Women and Development in Africa: Competing Approaches and Contested Achievements

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Abstract

Women clearly represent the face of poverty and underdevelopment in Africa. Several reports point to the fact that, in quantitative and qualitative terms, African women experience some of the worst conditions of living in the world. Not surprisingly, efforts aimed at addressing this phenomenon and designing a roadmap for development in Africa have not only stimulated interesting scholarly debates but also have informed different developmental approaches on women over the years. It is against this backdrop that this article examines the dominant theoretical and methodological approaches toward the study of women and development. It examines critically the Women in Development (WID), Gender and Development (GAD) and Women, the Environment and Development (WED) approaches. This article employs these approaches as a framework to categorize and explain the drive toward pro-female development studies in Africa. It further surveys the achievements recorded thus far on gender equality and women empowerment in Africa within the context of the United Nations Millennium Development Goals. Given this, it forwards the argument that despite the scholarly debates and empirical researches on the underdevelopment of women – which underscore the need for women empowerment in Africa -- much has not been accomplished in practical terms on addressing the plight of African women and the scourge of underdevelopment on the continent. For data collection, we relied on existing statistics and documents from reputable international institutions as well as previous researches from scholars and experts.

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Introduction

Africa provides a good case-study for underdevelopment in the contemporary world. For long, the African continent has been characterized by a range of major economic and socio-political challenges and crises such as high infant and adult mortality, mass illiteracy, high rates of unemployment, widespread diseases, and famine. By the measurements of development, most especially the Human Development Index (HDI) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), African countries consistently maintain some of the lowest rankings in the world. In the 2011 HDI report, for example, several African countries -- Burkina Faso, Burundi, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Liberia, Mozambique, Niger, and Sierra Leone – were listed amongst the least developed states with the worst conditions in the classification of Low Human Development. Unfortunately, the current state of underdevelopment in Africa appears most visible in the living conditions of its women. African women constitute not only the highest population of the unemployed and the poorest, but also often the largest number of victims of diseases and violent conflicts across the continent. Certainly, it is against this backdrop that development experts and observers such as Obi Ezekwesili (World Bank 15 May 2009) and Charlayne Hunter-Gault (8 August 2006) have argued that 'poverty has a female face' in Africa.

Given the above, there have been interesting scholarly arguments on the condition of women and development in Africa, and the ideal pathways for improving their condition. In the 1970s, the remarkable emergence of the Women in Development (WID) scholarship in the feminist development discourse provided the impetus for debates on the extent to which women have been subordinated in Africa and the need to promote an agenda for the proper integration of women into the modernization and developmental plans of governments. The sudden shift in the discourse in the 1980s, which informed the Gender and Development (GAD) school of thought, became another defining moment in the debate on the plight of women in Africa. With this, scholars provided the argument that emphasis should be placed on the analysis of the social relations of gender and the construction of gender identity in societies to understand better the disempowerment of women and

push more effectively for their empowerment. In the 1980s, the Women, the Environment and Development (WED) perspective introduced another fresh debate on how environmental degradation poses a major threat to women with particular reference to those engaged in agricultural production in the rural areas. This perspective easily gained popularity in Africa not only because women on the continent deal extensively with the earth for their sustenance, but also due to the fact that they use proceeds from their agricultural activities to support their families. Following this, the WED advocates looked to emphasise the importance of integrating women into the identified processes of environmental rehabilitation and sustainability as they relate to the African society.

While scholars have made tremendous progress on debating and developing approaches for more meaningful understanding of the condition of women in Africa, policymakers have not fared well in implementing agendas for gender equality and women empowerment. There is still much social and institutional neglect of members of the female gender in many parts of Africa with the net effect that they continue to be poorer, work longer hours, receive less effective medical attention, die more during childbirth than their peers elsewhere, and experience less access to education, political power, and employment. Bearing these in mind, this article offers a review of the literature on the major approaches on women and development in Africa. Its major objective is to demonstrate the extent to which the scholarly environment has achieved a bit of success in providing a foundation for the establishment of institutional mechanisms for women empowerment, and how the resultant mechanisms have not been well implemented in Africa as a result of institutional and societal constraints. Given this context, this article is organized into four sections. The first section discusses the present state of underdevelopment in Africa and its visibility in the lives of women. The second section provides a review of the aforementioned approaches. The third section examines the institutional mechanisms advanced so far in line with the positions of these dominant approaches and their shortage in addressing female poverty in Africa. Finally, the fourth section ends with a summary and conclusion.

