender dimensions?*

5.2. Gender equality

Consistent attention to gender equality has resulted in some progress. This development however, continues to be hampered by emerging challenges with resultant competition for resources. In an effort to meeting the MDGs, especially in the area of education, gender gaps in economic participation continue to spiral. Calls for investment in the informal sector seem to go unheeded, even though research abounds showing the possible gains that countries are likely to reap if investments are made in this sector where the majority of women are found.

- Q: How can countries establish a coordinated gender management system to incorporate all role players in addressing gender equality?*
- Q: How can countries ensure that the gender momentum gained in their respective countries is guarded in the face of changing priorities due to climate change and economic crises?*
- Q: What strategies should be adopted for transforming institutions (i.e. ensuring that they integrate issues of women's empowerment and gender equality into their work?*
- Q: What mechanisms can be used to share success stories on how countries have implemented gender-equality policies and how they have monitored and evaluated their programmes?*

Q: How can national machineries lobby governments to implement the BPFA commitments?

Q: How can the B+10 outcomes be best incorporated in the MDG 3 goals

Q: What is Africa's vision, more than a decade after the World Conference on Women?

Q: What effective strategies can be used to strengthen implementation of all Resolutions/ Declarations on women from a human rights perspective?

5.3. Financing for Gender Equality

Bilateral and multilateral agencies have over the years, assumed the responsibility of financing for social development. The 7th Africa Regional Conference on Women report show that there was impetus in the support of gender equality goals by these agencies. However, not all areas of the Platform received the much desired funding. The findings demonstrated that most of the funding is usually directed to health, VAW, institutional mechanism and human rights of women. Other equally important areas such as the media, education and training of women, receive less funding, with the girl child standing out like a forgotten monument. In this regard, the following are issues to be discussed:

Q: How can national machineries lobby governments to implement the BPFA commitments?

Q: Gender budgeting initiatives: are they yielding fruit? What are the impediments to this widely acclaimed tool for gender equality?

5.4. Millennium Development Goals

Research abounds showing that sub-Saharan Africa is not on track to achieve most of the MDGS. This however does not detract from the fact that a lot of countries have exerted effort towards addressing these goals. This is evidenced by the development of several Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), some of which are clearly pronounced on gender e.g. Tanzania.²

There is wide consensus that reaching the MDG targets will help to propel countries forward, while assisting others to guard the gains already attained. This needs to be guarded, especially in the area of gender in education. The challenge however, is how to ensure that adequate resources are directed towards gender equality. While this debate is not new, Africa needs to strategise on regional mechanisms to advance this forward.

² Synthesis of the national progress reports on the implementation of the Dakar and Beijing Platforms for Action, UNECA, 2004.

Q: How can gender machineries better influence the MDG Africa working group?
Q: What measures can be adopted to infuse gender policy directives into strategic interventions in MDG goals other than MDG3?

6. The Way Forward

For gender equality to be addressed, African Governments need to renew their commitment to MDG3, especially in relation to women's access to economic resources. The need for women's access to economic resources has been extensively touted as a missing link in women's empowerment efforts. The partnership proposes a debate around the following questions:

- How can Africa States effectively identify and forge strategic partnerships and pledge actionable commitments for delivery both in the short, medium and long term.
- How to address the lack of data to monitor the agreed commitments.
- What strategic measures can be adopted by African gender ministers to assure progress towards attainment of MDG 3?
- How can we reinforce local ownership and accountability to gender equality?
- How can the partnership be utilised to upscale gender equality efforts at national, sub-regional and regional levels?
- What should inform the plan of Action for the partnership towards Beijing +15 and beyond?

Conclusion

The issues enumerated here are more structural and deep rooted than this paper can claim to express. They are neither exhaustive, nor are the questions posed for debate finite. It is hoped that this will form the basis for discussion, a catalyst from which meaningful strategies and programmes will be formulated.