

Special Edition

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AfricaRenewal



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of Public
Information

Women in Africa assert their rights

Battling for equality
on all fronts

Taking on violence
against women

Does financing
benefit African women?



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2012 Special Edition on Women

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Note on original sources

In this special edition, all but two of the articles (on pages 17 and 30) were previously published in *Africa Renewal*, although most have been revised and updated with more recent information.

Cover photo:

A polling station worker waits for voters in Monrovia, Liberia.  UNMIL Photo / Staton Winter

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AfricaRenewal

Formerly 'Africa Recovery'



African women themselves are at the forefront of the march towards equality.

 UN Photo / Christopher Herwig



United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women

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African women: asserting their rights

AS ELSEWHERE IN THE WORLD, women in Africa are struggling for their fair share of political power and economic opportunity. In recent decades — thanks in great measure to their own organization and energetic efforts — they have made important strides. As Africa shakes off its legacies of autocratic rule, social marginalization and economic disarray, women are staking their claim to participate fully in their continent’s promising future.



But progress has been halting and uneven, and each step forward has been won against difficult obstacles and stubborn resistance. As in many parts of the world, gender inequalities remain deeply entrenched. Women suffer violence and discrimination across the continent. They lack access to decent work and face occupational segregation and wage gaps. They are still too often denied access to education and health care. Few women are represented in key political and economic decision-making positions.

Accelerating women’s empowerment is obviously critical for women themselves. But as the UN’s global agency for women, UN Women, emphasizes, gender equality is more than just a basic human right: “Its achievement has enormous socio-economic ramifications. Empowering women fuels thriving economies, spurring productivity and growth.” When UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon launched UN Women in 2010, he observed: “Where women are educated and empowered, economies are more productive and strong. Where women are fully represented, societies are more peaceful and stable.”

Over the years, *Africa Renewal* has frequently reported on and analyzed many different aspects of the struggles of African women for political, economic and social advancement. This special edition of the magazine – with the



Michelle Bachelet, executive director of UN Women, the world body’s new agency on gender equality issues.

UN Photo / Paulo Filgueiras

generous support of UN Women — brings together a number of those articles, most of them with new and updated material.

The *Africa Renewal* articles highlight important developments at the summit of political power, such as the adoption by the African Union (AU) of a legally binding protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights on the rights of women. The AU has also declared the current decade, 2010-2020, as the “African Women’s Decade.” A few countries, such as Angola, Mozambique and South Africa have exceeded the 30 per cent benchmark for women legislators, while Rwanda has the highest percentage in the world. But in all African countries women still have a long way to go.

In some areas gender gaps have narrowed noticeably, as in primary schools, where nearly as many girls

as boys are now enrolled. But completion rates remain low, and many girls still are unable to go on to secondary or tertiary education. Meanwhile, health care for women and girls has scarcely improved, while HIV/AIDS continues to exact a deadly toll on Africa’s women.

Repeatedly, the articles in *Africa Renewal* have noted that it is the hard work and commitment of women at the grassroots that can make the difference: the women farmers, traders, entrepreneurs and activists who struggle day-in and day-out to better their lives and improve the prospects for their families, communities and nations. If Africa is to have a brighter future, gender equality must be achieved. 🌍



'Renewed energy for women's empowerment'

Interview with head of UN Women in Southern Africa

Nomcebo Manzini is a busy woman. As the regional director for Southern Africa and the Indian Ocean islands of the UN's recently created Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women — officially known as UN Women — she is constantly on the road from one country to another, addressing public gatherings, attending conferences and strategizing with government officials and women's activists alike. *Africa Renewal's* managing editor, Ernest Harsch, was fortunate to catch Ms. Manzini at her home in Johannesburg, South Africa, in late March 2011, during a brief stopover in her travels.

Africa Renewal In South Africa and Mozambique, women have reached the benchmark of 30 per cent women's representation in parliament. What's the picture across Southern Africa?

Nomcebo Manzini As a sub-region we certainly have a long way to go. A few countries have been doing well, but there are others that have regressed. In terms of women in political leadership positions, the average is only 18 per cent. It is way below the 30 per cent we have been calling for, and far below the 50 per cent that the heads of state and government agreed to in signing the Gender and Development Protocol [of the Southern African Development Community, SADC]. We



are seeing a lot of change at the local level. Most countries seem to be doing much better in terms of representation in local governments. This might be because women work in the community and are better known at that level.

Women's political representation is absolutely important because participation is a basic human right. Women bring their experiences, knowledge and capacities, which are different from those that men bring.

AR Beyond getting into office, how can women better engage with broader governance issues, including political conflicts?

NM One of the things that UN Women is doing is building capacities for women to participate in leadership, but

"Women's political representation is absolutely important," says Nomcebo Manzini, head of UN Women for Southern Africa.  Africa Renewal / Ernest Harsch

transformative leadership, so that they can engage from a perspective of basic human rights and understand broader governance issues and democracy in general. Some countries are in deep conflict. Our position is to support women to participate in negotiations, in mediation, but also in prevention. In Comoros, for instance, we are working within the context of the UN country team on a peacebuilding project. Our contribution is to build the skills of women to understand the issues of gender relations in peace, in peacebuilding, even in conflicts and how conflicts happen. Even if they understand that, they need to build allies

within the traditional leaderships, amongst men, with their partners, etc. We try to engage a more holistic approach to dealing with such issues.

AR UN Women coordinates the Africa Unite campaign, which targets violence against women and girls. What is the main challenge?

NM The problem is the resources. We are not getting enough funds from national budgets or from the donor community. African heads of state launched the campaign in Africa in January 2010. We are now doing advocacy with the different heads of state to ensure that their ministries of planning and finance allocate funds for implementing the national action plans.

We have safer cities programmes that we will be rolling out in several countries, working with UNICEF. Research shows that rape of young girls is normally of school children in the early morning when they are going to school, and in the evening when they are going back home, often through thick bushes and other unsafe pathways. But when we talk to governments about this, they hardly have the resources to provide sanitation and water to communities. They don't see it as a priority.

AR And the judicial and security systems?

NM We work with the police, military and other entities in the security sector to make sure they understand the gender dimensions of policing and security, also gender-based violence. We had a conference to talk about how we can support the SADC gender unit to mainstream gender in the SADC Organ on Politics, Defence and Security. We talked about ensuring that the officers who go on peacekeeping missions have some gender training.

We look also at the informal justice sector. In Southern Africa research



clearly shows that when women experience abuse or violence in the home they are not going to the police as a first port of call. They go either to their families or to traditional leadership.

AR There has been real progress in narrowing the gap between boys and girls entering primary school. But do the girls stay in school?

NM That is a fundamental point. Looking at many countries, we find that there is parity in terms of entry. In some countries girls are even surpassing boys in entering basic education. But as you move further into the school years and you get into grade seven and eight there are fewer girls continuing in school. Parents are more likely to withdraw the girls from school if they are cash-strapped – or the girls are going to get married. The other problem is that pregnancy in schools is very high and girls will drop

Students at the University of Dar es Salaam, Tanzania: In many countries, there is now gender parity in the primary schools, but economic and social constraints hinder more girls from moving up to secondary and tertiary education.

 Panos / Mikkel Ostergaard

to have the babies. Girls also tend to have more work to do in the home, so they have less time to study and therefore tend to have a lower passing rate than the boys.

AR Southern Africa has the highest HIV prevalence rates in the world. How are women affected?

NM So much money has come through for programmes against HIV and AIDS. But the work has not taken into account the clear connection between gender inequality and the spread of HIV/AIDS. In some Southern African countries there are 5 per cent of men with HIV, but you find 20 to 22 per cent of young women of the same age group with HIV.

When you do the research, it is very much: "I didn't want to sleep with him, but he forced me." And then there is the whole issue of "survival sex" in Southern Africa, where young girls will sleep with older men so that they are able to go to school.

AR And women are also more likely than men to be in poverty...

NM It seems as though even our governments have now acknowledged that development is not going to happen without the full involvement and participation of women in the economy. But they have not just all of a sudden become benevolent. It is because of the advocacy that has been coming from the women's movements and from the ministries responsible for women and gender.

At UN Women we are working with five governments in the sub-region in a pilot programme to see exactly what women are doing to get out of poverty. Most of these women are in what is called the informal sector, and their work is not recognized. The women who kept the Zimbabwe economy going at the lowest point in its history are not recognized even today. Yet they ensured the survival of their families and the economy.

“ Even our governments have now acknowledged that development is not going to happen without the full involvement and participation of women.”

It is absolutely fundamental to deal with the economic empowerment of women, because we know that when women have that economic independence they are more likely to be able to make decisions about their dignity, their security and their welfare.

AR Does UN Women work with rural women?

NM We have a \$33 million project that we are currently fund-raising for as UN Women to do exactly that, to work with rural women, particularly rural women farmers. It is a major challenge. At least 70 per cent of the labour in agriculture is women. When we seek \$33 million, that's a drop in the ocean really, it's nothing in terms of the need. And what happens when the \$33 million is finished? We need to be able to define programmes that governments include in their own national

development plans. And governments must be able to desist from corruption. It is not that the national resources are not there, but they are misused.

AR UN Women has just been created, merging four different UN entities that dealt with women. For women here in Southern Africa, what difference can UN Women make?

NM What I see already is just an amazing amount of renewed energy for women's empowerment in the various areas of work, since the creation of UN Women. Renewed hope indeed that UN Women will do things better and faster in promoting women's rights globally. It is a very tough call for us in UN Women to deliver on that.

I was privileged to be part of the first strategic meeting for UN Women in January this year [2011], when all the different entities came together. You could feel it in the room, the energy. Madam [Michelle] Bachelet is using her diplomatic skills to bring us together. We have been holding consultations with different partners, including the donor community, governments and civil society organizations, to define what should be in our strategic plan. So we continue to be hopeful, and totally energized. 🌍

International Women's Day rally in Cape Town, South Africa: More funding is needed for national programmes to combat violence against women and girls.

📷 Panos / Eric Miller





STRUGGLE FOR RIGHTS, EQUALITY

African women's long walk to freedom

Some gains, but an uphill climb still looms

By L. Muthoni Wanyeki

Africa's political independence was accompanied by a clarion call to eradicate poverty, illiteracy and disease. Fifty years after the end of colonialism, the question is: To what extent has the promise of that call been realized for African women? There is no doubt that African women's long walk to freedom has yielded some results, however painfully and slowly.

The African Union (AU) now has a legally binding protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the rights of women. The protocol spells out clearly women's rights to equality and non-discrimination in a number of areas. It has been ratified by a growing number of African states, can be used in civil law proceedings and is being codified into domestic common law. The AU has also issued a Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa, under which member states are supposed to regularly report on progress.

The protocol and declaration both reflect and reinforce developments at the national level. Many African states have moved to enhance constitutional protections for African women — particularly in the area of women's rights and equality. And

L. Muthoni Wanyeki is a former executive director of the Kenya Human Rights Commission.



the last two decades have seen the emergence of legislation to address violence against women, including sexual violence.

Political representation

These developments have been accompanied by improvements in African women's political representation. The AU adopted, from its inception, a 50 per cent quota for women's representation, which is reflected in the composition of the AU Commission.

Again, this standard reflects and reinforces efforts to enhance women's representation at the national level. Angola, Mozambique and South Africa have exceeded the 30 per cent

Across Africa, women's movements are now putting more emphasis on decision-making power.

Reuters / Mowliid Ibdii

benchmark for their legislatures. Rwanda made history in 2008 when 56 per cent of legislators elected to parliament were women, the highest in the world. A few countries, including Nigeria, have seen women assume non-traditional ministerial portfolios, in defence and finance, for example. And Liberia also made history ("herstory") by becoming the first African country to elect into office a female head of state, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf.

Progress is evident, particularly in countries that have electoral systems

based on or incorporating proportional representation. However, enhanced women's representation has been harder to achieve in first-past-the-post electoral systems.

Even where there has been progress, the question is whether increased representation of women is catalyzing action by the executives and legislatures in favour of gender equality. That question arises because the battle for women's representation is not only demographic (with political representation as an end) but also for gender equality (with political representation as a means).

Put another way, there has been a shift in the focus and strategy of the African women's movement over the last two decades, from emphasizing capacity-building to improve African women's access to resources to emphasizing decision making to enhance African women's control over resources. This shift was made possible by real gains resulting from the capacity-building approach.

Education, poverty, health

These gains are most evident in African women's education. Girls and boys are now at par with respect to primary school enrolment. Efforts to get girls into school have been accompanied by efforts to keep them in school and to promote role models by developing gender-responsive curricula. Gender gaps are also narrowing in secondary education. The real challenge now lies at the university level, both in the enrolment figures and in curricula to benefit young women. So much for the "illiteracy" element of the African independence clarion call.

Gains for women are harder to see in that call's "poverty" element, however. It is true that since independence investments in micro-credit and micro-enterprises for women have improved their individual livelihoods — and therefore

those of their families. Since African women have proved that they are good lending risks, micro-credit is now being offered not just by development and micro-finance institutions, but also by commercial financial institutions.