The Socio-economic Condition of Women in Africa

A cursory examination of World Development Indicators 2010 displays

Africa has a weak development context in many ways: in the 54.2 years life span of sub-Saharan Africans, which is the shortest of any region in the world; in the 76.9 infant mortality rate per 1,000 live births; in the 68.7% literacy rate for female youth aged 15-24 as compared to male literacy rates of nearly 80%; and HIV prevalence rate of 5.5% of the total population aged 15-49. Virtually all of the region's socio-economic indicators demonstrate the poor living conditions of women in Africa. For instance, UNAIDS (2010: 121) reports that the largest population of HIV patients in the world are women living in sub-Saharan Africa. African women constitute 80% of all women living with HIV in the world. Similarly, it was reported that women account for 59% of those living with HIV in sub-Saharan Africa (UNAIDS 2010: 2). Furthermore, it is estimated that young women aged 15-24 years are eight times more likely to be living with HIV than men of the same age range (UNAIDS 2010: 2). In Swaziland, for instance, the infection rate for males between the ages of 15-24 stood at 6.5% in 2009 while the rates for women from the same age bracket was more than double at 16.5% (www.africa-portal.org/articles/2012/08/21/swaziland-hivaids-and-global-fund). Mbirim-Tengerenji (2007: 606) has also shown that the prevalence of 'poverty does seem to be the crucial factor in the spread of HIV/AIDS through sexual trade' among African girls.

Besides the issue of HIV/AIDS, it is also estimated that complications during pregnancy and childbirth cause the death of 250,000 women on a yearly basis in Africa. African countries such as Angola, Burundi, Cameroon, Chad, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Malawi, Niger, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, and Somalia have the highest number of maternal deaths in the world with 1,000 deaths for every 100,000 live births (UNDP/UNICEF 2002; WHO 2010). With approximately 30% of all maternal deaths in the world, an African woman living in West or Central Africa is more exposed to maternal risk than an average woman anywhere else in the world. In fact, UNICEF's State of the World's Children 2009 Report concludes that an expectant woman in Africa is 300 times more likely to die of pregnancy-related complications than counterparts in industrialized nations – double the estimate in 2005 (World Economic Forum 2005: 2).

The issue of female literacy is particularly crucial since it serves as a defining factor in the ability of women to control and structure the socioeconomic opportunities that inform and give definitive shape to their

lives. Unfortunately, illiteracy is most common among the female gender in most parts of Africa. As Verna (2005: 2) underscores, 'female illiteracy is particularly high in sub-Saharan Africa'. Indeed, in countries such as Niger and Burkina Faso, female illiteracy is extremely high at about 90% in 2005 (Verna 2005: 2). This may not be surprising given that more than 40% of women in Africa do not have access to basic education (UN Millennium Project 2011). Despite significant progress being made in the area of female youth since the turn of the 21st century (with 68.7% literacy rate), females continue to be clearly under-represented at all levels of education in Africa (ADF 2008; UN 2010; World Development Report 2011). For those who receive education, access to employment often pose additional risks due to discriminatory practices.

The discriminatory practices against women is further worsened by a global environment of high and growing unemployment rates in which women in many African countries find themselves excruciatingly burdened with the responsibility to feed and maintain their families. Increasingly, many young women in parts of the continent are forced by their circumstances to engage in sex work to support their families; many others work in extremely harsh conditions as labourers, traders and farmers; and some others work as unpaid home-based workers (Manuh 1998; Hunter-Gault 8 August 2006; Mbirimtengerenji 2007). This, particularly, has been a major problem in Botswana, Burkina Faso and Lesotho since the 1990s given that the increased out-migration of able-bodied men to urban centres for better livelihood has led to a growing number of women embarking on 'harder work' on farms throughout the continent. In effect, therefore, the socio-economic challenges facing males and their communities or societies have often had the unintended consequences of imposing special liabilities on women who must labour to keep things together at home in the absence of their male family members (Manuh 1998).

Women and Development in Africa: Competing Approaches

In light of the multifaceted hardships experienced by African women, there has been increasing scholarly debates on the phenomenon of female poverty and underdevelopment in Africa. As previously noted, the arguments are structured around the three major approaches in the women and development literature that are also recognized by notable international developmental

agencies. These are the Women in Development (WID), the Gender and Development (GAD), and the Women, the Environment and Development (WED) approaches. Despite employing different theoretical and methodological standpoints, each of the three approaches champions the cause of gender equality and the incorporation of women into the structure of development in societies. Although it first emerged within intellectual circles, WID was more influenced by the activities of the 1970s American feminist movements (Razavi & Miller 1995: 2-3). It was also significantly influenced by the modernization theory of development in the Third World, which was popular in the 1950s and 1960s (Koczberski 1998: 397). The advocates of this viewpoint saw as fundamental the displacement of African traditional values, which they believed reduced women virtually to the status of domestic workhorses. For the advocates, this displacement must constitute the starting point for the resolution of female poverty in Africa (Hardy 1939: 7, cited in Hafkin and Bay, 1976: 2). Therefore, they argued for the proper integration of women into the West-driven modernization processes highlighted as the pathway for development in the Third World nations.

