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Raising Gender Awareness

African women have made tremendous progress over the past four decades. Awareness of the rights of women has been awakened by global mechanisms such as the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, ratified by some 160 states worldwide. However, there is still a large gap between rhetoric and action to maintain the momentum of this progress in Africa. Economic and legal barriers, as well as social discrimination, continue to prevent women in Africa from improving their status and productivity and achieving their full potential. These barriers include low investment in women's education and health and poor access to services and assets, as well as legal and regulatory barriers that restrict women's options and impede their full participation in and contribution to the continent's development.

Overview

The gender dimensions of poverty best exemplify the impact of these barriers. Of the 1.3 billion people who live in poverty worldwide, 70 per cent are women. The gender impact of poverty is particularly acute in Africa, where women find themselves more vulnerable due to traditions that give them less decision-making power and less control over productive assets than men. Gender disparities in access to social services, especially education and health, are among the major determinants of the disadvantages faced by African women.

These disparities persist despite the significant high returns to society from investments in women's education and health:

- On average, 70 per cent of all African women over 25 are illiterate, compared to 40 per cent in East and South-East Asia and 20 per cent in Latin America and the Caribbean;
- Some 45 per cent of African females are under the age of 15, and close to half marry by the age of 18, some as soon as they reach puberty;
- Africa accounts for 20 percent of the world's births but 40 percent of the world's maternal deaths. With records of as high as 1,500 deaths per 100,000 births in most sub-Saharan African countries, maternal mortality rates in the continent are the highest in the world;
- Africa's total fertility rate of 6.0 (1997) is also the highest in the world. Contraceptive prevalence rates in Africa are some of the lowest in the world; and

- The HIV/AIDS pandemic in Africa is increasing more rapidly among women than men. More than 80 per cent of the 12 million women with AIDS in the world are Africans. Ninety-five per cent of the global AIDS orphans are in sub-Saharan Africa.

Although women dominate informal- and service-sector activities in Africa and are making an entry into the industrial sector of the economy, especially in North Africa, they continue to face gender-specific barriers in accessing financial services, including lack of collateral (usually land). Such barriers prevent them from expanding their economic activities and contributing more fully to Africa's growth. Furthermore, their contribution to overall economic development goes largely unrecognized. This is largely due to the fact that many African countries do not collect labor statistics that are disaggregated by age or sex. Even in sectors like agriculture and trade, where women predominate, their work is seen as an extension of their domestic chores.

In addition to improved access to productive assets and basic social services, African women need adequate representation in the legislature, in the judiciary, and in the executive institutions of their governments in order to participate meaningfully in national affairs. Today, women in sub-

Saharan Africa represent only 6 per cent of national legislatures, 10 per cent of local legislatures, and 2 per cent of national cabinets. Half of the national cabinets in sub-Saharan Africa have no women at all. The exclusion of women's input to public policies and programmes reinforces gender inequalities and robs society of the significant social and economic gains to be made from women's full participation in development.

The Challenge

The challenge to improving the status and productivity of women in Africa requires complementary actions on several fronts. The first relates to removing the legal and economic barriers to women's access to productive assets and basic services in Africa. Key in this regard is the need to modify existing legal and regulatory frameworks that restrict women from participating and benefiting fully from development. This is essential to eliminate gender discrimination and to equalize opportunities for women and men. However, addressing this challenge requires action beyond legal reform—it requires systematic public awareness campaigns and advocacy for laws and customary practices that can help reduce gender inequalities, as well as firm public action to ensure the enforcement of gender-neutral laws at all administrative levels.

A related challenge is to promote policies that eliminate gender gaps in access to basic social services. While the private and non-government sectors have a role to play, the role of public policy is particularly critical. African governments therefore face a special challenge to redirect public expenditures to investments in the social sectors that offer the highest social returns and that ensure that both women and men benefit equally. A related challenge involves



Curt Carnemark/World Bank

Removing legal and economic barriers to women's access to productive assets and basic services will promote gender equality.

designing and implementing targeted public interventions in basic services most heavily used by women, for example, maternal and child health services, primary health care, rural water supply and sanitation, and the provision of credit to female entrepreneurs.