Yet there was a critique of such investments, especially in the decade of the 1980s when governments withdrew from social service delivery as a result of structural adjustment programmes. Under those circumstances, such investments essentially enabled redistribution among the impoverished, rather than at a larger level from the rich to the poor.

The end of that era thus saw a new focus on gender budgeting: looking at where national budget allocations and expenditures could enhance women's status in the economy. Unsurprisingly, this approach has led African governments back towards public investments in social services.

It is now agreed, for example, that the benchmark for public investments in health in Africa is 15 per cent. The African women's movement has called in particular for more to be directed towards reproductive and sexual health and rights. These areas are of critical concern to women, given the impact of HIV/AIDS, maternal mortality and violence against women, particularly in conflict areas. They are also of concern since African women's continued lack of autonomy and choice over reproduction and sexuality lie at the heart of so much suffering. So much for the "disease" element of the independence call.

Where next?

Where to over the next 50 years, then? In light of the experience so far, the African women's movement will be focusing not just on political representation, but also on the meaning of that representation for advancing gender equality and women's human

rights. And given recent retreats in Africa (such as the rise of the constitutional coup and "negotiated democracy"), the women's movement will also be focusing on democracy, peace and security more broadly — that is, on the nature of the political system itself and not just on the means of getting into that system.

Economically, women will continue to focus on the macro-level, but in a deeper sense. What has emerged from gender budgeting efforts is the need to actually track budgetary expenditures, not just getting information about allocations.

It is also necessary to concentrate on the macro-economic framework for fiscal and monetary policies, especially in the context of stabilization programmes in response to the recent economic shocks. Previously that framework was assumed to be gender-neutral, but it clearly can have gendered consequences. This problem must be addressed to ensure that Africa's growth will enhance women's livelihoods.

Finally, the women's movement will be focusing on reproductive and sexual health and rights. The battle over choice (including over gender identity and sexual orientation) is now an open one in many African countries. It is no longer couched politely in demographic or health terms.

The upsurge of conservative identity politics (in both ethnic and religious terms) is fuelling conflict on the continent. It constrains and dangerously limits women's human rights, including reproductive and sexual rights. Such notions are not harmless — they have grave consequences for women's autonomy, choice and bodily integrity. They therefore must be challenged.

African women's long walk to freedom has only just begun. 



STRUGGLE FOR RIGHTS, EQUALITY

Battling for equality on all fronts

Some progress since Beijing, but hurdles persist

 **By Gumisai Mutume**

A decade-and-a-half ago, after a ground-breaking 1995 conference in Beijing that set ambitious targets to transform the lives of women worldwide, African women had reason to expect change. Like their counterparts elsewhere, African women are asking why progress has been limited and are seeking ways to overcome the obstacles.

In 2005, Rachel Mayanja, then special adviser to the UN Secretary-General on gender and the advancement of women, announced progress in the implementation of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), a UN protocol, as well as the development of new policies and guidelines and creation of networks of gender experts.

Currently, only South Sudan, Sudan and Somalia among African countries have not ratified CEDAW, adopted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly and often described as the international bill of rights for women. South Sudanese women's rights activists are

currently agitating for ratification of CEDAW.

While briefing the Women's Committee of the European Parliament in early 2011, the executive director of UN Women, Michelle Bachelet, lauded the efforts of Egyptian women in pushing for democracy. She cautioned, however: "Don't let that presence, that participation, that perspective disappear. Democracy is not only about voting,

Classroom in Liberia: Half of all African countries have made moderate improvements in reducing the gender gap in education.

 Panos / Aubrey Wade



it is also about inclusion, pluralism, diversity ... and I think now there is a tremendous opportunity for women, even if lots of help is needed.”

Poverty has a woman's face

Out of the 1995 conference emerged a plan, the Beijing Platform of Action, which laid out areas that need improvement if the position of women was to be advanced. The areas include reducing poverty among women, stopping violence, providing access to education and health care and reducing economic and political inequality. Barring some notable exceptions, progress in these areas has been slow.

For many African women, the Beijing platform and the various international instruments their governments have signed have yet to translate into positive changes in their daily lives. They remain at the bottom of the social hierarchy, with poor access to land, credit, health and education. While some of the agreements that African

Because of pressure from women, a number of African countries introduced affirmative action policies that have increased the number of women in decision-making positions.

 Africa Media Online / George Philipas

governments have ratified enshrine property and inheritance rights, in most countries women are denied those very rights.

Compounding the situation are setbacks such as the HIV/AIDS pandemic that is destroying the health of more women than men in Africa and eroding some of the development gains women had attained. As a result, poverty in Africa continues to wear a woman's face, notes Ms. Gladys Mutukwa of the Zimbabwe-based non-governmental organization Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF). She finds it disturbing that since the Beijing conference, African women are much poorer.

A UN Food and Agricultural Organization study on Benin, Burkina Faso, Congo, Mauritania, Morocco, Namibia, Sudan, Tanzania and Zimbabwe shows that women rarely own land. When they do, their holdings tend to be smaller and less fertile than those of men. Studies also show that if women farmers had the same access to inputs and training as males, overall yields could be raised by between 10 and 20 per cent.

Getting girls into school

Perhaps the most inhibiting factor is that many women in Africa continue

to be denied an education, often the only ticket out of poverty. Disparities between girls and boys start in primary school and the differences widen through the entire educational system. Although Africa, of all regions, registered the highest relative increase in primary school enrolment during the last decade, it is still far from attaining parity. The good news is that by 2011, sub-Saharan Africa had significant girls' enrolment. Together with South Asia, primary education level enrolment in sub-Saharan Africa rose to 23 million, up from 20 million a decade earlier.

Policies specifically targeting girls were responsible for notable improvements in countries such as Benin, Botswana, the Gambia, Guinea, Lesotho, Mauritania, Namibia and Liberia. In Benin, for instance, the gender gap has narrowed, thanks to policies such as sensitizing parents through the media and reducing school fees for girls in public primary schools in rural areas.

Yet various hurdles hamper the expansion of education in Africa. Households that became poorer often face the stark choice of deciding who to send to school — and often it is the girl who stays home. Costly tuition, mandatory school uniforms, long distances between home and school, and inadequate water and sanitation,



all help to restrict girls' access to education.

Citing 2008 data, the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) reports that more men than women are literate in Benin, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Niger, Nigeria and Uganda, with a gender gap ranging from 12 per cent to 26 per cent. Nevertheless, about half of sub-Saharan African countries have registered moderate increases towards gender parity in this area, UNESCO reports.

Channelling money to women

Many now acknowledge that to enable women to escape poverty, development policies should place more emphasis on their contributions to the economy. Even though women make up a significant proportion of the economically active population, their contribution is not fully recorded because they are mainly engaged in family farming or in the informal sector. In other cases, what they do, such as household work, is not considered an economic activity.

In agriculture, sub-Saharan Africa's most vital economic sector, women contribute 60–80 per cent of labour in food production, both for household consumption and for sale. But while they do most of the work, they lack access to markets and credit. In Uganda, women make up 53 per cent of the labour force, but sell only 11 per cent of the cash crops.

To redress the bias in macroeconomic policies that favour men and boys at the expense of women and girls, a number of African countries have adopted a tool known as gender budgeting. This involves analyzing government spending choices and their impact on women and men, boys and girls, with the aim of better identifying disparities. Kenya, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania and Uganda are among the countries currently assessing their budgets along gender lines.



Influencing policy

Almost all countries in Southern Africa have a national government body that deals with gender issues. However, these units, departments or ministries “have become weak and unable to be responsive to the challenges presented by the struggle for gender justice,” NGOs declared at an African Social Forum in Lusaka, Zambia. “Poor resource bases, few staff and no power or authority within governments to advance equality and justice for women are just a few of the constraints.”

In some countries, the presence of women in parliament has made a difference in the adoption of gender-sensitive policies. Because of pressure from women, some countries now have affirmative action policies, such as quotas, to increase the number of women in decision-making positions. In South Africa, women parliamentarians succeeded in passing various pieces

For women and girls, education is often the only ticket out of poverty.

 Panos / Giacomo Pirozzi

of legislation, such as those legalizing abortion, countering domestic violence and ensuring child support.

In Uganda, women parliamentarians helped to adopt legislation making rape a capital offence. In 2003, following a long delay, Mozambique passed a family law considered pivotal for the emancipation of women in that country. In Liberia, where a woman was elected president in 2005, a law making rape a serious crime has been passed.

Efforts by gender activists to protect the rights of women paid off when in 2005 the African Union decided that the African Charter on Human and People's Rights should become operational. The AU Executive Council in 2006 elected judges to the African Court on Human and People's Rights. 



STRUGGLE FOR RIGHTS, EQUALITY

NEPAD embraces women's rights



NEPAD acknowledges that women play the predominant role in food production.

UN Photo / Christopher Herwig

one said that empowering women was a priority. I got excited. Then I flipped the pages to find a plan of action that said concretely what NEPAD would do — one, two and three — for women. There was nothing there.”

The once skeptical activist later joined NEPAD's management structure, heading the Gender and Civil Society Organizations Unit formed in 2004 to bring women's issues into policies, programmes and activities related to the initiative. The unit was created in direct response to recommendations by women's groups, civil society organizations and other stakeholders.

“Our attitude in protesting was: If you see something missing, help add to it,” Ms. Musyimi-Ogana reflects. “Don't just complain. While the NEPAD declaration was far from perfect, I saw a commitment, I saw a spirit in it. It is the first time heads of state are committing to Africa voluntarily. This is historic. I said to myself: ‘I am going to support this vision and change things from within if necessary.’”

Monitoring rights

In one of NEPAD's most innovative initiatives, the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), African governments carry out periodic reviews of the policies and practices of participating countries to assess progress in promoting democracy, good governance and economic

After slow start, continental initiative advances gender equity

By Itai Madamombe

When African heads of state originally launched their continental development plan, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD),

in 2001, women's organizations banded together to protest the initiative's seeming lack of sensitivity to gender issues. They demanded that NEPAD's proponents ensure that women were not frozen out of the social and economic benefits promised by the initiative.

Ms. Litha Musyimi-Ogana, an advocate for women's rights, was among those in the forefront asking for change. “I got the NEPAD foundation document into my hands,” recalls Ms. Musyimi-Ogana. “I rushed to the goals and the second

management. Among other indicators, countries participating in the peer review are required to demonstrate the measures they have taken to promote and protect women's rights, as well as the laws adopted and other steps taken to enhance the participation of women in society. They are expected to back up their claims with figures on the percentages of women in decision-making positions, parliament and so on.

Rwanda has been a leader in the number of women elected to parliament, notes Ms. Anne Marie Goetz, an expert on peace and security issues with UN Women, the world body's agency on gender equity. The constitution mandates that at least 30 per cent of parliamentary deputies be women, but the strong push to support women candidates during elections resulted in women holding 56 per cent of seats.

NEPAD's peer review report on Rwanda, released in 2006, found that in addition to constitutional provisions, "Rwanda has created a plethora of institutions and development programmes to enhance the status and welfare of women in all walks of life." Despite the huge strides, the APRM's country review team reported that women still face many hurdles. Similar reviews, accompanied by proposals to improve women's status and opportunities, as well as other recommendations, have also been carried out in more than a dozen other African countries.

Hands on the purse strings

Overall in sub-Saharan Africa, an average 19.4 per cent of parliamentary seats are held by women, in line with the world average of 19.3 per cent, according to estimates by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), an international body that serves as a forum for dialogue among legislators.

"Getting women into key positions is critical," Ms. Goetz points out. "If

you have women in public office — though not always the case — they tend to be more sensitive to the needs of female citizens." The ability of women deputies to bring about real change, however, depends on the stance of their parties and the calibre of the representatives themselves. Occupying top government posts does not necessarily translate to influence. It is disappointing, the IPU reports, that women are still less likely than men to hold an economic portfolio or to be a country's top foreign affairs representative.

"The question of women keeps coming back," notes Augustin Wambo, a NEPAD agriculture policy expert. He argues that noble goals will be meaningless unless those in positions of power are made aware of women's needs. "No matter how many pledges are made," Mr. Wambo stresses, "unless we empower lawmakers to unblock resources from national budgets and put in place the necessary means and policies to support women, the initiative is not going to fly."

NEPAD's Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP), launched in 2003, argues that "special attention must be given to the vital food-producing and entrepreneurial roles of women in rural and urban African communities." The CAADP adds, "African women account for substantial amounts of production in both the informal and formal sectors," while women entrepreneurs "not only invest in their business but also place high value on social investments in their communities."

It is estimated that women produce more than half the food crops in most African countries. Studies by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) have found, however, that despite women's

dominant role in food security, contemporary laws and traditional customs make it difficult for them to own land or acquire credit. Women also get only a tiny fraction of the professional training provided by agricultural institutions.

Networks and think tanks

To ensure that issues affecting women are better reflected in policies and programmes, NEPAD personnel consult with pools of experts across all sectors. In 2005, for example, at a meeting organized by the Kenya-based African Women's Development Communication Network (FEMNET), representatives from over 40 countries called for a mechanism to respond to gender and civil society matters.

