

Civil Society input to the Africa Commission

on Effective Development Cooperation with Africa



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Women's economic empowerment

- an important aspect of Gender Equality

Women are being excluded from full participation in economic life and it has direct consequences for the welfare of individual families and for the entire economy. Increasing economic opportunities for women is essential for improving women's lives and accelerating economic growth and development, with potential to lift hundreds of millions of people out of poverty. It is generally recognised that progress on gender equality is necessary in order to achieve the Millennium Development Goals.

"Modifying the role and the power of gender is unavoidable to lay the foundation for another world, with equality, peaceful and democratic solidarity, and for sustainable development. Women are not a social group, nor an ethnic minority, nor a socio-professional category: women, just like men, simply define humanity. It would therefore be an illusion to seek to instate equality at the place of work without also seeking to do it within society as a whole, and, within the family in particular"

Mama Koité Doumbia, FEMNET Chair, Mali.

Key economic force

Female-headed households, single women and their children are often described as "the poorest of the poor". But women are also the backbone of the agricultural sector and the informal economy and produce more than half of the global food production. Furthermore the daily reproductive tasks such as fuel, water and food supply for home consumption and for sale are almost exclusively performed by women and carried out together with productive activities. Women are mainly the ones in charge of housework, and they play a vital role in rural home's economy. But this contribution, which systematically implies "double working hours" usually remains unnoticed.

Still women are not allowed to own nor inherit property, productive resources including land and they face huge challenges in accessing services such as savings accounts, small loans, insurance, micro credits and technical assistance, which are essential inputs to increase production.

New research shows that total agricultural output in Sub-Saharan Africa could increase by 6-20 per cent if women had equal access to agricultural inputs as men. Women therefore play a vital and largely unrecognised role in both food production and the fight against hunger.

Decent work and equality

Africa has only seen modest increases in women's participation in non-agricultural activities, but both Asia and Latin America have seen relative improvements due to investments in the export-oriented manufacturing industries, such as textiles.

Creating waged employment will not only increase women's income, but will also impact positively on their participation in household and community decision-making on important issues such as girls' education and health.

Still not all jobs lead to the empowerment of women, e.g. employment in export processing zones and other types of exploitative low paid work can add to women's work burden without offering them much in return.

The concept of decent work needs to be applied in order to ensure working conditions that promote higher gender equality and ease the lives of women. Furthermore women need to be empowered to keep greater control over their own income and an equal say in the discussion on household economic distribution.

"Promoting gender equality is not simply an instrumental issue, it is a global challenge where we from North and South have to work together and learn from each other. It is also a political and moral issue and it has to start from a personal and an organisational commitment. It is important that civil society organisations, private business and governments all deal with the issue of how to address gender equality concerns within our own organisations or institutions.

Gender equality is not only a women's issue it has to involve both men and women. Men must engage in gender equality discussions both to ensure their own gender rights but also to help promote gender equality at large. Men need to be willing to relook traditional ways of distribution of labour, resources and power in order to achieve a more gender equal society. Men can act as positive role models showing that the responsibility of gender equality lies with both men and women. Many years of experience with gender equality work have taught us that women's empowerment is important and necessary but that the best results happen when both men and women get involved in changing unequal practices, systems or norms."

Henrik Stubkjær, Secretary General DCA and member of the MDG3 Champion Network"

Political participation

While economic empowerment of women is a precondition to greater gender equality it is not the only condition. While there can be no doubt that economic growth and economic equality between the genders are very important factors in promoting gender equality, it is important to remember that equality is also about political participation at all levels; it is about having a say in personal matters including deciding on sexual and reproductive health issues; it is about having national legislation that equally protects the rights of men and women; it is about changing the way gender roles are traditionally perceived; and it is about removing barriers for attaining greater equality between men and women at all levels.

"If positive and meaningful progress is to be attained a more integrated and multi-pronged approach that factors in not only economic empowerment but also other economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights is imperative. First, there is need to invest heavily in interventions that target quality all-round education, access to assets including credit, and rolling out of pertinent policy and regulatory framework. More critically investment in societal attitudinal changes, and the reversal of cultural practices that continue to view and treat girls and women as individuals who have no rights and who cannot enjoy the rights enshrined in international and national human rights legal frameworks is imperative."

Judy Kamanyi, NGO representative, Uganda

Policy and strategy

Despite commitments of national governments to promote gender equality and women's empowerment, they often fail to address gender equality issues in the political and legal spheres and they have not yet sufficiently translated verbal commitments to gender equality into gender specific allocations in national or sector specific plans. Gender responsive budgets must therefore be promoted in all development policies, especially the national Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). Women's participation in budget planning processes is naturally vital to ensure the right gender priorities and decisions.

Vital role in food production

The life of African women; the typical African small-holder farmer is a woman, breadwinner to a large extended family, involved in subsistence farming with low-yield crops on one hectare of land or less. She has no access to irrigation, fertilizers or basic services and her children's manual labour is indispensable. Still, women produce the vast majority of the global food production and they prioritise food, nutrition and the feeding of children higher than men. It is thus crucial to strengthen women's position, recognizing their experiences, knowledge and role in food production and that development strategies include a strong focus on transforming patriarchal power structures, ensuring women's property rights and providing access to credit.

Gender finance

Gender concerns have been integrated in development assistance for almost a century and in recent years, financing towards gender mainstreaming has increased enormously, but it still constitutes only 3,6 percent of the total development assistance. Furthermore only 10 percent of this assistance is being targeted towards productive sectors, which are central in order to promote the economic empowerment of women and a sustained transformation of the relation between men and women. Even worse a very limited part of development assistance is targeted towards increasing women's participation in the political life and towards changing legislative, policy and normative barriers which hinders gender equality.



• Sonja Skov

Policy recommendations

- Gender equality goals within the political, legal, and socio-economic spheres of the society must be recognised as crucial to the achievement of sustainable economic development and pro-poor growth.
- All policy and business initiatives must be assessed from a gender perspective before implementation and analysed for its differential impact on women and men.
- Governments must ensure funding and mechanisms for the participation of women's rights organizations as part of civil society and for increasing women's participation in general in all national development policy and planning processes.

Literature

World Development Report 2007
ILO homepage

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