By far, the work of Ester Boserup (1970) appears most visible and influential from the WID perspective. Paying particular attention to the internal workings of African communities, Boserup takes the position that female subordination in the economic structure of modern societies is a direct consequence of colonialism. According to her, colonialism dislocated the 'female farming systems' that once thrived in Africa. Colonial administrations introduced modern agricultural equipment that incapacitated the strength of women in the traditional agricultural economy in Africa. She insists that along with colonial administrators and their technical advisers, European settlers were primarily responsible for the decline in status previously enjoyed by women in the agricultural sectors of developing countries. She noted pointedly: 'It was they who neglected the female agricultural labour force when they helped to introduce modern commercial agriculture to the overseas world and promoted the productivity of male labour' (Boserup 1970: 53-54).

Boserup (1970: 59-60) further argued that the rapid decline of women's contribution in agricultural production was also caused by land reform policies introduced by the European colonial regimes in Africa. The Europeans employed the instrumentality of religious principles to launch 'a strong propaganda' against a matrilineal society. Given this factor, women lost much of their customary rights to use land for cultivation in African

societies. Post-colonial industrialization and modernization efforts in Africa and elsewhere in the developing countries further exacerbated the scenario. She suggests that the introduction of modernized farming techniques in the post-colonial era discouraged female labour. Accordingly, the economic structure of societies was fundamentally altered in a way that enthroned and ensured male dominance; this, she concludes, explains the contemporary relegation and near invisibility of women in all sectors of the production process (Boserup 1970: 80-81). Given both their historical significance to the economy and the need for development, Boserup (1970: 224-225) argued generally that African women should be re-integrated into the economic processes of their countries. Strategies toward the achievement of this re-integration would include: the elimination of all manners of sex discrimination in admission to agricultural schools; training of women in the use of modern agricultural equipment; and, most importantly, the adoption of birth control programmes in line with the structure of female life in the West.

Although the WID approach was hugely successful in creating or raising awareness of the extent of women's subordination in societies around the world, it was also subjected to robust criticisms from different quarters. It is strongly criticised for overly 'compartmentalising' women in its analysis of the social frameworks of societies. For instance, Koczberski (1998: 404) suggests that women cannot be isolated for analysis to explain their subordination. Rather, the existing linkages between their work roles and kinship relationships including the nuances of the predominant socio-political systems in which they operate must be taken into consideration. Thus, by ignoring those vital linkages, the WID approach 'predisposes simplistic and unrealistic analyses and constructs images far removed from reality' (Koczberski 1998: 404). Furthermore, the WID approach is criticised for neglecting the consequences of the processes and levels of the system of capitalism on women in the developing countries, particularly in Africa (Fernández Kelly 1989: 619). For instance, Pala (1977: 9) argues in her critique that the WID approach has not analysed adequately the condition of women in Africa because their condition is 'at every level of analysis an outcome of structural and conceptual mechanisms by which African societies have continued to respond and resist the global processes of economic exploitation and cultural domination'. In addition, the WID approach is criticised for conceptualizing traditional African practices as 'backward' and the integration of women into an 'advanced' modernized (Western) system as

a necessary step toward development – which underscores the major assumption of the modernization theorists.

Thus, it was the mounting criticisms of the WID approach that informed the emergence of the Gender and Development (GAD) approach in the late 1970s. GAD operates on the premise that the problem of women can only be understood by understanding the pattern of relationships existing between the male and female genders in societies. According to its proponents, these relationships are not biologically factored; rather, they are conditioned by the prevalent socio-cultural and ideological practices of societies (Elson 1991; Østergaard 1992). This suggests that there is a conceptual difference between 'sex' and 'gender'. Sex is the biological composition of a being, which is unchangeable, while gender is a societal (human) construct employed to determine social roles based on sexual difference; the latter is changeable. As such, Ann Whitehead, one of the prominent advocates of GAD perspective, insists that:

> No study of women and development can start from the viewpoint that the problem is women, but rather men and women, and more specifically the relations between them. The relations between men and women are socially constituted and not derived from biology …. in this connection sex is the province of biology, i.e. fixed and unchangeable qualities, while gender is the province of social science, i.e. qualities which are shaped through the history of social relations and interactions (cited in Østergaard 1992: 6).