As a result of further consultations, the Civil Society Organizations Think Tank, comprising 60 gender experts from all regions of Africa, was created that same year. Its members are experts in NEPAD's various priority themes, such as agriculture, education, transportation and health. These experts work with women on the ground, and thus have a good understanding of what ordinary women most need.

Such willingness to consult gender experts, notes Roselynn Musa, a programme officer at FEMNET, a member of the think tank, shows that African leaders now realize that NEPAD's goals cannot be achieved unless women and girls are able to participate to the best of their abilities.

"The think tank shows that the NEPAD leaders are aware there was a gap in how they initially planned to do business," Ms. Musa told *Africa Renewal*. "They are now trying to fill that gap." By having a positive impact on daily lives, Ms. Musa adds, NEPAD will become more credible and relevant to African women. 



POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

African women are ready to lead



But social beliefs and attitudes hinder their quest

 **By Gumisai Mutume**

When the young Inonge Mbikusita-Lewanika was sent off to an all-girls boarding school in Zambia renowned for its academic excellence and sporting discipline, she was laying the foundation for a career in leadership. She had plenty of time to concentrate on her studies. Since then, she has represented her country as ambassador to the US,

has served in parliament and in 2001 became the first woman to run for president in Zambia. She is currently Zambia's ambassador to Belgium, the Netherlands and the European Union.

Ms. Mbikusita-Lewanika grew up with parents who supported her dreams and who were always available. "We spent a lot of time with our parents," she says. "My parents created an enabling environment, and sent all of us [both boys and girls] to school."

Ms. Mbikusita-Lewanika has been taking part in the women's lobby that pushed the continental political organization, the African Union, to adopt groundbreaking rules in 2004 requiring

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf taking the presidential oath in Liberia, after her election: Partly because of the social traumas of war, several post-conflict countries have seen new openings for women's advancement.

 Reuters / Jason Reed

a 50–50 gender balance among officers in its highest ranks. She also lobbied for the adoption in 2000 of UN Resolution 1325, which promotes equal participation by women in conflict prevention and resolution, peacekeeping and peacebuilding.

But she represents the exception rather than the rule. By 2008 only seven countries in Africa (Rwanda, South Africa, Mozambique, Angola, Tanzania,

Uganda and Burundi) had attained the goal of having at least 30 per cent of the seats in national parliaments filled by women, in line with the UN target for women in decision-making bodies. Rwanda holds the current record for the highest level of female representation in a national parliament.

Multiple roles

Getting into and staying in positions of power is difficult because of the roles traditionally expected of women, Ms. Mbikusita-Lewanika told *Africa Renewal*. If one wants to be a parliamentarian as well as a wife and a mother, and the husband does not support her, then it is hard to continue. “When you have young children, you have to rush home while your male counterparts carry on with discussions in the bars or in the chambers” of parliament, she said.

Activists note that because women are often viewed as out of place in professional environments, they are subjected to more scrutiny at work than are men of the same rank, which slows women’s advancement into management positions.

To gain positions of authority, women frequently have to be overqualified just to be noticed, says Ms. Mbikusita-Lewanika. That, she says, is a direct reflection of how societies view women — as not as good as men. And when women do get appointed, “you hear people say, ‘She is just like a man.’ In other words they relate to you as a man if you are an achiever.”

Turning point

Since the First World Conference on Women in 1975, the women’s movement has taken significant strides. In February 2006, gender activists and policymakers convened in New York on the 50th anniversary of the UN’s Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) to take stock of progress. Established in 1946 by the Economic and Social Council (one of the five organs of the UN), the



commission has the task of advancing women’s interests.

When the CSW was first established, women could vote in only 30 of the original 51 UN member states. Now, across the globe, women have secured the right to vote and, in most countries, to stand for election. The frontlines of the battle have now shifted.

“Progress has been slow and uneven,” said then CSW Vice-Chairperson Adekunbi Abibat Sonaike, from Nigeria. The UN Economic Commission for Africa concurs, observing that women lack adequate access to productive resources, such as land, water, energy, credit, means of communication, education and training, health and work with decent pay.

The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing, China, in 1994 was a critical turning point in the struggle for gender equality. In Beijing, governments set an international benchmark for women’s participation — 30 per cent of posts in decision-making positions.

Breaking into leadership

Despite the challenges, a growing proportion of women are breaking through the glass ceiling. The world average for women in parliament rose from 11.7 per cent in 1995 to 19.3 per cent by July 2011. But the advancement of women into positions of power does not, by itself, resolve the need to create an environment that allows them to make a real difference,

A polling station in Nigeria: From voting to holding elective office, Africa women are pressing for a bigger voice in political affairs. 📷 Reuters / Akintunde Akinleye

notes Ms. Pumla Mncayi, director of the Gender Advocacy Programme, a South African lobby group.

Because historically women have had fewer opportunities and exposure to leadership positions than men, women often feel intimidated by the political system and are hesitant to participate, says Ms. Mncayi. Deliberate programmes to train and equip women when they enter the corridors of power are therefore needed.

Enhancing participation

Some of Africa’s women politicians also have to deal with political systems that promote patronage. Under such systems, politicians are beholden to the party hierarchy rather than to their constituents, which renders elected officials less effective in policymaking.

Shireen Hassim and Sheila Meintjes, in a paper commissioned by the UN Office of the Special Adviser on Africa, note that proportional representation, an electoral system widely assumed to be more favourable to women, carries costs that are not often cited, allowing “political parties to establish mechanisms of control over women.”

In Zimbabwe, write Catherine Makoni and Tsitsi Matekaire, the women’s lobby was at a loss about whether or not

to celebrate the appointment in 2004 of the country's first woman deputy president, Joyce Mujuru. Her appointment was seen in some quarters "as one of the games that political parties play," they note in a study for the Women's Environment and Development Organization (WEDO), an international women's lobby group.

Post-conflict countries do well

Although armed conflict has been very disruptive in Africa, says Doris Mpomou, a New York-based researcher for WEDO, it is also paradoxically "opening up opportunities for women to change gender relations and to enter positions of leadership."

During the previous decade, more than a third of armed conflicts worldwide were in Africa. The wars destroyed infrastructure, stalled development and exposed women in particular to rape and abuse.

But conflict created occasions for women to transform their lives and redefine their gender roles. Conflict often results in significant demographic changes, as men go to war and are killed in combat. In some conflicts, such as the Eritrean war for independence from Ethiopia and the liberation wars

in South Africa and Zimbabwe, women fought alongside men, asserting their equality and winning some bargaining power in post-conflict settlements.

UN Women, a UN agency on gender issues, has been very active in training women for leadership in many African countries, including Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Liberia and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Independent organizations such as the London-based International Alert, established in 1985, have also played important roles. The group works with women's networks and has facilitated the participation of women in the peace processes in Liberia and the DRC.

Women in international agencies

Gender activists want more women in high office in international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Out of all policymaking areas, women are least represented in economics and finance, notes WEDO. Over the last few decades, the World Bank and IMF have been designing economic reform programmes in poor countries. The absence of women in the formulation of those policies has meant "that the majority of the monetary, financial and trade policies being

implemented worldwide ... are gender blind, resulting in serious economic costs to society as a whole," reports WEDO.

One of the outcomes of the 2006 meeting of the Commission on the Status of Women, said Ms. Mpomou, was that "activists have managed to push for the inclusion of the international financial institutions and academia in the 30 per cent quota target."

At the Bank and IMF, female representation among leadership staff is around 20 per cent, and fewer than 10 per cent of the members of the organizations' boards of governors are women. While those institutions have the authority to alter the gender composition of their staffs, they have little control over the boards. Governors are appointed by individual member countries. In June 2011, Christine Lagarde of France became the first woman to head the IMF.

The African Women's Caucus at the CSW has charged that even the UN is still lagging behind. In its more than 60 years of existence, "no woman has ever been Secretary-General of the UN," they noted in a statement, urging the UN to promote the rise of women to the top post, especially at a time when the organization is undertaking reforms. 

Women storm onto Rwanda's political stage

Women in Rwanda now top the world rankings of women in national parliaments, with 56 per cent representation in the lower house compared to a world average of about 19 per cent. Rwandese women not only head about a third of all households, but have also taken up many jobs that were formerly the preserve of men, as in construction and mechanics.

However, their most notable achievement has been in politics. Thanks to a new constitution, 24 out of 80 seats in the lower house of parliament are reserved for women. In the upper house, 6 out of 20 seats are reserved for women. To attain this, Rwandan women lobbied heavily, helped to draft the new constitution and developed voting guidelines that guaranteed seats for women candidates. They were also able to push for the creation of a government ministry of women's affairs to promote policies in favour of women's interests.

"It will be interesting to see what the entry of so many women in the national assembly will do for politics in Rwanda," says the Inter-Parliamentary Union, a Geneva-based organization representing 138 parliaments worldwide. IPU President Anders Johnsson observes that the European Nordic countries have an established history of women's participation in decision-making, but that Rwanda now overtakes the long-time leader, Sweden, where women constitute 45 per cent of parliamentarians.

Rwanda's success in bringing women to the political table mirrors that of a small, but growing number of countries in sub-Saharan Africa. In South Africa, Angola and Mozambique, for example, women hold at least 30 per cent of the seats in parliament — matching the international target.



POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

Three women laureates

When the Nobel committee announced in October 2011 that year's recipients of its Peace Prize, it raised to three the number of African women to receive the internationally distinguished award. Two of the three new recipients were from Liberia, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf and Leymah Gbowee. They thereby joined Wangari Maathai of Kenya, the first African woman to receive the prize in 2004. While Ms. Maathai had been honoured for her work in defence of the environment and human rights, Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf and Ms. Gbowee — together with Tawakkul Karman of Yemen — were cited “for their non-violent struggle for the safety of women and for women’s rights to full participation in peace-building work.”

Wangari Muta Maathai

Wangari Muta Maathai, who died of cancer less than two weeks before her Liberian sisters were similarly honoured, launched the non-governmental Green Belt Movement in 1977 to plant trees, alleviate poverty and end conflict. She mobilized Kenyans, particularly women, to plant more than 30 million trees, and inspired the UN to launch a campaign that has led to the planting of 11 billion trees worldwide.

Liberian peace activist Leymah Gbowee.

UN Photo/Emma Simmons



Ms. Maathai linked social change with political action. In 1992, while protesting corrupt land allocations, she was beaten by thugs and state police. Later, after a change in regime, she won a parliamentary election and became assistant minister of the environment. Following her death, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon called Ms. Maathai “a pioneer in articulating the links between human rights, poverty, environmental protection and security.”

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize six years after she became Africa’s first elected female head of state. With a background as a development economist, she had previously served as a finance minister in Liberia and as the Africa director of the UN Development Programme. In the 1980s she was prominent in opposing the repressive military regime, which forced her into exile. She later returned during a pause in the civil war that began in 1989, ran against Charles Taylor in the 1997 presidential election, and was briefly forced abroad again when Taylor won.

After a peace agreement installed an interim government in 2003, Ms. Johnson-Sirleaf headed the Governance Reform Commission. She then ran for president in 2005, in the first election after 14 years of war, and won. Her tenure focused on



Wangari Maathai, the late environmental and human rights activist.

Associated Press / Khalil Senosi

overcoming the economic devastation and social tensions left by the war. In November 2011 she was re-elected to a second term.

Leymah Gbowee

Leymah Gbowee, born in a central Liberian village in 1972, played a central role in mobilizing Liberian women to oppose the civil war and work for reconciliation. At the height of the fighting in early 2003, she led women in picketing, fasting and praying. Excluded from internationally-sponsored peace negotiations, the women nevertheless pressured the leaders of the warring factions and helped keep the talks going until an agreement was signed.

Trained as a trauma counsellor, Ms. Gbowee has worked with girls and women who were raped during war, including in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. She heads the Ghana-based Women Peace and Security Network. The reception of the Peace Prize by three women in 2011, Ms. Gbowee said, was “a victory for women’s rights everywhere in the world,” as well as “a great tribute” to the pioneering work of Wangari Maathai. 🇦🇪



POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

North African women on the barricades



Activists press for freedom, dignity and rights

By Fatma Naib Cairo

Arab women have shown once again that women can often play important roles in revolutionary events. In Egypt and Tunisia they participated in the popular uprisings for democracy — and are continuing to press for progressive changes in their societies — just as they

Fatma Naib, a reporter for the Al Jazeera news network, contributed this article to Africa Renewal.

were active in labour strikes in recent years, in some cases even pressuring men to join the strikes.

“The women contributed equally to the revolution, like the men,” affirms Emna Ben Jemaa, a Tunisian lecturer and journalist. “We took part in protests in the street, without any discrimination against us.”

Women’s activism is not a recent development, notes Ms. Jemaa. “For Tunisian women, independence is not something that came with the revolution, it has been there.” Before national independence in 1955, Tunisian women faced severe discrimination. They were often taken out of school, forbidden to see male doctors and limited in the political sphere. Yet during this period

Egyptians in Cairo’s Tahrir Square celebrate the fall of the Mubarak government, but activists acknowledge the need to continue pressing for human rights and democratic reform.

 Associated Press / SIPA / Alfred

Tunisian women developed an awareness of their deprivation and began fighting to advance their role in society.

