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GENDER EQUALITY: A MUST FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

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Abstract

Gender equality is when both men and women have equal rights, responsibilities and opportunities. It is a human rights fundamental that is essential for economic prosperity and sustainable development. Both individuals and societies benefit when there is gender equality. However, though a key human rights factor, very few countries in the world can boast of having a gender equal society. This is concerning, because no society can develop socially, economically or politically when half of its population (predominantly women) is marginalised. In fact, this is emphasized in the United Nations (UN) 17 sustainable development goals. Goal 5 of the UN 17 sustainable development goals highlights gender equality as a necessary foundation for a peaceful, prosperous and sustainable world. The importance of gender equality for sustainable development is non-arguable. This paper presents a cursory view of gender equality in Africa, where gender inequalities are rife and many of its countries are described as least developed. Using specific examples from existing literatures, we argue that no society can develop sustainably without supporting opportunities, resources, and choices for men and women so that they have equal power to shape their own lives and contribute to their families, communities, and countries. In essence, we try to show how gender equality is crucial for sustainable development in Africa and the efforts needed to promote it.

Key Words: Gender equality, Sustainable development, Africa

Introduction

Gender equality is a human rights fundamental that is essential for economic prosperity and sustainable development. Gender equality refers to a situation in which both women and men are granted equal opportunities to develop their personal abilities and to make choices without being constrained by gender roles and stereotypes (Hoseini, 2014). The World Conference report to review and appraise the achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality Development and Peace in July 1985 in Nairobi describes equality as both a goal and a means whereby individuals are accorded equal treatment under the law and equal opportunities to enjoy their rights. It further states that equality enables all individuals to develop their potential talents and skills so that they can participate in national political, economic, social and cultural development and can benefit from its results. Although there have been a number of improvements to women's lives in the past twenty years, the gender divide remains. For instance, there has been little breakthrough in women's participation in decision-making processes and little progress in legislation in favour of women's rights to own land and other property (Hoseini, 2014). In most societies,

gender power relations are skewed in favour of men and gender inequalities are persistent. As studies have shown, gender inequalities extract high economic costs and impede sustainable development (Hoseini and Naierossadat, 2014).

The 1987 Brandtland Report describes Sustainable Development as a kind of development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. This has become the most popular definition of sustainable development. Sustainable development therefore refers to a development process which enhances peoples' capacity to create and consume wealth on a lasting basis and it requires an environment which enables men and women to engage in and sustain the development process (Hoseini, 2014). Sustainable development is a multidimensional process as it encompasses economic, social, political, cultural and environmental dimensions (Hoseini, 2014). It includes development in the political, economic, social, cultural and other dimensions of human life, as well as the development of the economic and other material resources and the physical, moral, intellectual and cultural growth of human beings (Ray, 2016).

Sustainable Development requires equal rights and opportunities. Yet, gender inequality is pervasive across the world with women being the most disadvantaged, in comparison to men. Thus, a situation where approximately half of the population is denied equal opportunities, equal participation in decision-making, and equal access to resources, education and employment severely inhibits sustainable development (Dugarova, 2018). Though it is evident that gender equality is critical for sustainable development, very few countries in the world can boast of having a gender equal society. This is concerning, because no society can develop socially, economically or politically when half of its population (predominantly women) is marginalised. The role of women in sustainable development is related to the goal of comprehensive social and economic development and is fundamental to the progress of all societies (Ray, 2016). Efforts have been made by several governments and international bodies to promote gender equality for sustainable development. Yet, although some progress has been made, gender equality is still far from being realised. In Africa in particular, gender inequalities are rife and many of its countries are least developed. There is thus a dire need for sustainable development in Africa. This paper thereby prioritises Africa and using specific examples from existing literatures, we argue that no society (in particular African societies) can develop sustainably without supporting opportunities, resources and choices for men and women so that they have equal power to shape their own lives and contribute to their families, communities, and countries. In a nutshell, we endeavour to show through this study, the importance of gender equality for sustainable development in Africa and highlight ways in which it can be fostered. We start with a brief literature of gender inequalities. The following section thus presents literature that contextualises gender inequality in Africa.

