

**Locating Gender in African Development: Pushing for Progress and Overcoming  
Obstacles**

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**Theme of Presentation: Engendering African Development**

## **Abstract**

This paper is based on the saying that “nothing arguably is important today in the political economy of development as an adequate recognition of the political, economic and social participation and leadership of women. This paper argues that despite the role women play in development economies and their potential to contribute even more, the difficulty of accessing resources and basic services denies many women the opportunity to make such contribution. The point made in the discussion is that women are generally made invisible in national accounts and economic policies throughout the continent. Over two-thirds of energy-depleting and time consuming activities by millions of women and girls are unrecorded thus keeping the livelihood of millions of African female outside the reach of policy.

The objective of this paper is to provide a framework for concrete and action oriented dialogue on the important challenge of mainstreaming gender in African development in practice than in theory. Another primary challenge outlined in the paper is that gender equality should be addressed not only in its own right, but also as a matter of practical necessity for achieving social progress and for fighting against poverty, economic destitution and the cultural values that operate as “fetters” to African women and development. This is because women are the key element of the world’s labor force with the potential to contribute more to the growth and development of their nations. Yet women’s empowerment is not addressed in the current deregulation and liberalization of the economy and development.

This paper points to the fact that any noble cause including the question of women and their right to equality and development requires sensitization and consensus building for its effective promotion at international and regional levels. Thus the challenge facing Africa and the international community is acceptance of the right of women to full equality and development because these are ‘indispensable tools’ for organizing and mobilizing communities and women need to be directly involved since participation of women in decision-making is vital to rendering policy decisions that are gender-sensitive. The paper concludes by stressing that women would bring values to decision-making which ensure that policies formulated are people-centered rather than elitist and that these should address poverty and other social and cultural ills that afflict women more in Africa. The political activism and dedication to grassroots development and gender equity work while difficult and without glamour, is the only way to lay the foundations for gender equity without which Africa would have little hope for the future.

## **Engendering African Development: A Contested Engagement with Policy**

Gender equality is a core development issue yet gender discrimination remains pervasive in many dimensions of life worldwide. Gender inequalities undermine the effectiveness of development policies in fundamental ways, yet this is an issue that often lies at the periphery of policy dialogue and decision making both in national and international arenas. Part of the neglect comes from policy makers' reluctance to deal with topics that they deem inextricably associated with societal norms, religion or cultural traditions. Another part comes from a belief that gender gaps should be addressed by advocacy and not policy.

These inequalities are linked to the lack of development. Inequalities between the genders in terms of access to development concerns such as education and adequate health and welfare (second generation rights) (Tamale & Oloka-Onyango, 2000) are more acute among the poor than among those with higher incomes. Most women are perpetually poor-so whether inequalities are measured in terms of command over productive resources such as land or credit or in terms of political or social space to influence development process-poor men tend to have something although less whereas poor women generally have the least of all. These disparities even in the face of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) tend to disadvantage the female gender and limit its capacity to participate and benefit from development.

Gender inequalities hinder development. The full costs of gender disparities in development ultimately harm everyone (Kabeer, 2003). This occurs irrespective of whether the disparities in basic rights or in the ability to participate in public life take their most direct toll on women and girls. The fact is that ignoring gender disparities in development come at a greater cost to people's well-being and to countries' abilities of sustainable development and effective governance that can combat poverty.

Of course, the poverty of women is linked to the division of labor in the household and in most parts of society at large. Women perform traditionally "reproductive work" which is never given any economic value or considered in economic context. Reproductive work is seen as inferior to "productive work" which tends to be male – and paid for. However it must be recognized that the so called reproductive work is and has always been a precondition for the productive work in society. Even the most advanced philosophers, policy makers, engineers, etc, in history have been dependent on nursing in childhood, on food, shelter and other basic services often provided by women.

It is estimated that 75% of all health services globally are provided in the household by women. This is never estimated in economic and development terms and is thus not really seen and acknowledge as a contribution to economies despite its fundamentals value even in the face of the Beijing +5. It is not thus a question of 'engendering development' or 'integrating' women in economy and development but of recognizing what women do and could do if given equal rights and access to resources. We need a coherent, holistic picture instead of the far too often fragmented approach to locating gender in African development.