With independence, President Habib Bourguiba played a pivotal part in advancing the role of women.

A “personal status code,” adopted in 1956, gave women rights that were unprecedented in the Middle East and the Muslim world. These included the right to vote and to be elected to parliament, to receive wages equal to those

of men, to have access to mixed-gender education and to be granted divorces. In 1993 “honour crimes” — in which women were harmed, even killed, by family members for transgressing cultural norms — were criminalized.

As a result, the women’s movement in Tunisia is relatively advanced compared to those in other Middle Eastern countries, notes Ms. Jemaa. This paved the way for Tunisian women’s visible involvement in the revolution that toppled President Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali on 14 January 2011 and forced him into exile in Saudi Arabia.

“Prior to the revolution, women’s issues were not key,” she observes. “Freedom and democracy for all is what pushed us to revolt against the regime, as Tunisian men and women, side by side.”

‘We are still at the beginning’

After the ouster of the president, members of the previously banned Islamist Ennahda Party returned to the country. The party won the largest bloc of seats in the October 2011 parliamentary elections. Its leader became prime minister, although a secular opposition politician was named president.

“People assume that Islamism would interfere with women’s rights and freedom. But this is not necessarily correct,” says Ms. Jemaa. “When Islam came to mankind, women used to work and played an active role in society. So I don’t understand why people assume that the presence of an Islamist political party will lead to the exclusion of women.”

However, Ms. Jemaa admits there are fears of a possible backlash for women’s freedom if the country is ever ruled by a religious party. “People look at the examples of Algeria and Iran. History has proven that there is no guarantee that an Islamic party such as Ennahda will secure women’s rights. Even if they say they are for women’s freedom, there



is no guarantee they will keep their word on anything after they come into power. This is the case with all politicians.”

So Tunisians need to be on guard, she concludes. “In terms of the future, we need a revolution in the way of thinking and in the mentality. Change will not come overnight. In my opinion, we are still at the beginning of the revolution.”

Side by side in Tahrir Square

The revolution in Tunisia inspired people in neighbouring Egypt to take to the streets on 25 January 2011 to demand freedom and dignity. But even before the uprising, female factory workers had staged major strikes in 2007 in the city of Mahallah.

When 2011’s protests began in Cairo’s Tahrir Square, women accounted for 40 to 50 per cent of the demonstrators during the 18 days that led to the fall of President Hosni Mubarak. Women of all ages, with and without veils, set up barricades, led debates, shouted slogans and, together with the men, risked their lives.

The idea that men and women should behave differently was set aside during the revolution. Nawara Najm, an Egyptian journalist, blogger and human rights activist, recalls how she along with other women fought side by side with the men. “When we had to fight, I fought. When we had to hurl

“Long live freedom!” declares graffiti in Tunis: Tunisian men and women mobilized side-by-side against the authoritarian regime.  Reuters / Louafi Larbi

stones, I did. When we had to shout slogans, I did. We did whatever was necessary to achieve our freedom.”

On 28 January, dubbed the “day of rage,” she and other women helped mobilize the resistance. “When the police clashes intensified and the shooting escalated, some of the guys would retreat. At that point all the women would push to the front. When our male fellow revolutionaries would see us do that, they would return immediately and push to the front with us and overcome their fear. I was on the bridge when the severe fighting took place on that day. I was surrounded by women. We went forward to the front line and seeing us pushed everyone to come.”

That day also brought Ms. Najm’s worst memory of the revolution, when a person died next to her. “We were on the bridge by the Nile. What upset me was that his death was preventable, but we couldn’t call an ambulance. I tried to use my phone, but the lines were cut. Then he shut his eyes. I asked if he was asleep, but another person told me that he had passed away.”

But she focuses on the positive memories. “The 25th of January was the best day, because everyone went to the streets thinking that they would



Women in Cairo calling for equal rights.

 Fatma Naib

be alone. But I was filled with joy when I realized that I was not alone. It was a very emotional moment for me.”

‘No one can stand in the way’

For Ms. Najm, the revolution is still ongoing. “We managed to topple the head of the regime, but the entire regime is not gone yet and our key demands have not been met.”

“I am not too worried about the Muslim Brotherhood having political power in Egypt,” Ms. Najm adds. “They are a political organization that has the same right as everyone else to participate in the political arena. There is room for everyone in Egypt. All are welcome, and all different voices are allowed. No one can stand in the way of the will of the people anymore. The people have spoken and we have decided to fear no more. No one can silence our will for freedom.”

Salma El Tarzi, an Egyptian filmmaker, was also active in the revolution and echoes Ms. Najm’s fighting spirit. “I am not into any political parties. I prefer to remain neutral for now. I know I will always be in the ‘opposition,’ so I am there ready to demonstrate, or fight.”

Weeks after Hosni Mubarak stepped down as president and power was transferred to the military, the youth movement continued to gather in Tahrir Square to protest the slow pace of reforms. Ms. Tarzi says there was a sense among protesters that the army had betrayed them.

She speaks in agitated terms about what happened when soldiers cleared Tahrir Square on 9 March: “They violently dispersed the crowd and arrested several activists, including women who had to undergo forced virginity tests. Those who failed the tests and were not married were later charged with prostitution. The police and army used the virginity test as a form of humiliation. The men suffered from different sorts of humiliation. It is just that they did not find means to humiliate men that are as harsh as the tests for the women. I’m sure if they had found something they would.”

Ms. Tarzi, like other women, continues to protest against the injustices that prevail in post-Mubarak Egypt.

From Algeria to Saudi Arabia

Nabila Ramdani, a French political analyst of Algerian origin, compares the role of women during the revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt with that of women in the 1954–62 Algerian independence war. “Women played an

important role in the battle for Algerian independence. They planted bombs and acted as informants who would relay information to the fighters. But history didn’t give them the place they deserve in society, with an equal status to the men after the war.”

Ms. Ramdani believes that religion, culture and law have all contributed to the state of affairs in Algeria today, with certain interpretations of religion posing particular problems for women. In post-revolution Tunisia, Ms. Ramdani adds, the voice of women is louder than in Algeria because it is a secular society, with a distinction between religion and the rule of law.

She is very optimistic about the future, because women are finally speaking up. She notes that this is evident elsewhere in the Arab world, including in countries such as Saudi Arabia and Yemen. In Saudi Arabia, where women are banned from driving, several women drivers have posted videos online showing themselves defying the ban. “It was previously unthinkable that women there would defy the king by getting into their cars and driving,” comments Ms. Ramdani. The king has since promised that women will be allowed to vote and run in Saudi Arabia’s 2015 municipal elections.

“I am positive about the future for women in the Middle East,” she says. “The fear barrier has been broken. Fear was a major hindrance and it is gone forever.” The wind of revolt that is sweeping across the Arab countries has led people to realize that change is possible.

Women in different parts of the region face different challenges. While some countries have accomplished more, it seems that what women across the Arab world want is for their voices to be heard. They want their basic human rights to be respected in societies that are free and fair for all. 



COMBATING VIOLENCE

Taking on violence against women in Africa

International norms and local activism start to alter laws, attitudes

 By Mary Kimani

Kenya's current law against wife-beating was prompted some years ago by a particularly dramatic incident of a common problem—one that is not unusual across Africa. In December 1998 a Kenyan police officer, Felix Nthiwa Munayo, got home late and demanded

meat for his dinner. There was none in the house. Enraged, he beat his wife, Betty Kavata. Paralyzed and brain-damaged, Ms. Kavata died five months later, on her 28th birthday.

But unlike many such cases, Ms. Kavata's death did not pass in silence. The Kenyan media covered the story extensively. Images of the fatally injured woman and news of her death generated nationwide debate on domestic violence. There followed five years of protests, demonstrations and lobbying by non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as by outraged men and parliamentarians. Finally, the government passed a family protection bill criminalizing wife-beating and other forms of domestic violence.

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), domestic violence is a global problem affecting millions of women. In a 2005 study on women's health and domestic violence, the WHO found that 56 per cent of women in Tanzania and 71 per cent of women in Ethiopia's rural areas reported beatings or other forms of violence by husbands or other intimate partners.

Violence against women goes beyond beatings. It includes forced marriage, dowry-related violence, marital rape, sexual harassment, intimidation at work and in educational institutions,

Slogan on a wall in Kibera, a slum in Nairobi: Kenya has a law against domestic violence, but implementation is difficult.

 Reuters / Zohra Bensemra



forced pregnancy, forced abortion, forced sterilization, trafficking and forced prostitution.

Such practices cause trauma, injuries and death. Female genital cutting, for example, is a common cultural practice in parts of Africa. Yet it can cause “bleeding and infection, urinary incontinence, difficulties with childbirth and even death,” reports the WHO. The organization estimates that 130 million girls have undergone the procedure globally and 2 million are at risk each year, despite international agreements banning the practice.

Rooted in culture

Perpetrators of violence against women typically have a history of violent behaviour, grew up in violent homes and often abuse alcohol and drugs.

In a report by the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) in 2000, the agency noted that in interviews in Africa and Asia, “the right of a husband to beat or physically intimidate his wife” came out as “a deeply held conviction.” Even societies where women appear to enjoy better status “condone or at least tolerate a certain amount of violence against women.”

A study on domestic violence in Uganda by the US-based Human Rights Watch (HRW) found that families justified forcing widows to be inherited by other males in the family with arguments that the family had “all contributed to the bride price” and that therefore the woman was “family property.” Once inherited, a widow lost her husband’s property, which went to the new husband. And if a woman sought separation or divorce, the dowry had to be reimbursed. Often, the study found, “a woman’s family is unable or unwilling” to refund the dowry, and her brothers may beat her to force her back to her husband or in-laws “because they don’t want to give back cows.”

Africa’s economic decline over the past three decades has left many

women in worse conditions. Their plight is so severe, noted a study by the WHO and the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), that many women see no option but to remain with husbands who routinely batter them. The women stay because men “serve as vital opportunities for financial and social security, or for satisfying material aspirations.”

The WHO found that women with at least a secondary education were more able to negotiate greater autonomy and control of resources within marriage, have a wider range of choices in partners and are more able to choose whether and when to marry. Such capacities have often been associated with lower levels of violence in the home.

Women’s activism

Women, however, are not just victims. They have been working actively to gain better mechanisms to protect themselves. This has included successfully pushing for adoption of international treaties and instruments, such as the 1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. That convention commits governments to change discriminatory practices and laws, including those that permit early marriage, bar women from inheriting property or relegate them to a secondary status.

The convention entered into force in 1981, and as a result the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) was officially established. In 1992, the committee affirmed that violence against women was a “violation of their internationally recognized human rights” and “a form of discrimination” that “nullified their right to freedom, security and life.”

The committee asked governments to identify and end customs and practices that perpetuate violence against women. It urged them to conduct public education, create safe havens,

institute counselling and rehabilitation programmes for victims, sensitize law-enforcement officials and draft relevant laws to protect women against all kinds of violence.

Unfortunately, few countries have met those obligations. Many countries do not collect information on violence against women, so there is little data available to assess whether measures are having any impact. Worse, few countries have enacted laws to prevent abuse. A 2011 report on *Progress of the World’s Women* by UN Women, the UN body responsible for gender rights, reported that only 21 sub-Saharan countries had specific laws against domestic violence.

Many countries that are party to the convention still have no laws specifically outlawing domestic violence and sexual harassment. The sexual violence bill in Kenya, for example, passed only after certain sections, such as one that would have outlawed marital rape, were removed.

Enforcement

Putting new laws on the books is not enough. Law enforcement and court mechanisms also have to be made friendly and accessible to women, says Ms. Mary Wandia, a leading Kenyan gender advocate. “The police force is often uninterested in domestic violence,” she observes. “Unless a woman can show physical evidence of the violence she has suffered, police and law-enforcement authorities are often unwilling to believe and assist her.” Moreover, Ms. Wandia adds, “many communities are complicit in excusing or condoning violence against women, and in so doing, tacitly approve of the abuse.”

According to Ms. Thoraya Ahmed Obaid, the former executive director of the UNFPA, there is a need “to ensure that all those who respond to violence against women — whether they are police officers, judges, lawyers, immigration officials, medical personnel or social workers — are sensitized and trained to provide

a response that is compassionate and comprehensive.”

In Rwanda, gender desks have been established at police stations, staffed mostly by trained women who help victims of sexual and other violence. They investigate cases and ensure that evidence is available for court proceedings. The gender desks have “improved reporting and response to these crimes,” Ms. Josephine Odera, UN Women’s director for West Africa, told *Africa Renewal*. “What we need now is to expand this approach to more countries.”

When the government of Burkina Faso passed a law prohibiting female genital cutting in 1996, it launched a public education campaign to make the law effective. It added the topic to the school curriculum and opened a telephone help line for girls at risk. As a result, reports Plan International, the number of convictions has gone up and public support for female genital cutting has fallen.

However, even good laws can fail if the legal process is too expensive. In Kenya, for instance, some women have had cases pending before the courts for years because they rely on free public defenders who handle too many cases.

“There have to be free legal services,” argues Ms. Saran Daraba Kaba, a former government minister in Guinea and founder and president of the Mano River Women’s Peace Network, which works in Guinea, Sierra Leone and Liberia. “There is a need for lawyers who are well trained in helping the victim to make an informed decision.”