Literature Review/ Theoretical Background and Hypotheses

Africa is described as a region strongly characterised by gender inequalities and discrimination as African countries are still largely affected by gender inequalities in the social, economic and political spheres (Gender in Geopolitics Institute, 2021). African women have to contend with occupational segregation and multiple barriers. Gender inequalities in Africa like any other continent has its roots in biases, discrimination cultural mindsets and stereotypes. These biases according to Falach, (2020) ultimately result in increased poverty rates of women. According to De Hoyos et al. (2012), women are unable to benefit equally from the opportunities brought about by trade liberalization due to being

denied access to the job market, education and involvement in decision making. In comparison to men, women in Africa have lower levels of education, less control over possessions, and less social mobility compared to men. For instance, Bayeh (2016) catalogues the gender inequalities inherent in Ethiopia such as a male dominated political sphere and women being relegated to positions that limits their contribution to social development. Further, women are not being properly protected in order for them to meaningfully participate in development initiatives (Bayeh, 2016). Thus, women have a higher likelihood of living in poverty than males despite significant changes made in recent years (OXFAM International, 2022). Furthermore, there is a high level of gender disparity at work as women are likely to be underpaid, undervalued or totally unpaid. All these contribute to women being poorer than men and the poverty status of women in turn exacerbates gender - based violence as women living in poverty are more prone to violence and exploitation.

Gender inequality in Africa is thus high with stagnated gender parity and this severely impacts the continent's growth (Moodley et al, 2019). In the 2022 Gender Equality Gap Index, Namibia and Rwanda managed to make the top ten. The majority of African countries however, out of 146 countries are not in any notable positions. In fact, a significant number of African countries comprise the bottom 20 and this includes countries such as Mali, Democratic Republic of Congo, Algeria, Chad, Morocco and Benin. Furthermore, a significant number of African countries are described as least development. This is evident in the Human capital Index wherein the bulk of countries with the lowest human capital index comprises African countries such as Mali, Niger, Chad, Liberia, South Sudan and Central African Republic. It is evident that societies with high gender inequalities tend to have poor unsustainable development. Gender inequality does impede sustainable development and with Africa's high levels of gender inequalities, it is not surprising that many African countries are not sustainably developed. The hypothesis for this study is thus - *Gender Equality is necessary for Sustainable Development in Africa*

This paper is underpinned by various theories on gender equality as well as the empowerment, and capability frameworks of Kabir (1999) and Sen (1985), leading scholars on women's empowerment and capability, who have defined access, agency and achievement as key factors to women's empowerment and sustainable development. These scholars argue that gender inequality disempowers women and in turn impedes sustainable development. To foster gender equal societies in Africa for sustainable development, it is important that women be first empowered. For Kabeer (2001), empowerment is "the expansion in people's ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them" and for Sen (1995), "it is the expansion of assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control, and hold accountable institutions that affect their lives". The empowerment framework is therefore fitting for this study as the empowerment of African women will assist in curbing or minimising gender inequalities and in turn foster an enabling environment for sustainable development. In terms of **methodology**, due to the nature of the topic of this paper, we undertook a desk top research where we used existing secondary literature from a broad range of channels to obtain relevant data. This involved the summary, collation and synthesis of existing literature. In the next section we present literature that supports the argument that gender equality is necessary for sustainable development.

▪ Discussion and Results

Gender Equality as an important component for Sustainable Development

The importance of gender equality for sustainable development can be seen in almost all definitions of sustainable development, although there are varied interactions between different dimensions of sustainable development. (Hoseini, 2014). The interrelatedness between gender equality and sustainable development is echoed in various circumstances. In the Beijing Platform for Action for instance, it was agreed by governments that equality between women and men is a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and is also a necessary and fundamental prerequisite for equality, development and peace (Hoseini, 2014). Another example cited, is that of UN member states acknowledgment at the Rio+20 Conference, that gender equality and effective participation of women are important for effective action on all aspects of sustainable development (Hoseini, 2014). In the World Drug Report (2012) the importance of gender equality as an instrument for development was emphasised. The importance of gender equality as an essential component has thus been recognised by governments and international bodies human right and has been enshrined in several international instruments (Filho et al, 2022) such as Agenda 2030.

The 2030 Agenda (a global plan for human and environmental prosperity) enshrines 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets (Filho et al, 2022). It recognises that the achievements of the 17 SDGs are linked to human and planetary prosperity and promotes the eradication of poverty, discrimination and inequalities in all forms (UN, 2015). SDG 5 advocates for the achievement of gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls. It identifies issues of gender-based discrimination such as unpaid work, sexual and reproductive rights, and gender-based violence (Fihlo et al, 2022). It includes nine targets that aims at ending all forms of discrimination and achieving sustainable development (SD) goals. It is suggested that SDG5 is critical to all the other SDGs, with gender inequality being an obstacle to progress (Fihlo et al, 2022). Furthermore, it also has the potential to serve as a sustainable development accelerator, with a positive multiplier effect, to speed up the progress of the 2030 Agenda (UNSDG, 2018).