Thus, the GAD central framework was located in 'gender relations' or the idea of 'gender division of labour and the gender division of access to and control over resources'. Indeed, the prevailing gender relations promote social systems with unambiguous 'male bias'. For Elson (1991: 3), male bias can be defined as a 'bias that operates in favour of men as a gender, and against women as a gender'. The net effect of such predisposition is that women are subjected to lower status in the economic structure of societies; they are made to engage in demeaning jobs and side-lined in decision-making processes of the state.

In some of the early writings on the GAD, Jacobs (1991: 51-82) employed the framework to study the resettlement programme in north-eastern Zimbabwe to substantiate the gender relations thesis. She forwards the

argument that resettlement policies were structured not only to undermine women but also to keep them perpetually dependent on men. Dennis (1991: 83-104) also observes that Yoruba women in Nigeria are customarily permitted and encouraged to earn income and support their households autonomously. As such, women often have aspirations to pursue independent self-employment in the informal sector. However, emerging societal conditions frustrate this aspiration as a result of the social construction of gender roles and the promotion of male bias.

The GAD framework has remained influential in more recent studies on women and development in Africa (cf. Walker 2002; Kevane 2004; Dunne 2008; Arbache *et al*. 2010). For example, a World Bank study by Arbache *et al*. (2009: 8-19) on gender disparities within the labour markets in 18 African countries[1] identified a wide gender gap against females in various sectors of the African labour markets. The gaps were attributed not only to cultural and social norms but also to general dysfunctions in African states. In addition, they found that the poor state of girl-child education in Africa also plays a significant role in fuelling gender discrimination in work places, and that gender disparities -- especially in terms of employment opportunities -- are more prominent in urban areas.

Given the foregoing, GAD advocates see the need for women to have a change of attitude and develop a sense of their own identity as a major strategy to eliminate male bias (Elson 1991: 192). They also push for the integration of women into the 'mainstream of economic development' (Østergaard 1992: 10). This gave birth to the concept of 'gender mainstreaming', which the United Nations Economic and Social Council argues as: '… the process of assessing the implications for men and women of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels' (UN 1997: 28).

Several criticisms have also followed the GAD approach. For instance, Cornwall (1997: 8-13) argues that the approach is too simplistic in its analysis and fails to answer several questions on gender relations. According to her, it fails to offer profound explanation of, and insight into, relationships among women, and among men in communities. It also fails to

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[1] Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cote d'Ivoire, Cameroon, Ethiopia, Gambia, Ghana, Kenya, Madagascar, Malawi, Mauritania, Mozambique, Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, Sierra Leone, Uganda, and Zambia.

explain the intersection of gender with other differences such as age, status, and wealth. Furthermore, the theory over-problematized males; in a bid to push the agenda of the female gender, men are minimally factored into the analysis, which contradicts the fundamental issues of gender equity that forms the crux of GAD framework. In another instance, Razavi and Miller (1995: 16) argue that the GAD framework neglects the 'concrete relations' that exist between men and women. Therefore, it fails to show a meaningful understanding of the system of co-operation and exchange between men and women in different societies.

The increased interest and awareness of the significance of the environment to sustainable development gave birth in the 1980s to the Women, the Environment and Development (WED) approach. By factoring environmental concerns and imperatives – particularly the emphasis on the impact of environmental degradation on the health and livelihood of women -- the WED approach clearly advanced the preceding approaches. Advocates of the approach believe that while its predecessors explain the hardships encountered by women in developing countries, 'the accelerating degradation of the living environment is the latest and[,] in many ways, the most dangerous of the threats they [women] face' (Dankelman & Davidson 1988: 6). They further posit that environmental degradation is a product of modernization and industrialization championed by the West. Modernization, according to them, has not generated any meaningful development in the developing countries. Rather, it has worsened the lives of people, particularly women, who largely depend on the earth for their livelihoods (Braidotti *et al.* 1994: 1). Due to steady increases in the rates of poverty and unemployment among women, they were often forced to place more pressure on natural resources in a bid to seek alternative livelihoods. In this way, environmental resources are further degraded by human survival activities (Dankelman & Davidson 1988: xii).

WED proponents argue further that despite the significance of women to the environment, women are not recognised in the decision-making process for environmental conservation and sustainable development at the international and national levels. Therefore, they insist that women should be duly recognized in the processes of environmental rehabilitation and sustainability given that they deal extensively with the environment and have the capacity to manage it better (Dankelman & Davidson 1988).