Changing social attitudes

To Ms. Kaba, the biggest challenge is changing the social attitudes and beliefs that confine women to an inferior status. “We have to get more women to know their legal rights. We have to teach our people why it is important to protect women and how it benefits the entire community

Respect Women



when women are afforded better protection,” she argues.

Educating both men and women on domestic violence is critical. It sends a message that such violence is not an issue just for women, but a problem affecting the whole community.

Regional efforts

To extend the frontiers of outreach in Africa, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and African Union Commission Chairperson Jean Ping launched the Africa UNiTE campaign in January 2010. It is part of the Secretary-General’s global campaign to end all violence against women and girls. The African campaign seeks to involve African governments, civil society, the private sector and schools and colleges, and to “empower women and their communities in stopping gender-based violence and demanding accountability.”

Women’s Day rally in South Africa.

Redux / eyevine / Xinhua / Li Qihua

The Africa-UNiTE campaign urges governments to consult with civil society to identify areas to be strengthened in current national legislations. Civil society groups have organized workshops for local journalists on gender violence. Private companies have introduced “zero tolerance” policies against gender discrimination and sexual harassment. And schools and universities have included awareness-raising activities in their curriculums.

UN Women, in partnership with the Kilimanjaro Initiative, is organizing an Africa UNiTE Mount Kilimanjaro Climb in March 2012. Commitments from all African governments to end gender violence by 2015 will be carried to the mountain top. 🌍



COMBATING VIOLENCE

Security reform key to protecting women



Training, recruitment and prosecutions can reduce violence

By Ernest Harsch

Sexual and other violence against women has been a feature of conflicts across Africa, from Sierra Leone and Liberia to Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Even in countries not at war, women

are commonly raped, beaten and victimized in other ways. Only rarely do police or prosecutors take such crimes seriously. Even worse, policemen and soldiers — whose job is to protect citizens — have all too often been among the abusers.

Here and there steps are being taken to reform Africa's security institutions to increase their ability — and willingness — to safeguard women. But such improvements remain limited, notes Ecoma Alaga, an expert on gender and security sector reform and a former director at the non-governmental Women Peace and Security Network–Africa

Graduates of the police academy in Liberia: Under President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, the country has set quotas for recruiting more women into both its police force and army.

UN Photo / Christopher Herwig

(WIPSEN–Africa), headquartered in Accra, Ghana. Frequently, Ms. Alaga points out, the security sector in Africa “finds itself falling short in its responsibility” to protect women.

‘Twin approach’

While it is imperative to overhaul Africa's security sectors generally, to make them more effective and responsive to citizens' concerns, it is especially important for such

reforms to put more emphasis on overcoming gender discrimination and on protecting women, she argues. For that to happen, Ms. Alaga maintains, a “twin approach” is required. First, those engaged in security reforms need to pay more attention to gender and to actively involve women in all phases of reform programmes. Second, women’s groups must themselves stop viewing security as “men’s business.”

The key to making security forces more gender-sensitive is similar to the essential ingredient in combating violence against women and girls more generally, argues Letty Chiwara, chief of the Africa Division of UN Women, the UN’s gender agency: breaking the silence that surrounds such violence. “What is fueling the most atrocious types of violence against women is the silence,” she said at an international conference on “the role of security organs in ending violence against women and girls,” held in October 2010 in Kigali, Rwanda.

Reforming security forces will not be easy, notes Adedeji Ebo, chair of the UN’s inter-agency task force on security sector reform. Africa’s armies and police forces were originally set up under colonial rule, “were never created to protect Africans” and were instead viewed as instruments for extracting taxes and for “keeping the natives in check.” After independence, adds Mr. Ebo, many African governments perpetuated or recreated similar security structures.

But as more African countries seek to rebuild after debilitating wars or to democratize repressive political systems, more are also trying to professionalize their armies, police forces, intelligence services and court systems. The ultimate aim is to bring their security sectors under the control of elected civilian leaders and to make them more attentive to popular aspirations.

Cleaning out the ranks

In countries where armies have been especially notorious for brutalizing civilians, one of the most obvious reforms is to rid them of personnel guilty of serious abuses.

After more than a decade of civil war, Liberia began building a new army in 2006. Although members of the old government armed forces and of demobilized rebel groups were permitted to apply, the selection criteria were rigorous. “Vetting” panels assessed the qualifications of each applicant, turning away anyone known for abuses. The names and photos of applicants were published and circulated in local communities, and the public was invited to provide any information that would disqualify a candidate. In the end, three quarters were rejected.

In the DRC a peace agreement in 2002 also set the creation of a new army. But the vetting process was much more limited than in Liberia. Often entire units from the previous factions were incorporated into the new Forces armées de la République démocratique du Congo (FARDC), with only a few of the most notorious officers excluded.

Despite the peace accord, insecurity has persisted in the DRC’s eastern provinces, with women often brutalized and raped. Monitors from the UN and human rights organizations ascribe much of the abuse to the remnants of anti-government groups. But they frequently cite evidence that undisciplined soldiers from the FARDC have also raped, pillaged and killed.

In recent years, some FARDC soldiers and officers have been tried by military tribunals and found guilty of rape and other crimes. During 2010 alone, 79 cases were heard, including of a mass rape in South Kivu. But the Congolese army as a whole still has a long way to go before it respects the rights of women and other citizens.

Training and staffing

Training is important for changing the outlook and conduct of military and police personnel, and instructors from the UN peacekeeping mission in the DRC and the European Union teach courses on human rights and gender issues to Congolese army and police units. Similarly, in Burundi, Liberia, Sierra Leone and South Africa, questions of women’s rights and gender-based violence have been integrated into military and police curricula and training programmes.

Training on its own can have only a limited impact. Changes in staffing are also vital, advocates for women’s rights argue, both to alter the overall culture of security forces and to carry out particular tasks to help protect women. One of the recommendations of the October 2010 Kigali conference was to “recruit and promote more women officers at all echelons of the security organs.”

Liberia — which produced Africa’s first democratically elected female president, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf — has made especially pronounced efforts to change the gender composition of security forces. When recruitment for the new national army commenced, President Johnson-Sirleaf announced a goal of achieving a military that would be 20 per cent female. But it proved difficult to find enough women willing to enlist who could also meet the minimum qualification of a high school education. The actual proportion of female army recruits is still only around 7 per cent.

Greater progress has been made in the Liberian National Police, for which the target was also 20 per cent. With the help of female instructors from the UN peacekeeping mission, the first all-female class of police cadets graduated in 2009. By May 2010, the force’s total proportion of women had risen to about 16 per cent. Progress was enhanced with an “accelerated learning” programme in which young women applicants who had



A South African peacekeeper in Darfur, Sudan: More women need to be recruited or promoted to the officer corps in African security forces.

UN Photo / Albert Gonzalez Farran

not completed a secondary education obtained their certificates from a local polytechnic school.

South Africa, which has been recruiting female troops and police since it started restructuring its security forces in the mid-1990s, has recently increased its quota for both institutions to 40 per cent in an effort to speed the process. After a “gender mainstreaming” audit highlighted shortcomings at the command levels of the army, eight female brigadier generals were appointed in 2007.

Legal action

While African conflicts hold particular dangers for women, abuse is also common in countries at “peace.” Even in the DRC, only an estimated 3 per cent of all rapes and other sexual assaults nationwide are perpetrated by members of armed groups. To counter the broader scourge of such violence, the police and courts must become more effective in pursuing such crimes.

But across Africa, women’s access to justice remains very limited. The

reasons include the weakness of the courts (which scarcely exist outside the larger towns), high court fees, corruption and ignorance of the law by potential plaintiffs, lawyers and even judges.

In a number of countries, including Rwanda, laws on rape and sexual violence have been strengthened in recent years. Liberia, Sierra Leone and South Africa now have specialized police units to investigate such crimes, and Liberia has a special court to hear cases of sexual violence. Guinea-Bissau has introduced gender training programmes for magistrates.

New legal aid clinics have emerged in the Congolese province of North Kivu. “Each month, we record about 30 cases of rape,” reports Eugène Buzake, a lawyer with the non-governmental *Synergie pour l’assistance juridique*, “and we direct the victims to the courts.” The group provides free legal advice, arranges protection for witnesses and helps transport them to court appearances.

Breaking the silence

As this example illustrates, greater involvement by civil society groups, women’s organizations and others is vital. They can pressure security forces to correct shortcomings and

take more energetic action. In South Africa in the late 1990s, women’s organizations exposed sexual harassment of women by army personnel, helping to spur reform.

Violence against women is a broader societal problem and cannot be curbed by security institutions alone, notes Anne Marie Goetz, a governance and security adviser to UN Women. Much violence takes place in the family and other “private spaces,” and is therefore difficult to police. Moreover, the “wide tolerance of abuses” prevalent in many societies in turn makes it harder to transform the security institutions.

Another hurdle is women’s generally subordinate position in society. In Sierra Leone, according to a study by WIPSEN–Africa, some women who met all the selection qualifications for the police or army were ultimately “ordered” by their husbands to not join.

Getting Africa’s security institutions to better protect women and advancing women’s overall social and political status thus go hand-in-hand, emphasizes Kristin Valasek of the Geneva Centre for the Democratic Control of Armed Forces.

Grassroots action is especially vital, argues Joséphine Pumbulu of the *Association africaine de défense des droits de l’homme* in the DRC. Her group promotes women’s rights in schools, churches, marketplaces and other public venues and presses the government, army and police to safeguard women from violence. She urges Congolese women to more vocally “denounce the rapists.”

To enable Congolese and other African women to do that, concludes Ms. Chiwara of UN Women, it is essential to create “a safe space for women and communities to *speak out*. At the heart of impunity is the silence that needs to be broken!” 🌍



IMPROVING HEALTH

Investing in the health of Africa's mothers

Lacking care, too many women do not survive childbirth

 **By Mary Kimani**

Not far from Mathare and Korogocho, two of the biggest slums in Nairobi, Kenya's capital, lies the Pumwani Maternity Hospital. Some 27,000 women give birth there each year. Most are poor and young. Yet the government-run hospital, the largest maternal health centre in East and Central Africa, lacks resources. Patients have to buy their own syringes, needles, cotton wool and maternity pads.

The case of Pumwani exemplifies the state of health institutions in Africa. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), high service costs, lack of trained staff and supplies, poor transport and patients' insufficient knowledge mean that 60 per cent of mothers in sub-Saharan Africa do not have a health worker present during childbirth. That heightens the risks of complications, contributing to greater maternal and child death and disability.

WHO estimates that in Nigeria, 800,000 women are living with fistula, a disabling condition often caused by problems in childbirth; the number grows by 20,000 each year. In Tanzania, 9,000 women die annually of complications related to pregnancy. The country's maternal health facilities are often too far away and the women lack adequate transport.

Despite scarce resources, some countries have been able to find ways to expand access to maternal health care. In Senegal, the Ministry of Health and the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) jointly fund community health workers who bicycle to visit women in their villages. They are trained to monitor the health of pregnant women, refer the women to local health centres for prenatal checkups and ensure that they get to a centre where skilled attendants can assist with delivery. Similar efforts are under way in Rwanda.

Preventable deaths

Across Africa, the challenge of preventing maternal deaths is

enormous. Of the 536,000 women worldwide who die each year from complications of pregnancy or delivery, 99 per cent are in developing countries. Of those, half are in sub-Saharan Africa.

Dr. Luc De Bernis, UNFPA's senior advisor on maternal health in Africa, says the problem is the poor state of Africa's health systems. "We know that 15 per cent of pregnant women develop complications that require obstetric care, and up to 5 per cent will require some type of surgery. We

Checking the blood pressure of an expectant mother in Rwanda.

 Redux / eyevine / Kate Holt





"We have never seen any country developing without a minimal health system," says Dr. Luc De Bernis, a UN maternal health expert.

 Redux / eyevine / Kate Holt

have to invest in the infrastructure necessary to do it."

According to Dr. Yves Bergevin, a senior adviser on reproductive health at UNFPA, women need to be near health centres so they can get advice about nutrition. Facilities for emergency surgery or lifesaving blood transfusions must be available. "Even if it is three in the morning an obstetric emergency is not something for which you can tell the mother to come back tomorrow," he told *Africa Renewal*.

The international community has agreed that bringing down maternal mortality is a priority. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), agreed to by world leaders in 2000, include a target for reducing the number of women dying during pregnancy and childbirth by three quarters by 2015. In 2001 African leaders pledged to put

aside 15 per cent of their annual budgets to improve health access.

One problem, says Dr. De Bernis, is that governments and donor agencies tend to focus on specific themes, such as HIV infection, malaria and tuberculosis, while failing to improve the general state of Africa's health care systems. "Strengthening health services to address maternal mortality would be very important for all these programmes," he says.

"A surgery room," he adds, "will not only serve the mothers. It will serve the needs of the community. A road which goes to a health centre will serve the community in other ways. This is a development issue and economists should recognize this. We have never seen any country developing without a minimal health system. What we need is long-term investment, which is not what is being done at present."