Gender equality and women's empowerment have a catalytic effect on human development ((Fihlo et al, 2022; Odera and Mulusa, 2020) if gender is actively addressed across all SDGs. Fihlo et al (2022) argues that it is important that gender equality be considered in relation to all of the SDGs because in under-utilising part of the world's talent, poverty reduction (SDG1) falls short. Caridade et al. (2022) notes that aligning gender equality with sustainable development has multiple benefits and in a similar vein, Morgan et al. (2020) raise similar views, although the focus is on the importance of gender in relation to health and well-being (SDG3), the connection between water and sanitation (SDG6) and energy (SDG7). This illustrates the interconnected nature of sustainable development and gender equality (Fihlo et al, 2022). The Gender Gap Index by the World Economic Forum shows the correlation between gender equality and wealth per capita (Ray, 2016) and in essence arguing that gender equality is critical for sustainable development.

The UN has made increased efforts to promote gender equality. According to Fihlo et al. (2022), this is earmarked with the establishment of the Commission on the Status of Women in 1946 (UN Women, 2020a) and the adoption of landmark agreements such as the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1979 (OHCHR, 2020), the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 1995 (UN, 1995), and the establishment of UN Women in 2010 (UN, 2012). The important role of gender equality for socio-economic development is further highlighted in the UN publication "We the Peoples"

(Annan, 2000), and it calls attention to the untapped development potential due to social, economic and political inequalities arising from gender discrimination (Connor et al., 2020). Fihlo et al (2022) emphasise that the recognition of the important role of women in global, social, economic and environmental prosperity is also clearly stated in paragraphs 236–243 of the 'Future We Want' (UN, 2012) and in the Open Working Group Proposal for Sustainable Development Goals (2014). Adding to the advocacy for incorporating gender equality in sustainable development, it is stated in a UN World Survey on the role of women in development (2014) that achieving gender equality and realising the human rights, dignity and capabilities of diverse groups of women is a central requirement of a just and sustainable world. This document further states that gender equality is required to redress the disproportionate impact of economic, social and environmental shocks and stresses on women and girls. Investing in women and girls can have a multiplier effect on poor economies (Stevens and Candice 2010).

Sustainable development thus cannot be achieved without considering and solving the prevailing problems of gender inequality and inequity. As the World Development Report (2012) shows, gender equality can enhance economic efficiency and improve other development outcomes in three ways. The first includes removing barriers that prevent women from having the same access as men to education, economic opportunities, and productive inputs can generate broad productivity gains. Depriving women of education, political representation, leadership, land, economic participation, access to resources, among many others inhibits sustainable development. It is important that such barriers be removed to facilitate sustainable development.

Secondly, improving women's absolute and relative status feeds many other development outcomes, including those for their children. Third, levelling the playing field where women and men have equal chances to become socially and politically active, make decisions, and shape policies is likely to lead over time to more representative, and more inclusive, institutions and policy choices and thus to a better development path. (World Development Report, 2012 p. 3)

From the various literature presented it is evident that there is a significant number of scholars that advocates for gender equality for sustainable development. In concurrence, Bayeh (2016) noted that a number of studies have shown that sustainable development is impossible without women's empowerment and gender equality. It is indeed a precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable development (Alvarez and Lopez, 2013). Using the various literature presented as our evidence, we argue that gender equality is necessary for sustainable development in African countries. If gender inequality is not tackled, sustainable development cannot be achieved (Stevens, 2010). Drawing from Bayeh's (2016) argument and from the other authors whose views are presented in this paper, we argue that unless women are empowered to play a role in economic, social, political, and environmental spheres and gender equality is achieved, African countries will not achieve sustainable development. In short, we argue that gender equality is a must for sustainable development. It is therefore important that African governments and relevant stakeholder strive to empower women and utilise their potentials in tandem with men to bring about sustainable development. Having made this argument, it is also important to explore how gender equality can be fostered in Africa for sustainable development. Though some of the actions and suggestions are applicable for all contexts, we tender them specifically for their consideration in the African context. This is detailed in the next section.

Towards gender equality

In line with the empowerment frameworks earlier discussed, this section seeks to provide insights that will assist in the empowerment of women and foster gender equality. The role of women as a factor of development is in many ways linked to their involvement in various forms of social activities, levels of decision-making, management and social structures, such as worker participation in management, worker self-employed and co-operatives (Ray, 2016). Thus, the development of these forms of participation, which have an impact on the development and promotion of working and living conditions, and the inclusion of women in these forms of participation is of crucial importance (Ray, 2016). Development should therefore be aligned with providing women, particularly poor women, with the necessary means for increasingly claiming, achieving, enjoying and utilizing equality of opportunity (Ray, 2016). According to Stevens (2010), sustainable development should involve confronting negative social trends such as growing income disparities, rising unemployment, and a persistent gender gap. Ignoring basic social requirements such as income equity, job quality and gender equality will result in unsustainability of these initiatives.