Since the 2000s, the discourse on WED changed subtly to 'Gender

and Climate Change' (UNDP 2009; Dankelman 2010; Kiptot & Franzel 2011). With this, gender analysis became the focal point for understanding the consequences of climate change with questions such as: 'Do people face climate change in similar conditions? Do they have the same abilities to deal with it? Will the consequences of climate change affect everyone in the same way?' (UNDP 2009: 24). To answer these questions, its proponents argue that women particularly have 'socially conditioned vulnerabilities and capacities' which make them more prone to the dangers of climate change. Worse still, women lack the capacity to have access to information on early warning and safety measures as a result of 'cultural limitations' (UNDP 2009: 27).

In essence, experts have demonstrated not only that some societal factors have shaped and effected environmental destruction and climate change, but also that women have been disempowered with respect to sustainable development (cf. Scandorf 1993; Nyamwange 1993; Babugura 2010; Ribeiro & Chauque 2010). In their case study of Mozambique, Ribeiro and Chauque (2010: 1-2) revealed that power relations determine gender disparity with regards to the impacts of climate change. In Mozambique, persistent droughts have caused the migration of men to neighbouring countries such as South Africa with the resultant effect of increasing the productive work of women in environmentally disadvantaged communities. Similarly, Babugura's (2010) research in uMzinyathi and uMhlathuze municipalities (South Africa) show that despite the fact that women and men are both dependent on agriculture for livelihood and are generally affected by poverty, women seem to be more affected by climate change due to socially constructed roles and responsibilities. Also, Archer (2010: 267-270) concluded in her work on climate information system in Limpopo Province of South Africa, that there are 'gendered preferences' (against women) in accessing the devices for climate information and weather forecast.

Among the criticisms levelled at the WED approach is the argument that it fails to take adequate account of the increased amount of time and labour women would require to 'save' the environment (Joekes *et al.* 1994, cited in Goebel 2002: 296). It is also argued that besides natural resources, the approach is too limited since it fails to account for the range of endeavours undertaken by women (Goebel 2002: 296).

Contested Achievements

Despite crucial areas of differences and divergence, the WID, GAD and WED

approaches share a common vision in the value they place on the promotion of women empowerment and gender equality. There is no gainsaying the contributions their collective analyses have made not only in stimulating increased awareness of the plight of women but also in strongly informing the establishment of important institutional frameworks and initiatives on gender equality and women empowerment at both national, regional and global levels. The notable international instruments advanced in this direction include the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) signed by 64 states; the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action agreed upon by 189 states; and the 2000 Millennium Declaration that highlighted gender equality as an effective way to end poverty by 2015 in the developing countries. In Africa, the adoption in 2004 of the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA) under the platform of the African Union (AU) marked a significant drive toward the promotion of gender equality on the continent. Prior to this, there had been in 1999 the African Plan of Action to Accelerate the Implementation of the Dakar and Beijing Platforms for Action and, in 2003, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (DESA/UNEC 2007:3; ADF 2008:1).

The frameworks, debates, declarations and instruments notwithstanding, there has been little or no progress (but for a handful of notable political successes) on the promotion of gender equality and women empowerment in Africa during the second decade of the 21st century. Gender equality, the third target of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), is measured by the extent of the education, employment and political participation of females in relation to males in individual states. In Africa, wide gaps continue to exist between males and females in regard to each of those three MDG variables. This is despite noteworthy progress on the empowerment of women in parts of the continent. For instance, the region has achieved a number of landmark accomplishments in the political representation of women such as: the emergence of female presidents in Liberia (Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf since 2005) and Malawi (Joyce Banda in 2012); the emergence of a female Prime Minister in Mozambique – Luisa Diogo – in 2004; and the globally leading high female legislative representations in both the Rwandan and South Africa parliaments. However, despite their individual importance, such accomplishments have not been quantitatively significant within the region. The prevailing norm through

much of the continent remains overwhelmingly that women are severely underrepresented in the politics and decision-making activities of their societies and countries in issue-areas such as education, employment, and political participation.

Education

Theoretically and institutionally, there is broad-based agreement that women education is generally the best strategy for empowering women and making them relevant to development in society. Education represents a cardinal objective of the MDGs agenda on women, which emphasize gender equality at all levels of education in such a way that females can be well represented in educational institutions. Recent reports suggest that there have been noteworthy improvements in the education of women in the last ten years across the globe. However, with the exception of South Africa, the reverse is the case in many African countries (ADF 2008; UN 2010; World Development Report 2011)[2]. Given the cultural conception and perception of the role of women in African societies, women are still clearly discouraged from acquiring formal education, especially at the higher levels. For instance, in 2005, African girls constituted a disproportionate number of the 72 million children that were out of school in the world (Tebon & Fort 2008: 4). Furthermore, a 2010 study shows that Africa added over 32 million to the world's population of illiterates; of those, 72% were women (UN 2010: 44). Thus, Africa is specifically mentioned as the region lagging behind in closing gender gaps in educational terms in the world (World Development Report 2011: 3).