User fees

The poor state of Africa's health sector is partly a legacy of policies pursued in the 1980s and 1990s

at the urging of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. To counter the continent's burgeoning debt, corruption and misuse of resources, these institutions prescribed a regimen of reduced domestic spending by African governments that was intended to improve fiscal balances and ensure continued debt payments.

However, Dr. Bergevin argues, such austerity also had the negative effect of reducing funding for health care. Health centres became dilapidated and there was limited hiring of new health workers, especially doctors. In an effort to overcome the decline in government financing, many hospitals and clinics began asking patients to pay more for services. In Kenya, the government introduced "user fees" at public health facilities.

In the face of the negative impact on health care systems, the World Bank has backed away from promoting user fees. It now supports the provision of less expensive basic health care, including maternal health services.

But since enough financing is not available to provide free care, many African health facilities remain locked into “cost sharing” practices. Such a “pay-for-service” model, notes Dr. Bergevin, has had a catastrophic impact on the poor, who cannot afford to pay fees.

The situation at Pumwani Maternity Hospital is typical. Up until May 2007, patients wishing to receive maternal care had to deposit 1,200 Kenya shillings (US\$17). Women without the money were turned away. It costs Ksh3,000 for a normal delivery and Ksh6,000 for a caesarean. Daily bed charges of Ksh400 accrue throughout a woman’s stay at the hospital. The hospital’s fees are low compared to those charged at private facilities, but significant for the 60 per cent of Kenyans who live on less than Ksh140 (\$2) a day.

In Ethiopia, which has a similar model, a rich woman is 28 times more likely than a poor mother to have a doctor available during delivery, according to the UN’s Department of Economic and Social

Affairs. In Chad and Niger, the gap is 14 times or more.

“We cannot accept systems which do not provide access to everybody,” says Dr. De Bernis. “If the poor have no access, we will never reduce maternal mortality in a meaningful way.”

Concerned that high costs were impeding access to maternal health care, Kenya’s Health Ministry abolished maternity fees in public hospitals such as Pumwani in May 2007. But the money still has to come from somewhere.

‘Unacceptable’

Across Africa, spending on health remains limited. “Currently sub-Saharan countries are spending less than \$2 per person for maternal health,” Dr. Bergevin notes. “Most experts agree that you need to spend at least \$8. To see a fully functioning health system, you need to spend \$40–50 dollars per person, excluding anti-retroviral drugs.”

Some donors are seeking to bridge the financing gap for maternal health. In October 2007, at the

launch of the Deliver Now campaign, Norway announced that it would give \$1 billion over the next decade towards improving maternal health worldwide.

Dr. De Bernis warns that efforts to introduce free health care should not depend entirely on donor assistance. Given the uncertainties of external aid, “this is not sustainable.” But there are other options, he adds. “In West Africa, we have seen examples of useful cost sharing,” so that the burden is not placed solely on the patients. “A calculation is made of the health cost, how much the government can afford to provide and the rest of the financial burden is shared with the community,” he explains. However, even in such schemes, the really poor should still be exempted from paying, he argues.

Despite the challenges, his compatriot, Dr. Bergevin, is optimistic. “We know that maternal mortality can be reduced. We know what to do, and how to do it. Other countries are on track.” The biggest challenge lies with 66 countries in the developing world, including 45 in sub-Saharan Africa. “We know it can be done.” 

Social hurdles to better maternal health

Even when maternal health facilities are available, expectant mothers in Africa do not always get timely care. A study by the Africa regional office of the World Health Organization (WHO), *Reducing Mortality Rates*, reports that sometimes women or birth attendants “fail to recognize danger signals and are not prepared to deal with them.” One answer, argues Dr. Yves Bergevin, senior adviser on reproductive health for the UN Population Fund (UNFPA), is to improve the skills of birth attendants and the knowledge and capacity of women, their families and their communities.

Involving men is important, says Lucy Idoko, UNFPA’s former assistant representative in Nigeria. Most men, she says, do not know the risks of going through labour. “Maternal health is not only a woman’s issue but also a man’s issue, and important to society as a whole.”

Cultural practices can also affect women’s health risks. WHO cites genital mutilation, early marriage and multiple

pregnancies. Women who have undergone infibulation, a form of genital mutilation where the external genitalia are stitched, are more likely to suffer from obstructed labour. UNFPA data show that girls who give birth between the ages of 15 and 20 are twice as likely to die in childbirth as those in their twenties, while girls under 15 are more than five times as likely to die.

“Adolescent girls face the highest risk of premature delivery,” says Dr. Grace Kodindo, former chief of maternity at the Ndjamen general hospital in Chad. “Because their bodies are not yet fully mature, they risk obstructed labour. This is why we encourage young women to postpone their first pregnancy.”

Dr. Kodindo argues that both young age and the low status of women in society often leave them with little power to determine if, when and with whom to become pregnant. They also have little choice in the number and timing of their children.



IMPROVING HEALTH

In Africa, AIDS often has a woman's face



Testing a patient at an HIV clinic in Soweto, South Africa.

 Africa Media Online / South Photographs / John Robinson

Knowledge, power and resources needed to combat the scourge

 **By Kerry Cullinan**
Durban, South Africa

Schoolgirl Nomasonto Masango giggles as she lists all the things she and her friends want boyfriends to buy them. “If you

 Kerry Cullinan is managing editor of the Health-e News Service, based in South Africa.

have an older boyfriend, he can buy you things and it is nice to show your friends that you have things,” says Nomasonto. The most prized items are cell phones, jewelry and fashionable clothes. But they can also be as humble as school stationery, food and cold drinks.

Nomasonto appears oblivious to the danger she faces from older men with cash. She is six times more likely to become infected with HIV from a man over the age of 24 than from a boy her own age, according to research conducted in Vulindlela, her semi-rural village in South Africa.

In Southern Africa, the HIV statistics for young women are shockingly

high. In Nomasonto's village, for example, over half the young women aged between 20 and 24 are already living with HIV, while less than a third of men the same age have HIV.

Worldwide, a quarter of all new HIV infections are of women aged between 15 and 24. The vast majority of these young women live in sub-Saharan Africa, where six out of every 10 people living with HIV are women. AIDS is still the biggest killer of women of child-bearing age in Africa.

Southern African countries carry a very high burden of HIV (in Swaziland, a quarter of adults have the virus), while the risk moderates in East and Central Africa and is relatively small in West Africa.

More vulnerable

The odds are stacked against women in the fight against HIV, with biology as well as social, cultural and economic factors conspiring to make women much more vulnerable to the virus than are men.

Physiologically, women are up to four times more vulnerable to HIV infection than men. There are several reasons. Infected semen remains in the cervix for some time, there is a large surface area in the vagina and cervix exposed to the virus, and the vagina is more susceptible to small tears during sex. Young women's cervixes are even more vulnerable, particularly when they first start having sex.

But perhaps the most compelling risk factor is women's lack of power to ensure they have safe sex. There is a

large body of evidence pointing to the fact that many women are simply unable to *abstain* from sex, guarantee that their partners will be *faithful* or insist on the use of *condoms* – the famous “ABC” mantra of AIDS educators.

The Global Campaign for Microbicides (GCM), a civil society group headquartered in the US and active in several African countries, bluntly describes the HIV prevention messages “encouraging abstinence, mutual monogamy and male condom use” as having “little relevance for the majority of women at risk; even less for those in resource poor settings.”

“In spite of our best efforts, there are still millions of women who are simply unable to implement any of the current prevention strategies,” says the GCM. “As a result, infections among women and young girls are rising.” The group advocates the development of a vaginal gel (microbicide), which women could control, to prevent HIV infection.

In many African countries, particularly where people have

been displaced by war, women are extremely vulnerable to sexual violence and “transactional sex,” or exchanging sex for goods. Even in countries where there is no war, such as South Africa, the common notion that masculinity means sexual dominance has led to high levels of coercive sex. In one survey, 40 per cent of young South African women reported being sexually abused before they reached the age of 19.

‘It was meaningless’

But many African women get infected within stable relationships and marriages. A study in Kenya and Zambia found that young, married women under the age of 20 had a higher HIV rate than did unmarried women – mostly because they had married older men.

But this problem does not only affect young women. For many African women, their only risk factor for HIV was that they were married.

A lab worker tests blood for HIV in the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

 Panos/Sven Torfinn



Ugandan AIDS activist Beatrice Were was a virgin when she married, but she discovered shortly after her husband died that she had been infected with HIV by him. "I had abstained and remained faithful, but ultimately it was meaningless," she explains. "And so I was left at 22, widowed with two baby daughters, and enveloped by a cloud of bitterness that took years to disperse."

Activist lobbying

Ms. Were became one of the first women in Uganda to publicly declare her HIV status. She started the National Community of Women Living with AIDS (NACWOLA) in 1993, one of the first organizations on the African continent aimed specifically at supporting women with HIV and lobbying for their rights.

Ms. Were's NACWOLA was one of the most successful lobby groups for HIV positive women, campaigning for mother-to-child treatment and access to anti-retroviral medications (ARVs) as well as giving support and comfort to some 40,000 women.

South Africa's Treatment Action Campaign (TAC) is arguably one of the world's most successful HIV activist organizations. Although not exclusively for women, the TAC has led a number of campaigns aimed at improving women's access to treatment. In 2001, the TAC successfully used the courts to force the South African government to roll out a national campaign for the prevention of mother-to-child HIV infection. It has also campaigned tirelessly for access to anti-retroviral medicines, including cheaper generic ARVs.

More recently, the TAC has turned its attention to lobbying the public health system in South Africa to start vaccinating women against the human papilloma virus (HPV), which causes cervical cancer. HIV

positive women are far more susceptible to being infected with HPV.

There are dozens of AIDS activist organizations in Africa, most led by people living with HIV. But many are facing severe budget restraints as donor funding dries up.

Rwanda's first lady, Jeanette Kagame, has ensured that the Organization of African First Ladies is active in lobbying and fundraising for HIV programmes, including for women living with HIV.

Not just knowledge, but power

It has taken some time for policy-makers to realize that women need not only knowledge about how to protect themselves from HIV. In many cases, they also need the power to insist that men use condoms.

At a High Level Meeting of the UN General Assembly on AIDS in June 2011, member states pledged to:

- eliminate gender inequalities and gender-based abuse and violence,
- increase the capacity of women and adolescent girls to protect themselves from the risk of HIV infection through the provision of health care and services,
- ensure that women can exercise their right to have control over, and decide freely and responsibly on, matters related to their sexuality in order to increase their ability to protect themselves from HIV infection, free of coercion, discrimination and violence, and
- take all necessary measures to create an enabling environment for the empowerment of women and strengthen their economic independence.

Lack of funds

However, at the very moment when attention is finally being paid to the role of gender inequality as a major trigger in the spread of HIV, the fight

against the virus is being increasingly threatened by a lack of funds. Donor funding in Africa peaked in 2008, but donations are now declining as the global economic recession takes its toll.

The US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (Pepfar) has been reducing funding allocations since 2008. It is trying to transfer responsibility for treatment to governments in the countries where it donates funds. As a result, Uganda reported that since last year it has had to ration ARVs for new patients because of a lack of funds. Many other countries are slowing down on treatment, prevention and care, while shortages of ARVs are becoming common in many clinics and hospitals on the continent.

The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria announced after its September 2011 board meeting that it is facing "resource constraints," and is "revising down" the grant money it has to disperse to countries in need. Some of its grant money may only be available in late 2013.

As it stands, only four out of ten Africans who need anti-retroviral medication are able to get it. Only half of African HIV-positive mothers receive ARV treatment to prevent their babies from getting the virus during pregnancy and birth.

Rather than seeing funding reduced, the global effort to combat HIV/AIDS "needs increased support," argues Dr. Peter Mugenyi, director of the Joint Clinical Research Centre in Kampala, the largest ARV treatment facility in Uganda. UN Women, the world body's agency on gender issues, agrees, emphasizing that "more resources are needed, and strategies and programmes must be targeted to women in particular."

For women in Africa, it is literally a matter of life or death. 



IMPROVING HEALTH

Gender violence hampers AIDS fight

Activists in Zambia counter a deadly link

 **By Reginald Ntomba** Lusaka

Maria is living with HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Anti-retroviral medicines (ARVs) are now more widely available and are supposed to make her life better. But her continued therapy is under threat because she fears that if her husband discovers her HIV status he will become verbally abusive or even divorce her. As a result, Maria says, she has had to hide her life-prolonging ARV drugs and only takes them when her husband is not around.

Maria's tale was one of the many cases documented by Human Rights Watch (HRW) in Zambia. The international non-governmental organization (NGO), headquartered in New York, warns that if gender violence is not addressed, the government's comprehensive programme to provide free ARVs through the public health system will be frustrated. "Gender-based abuses will continue to shatter the lives of countless Zambian women in acute need of anti-retroviral treatments and contribute to avoidable losses of health and lives," notes HRW researcher Nada Ali.

According to the Joint UN Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS), there are 33.3 million people worldwide living with HIV. Of those, slightly over half (52 per cent) are women. In Africa, however, women account for 60 per cent of all adults living with HIV. In parts of Africa, adds UN Women, the

UN's gender agency, young females aged 15–24 are up to six times more likely to be HIV-positive than males of the same age.