A second challenge, which is a prerequisite to addressing the first, is to build the institutional and technical capacity of African governments to design and implement gender-sensitive policies and programmes. Africa's partners can play an important role in this area. As a first step, donors must ensure that their own programmes are gender-sensitive. Other actions required include promoting and supporting the collection and analysis of gender-disaggregated data in Member States; promoting and advocating gender-sensitive policies; developing and providing gender-analysis training to policy makers; providing technical and policy support to African governments in formulating and implementing gender-sensitive policies and programmes; and building national capacity to implement and monitor these policies and programmes. Direct support and partnership with the offices in charge of integrating gender concerns in national planning is crucial to ensure that public policies are designed to reduce gender disparities, that programmes are effectively implemented, and that effective monitoring and evaluation systems are put in place.

A third aspect of the challenge has to do with reversing the historic marginalization of women in decision-making as well as in the democratization process, to match their citizenship rights to those of men, to increase their representation in political structures, and to make their voices heard in policy formulation. Educational and skills attainment is fundamental to facilitating the entry of women to decision-making positions and to giving them an opportunity to be heard. Women's leadership training and literacy programmes are crucial in this regard.

The ECA Response

In the 20 years since the First World Conference on Women in 1975, the African Centre for Women (ACW), one of the substantive arms of ECA, has

contributed to improving the knowledge base on African women's issues through training, research, raising awareness of policy, and the dissemination of information. In Member States, it has facilitated the creation of offices and branches of government that advance the role and status of women in Africa. Over the years ACW has worked closely with these offices to strengthen the efforts of Member States in implementing and monitoring the recommendations of international conferences on women. During the past two years, the Centre has undergone a process of reassessing its strategic focus to maximize its continent-wide impact, while implementing its new mandate of mainstreaming gender in the work of the Commission.

Promoting Economic and Legal Policies to Eliminate Gender Gaps. Through its advisory services to Member States and its convening power, the Centre will continue to promote the incorporation of gender concerns in national policies, disseminate cross-country lessons (see box 4), and advocate legal reforms to ensure gender equality. It will also provide technical and policy advisory support to Member States in formulating and implementing gender-sensitive programmes; develop training modules and provide training to policy makers on gender analysis; facilitate networking among researchers, policy makers, and practitioners working on African gender issues; and facilitate opportunities for women's participation in and contribution to the continent's development. In all these areas, the Centre attaches great importance to building strategic alliances with national stakeholders and change agents, as well as to networking with Africa's external partners.

Monitoring and Supporting Implementation of the Beijing Agenda. An outcome of the 1995 Beijing Conference was the commitment by developing countries to prepare national plans of action for improving the status and role of women in development as articulated in the Beijing Platform. In fulfillment of its mandate, ACW organized subregional meetings in West Africa, Central Africa, and North Africa in 1997 and 1998. A similar meeting for East and Southern Africa is scheduled

Box 4. Gender and Law—Eastern Africa Speaks

ECA collaborated with the World Bank to organize a conference for lawyers, academics, civil society leaders, and government representatives from five countries in Eastern Africa—Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and Zimbabwe. The aim was to initiate dialogue and discourse on gender and law issues in Eastern Africa as well as the rest of the continent.

The Conference on Gender and Law: Eastern Africa Speaks, held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in October 1997, also set out to identify issues viewed by participating countries as priorities. The concerns identified were land-related issues, family law, violence against women, employment and labour, and implementation in decentralized government frameworks. Country issues papers were prepared, discussed at national workshops, and finalized for presentation at the Regional Conference.

Policy makers from all the participating countries agreed at the outset that addressing gender issues in the legal framework was an important step towards sustainable development, and reported that strong constituencies and lobbies were being built at national level towards this end. Special administrative mechanisms had already been established in all the countries, and a number of legislative measures had been implemented.

Conference participants zeroed in on two common themes. The first was customary practices, which—whether or not they are enshrined in law—play a significant role in determining women's rights, whatever the sphere of activity. For example, customary laws and practices, most often applied in the division of household property, do not provide women adequate security. Land allocation is also, for the most part, based on customary practices that deny women control over land.

The second common theme was the need to find mechanisms for better implementation of equitable laws. In countries where the majority of women are illiterate and work in the informal sector, the challenge of implementation is daunting, particularly when laws are seeking to change behaviour and attitudes. What is more, the wide divergence between de jure laws and actual practice also mitigates against implementation of gender-friendly policies.