Gender has become particularly a contentious arena within the field of development as institutions and communities struggle over the nature of representation, the construction of social problems and the appropriation of resources directed towards development intervention. This paper identifies three problematic areas when it comes to providing equal rights to development and opportunities for women as well as the lack of policy measures that address the persistent inequalities:

- (i) **Rights**-gender disparities on rights to development constrain the sets of choices available to women in many aspects of life. This affects their ability to participate and benefit from development. I have yet to come across a region where women and men have equal social, economic and legal rights. In many countries women still lack independent rights to own and manage land, property or business. The point made is that the problems about rights to development for women are conceptualized as a form of institutional discourse communicating assumptions about problems, communities and solutions. Even the MDGs fail on this because narrow time-bound goals that are matched with 18 targets and 48 indicators are located within a framework that does not recognize women's rights as development goals. This means the MDGs are also not informed by rights based approach thus sacrificing women's strategic gender concerns.
- (ii) **Resources**-Women continue to have systematically poor or no command on productive resources that could help uplift their development. The MDGs argue for rights to resources for women including rights to education, land, information and financial resources. However many women still cannot own land and despite their educational achievement many continue to earn less than men in the labor market. Market failures, too, mean insufficient information about women's productivity in the labor market. (because they spend a greater part of their working hours in non-market activities because labor markets are absent or undeveloped). In parts of Southern Africa female run enterprises suffer because they are undercapitalized in terms of machinery and other resources. These are clear obstacles. Those that gain some level of finance do so using a man as a front-runner. These disparities translate into greater risk and vulnerability for many women in the face of personal or family crises, in old age and during economic shocks that have come to characterize African development.
- (iii) **Voice**-Lack of resources impact heavily on women's ability to voice and power to influence resource allocation and investment decision in the home. Women remain vastly under represented in national and local assemblies thus limiting their ability to influence decisions in their communities and at the national level except limited voice through gender machineries and activists. Progress has been neglected in most regions as illustrated by the fluctuating percentage of female representation since the beginning of economic and political transitions. Therefore it has been difficult to exercise urgency and influence declarations and draft legislation when the only African woman portrayed as having a 'voice' is a grassroots woman who is perpetually poor, powerless and pregnant.

These indicators reflect that the lack of development across the female gender lines impose large costs on the health and well being of men, women and children. It also affects their ability to improve their lives and thus lower prospects for reducing poverty and ensuring economic progress. All these weaken a country's governance and the effectiveness of its development policies (World Bank, 2001).

Foremost among the costs of failure to locate gender in African development is the toll on human lives and the quality of those lives. Identifying and measuring the full extent of these costs are difficult. Even the MDGs are still missing many vital targets for development because they assume a universal and equal playing field that does not consider specific contexts. A wealth of evidence from countries around the world still demonstrate that societies with large persistent gender inequalities in terms of development pay the price of more poverty, malnutrition, illness and other deprivations (World Bank, 2001). A glaring shortcoming and may be ignorance is the absence of specific targets and indicators on gender and development and gender violence- the latter of which has reached epidemic proportions in Southern Africa and is fuelling the spread of HIV/AIDS in the region.

Of equal concern is that the only gender specific indicators of the MDGs and other political declarations about gender in Africa relate to maternal mortality and education. Apart from this goal the gender dimensions of the rest of the goals are not mentioned and therefore not likely to be measured in terms of development. This indicates that unless gender equality is centrally located across all of the MDGs and declarations documented and signed, they will have no meaning for women and progress in development will not be achieved (Moolman, 2005).

The central issue here is that development led higher household income is associated with higher survival rates and better nutrition and efficiency in life. When economic development raises incomes and reduces poverty, gender inequalities often narrow. Thus putting development incomes in the hands of women in society tends to have a larger positive impact than putting development incomes in the hands of men. Unfortunately, rigid norms, customs and traditions and religiosity about the appropriate gender division of labor and limited employment for women still restrict women's ability to earn an income.