"Sexual violence," notes UN Women, is not only "a widespread and brutal violation of women's rights." It also "exacerbates the risk of transmission" of HIV. In Africa and other regions, UN Women coordinates the UN Secretary-General's campaign "Unite to End Violence Against Women," first launched in 2008.

Activists in Southern Africa are now drawing attention to the contribution of gender violence to other ills, such as the AIDS pandemic. The Zambian chapter of Women and the Law in Southern Africa (WLSA), a research and advocacy group, argues that unless such violence is addressed, combating HIV/AIDS will be an even more arduous task. "Violence against women has affected treatment of HIV/AIDS and this is worrying," says

Mrs. Matrine Chuulu, the chapter's national coordinator.

The Zambian chapter of the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), with funding from the European Union, runs a crisis centre for battered women and provides such services as psychotherapy and legal advice. According to data collected by the YWCA, in cases of gender violence reported since 2006, nearly half of the women were found to be HIV-positive.

NGOs have lobbied the government to strengthen legislation. In 2005 it amended the penal code to prohibit indecent assault, sexual harassment and trafficking of women and children, and in April 2011 enacted a new law to combat gender-based violence. 

Holding anti-retroviral medicines in Zambia: Fear of violence has prompted some women to hide or forgo using them.

 UNICEF / NYHQ2009-0327 / Christine Nesbitt





ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Does financing benefit African women?

New initiatives to track the gender impact of development funds

 **By Michael Fleshman**

Decades after the world officially recognized a human right to gender equality, women remain largely excluded from the upper ranks of government and business, earn less than their male co-workers and face an array of customs, traditions and attitudes that limit their opportunities. Are governments, businesses and the international community putting money behind their resolutions calling for women's advancement? Are international aid budgets, government funds and private sector resources being spent in ways that narrow economic, social and political inequalities between men and women?

The answer, notes Jacinta Muteshi, the former chair of the Kenyan government's Commission on Gender and Development, is generally "no." While there has been some progress in women's political representation, advances have been limited in the economic realm, for poor women in particular. That is because disadvantages "are often anchored in social institutions, macro-economic policies and development strategies that have not adequately recognized that women are important agents of economic development and poverty reduction," Ms. Muteshi told *Africa Renewal*.



In UN Women's 2010-11 annual report, Executive Director Michelle Bachelet expressed concerns with the pace of progress: "It is not acceptable for young girls to be taken out of school, or for women to die from childbirth complications that could be prevented, but these things continue to happen every day." In a few countries, including Rwanda and South Africa, there has been an increase in the number of female

Few women in Africa work in regular, formal sector jobs, and even those generally earn too little to escape from poverty.

 Panos / Sven Torfinn

parliamentarians and other elected and appointed officials.

Poverty's female face

Economic parity seems very distant. In employment, a 2008 report asserted, gender bias has meant that "women have been more

concentrated than men in informal, subsistence and ‘vulnerable’ employment,” that is, self-employment and jobs without salaries in family-owned businesses. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), more than 67 per cent of African women work in agriculture, mostly as smallholder subsistence farmers. Fewer than one in five working women in sub-Saharan Africa receive regular wages or salaries, compared to a third of employed African men and almost 93 per cent of women in the developed North.

The extra obstacles faced by women struggling to work their way out of poverty are suggested by the World Bank. Its *2010 Enterprise Survey* found that in both the public and private sectors, only 1 in 26 salaried African women was employed in a senior management position, compared to 1 in every 6 men. That lack of opportunity at home contributes to a far higher percentage of college-educated African women, nearly 28 per cent, going overseas in search of employment, compared to 17 per cent of educated men.

A stacked economic deck

The UN Development Programme and others estimate that as many as 70 per cent of the world’s poor are women. In almost every respect, Ms. Muteshi argues, the economic deck is stacked against women. Citing UN estimates, she notes that women worldwide account for two thirds of all working hours and produce half the food, but earn just 10 per cent of the world’s income and own less than 1 per cent of the world’s property.

First and foremost, she says, this gap reflects “the absence of women in economic leadership.” African women are only rarely present among senior officials at central banks or ministries of finance, planning or trade. “The same can be said of women’s representation in the private sector.”

Employers in labour-intensive businesses often prefer women as they are seen to have fewer economic options than men and are therefore willing to accept poorer wages and working conditions. Women workers are also less likely to be members of trade unions than men.

Following the money

In the 1980s, women’s rights advocates began to scrutinize public budgets to understand how financial flows affected women. Activists initially focused on the area of most importance to women, government spending. By analysing public finance through a process known as “gender budgeting” (see *Africa Renewal*, April 2002), they hoped to ensure that women benefited fairly from national spending decisions and to improve the budget-making process itself.

In a December 2007 report to the UN Commission on the Status of Women on financing for gender equality, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon noted that 50 governments around the world, including several in Africa, used gender budgeting methods to help set spending priorities. Morocco has established gender budgeting methods as part of a broader reform of its budgetary spending process.

There have been efforts to put a price tag on gender inequality. Mr. Ban’s report

Recipients of loans from Buusaa Gonofaa, a non-governmental organization: Even a little cash can help poor women expand their economic activities.

Andualem Sisay



estimated that the equivalent of between 0.1 and 0.3 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) is lost every year from failure to “promote gender equality and empower women.” That goal is the third of eight internationally agreed development objectives known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The goal includes a specific commitment to eliminate gender disparities in education by 2015. Achieving this in poor countries, the report estimated, would require an increase in annual spending on gender equality programmes from an estimated \$8.6 billion in 2006 to nearly \$24 billion by 2015. The World Bank estimates the cost of achieving full economic and social equality between the sexes at \$83 billion per year by 2015.

Aid and accountability

Between 2002 and 2010, reports the industrialized countries’ Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), aid for programmes designed at least in part to promote gender equality rose from \$2.5 billion to \$15.2 billion, and the amount of aid screened for its impact on gender rose from \$15 billion to \$45.7 billion. But the group also reports, “A high percentage of gender equality focused aid alone does not mean that aid is well aligned with the gender equality policy objective.” It noted in an earlier report that such “gendered” aid was overwhelmingly concentrated in social services. Only \$1 out of every \$4 in aid for infrastructure and directly productive activities like mining, manufacturing and farming was spent on projects that included greater gender equality as a goal.

Governments that receive aid must also do better. In recent years donors have begun to channel a greater percentage of aid to poor countries through general budgetary support, instead of allotting aid for individual projects. A recent study by the OECD’s Network on Gender Equality found that such “programme” funding leaves decision-making with recipients’ finance ministries. “These ministries often are unaware of... gender

equality as a development issue, as are many staff on the donor side.”

Liberalization policies

Ms. Muteshi thinks the problem goes even deeper. “Current neoliberal economic structures are disadvantageous to women in general,” she asserts. That is because a narrow emphasis on GDP growth fails to recognize “the gendered nature of our economic lives.” The liberalization theories that influence many development strategies, she notes, tend to push women into “precarious, exploitive, unregulated and temporary forms of work” in the informal sector.

There has been some good news, Ms. Muteshi acknowledges. Women have benefited from microfinance loans, which are now available in most African countries. However, she adds, “the amounts remain small and have rarely been scaled up in ways that truly strengthen women’s economic power. It is time to provide women with credit that moves beyond ‘micro.’”

Ms. Muteshi argues that the greatest problem with donor programmes in Africa is that they generally do not invest in sectors especially important to women. In agriculture, she observes, “African women provide approximately 70 per cent of the workforce and grow about 90 per cent of the food, yet it is a sector that has seen little real investment directed towards women.”

Trading for equality?

Trade is another potentially important source of finance for gender equality, but efforts to assess its impact have been hampered by inadequate information and research. The overall effect, however, appears to be no better than mixed. Access to the US market through that country’s Africa Growth and Opportunity Act helped create jobs for women in the African textile industry in the 1990s.

But following liberalization of the textile trade at the World Trade Organization in 2005, many textile plants relocated

to Asia. Meanwhile, European Union barriers to African farm produce, the export sector most important to women, remain formidable.

More broadly, trade liberalization has not succeeded in dramatically expanding opportunities for women. African exports remain heavily concentrated in commodities, particularly energy and minerals, and in a few commercial agricultural products such as coffee and tea. These are sectors in which women are poorly represented.

African women’s efforts to include gender equality and poverty reduction rules in global trade agreements have been largely frustrated by the refusal of many major trading countries to consider human and social rights in trade negotiations. African women have had some success in working with Northern civil society “fair trade” groups to counter specific injustices.

Agenda for action

In the struggle for economic equality, UN Women, the UN’s gender agency, asserts, there is mounting evidence that African and other poor women remain “at the margins of formal economies.” Securing the resources women need for equality, the organization says, is “mission critical” to Africa’s development plans. It will require fundamental changes in the way power and wealth are distributed. Such changes include using quotas for elected and appointed offices, making sure women participate in setting economic priorities and accelerating progress towards the MDGs’ gender equality and health and education targets. Markets also need to be regulated to ensure that women can participate fully and fairly in economic life.

Current initiatives for women’s empowerment and gender equality are too narrowly focused, Ms. Muteshi argues. “They do not adequately address the root conditions that produce inequality.” Until the world learns how to value the work women actually do, “we leave women vulnerable to poverty, violence and powerlessness.” 



ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Women struggle to secure land rights



Hard fight for access and decision-making power

 **By Mary Kimani**

Felitus Kures is a widow living in Kapchorwa, northeastern Uganda. Her husband's death left her solely responsible for their children. To meet their needs, she

depended on the small piece of land she and her husband had farmed together. But just months after his funeral, her in-laws sold her husband's land without her knowledge. "We only realized this when the buyer came to evict us," Ms. Kures explains. She was able to regain use of the land after she got legal assistance with the help of the Uganda Land Alliance, a civil society group that campaigns for land rights.

Ms. Kures's plight is a common one in Africa, although she was more fortunate than most other women.

Maize field in Malawi: Women account for 70 per cent of Africa's food production, but often do not have secure access to land.

 Redux / Hollandse Hoogte / Arie Kievit

Many never regain access or rights to matrimonial land lost after divorce or the death of a spouse.

Experts report that women in Africa contribute 70 per cent of food production. They also account for nearly half of all farm labour, and 80–90 per cent of food processing, storage and transport, as well as hoeing and weeding.



Cassava farming in Liberia: Women's rights to land must be legally recognized, and institutions are needed to enforce those laws.

UNMIL / Christopher Herwig

Yet women often lack rights to land, notes Joan Kagwanja, a food security specialist with the Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, an NGO that works with small-scale farmers to promote agricultural productivity. Land rights tend to be held by men or kinship groups controlled by men, and women have access mainly through a male relative, usually a father or husband. Even then, women are routinely obliged to hand over the proceeds of any farm sales to a male and have little say over how those earnings are used.

Moreover, such limited access is very tenuous and can be quickly lost. One study showed that in Zambia more than one third of widows lost access to family land when their husbands died. "It is this dependency on men

that leaves many African women vulnerable," Ms. Kagwanja told *Africa Renewal*.

The spread of HIV/AIDS and the stigma associated with the disease have only made women's land rights more precarious. Widows of men who die from the disease have often been accused of bringing the malady into the family, possibly leading to the confiscation of their land and other property.

In response, activists are fighting to introduce or strengthen laws intended to give women more secure access to land and are combating social norms and practices that stand in their way. Despite many obstacles, they are making headway here and there.

Historical legacy

Researchers with the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), based in Washington, DC,

note that the marginal nature of women's land rights is an historical problem in Africa. Before colonial rule, land ownership and access took diverse forms but were largely vested in lineages, clans and families, with male leaders exercising day-to-day control. Members of a particular lineage or clan would seek rights to use land from those community or family leaders.

Except in a few communities where inheritance passed through the mother, land rights were typically only inherited by sons. Women rarely had full rights to land. They were seen as secondary claimants, through male relatives.

Benjamin Cousins, an agrarian specialist who teaches at South Africa's University of the Western Cape, points out that historically women had traditional protections that ensured continued access even after separation, divorce or

“Land rights activists suggest that one way to give women guaranteed access to land is to separate formal ownership of land from the ability to use it.”

widowhood. There also were traditional means of arbitration to which women could appeal if access was contested.

But colonial rule led to the introduction of Western systems of land tenure. In East and Southern Africa, the high number of white settlers encouraged the privatization and subdivision of land, held under individual freehold titles. In West Africa much land was left under communal forms of ownership, managed by customary leaders.

At independence, some new governments, as in Tanzania, Mozambique and Benin, proclaimed state ownership over all land. In Kenya and South Africa private ownership existed alongside lineage or clan ownership. In Nigeria, clan and lineage ownership coexisted with both state and private ownership, especially in urban areas.

Over the years, rapid population growth has contributed to the overuse of land and to the depletion of soils. This has made fertile land more valuable and increased competition for its control. Such pressures, together with changes in family structures and clan relations, have eroded traditional social safeguards that ensured access by women. So while many land disputes in Africa are still formally governed by customary law, notes Mr. Cousins, “many protections of women have not been accurately carried forward” into modern life. Moreover, he told *Africa Renewal*,

today there are many situations, such as cohabitation without marriage, to which traditional norms do not apply. Consequently, “Many women have lost access to land.”