The conference concluded that greater sharing of experience and knowledge was an important first step towards addressing the issues raised. To this end, the conference proceedings were published and disseminated in book form.

for early 1999. These meetings provide an opportunity for ministers in charge of women's issues, women parliamentarians, senior technicians, national-level NGOs, subregional NGOs, and inter-governmental organizations to assess national efforts towards meeting the objectives of the Beijing Platform. The Centre's goal is to provide Member States with adequate tools and information to improve their capacity to implement and monitor national action plans created in the context of the Beijing Platform of Action. These include the development of guidelines for monitoring and evaluating the incorporation of gender concerns in national policies and programmes.

To help prepare African governments to participate fully in the mid-decade international review of the Beijing Conference in the year 2000, ACW is organizing the Sixth African Regional Women's Conference to be held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in November 1999. The Conference will

review the experiences of African countries in designing and formulating gender-sensitive policies and programmes in the priority areas identified in the Beijing Platform of Action. It will also assess the adequacy of the institutional capacity and identify the achievements and constraints in incorporating gender concerns in national plans. As a tool for this assessment, ACW is updating the country profiles with indicators on women's rights, health, and the situation of women in decision-making, education, and economic activity in each of the 53 member states. The profiles, first published in 1998, are designed as an advocacy tool for women's civil society organizations and policy makers to monitor the advancement of women on the continent.

Fostering Economic Empowerment of Women.

The development of data disaggregated by gender is deemed critical to assessing women's con-

tributions in all sectors of the economy. Although economic policies clearly have unequal effects on women and men, the lack of gender-disaggregated data makes it difficult to assess gender disparities and monitor the gender consequences of policies. To help address this problem, ACW will provide support to Member States in collecting and using gender-disaggregated data for policy design and national accounting and budgeting processes. A major meeting involving policy makers, practitioners, researchers, and partner agencies is planned to take stock of the state of affairs on the collection and use of gender-disaggregated data in Africa, to assess existing capacity, and to identify institutional and human capacity needs. A major study on this topic with recommendations for governments and Africa's partners will be prepared as background documentation for this meeting.

Facilitating the Creation of Opportunities for African Women Entrepreneurs. Promoting entrepreneurship is an important means towards the end of economic empowerment of African women. The focus of ACW's work in this area is to facilitate access by African women entrepreneurs to information, technology, and markets. To this end, in May 1998, ECA and UNDP organized a joint study tour, which took African women entrepreneurs, representatives from training and research institutions, and small-scale manufacturers to India and Sri Lanka to study technologies for food production, processing, and packaging and to explore market opportunities. Similar tours, including intra-Africa tours, are planned over the next three years. In addition, ACW is in the process of identifying subregional business centres that will provide training, information, and networking for African women entrepreneurs. Implementation of a three-year project is scheduled to begin in the first half of 1999. Many of the planned activities are designed in the context of ECA's effort to promote South-South cooperation.

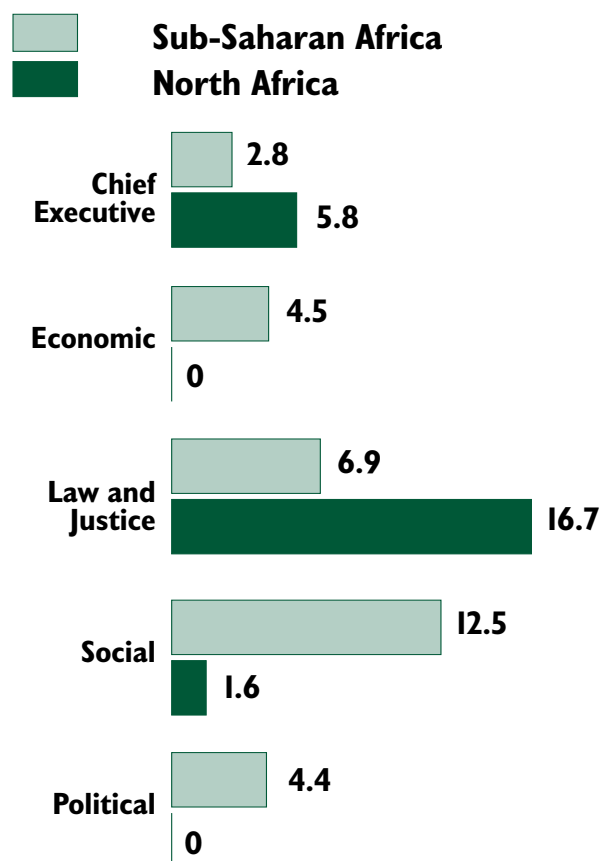
Access to resources also determines whether or not African women are empowered. In 1998, the ACW brought together experts to review an ECA study on limitations to women's access to and control over land and technology in six Afri-