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[2] Reports at local and international levels point to the fact that steady progress is being made in South Africa on the actualization of gender equality in educational institutions. In fact, girls may have an edge over boys in the schools in some respects. In a 2008 survey, it was observed that although male and female children had equal access to education, slightly more boys than girls attended at primary level (GPI of 0.97), while at the secondary level, girls were more likely than boys to attend school (GPI of 1.06) (see De Lannoy *et al.* (July 2010*). Education: Gender Parity Index*. University of Cape Town; also see UN 2010, *The World's Women 2010: Trends and Statistics*).

At the primary education level, Africa recorded the lowest rates of enrolment of girls compared to boys in the world; this is despite an impressive increase of 16% between 1999 and 2007 at the global level. Although an estimated 73% of primary-school-aged girls and 78% of boys attended school globally in 2007, Central Africa and West Africa performed worst as regions with less than 60% of girls of primary school age attending schools (UN 2010: 53). In another instance, it is estimated that the largest gaps between the boys and girls in primary schools are presently experienced in Africa and South Asia. In 2008, there were approximately 91 girls for every 100 boys in the primary schools in sub-Saharan Africa (World Development Report 2011: 3). Another 2011 report, estimated that girls in Africa have less than 50% chance of proceeding to secondary schools and that the average primary education completion rates for girls stood at 46% compared to the 56% for boys in 2010/2011 (United Nations Girls Initiative 2011: 4). This trend is observable at other levels of education. In Africa, it is estimated that on average 21% of women – as compared to 30% of men -- have acquired secondary or tertiary education (UN 2010: 51). In addition, a 2011 report estimated that for every 100 men, only 66 women are found in tertiary institutions in Africa (World Development Report 2011: 3). Thus, despite some progress regionally, a significant gap continues to exist in the educational opportunities availed to males vis-à-vis females around the continent. Not surprisingly, an estimated average of 41% of African women (as compared to 24% of African men) never had any form of formal education[3] (UN 2010: 75).

Employment

Based on the MDGs, the extent to which women have wage employment in the non-agricultural sector of national economies can be linked to the level of actualization of gender equality and women empowerment. There is evidence that substantial progress is yet to be made in Africa in this direction. For instance, a United Nations publication – *The World's Women 2010* – reported that African women are mostly found in 'vulnerable employment' and low wage informal employment due to very high rates of unemployment in many

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[3] For some countries such as the Republic of Benin, the figures are as high as 80% for females as compared to 57% for males (UN, 2010: 75).

African countries. Vulnerable employment, which comes in the forms of 'own-account' and 'contributing family' work, involves jobs that are prone to insecurity and also lack social benefits. In East and West Africa, 47% of female employment is 'own-account' activities while 'contributing family' employment constitutes 32% of female employment (UN 2010: 86-89). Rural and small-scale agricultural activities characterize a significant aspect of these economic endeavours as African women still have limited access to decent and formal non-agricultural jobs owing to historical and multi-dimensional societal stereotypes and female illiteracy.

At 22.7%, women have a substantially lower share of formal employment (and pay) all across Africa when compared to the male gender; and despite the MDG objectives and targets, there were no significant changes recorded in that regard between 1997 and 2007 (ADF 2008: 11). Thus, gender parity in this respect is still clearly out of sight. Given a 2004 report, it was observed that none of the 18 African countries whose employment data were available had achieved the 50% MDG target for gender parity in wage employment (ADF 2008: 12). Malawi's case signifies the worst examples. In Malawi as in many other African countries, women not only suffer high rates of illiteracy but also are predominantly stereotyped as household makers in the society. Malawian and other African women are often subjected to significant and diverse discrimination at interviews and jobs (Budlender *et al.* 2002 cited in ADF 2008: 13; Isike & Okeke Uzodike 2011:233-235). Thus, women are over-represented in informal employment as street vendors, independent home-based workers, industrial outworkers or waste collectors. It is found that an average of 84% of women – as compared to 63% of men -- in sub-Saharan Africa who are non-agricultural workers are involved in a range of informal employment (UN 2010: 88).

Not surprisingly (given the above context), women are often rendered more at risk against national, regional, and global economic emergencies. In conditions of crisis, formal and legitimate income opportunities are less readily available to women. Indeed, one study concludes that sub-Saharan Africa ranks among the regions in the world that recorded increased gender gaps (especially in the area of vulnerable employment) after the 2008/09 global financial crisis (ITUC 2011: 19; see also Rehn & Sirleaf 2002). Beyond inter-gender differences, there are other important dynamics that influence and shape women's access and representation in formal employment. As Ndinda and Okeke Uzodike (2012) have shown using the

South African experience, race (ethnicity) is a crucial complicating factor in determining the extent and nature of women's representation in senior and top management positions in South African firms.