Many African countries today recognize both “traditional” rules of land ownership and Western-type statutory laws. In Nigeria, the state assumed ownership of all land after independence in 1960. Although this weakened customary land tenure, traditional laws still were recognized by the government in areas of long-established clan and lineage ownership. The recognition of Islamic law in Nigeria’s northern states complicated the situation further.

Land titling

One solution that Western development experts initially promoted to overcome the shortcomings of customary law was to give land titles to individuals. Esther Mwangi, a land rights researcher at Harvard University, notes that governments in East and Southern Africa followed the course of land titling, in an effort to ensure that individuals had legal power over their land. This policy was expected to help women secure legal rights to properties that they owned or inherited.

“In the areas where I have been working, the privatization process has actually stripped women of their access,” Ms. Mwangi told *Africa Renewal*. During titling operations, it was mainly men who got their names on the documents because they were deemed to be the “household heads.”

Widows lucky enough to get land were allocated the smallest lots.

Land rights activists suggest that one way to give women guaranteed access to land is to separate formal ownership of land from the ability to use it. Thus, while the land may be registered in the name of a man, he would be barred from selling it without the consent of his wife or wives or other heirs. Ghana has a “head of family accountability law” that is intended to ensure that family property cannot be sold without others being informed, giving consent or benefiting from the proceeds.

“Another alternative would be for land to be put in the name of families or both men and women to have their names on the certificate,” suggests Ms. Mwangi. “Where resources such as water, sanitation and grazing land have to be shared communally, then whole communities could be identified as owners of the land, with everyone having equal access.”

Resistance to reform

But such ideas may be easier proposed than implemented. Activists for women’s land rights have tried to have laws passed in many countries, with mixed results. In Uganda, where there was very active lobbying by the Uganda Land Alliance for both men and women to be listed in title deeds as co-owners, the bill came to parliament repeatedly and failed each time.

Where progressive laws have passed, things do not necessarily get easier. In Mozambique, civil society groups gained a law in 1997 entitling women to secure access to land and property. “We saw the land law as a victory,” Lorena Magane of the Rural Association of Mutual Support told a reporter. But Rachael Waterhouse, an editor of a report on gender and land in Mozambique, says that while the law was fine in theory,

“If it benefits rural women, you can call it development.”

—UN Women

implementation proved difficult because traditional courts, which most rural women use, still consider the man the head of household and therefore the rightful authority over land.

In Ghana the 1985 Intestate Succession Law and the Head of Household Accountability Law were both intended to create greater security for widows and children. If a man died without a will, the succession law decreed that his property would be equally divided and distributed among his widow, children and other members of the extended family. Yet a study by the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) in Ghana's Volta Region found that few women knew of either law and that customary practices continued to determine inheritance. That left many women without access to land after the death of their partner.

Changing institutions

What women need, argues Ms. Kagwanja, is for their basic rights to be entrenched in constitutions and for equal rights of property ownership to be clearly stipulated in the law. Where this has already been done, it is necessary to bring all inheritance and land laws into harmony with the constitution, so that they say the same thing. In addition, legal institutions responsible for implementing the land laws need to operate equitably, be friendly to women and extend their reach to the countryside.

“At present,” she says, “we have very centralized institutions. Moreover, it is men who are in charge of the dispute-resolution systems and the

court systems are very expensive and intimidating.”

Traditional land ownership systems in particular need some rethinking, she says. Local chiefs authorized to allocate land generally assign it to men. “How do you democratize the systems for allocation of land?” Ms. Kagwanja asks. “Do you develop new localized land boards, where you elect members of the land board and insist on a requirement for gender equity, as is the case in Tanzania and Uganda? Or do you democratize the old system? These are some of the questions we need to answer.”

Combating negative norms

Broader cultural change is also vital, says Ms. Mwangi. Those who decide land allocations have particular cultural understandings of the role of women.

She spent some time talking to men and women about sharing land ownership. “I think that the men are not ready,” observes Ms. Mwangi. “They don't seem very sensitized to the idea that women can be decision-makers when it pertains to land.” That is a paradox, she adds. “Women's labour is key to productivity, yet that land is literally out of reach for women.”

Mr. Cousins agrees. “To address land rights, you need to address the unequal power relations within families. Unless you change the power relations, the legal definition of who has rights may not make much of a difference,” he says.

Positive developments

There are some positive achievements, however. In Swaziland, women cannot own land because they are considered minors under the

law. Yet some HIV-positive women who lost access to land after their husbands died were able to negotiate with a female chief to persuade other chiefs to give the widows land they could use to secure their livelihood.

In Kenya, community watchdog organizations and other groups providing home-based care for those living with HIV/AIDS are intervening. When they encounter property grabbing, they negotiate, mostly with male members of the family, for women and girls to retain access to the land and property.

In Rwanda, the government passed a law in 1999 giving women inheritance rights equal to those of males, overruling traditional norms by which only male children could inherit. This has enabled widows and female orphans of the 1994 genocide to secure land.

Currently, UN agencies such as FAO, UN Women and the UN Development Fund are working with non-governmental organizations to raise awareness among women of their rights and to support efforts to entrench equality of access in national laws.

UN Women's Africa programme for rural women has several pillars through which women's role in agricultural transformation can be enhanced. It considers equitable land allocation as critical to such a transformation. One of its strategies is “to strengthen the capacities of the ministries of agriculture to prioritize support to women food production systems in their planning and resource allocation mechanisms.”

One of UN Women's key messages is, “Rural women play a key role in food production and food security in Africa.” The UN agency encourages governments, development partners and the private sector to enhance women's rights to land, arguing that “if it benefits rural women, you can call it development.” 



Tapping women's entrepreneurship in Ghana



Access to credit, technology vital for breaking into manufacturing

By Efam Dovi Accra

"It has been a very long journey," says Leticia Osafo-Addo, a business owner in Ghana. Her journey to success began nearly 30 years ago. She started off in her kitchen by making just 10 jars of

black pepper sauce for friends. The chili sauce, popular in Ghana, is known as *shito*. Ms. Osafo-Addo's was a success and demand for it grew. She sought and found additional training, including an integrated capacity-building programme initiated by the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) for promoting sustainable small- and medium-enterprises.

Moving the business out of her kitchen and into formal premises proved a long, challenging process. The biggest hurdle was securing capital. In 2001 she landed in debt due

Selling tomatoes at a marketplace in Accra, Ghana: Women face many hurdles in expanding their businesses beyond the "micro" level.  Alamy Images / Ulrich Doering

to delayed payment from her biggest client, the Ghana Armed Forces. But that year also proved to be a turning point. The Ghana Investments Promotion Centre facilitated the acquisition of 51 per cent of her company by an Austrian soup-making firm, increasing its value and thus enabling it to secure loans from two government ministries. That in turn meant she could refurbish a rented industrial site, and the factory opened in January 2006.

Stuck at the bottom

Ms. Osafo-Addo's story of success is unusual. But her struggle is common to many of Ghana's women entrepreneurs. About 80 per cent of women-owned businesses are stuck at the "micro" level. They are unable to expand because they lack properly coordinated support, cheap and long-term credit, and sufficient access to new technologies. They face poor infrastructure, low capacity and sometimes obstructive government policies.

According to World Bank estimates, most businesses in Ghana, which account for 70 per cent of employment in the country, fall within the categories of "micro," "small" and "medium" enterprises. They range from farming activities, agribusiness, light manufacturing such as textiles and garments, and arts and crafts. However, due to neglect, this sector has suffered greatly over several decades, contributing to a nationwide shift from productive entrepreneurship to petty trading.

Because of such challenges, says Ms. Christy Banya, a programme analyst with the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the government should take firm action. "Local businesses need to be protected."

She also notes that the banks appear more willing to give loans to importers of cheap products than to local manufacturers. The importers sell their produce quickly, at higher returns. But home-grown businesses require more time to turn a profit and to repay their loans, so the financial institutions shy away from them.

As in Ms. Osafo-Addo's case, the challenge of finding much-needed capital has stalled the growth of Lucia Quachey's clothing manufacturing company. Usually, commercial bank interest rates are high. Moreover, banks want collateral, which many women do not have.

Ghanaian women generally do not face problems in starting businesses on a subsistence basis. The difficulty has always been in developing them beyond that level, to graduate in scale from micro to small. This is where help is most needed. In an effort to address the issue, the government launched the Venture Capital Trust Fund to help invest in small- and medium-scale enterprises, known as SMEs.

Social handicaps

But women's business groups worry that their members might not be able to tap into the fund. "At the end of the day, only big businesses will be able to access these funds, because the information doesn't flow to the ground, where the majority of the women are illiterate," says Ms. Quachey. "Resources may be available, but they may not be accessible to women at all, because culturally and socially, women are handicapped." She cites women's multiple roles. They are expected to look after the home and family, which impedes their progress in vocations outside the home.

In addition, Ghana's prevailing social norms affect the ability of women-owned businesses to function as bigger, male-dominated businesses do. Many deals are conducted in hotels after business hours. In a country where women are still largely regarded as home-makers, the question frequently pops up: "What is a married woman doing in a hotel with some men?"

Ms. Quachey also cites prevalent "old boyism" in business circles. These are overwhelmingly male-dominated, and there are simply too few women at the top to encourage other women to strive to break in.

Ms. Gifty Boahene, chief executive officer of Fairgreen Ltd., an information technology company, believes that times are changing and that perceptions of women doing business outside the home will change as well.

But she adds: "We are not there yet. I have seen married women who had to go out of their way to introduce their male business colleagues to their husbands," to reassure the husbands that their relationships were strictly professional. Some marriages simply fall apart.

Time for reform

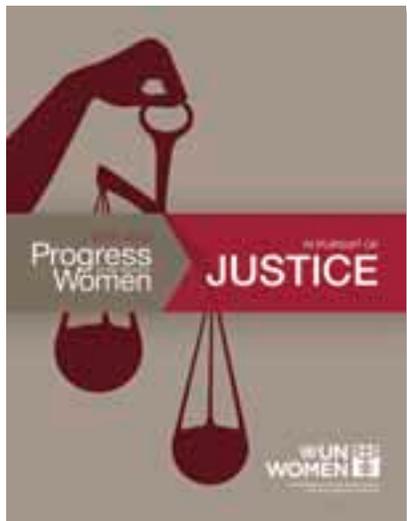
Ghana's political history has not been encouraging for entrepreneurship in general. Decades of military rule in the 1970s and 1980s drove away many local and foreign entrepreneurs. Now, with a stable political atmosphere and the goodwill that the country enjoys with the international community, industry activists are hoping the government will implement policies to encourage business growth. Such an approach could help create a shift from subsistence to micro businesses, from small to medium and from medium to large. This would in turn provide many opportunities for women-owned businesses to grow and flourish.

A wind of change may already be blowing in favour of women-owned businesses. The government, with donor support, is also implementing a programme of market reforms. The goal is to achieve widespread private-sector growth throughout the country by enhancing competitiveness and reducing the risk of doing business in Ghana. Although these reforms do not specifically target women-owned businesses, their nature should eventually promote women's entrepreneurship.

"Establishing practical and workable legislation is an essential part of assisting and encouraging women to consider starting and running their own business," says Mr. Patrick S. Frederick, head of a UK-based business consulting agency and co-founder of the African-Caribbean Business Network, who was quoted in a local magazine. "This is a hugely under-tapped resource that should be addressed and not overlooked." 

Resources on women

SELECTED REPORTS



Progress of the World's Women: In Pursuit of Justice 2011-2012

The most recent in a recurrent series of reports, *Progress of the World's Women* outlines ten recommendations to make justice systems work for women. The report also includes data on women's political and legal rights around the world.

<http://progress.unwomen.org/pdfs/EN-Report-Progress.pdf>



Annual Report 2010-2011

UN Women's *Annual Report* documents its work to foster women's empowerment and gender equality around the world. It highlights some of the organization's initiatives during the year and provides summary financial statements, a list of new programmes and projects, and contact information.

www.unwomen.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/06/UNwomen_AnnualReport_2010-2011_en.pdf

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LINKS

WomenWatch

Maintained by the UN Inter Agency Network on Women and Gender Equality, WomenWatch is a central gateway to information and resources on the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women throughout the UN system. The website also provides information on efforts to incorporate gender perspectives into follow-up to global conferences.

www.un.org/womenwatch

Say NO – UNiTE to End Violence against Women

UN Women's "Say NO" initiative is a global platform for advocacy and action, engaging participants from all walks of life to prevent and address violence against women and girls. It contributes towards the objectives of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's campaign, UNiTE to End Violence against Women, through social mobilization.

www.saynotoviolence.org

GenderandAIDS

UN Women's Comprehensive Web Portal for Gender Equality Dimensions of the HIV/AIDS Epidemic. GenderandAIDS.org aims to promote understanding, knowledge sharing and action on HIV and AIDS as a gender and human rights issue. This web portal offers up-to-date information on the epidemic from a gender perspective, a full range of resources, personal stories and commentaries, and multimedia advocacy tools.

www.saynotoviolence.org

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