can countries. The findings of the study were placed on the agenda of the East and Southern Africa subregional meeting in February 1999.

Building Capacity for Women's Leadership.

The rationale for mainstreaming gender in decision-making structures is to ensure development policies, programmes, and strategies are gender responsive. Without a critical mass of African women in parliament and in the public and private sectors, it may be difficult for action to catch up with rhetoric. Women need a transfer of skills to equip them for policy-making roles. While some organizations, particularly NGOs, already provide leadership training for women, there is need for a systematic effort to ensure that a critical mass of

Figure 6. Women in Governmental Decision-Making, 1994 (% of all positions)



Source: World Bank data.

trained women is available for leadership posts in Africa. Promoting women to decision-making positions has been identified as an important area requiring a leadership role for ECA at the regional level.

One of the Commission's responses is to work with partners in developing a major women's leadership training programme that will address the capacity needs of women parliamentarians, as well as women leaders of NGOs throughout the continent. Drawing on the work of others with experience in this area, and in partnership with them, ACW will design a prototype leadership training mod-

ule and field test, evaluate, and fine-tune similar modules tailored to the geographic, language, and cultural variations on the continent. All the modules will be available in English, French, and Arabic in the year 2000. ECA will work with its Subregional Development Centres (SRDCs) and key ECA-sponsored institutions such as the African Institute for Development and Planning (IDEP) to organize and provide the training programme in all five African subregions. A special effort will also be made to apply information and communication technologies to exploit distance learning opportunities. The emphasis of the overall training programme will be on providing practical training in key areas of leadership, including the parliamentary and democratic process, civic responsibility, and lobbying and advocacy.

Promoting the Role of Women in Peace-making. Women and children are by far the worst victims of armed conflicts in Africa. Yet when it comes to conflict resolution and peace building, their voices are barely heard. High-level mediation efforts remain the exclusive preserve of men. In the context of the apparent ineffectiveness of recent peace-making initiatives, and given the unique

position that women occupy in the conflict nexus, a consensus is growing that formal arrangements should be established to bring the input of African women to ongoing conflict-resolution and peace-building efforts.

In May 1998, this recognition led the Organization of African Unity (OAU) and ECA to form a 16-member Africa Women's Committee on Peace

and Development (see box 5). The birth of the Committee marked the culmination of a five-year process of consensus building throughout Africa. The Committee was formally inaugurated in November 1998, as an autonomous entity with advisory status

to the highest bodies of ECA and OAU, with its secretariat housed at ECA. The role of the Committee, which includes NGO and government representatives, is to ensure a gender dimension in all conflict-resolution efforts in Africa, and to actively involve senior African women in conflict-resolution negotiations on the continent. For the first time, the board of this Committee attended as observers and made a presentation to the December 1998 Summit of Head of States and Governments of OAU on Conflict Resolution in Africa that took place in Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso.

Mainstreaming Gender in ECA Programmes.

One of the ACW's mandates is to ensure that gender, one of the cross-cutting issues that defines the renewed ECA, is fully integrated into all aspects of the Commission's work. Two strategies have been adopted to promote gender mainstreaming within the Commission. The first is to appoint gender focal points in each of the five substantive ECA divisions and a gender coordinator in each SRDC. Since 1996, four SRDC gender coordinators have been appointed, and a fifth is being recruited in North Africa.