Therefore, it may not be enough to merely speak or write about women as a group. Basically, 'the question of women's representation in [formal employment and] top management must always be followed by another crucial query: which women' (Ndinda & Okeke Uzodike 2012:138). Although post-apartheid policy frameworks focussed attention firmly on gender representativeness as a necessary precondition for achieving equality and social justice, women not only remain under-represented as a group in top leadership positions of companies but also experience significant prejudicial treatment in terms of both access and promotional opportunities based on racial consideration. Yes, various post-apartheid South African governments have emplaced or affirmed equity policies aimed at addressing the effects of institutionalised discriminatory policies that disempowered African, Coloured and Indian communities while empowering Whites. Nevertheless, apartheid's race-based legacies and gender divides have remained salient features of the South African social and political environment because the implementation gaps associated with the employment equity policies have resulted in the continuing failure of the system to redress the unequal distribution of benefits and outcomes to the designated groups. Not surprisingly, 'Black women appear least impacted by affirmative action enacted through EEA' (Ndinda & Okeke Uzodike 2012: 138-139). This is because they are often the last choice among the equity candidates (Msomi 2006).

Political Participation

Women's participation in politics is another notable framework for the measurement of female empowerment. It must be underscored that women representation in politics in Africa varies very widely between countries with truly significant gains and achievements in some and extremely poor performances in many others. Overall, although some levels of progress have been recorded with some African countries ranked amongst the best global performers in the area of political participation by women, the overwhelming state of affairs remains that of a region where women continue to be marginal to effective political participation. For instance, Rwanda ranks first and South Africa is eighth in the category of 'Women in Parliament' in the world going

by the July 2012 report of the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU). Furthermore, South Africa also has a good ranking in the classification of 'Women in Ministerial Positions' with a 40% female representation in the cabinet (although not at the 50% target stipulated by regional and international organizations where South Africa is a signatory, the country ranks in the world's top 10) (IPU July 2012). It is also noteworthy that many African countries have adopted quota systems in order to ensure adequate representation of women in the decision-making processes of governments (DESA/UNECA 2007: 11; UN 2010: 116).

In spite of these achievements, there are compelling grounds for concern about women's participation in politics in Africa. Quite aside from the paucity of national success stories, the picture in many other parts of Africa is far less encouraging. In an online discussion with a group of women on this subject-matter, the general complaint from many women was that socio-cultural beliefs, economic dependency and financial difficulty still prevent them from playing active roles in politics (DESA/UNECA 2007: 15). Indeed, even the success cases are not exempt from many of the same challenges. For instance, as the experience in KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa) shows, the neo-patriarchal cultural tendencies that provided the ideological foundations for male domination in the region continue to remain salient in the workplace despite seemingly progressive political and institutional frameworks aimed at bridging the gap between male and female genders. It is for this reason that women are expected or even obliged in the formal workplace to assume and perform roles similar to what they do at home. For instance, Devi Rajab, a female journalist is reported to have insisted that: 'women colleagues are expected to pour tea, organise lunch or serve as helpers in a work situation while conversely, men are expected to behave in a stereotypical manner; namely to automatically assume leadership roles in a mixed group, pay for the business lunch, sit in the front seat of the car or handle serious management issues' (Isike & Okeke Uzodike 2011: 233).

Even where successes have been achieved by women, there are often critical areas of concern. For instance, women face a range of difficulties and marginalization in political parties and during electoral processes (DESA/UNECA 2007:12). Perhaps, this is because political parties are typically structured to maximise the control of the membership by the leadership. Such arrangements have the upshot of fostering patronage and godfathersim, which have the net effect of discriminating generally against

those on the margins or outside the mainstream of the political organization. Often, such victims are usually women, low-status patronage clients, and other members of what we will term 'power minorities'. A crucial factor underpinning the outlier status of women in politics is the persistence of the assumption that women who venture into politics are intruders in an otherwise male domain. Where they are tolerated such as in South Africa, they are often viewed as social deviants who are daring to acquire power in order to exercise control over men. The resulting efforts to resist such perceived aberrant behaviour often serve to impede the ability of women to carry out their tasks optimally. As one female minister in the KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa) provincial government underscored: 'Innuendoes targeted at undermining our morality and self-confidence are usually used by our male colleagues both in parliament and in the cabinet to reinforce their superiority even though on the outside they all tend to express belief in the political empowerment of women as a panacea for poverty alleviation' (Isike & Okeke Uzodike 2011: 234).