It is therefore important that gender equality in Africa starts with women's empowerment. This involves boosting the status of women through literacy, education, training and raising awareness (Alvarez and Lopez, 2013) and equipping women to make life-determining choices. It is therefore important to build up women's agency and capabilities to create better synergies between gender equality and sustainable development outcomes (World Survey on the role of women in development ,2014). In order to build women's agency and capabilities, barriers that impede women from having the same access and opportunities as men should be removed. For instance, eliminating barriers that prevent women from working in certain occupations or sectors builds women's agency as well as have positive effects in reducing productivity gaps between male and female workers and increasing outputs per worker (FAO, 2011). In reference to the agricultural sector for example, the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO,2011) estimates that equalising access to productive resources between female and male farmers could increase agricultural output in developing countries by as much as 2.5 to 4 percent (FAO,2011). Furthermore, closing the gender gap in agricultural inputs could lift 100–150 million people out of hunger (FAO, 2011). In promoting gender equality, it is important for gender gaps to be bridged. This however requires governments, international communities and civil society working together to eliminate various forms of discrimination, promote equal access to resources and opportunities, ensure relevant policies and programmes are gender-sensitive, and make women's voices heard as equal partners (FAO, 2011).

To provide gender equality, all sectors of society have a role to play to improve the quality of life in three key areas and these are economic growth and equity, social development and conserving natural resources and the environment (Hoseini, 2014). Further, banks and donors need to see women as active players in economic development and more aid should be focused on increasing income-generating initiatives based on women's traditional roles in the home, health services, nutrition, and agriculture (Hoseini,2014). Gender-sensitive development assistance is therefore a powerful tool for empowering women to compete in land, labour and product markets enabling them to make economic, social and environmental contributions to sustainable development (Hoseini 2014). Gender Analysis is also critical for promoting equality between men and women and this includes placing the issues that women say are of particular concern to them on the main agenda of those institutions which shape women's and men's lives (Hoseini,2014). In the context of economic

dimension of sustainable development, the focus is on the world of work and equality between women and men in elements such as equality of opportunity and treatment in employment and equal participation in decision-making at all levels (Hoseini, 2014). Since studies on gender equality show that women worldwide are more fragile in aspects such as poverty, representativeness in public employment positions, security, or physical and sexual violence, there is a need to redesign a gender-responsive approach towards implementing the 2030 Agenda (Hirsu et al., 2019; Liu et al., 2019; Bourgault et al., 2021). In exploring pathways towards gender equality for sustainable development, it is also fitting to look at some actions suggested by the UN World Survey (2014, p.14) as detailed below:

- In forging sustainable development pathways, an explicit commitment to gender equality, women's empowerment and women's rights in its conceptualization and implementation must be included.
- To achieve sustainable development the synergies between gender equality and sustainability must be recognised and there should be engagements with the tensions and trade-offs that inevitably arise between the three dimensions of sustainability and with the integration of gender equality.
- Addressing the trade-offs and negotiating the policy dilemmas to achieve sustainable development and gender equality requires inclusive deliberation processes and ways to monitor exclusions and trade-offs. The active participation, leadership and creativity of civil society and women's organizations, communities and concerned individuals are critical to such deliberations (World Survey on the role of women in development, 2014, p.14)

Conclusion

In this paper, we used existing literatures to argue that no society, in particular African societies, can develop sustainably without supporting opportunities, resources, and choices for men and women so that they have equal power to shape their own lives and contribute to their families, communities, and countries. In essence, we try to show how gender equality is crucial for sustainable development in Africa and the efforts needed to promote it. We started by providing an introductory section, followed by a cursory literature overview of gender inequalities in Africa that also encompasses the theoretical framework and hypothesis of the paper. In the discussion and result section we explored literature that supports our argument for gender equality as an important requirement for sustainable development followed by literature that details how gender equality can be achieved for sustainable development. It must be stated that taking into consideration the literature presented, our hypothesis that *Gender Equality is necessary for Sustainable Development in Africa* is proven. We conclude this paper by re-echoing that gender equality is a must for sustainable development in Africa and provide recommendations below that aligns with the empowerment theory.

Recommendations

Drawing from the literature presented in this paper, we make the following recommendations in order to promote gender equality in Africa and subsequently sustainable development.

- Collaboration of all sectors in society to play a role in promoting gender equality and equity with the aim of fostering sustainable development.
- Development initiatives should be gender-sensitive in order to ably empower women to compete in land, labour and product markets and be able to make meaningful economic, social and environmental contributions to sustainable

development A gender sensitive approach takes into consideration the many challenges of women and explores mechanisms for lifting those challenges. It furthers different opinions, concerns, needs, and priorities of men and women.

- Application of a gender analysis lens in all decisions affecting men and women and critically looking at issues that affect women through this lens with the aim of redressing power imbalances and giving both men and women equal opportunities.
- As women's empowerment is critical for gender equality, efforts must be made by relevant stakeholders to boost the status of women through literacy, education, training and awareness raising.

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