"I speak of women willing to change. The good future of African women in development will not take place just because the rhetoric is sweet. The good future depends upon women who see a different future for themselves, with real opportunities, and with the odds shifting more in their favour. I speak of men willing to change—men who value gender partnership, who see that, when women meet their full potential, societies will be better off, communities will be a better place to live, families will be more prosperous, and children will have a far brighter future." *K.Y. Amoako, from "Opening Plenary Address to the Conference on African Women and Economic Development: Investing in our Future", Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, 28 April 1998.*

Box 5. Celebrating 40 Years

In a clear demonstration of its commitment to gender equality, ECA celebrated its 40th anniversary in May 1998 with a four-day international conference on women. Organized by the ACW, the conference, entitled “African Women and Economic Development: Investing in our Future”, brought together 1,000 women and men representing African governments, civil society, non-governmental and private-sector organizations, and international agencies.

The Conference was a model of effective partnerships and collaboration between different actors. There were encouraging signs of growing support for the dynamism and creativity of African women from African men and ECA’s partners. Most welcomed was the fruitful interaction of government officials from ministries not primarily responsible for gender issues, such as Finance, Planning, and Agriculture. A pre-conference electronic discussion list, facilitated by the World Bank, enabled ECA to broaden participation.

Four conference themes linked women to economic development, good governance, the information age, and youth opportunities. The meeting ended with an innovative Forum of Heads of State and Government from eight countries, presided over by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, during which a panel of African women presented the views of conference participants to the Heads of State.

The theme “Developing African Economies: The Role of Women” took centre stage, with working groups deliberating on eight sub-themes. Among these, the challenges and opportunities of globalization and regional integration generated serious debate on an issue that has become contentious for Africa. The Conference agreed that the key challenge for women was to find ways to ensure that African women benefit from the globalization process. Policies that create an enabling environment for global economic competitiveness, ensure women’s access to education and training in entrepreneurship, facilitate women’s access to information and finance, and promote partnerships were seen as critical to meeting this challenge.

Of equal interest was the discussion on the linkages among gender, growth, and poverty reduction in Africa. Deliberations concluded that understanding and acting on the interaction between the three factors represented perhaps the most promising, yet the most neglected, avenue for improving Africa’s growth prospects. The lack of reliable data disaggregated by sex, age, and locality rendered difficult the assessment and analysis of gender

disparities, as well as the impact of economic and social policies to reduce gender inequality and poverty. In this regard, the Conference urged ECA to take measures to promote the inclusion of gender perspectives in national accounts and in budget processes, as well as to systematically collect and use gender-disaggregated data for policy and programme design and evaluation.

“Achieving Good Governance: The Essential Participation of Women”, the second theme, was discussed in five working groups. Deliberations highlighted the absence of women from electoral systems and decision-making positions, and the detrimental exclusion of women from conflict prevention, management, and resolution. Actions recommended included the provision of leadership training and civic education, enhanced advocacy, and promoting gender-sensitive legal reforms.

The theme “African Women and the Information Age: A New Window of Opportunity” discussed the potential income-enhancing opportunities offered by information and communication technologies for African women. The establishment of community-based women’s information centres for promoting women’s access to information technology was the key recommendation of the Conference.

The theme “Creating Opportunities for Africa’s New Generation” explored the issue of Africa’s largest and yet most under-utilized resource—its youth, who held a one-day preparatory workshop on the eve of the meeting. During the session, the youth discussed the urgent need to inject life skills in the educational curricula and the disturbing discrepancy between education and employment. They called for partnerships with governments, financial institutions, media, civil society, and multilateral organizations. Among other strategic actions, the working group sessions proposed the development of gender-sensitive school curricula and materials to address survival needs, the enforcement of laws that are responsive to the needs of youth, and the creation of opportunities for their economic empowerment.

Since the African Women and Economic Development Conference, ACW has held follow-up internal consultations with ACW staff and ECA Gender Focal Points, as well as meetings with ECA’s external partners, to brainstorm on concrete activities and partnership arrangements around the key Conference recommendations. The activities described in this chapter represent the thrust of some of these follow-up actions.

Secondly, the Centre is training all ECA professional staff members in the basic principles of a gendered analysis, while supporting them in developing indicators and tools that can be used in their daily work to monitor the incorporation of gender in their programmes. ACW has already held a number of in-house gender-sensitization

workshops for all senior managers, and gender focal points in the Commission. Work is currently underway to assess the specific gender training needs of each division and to develop customized gender-training modules for enhancing staff. This includes the development of manuals for gender analysis in each of ECA's thematic areas.