My take on this is that the toll on human lives is a toll on development because improving the quality of people's lives is the ultimate goal of development. However gender disparities impose costs on productivity, efficiency and economic progress. By hindering the accumulation of human capital in the home and the labor market and systematically excluding women or men from access to resources, public service or productive activities-gender inequalities in development diminishes any economy's capacity to grow and raise living standards. Unless women are able to exercise human rights in societies in which they are equal true development will not take place.

## **Rethinking the Concept of Engendering Development**

The restrictions in terms of engendering African development for women can be traced back to time in memory from the time the upsurge in feminist organizing across the world became increasingly evident in the 1970s (Mohanty et al. 1991 & Basu, 1995). At the same time the broader international women's movement offered a forum for African women organizing against the failure of development to articulate their perspectives. Through intervention at an international level from the early 1980s onwards leading African feminist became increasingly aware of the need to voice their distinct concerns and interest within international women's movement (Pereira, 2002). The Association of African Women for Research and Development (AARWORD) was the first regional institution to facilitate African women researchers and academics working on the question of gender and development. The aim of this organization was to set the agenda for feminism in Africa by facilitating research and activism by African women scholars.

At the international level conscious efforts at mainstreaming women into development discourse started during the period declared as the Second Development Decade by the UN which emphasized equity, redistribution and meeting people's needs. This coincided with feminist work towards social transformation in terms of development and gender through Boserup's 1970 path breaking work on 'Women's Role in Economic Development'. Such frameworks have given impetus to the formation of the Women in Development (WID) movement which led to the 1976-1985 UN Decade for Women declaration.

The influence of forums and organizations such as GAD, DAWN, AWID, CEDAW, The Beijing Platform of Action and the many international networks of research and activist created new political spaces for feminist work towards engendering development. Contributions by these forms of organization and political space provided struggles for critical voice, representation and resources by women for women as they demanded engagement with the content and processes of policy development (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994 & Pereira, 2002).

In spite of the above forums and organizations the odds have always and continue to be stacked high against women right from within the family unit to their participation in the economy and development. This has come to bear serious consequences in terms of pushing for progress and locating gender in African development. The fact is that the issues which were at the centre of the debate on engendering African development decades ago have now shifted both in focus and in content. Not only have women and those who advocate for gender equality in development been confronted with new forms of challenges, oppression and often violence, but they themselves in some instances have been forced to get involved in activities which may be said to undermine the basic principles of engendering African development.

The opposing sides in the fight for locating gender in African development are no longer clearly defined by gender machineries, activists and governments because other agents also view the process of engendering African development as a threat to be subdued or

even eliminated. These are in the form of extremist groups, religious or otherwise political parties and their supporters and not surprisingly even women's own families and societies (Iman & Mama, 1994).

Although there have been attempts to redefine the concept of gender in African development to include not only the direct and overt violation of rights of women, these have been shattered by dominant patriarchal ideologies by governments and communities. Despite mainstream opinion that development is 'gender-neutral' feminist scholars have long researched the gendered character of African development. The findings to date argue that women and men relate differently to development due to cultural values and practices. For the majority of women this has meant exclusion from access to and power over different technologies. The ability to harness gender and development is as it involves a shift in power relations and redefinition of development terms that reflect women's needs, interests and aspirations.

The underlying framework for this points that the forces of patriarchy which pervade the majority of African societies (Tamale & Oloka-Onyango, 2000) skew the balance of rights to mainstream development in favor of the male gender. This clearly points that 'human rights are not gender neutral'. This is partly illustrated by the fact that the concept of engendering African development should include economic and social policies or measures which concern education and welfare rights for women and girls. However based on their gender, development, let alone the engendering part has been used to curtail access to this rights for women to make their acquisition of learning tortuous and to cast doubt on their ability to develop.

Thus women's ladder of development is characterized by a continuous struggle to confront men and the dominant patriarchal ideology that prevails in policy making. Women have had to wage war against practices which blatantly and consistently violate the process of engendering African development. If engendering African development as declared by many governments refers to the development of members of the community, individually or collectively in the pursuit of development socially and economically to include the transmission of skills through production, creation, discussion, economic participation, etc, then women are not deprived of this development in same ways as some of their male counterparts. They are denied development in ways that are more subtle and covert as covered by stylized democracies which may therefore have escaped scrutiny. These are subtle but highly disempowering, subjugating and disadvantaging processes that betray the engendering of development apart from being influenced by the local and world socio-political contexts.

## **Technical Solutions to Political Problems of Gender and Development**

The above mentioned position of women on the development ladder indicates that the concept of engendering African development in the context of the changing sociopolitical landscape in Africa has had to be rethought. The problem with the concept is not so much what it includes, but rather what it does not include (Busia, 1996). In rethinking engendering of African development can we, for instance, exclude policies that disempower half the population of a nation, those which restrict their access to higher education, to the market economy and to the freedom to practice their democracy and those which do not provide equal opportunities for the pursuance of any field of study. These are practices that make it impossible for sections of women to conduct their business in peace, those which limit the amount of time that those sections can spend on their work and so on.

We can argue that all these can and should be included in the scope of rethinking African development. We can argue further that in the consideration of engendering African development in relation to women in particular it is precisely such issues that curtail the ability of women to realize their full potential. This means that attempts at protecting gender and African development cannot always be placed within the 'third generation rights' to justice because some of these rights are conditioned by cultural practices and biases within our societies. These often cannot be changed through legal processes or through the declaration of charters and resolutions. They can be eliminated only through the extensive education of civil society and policy makers about knowledge to change attitudes and behavior towards thinking about the female gender.

Improving the effectiveness of societal institutions and achieving economic growth are widely accepted as key elements of any long term development strategy. Although successful implementation of this strategy may not guarantee gender equality and development for women, public action is particularly important because social and legal institutions that perpetuate gender inequalities are extremely difficult, if not impossible for individuals alone to change. To advance the engendering process policies for institutional change and economic development need to consider and address prevailing gender inequalities in rights, resources and voice (Phalane, 2004). Active policies and programs are needed to redress long standing disparities between women and men.

Any progress in engendering development depends on strategic reforms in the making and implementation of third generation rights to justice, legal protection and peace. However statutory reform is seldom enough. In many African countries the capacity to implement legal reforms remain weak complicated by multiple and inconsistent legal systems. This is illustrated by instances where civil law provides for equal rights in divorce but customary law prevails in the division of conjugal property where divorced women are unable to retain access to land.

These are instances that hinder gendered development as they treat women as inferior, vulnerable, etc. We need to move away from the often paternalistic approach that treat women as 'cardboard victims' and to treat women with dignity and respect as well as

regarding them as important vehicles for poverty eradication and growth. In such context efforts to strengthen the enforcement capabilities of the country's judicial and administrative agencies are critical to achieving gender equality in basic right of development. To apply a gender perspective in the judiciary system and strive for gender equality requires change and transformation processes and perceptions in law and policy making, in political agenda setting and in allocation of resources. In almost all cases political leadership is decisive.

In most countries economic development is associated with improved circumstances in terms of consumption, investment and incentives in the labor market. However the structure of economic institutions affects gender and development in important ways by using a preference-based approach (Nussbaum, 2002) that typically reinforce inequalities. Women often are forced to have no preference of economic independence before they even learn about avenues through which women like them might pursue such a goal, nor do they think of themselves as key players in the labor market with rights to incomes that were being ignored before they even learn of their rights and are encouraged to believe in their equal worth. Such preferences too are not fixed in the nature of things –they are constructed by constructed by social traditions of privilege and subordination.

A preference-based approach reinforces existing inequalities in the economy and the labor market. Although economic development can promote gender equality, its current impact is neither sufficient nor immediate, nor is it automatic for the female gender. This is because the impact of economic development on gender depends in large part on the state of rights, access to and control of productive resources and political voice. All of these rights and the preferences based on them frequently shape women's active or inactive participation in the labor market. This gendered economic participation downturn requires social policies that will combat labor market inequalities and supplement what economic development alone could not achieve in reducing gender inequalities.

The implementation of social protection policies that recognize gender differences in market based work and risks are important to protect women (and men) from economic shocks or prolonged economic downturns of Africa. More broadly institutional reforms that strengthen basic rights and policies that foster economic development can be mutually reinforcing and can enhance the economic status of many women in transition economies of the North and the adjusting economies in Sub-Saharan Africa. At the same time policies and investments that deepen the markets and redress gender disparities in access to information combined with sanctions against those that discriminate-all can help strengthen incentives for gender equality and development in the labor market. The world cannot forgo salutary effects as remarkable as these.

To redress these power imbalances, civil society groups and international organizations like the UN should be actively involved with issues around the democratization of grassroots development. These should include cultural diversity, the right to communicate and property rights. Gender equality advocates should also push for measures designed to address the gender dimensions of development in any society. They

should work on integrating gender perspectives in national development policies and strategies that provide relevant development to women by promoting women's economic participation in the economy, capacity building and regulating violence against women and children connected to the use and abuse of their labor.

Many of these issues were raised by individuals and organizations working towards gender equality at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held in South Africa in 2002. The summit brought multiple stakeholders in the arena together to address the challenges and possibilities posed by development. However the outcomes of the summit left a lot to be desired in terms of global consensus on the lack of simultaneous attention to gender and development for human development and for equal access to development. In terms of gender the initial WSSD declaration and plan of action contained negligible reference to the potential impact of lack of development on the lives of women and girls across the world.

This form of negligence requires intensive lobbying and advocacy efforts of women's groups by gender strategies working groups and gender machineries to ensure that a more gendered language is included in such documented declarations. It remains to be seen whether gender issues are taken into consideration when stakeholders implement the MDGs, WSSD, Beijing +5 action plans

In order to support the growing call for more equitable development initiatives the world over, far reaching changes towards gender equality and women's empowerment in the development arena are needed at international, national and local levels. For instance international forums such as the UN, WSSD, despite their shortcomings could and should be used to challenge the Western ideology and corporate dominance on development. African governments need to act by building gender perspectives into development policies through the involvement of gender and development expert academics and researchers instead of the politically aligned gender machineries.

Academics, researchers and activist can and should ensure and see to it that whenever a new key development policy process/dialogue is launched, knowledge and awareness on gender and the different roles and opportunities for women (and men) are integral parts of both analysis and suggested action. Clear gender strategies are needed in the design, implementation and evaluation of mainstream development projects and programs. This requires sex-disaggregated statistics and gender indicators (Elson, 2002) on access, use, content, employment, education, and representation in policy making and on the impact of development on women and men. This indicates that engendering development is not merely about greater access and use of development programs by women, but it is about transforming systems of African development.

## **Conclusion**

The paper presented makes a compelling case for governments, activists, experts, etc, to intervene in locating gender in African development. Indeed, governments, civil society groups, academics and the international community all have a critical role to play in fighting gender inequalities in development. This will enable African societies to reap considerable benefits. However the outstanding challenge is on how to deepen understanding of the links between gender equality and development and how to reflect those links in policy. A further challenge is for policy makers to broaden their partnerships with civil society groups, researchers, academics, donors and others in the international community to enhance efforts to combat gender inequalities in development through active collaboration.

The honor lies with policy makers and African governments to be forward-looking in the face of rapidly changing circumstances because fostering broader broad participation and transparency in policy making has the potential for tremendous payoffs both for gender equality and for national development as a whole. Women all over the world have lacked support for development and central human functions. The lack of such support is to some extent caused by their being women. But women like men have potential to become capable of these human functions given sufficient access to development efforts and other support. That is why unequal failure of development is a problem of inequality rather than incapability of women as always claimed. It is up to all human beings to solve this problem. My claim on this is that facilitating broad exchanges of ideas and greater transparency in policy making and enabling greater female participation in the public domain can strengthen any country's governance and effectiveness of its development policy.

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