Quite aside from being under-represented in the leadership structure of political parties in their countries, women are still commonly intimidated by some male politicians through the use of violence during elections. In Sierra Leone, for example, it is reported that female candidates and supporters are often confronted with the 'all-male secret societies' that employ all manners of violence to intimidate and scare them off from elections (Kellow 2010: 6). As a result, there has not been any significant increase in the number of women in the Sierra Leonean parliament since its post-conflict election in 2002. It actually dropped from the meagre 15% representation in 2002 to 13% in 2007 (Kellow 2010: 10). Low representation in the parliament is also rampant in many other African countries. Despite the general euphoria about Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf's presidential victory in Liberia, less than 14% of the seats in the Liberian parliament were won in the same election by women. In the 2012 Women in Politics report, which shows the situation of women in the parliament by January 2012, many sub-Saharan African countries were in the lowest ranks with less than 20% female membership in parliament. These include the following: Burkina Faso (15.3%), Zimbabwe (15.0%), Gabon (14.2%), Cameroon (13.9%), Swaziland (13.6%), Niger (13.3%), Sierra Leone (12.5%); Chad (12.8%); Central African Republic (12.5%), Zambia (11.5%), Togo (11.1%), Cote d'Ivoire (11.0%), Mali (10.2%), Equatorial Guinea and Guinea-Bissau (10.0%), Kenya (9.8%),), Liberia (9.6%), Benin (8.4%), Ghana (8.3%), Botswana (7.9%), Gambia (7.5%), Congo (7.3%),

Nigeria and Somalia (6.8%), Sao Tome and Principe (7.3%), and Chad (5.2%) (IPU 2012).

Additionally, African countries have poor representation of women in their cabinets. Going by the IPU 2012 report, women have less than 15% membership in the cabinet of many countries on the continent: Gabon (14.3%), Cameroon (14.0%), Cote d'Ivoire (13.9%), Mali (13.8%), Congo (13.5%), Zimbabwe (13.5%), Guinea (12.9%), Chad (12.1%), Burkina Faso (12.0%), Zambia (11.8%), Sudan (9.1%), Equatorial Guinea (8.8%), Sierra Leone (7.7%), and Somalia (5.6%) (IPU 2012). Clearly, this has the implication of weakening the opportunities available to women to contribute to national decision processes on political, economic and social development.

In essence then, notwithstanding the efforts of feminist groups through new theoretical approaches, insights and debates about how best to address the issue of women marginalization in society, and despite national and institutional commitments and policies to redress the condition of women and facilitate their contributions to development efforts, African women have remained substantially weak as compared to African men with respect to access to employment opportunities and power resources. As a group, African women are less educated with some of the lowest literacy rates in the world, and they experience greater difficulty in securing employment, earn lower wages than men counterparts, have limited access to social services, and are less likely to access decision-making opportunities in business or government. Perhaps, it is for those reasons that Africa remains the region that is furthest removed from achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that through their evolution WID, GAD and WED have served as the dominant feminist perspectives that have shaped our understanding of the nature and extent of the factors that have combined to impede the effective participation of women in development activities in countries around the world. This article has examined the theories within the context of the continued poor condition and challenges facing women in Africa.

Indeed, despite the inspirational successes of some African women in a broad range of endeavors – whether business, educational, political and

social and leadership – women in many African countries continue to lag behind many of their peers around the world in terms of health, education, earnings, and access to basic food resources. The net effect of poor access to education, employment, and political participation is that African women suffer a more intense level of poverty than males. This situation is despite institutional mechanisms advanced at international and regional levels to promote gender equality and women empowerment in Africa (and the rest of the world). So, while there have been some pockets of women's successes, very little (if anything) has actually been achieved overall with respect to the overarching objective of improving meaningfully -- as outlined in the MDG framework on gender equality and women empowerment -- the living conditions of women in Africa. Clearly, broad-based and sustained development would be extremely difficult or even impossible in societies where women and the transformative role they can play in the developmental processes of society are not duly recognized and harnessed. Institutional and social-cultural subordination or discrimination against women -- in whatever guises – must continue to be discouraged and targeted for outright eradication. The use of legislative instruments, as is the case in countries such as Rwanda and South Africa, are important steps in the right direction. However, as demonstrated by a growing body of evidence in the South African context, care must be taken to ensure not only that policy pronouncements and objectives are targeted instrumentally and actively on obstacles but also that appropriate oversight arrangements for effective institutional and societal compliance are emplaced.

In pushing an agenda for the promotion of gender equality and women empowerment, there is a need for caution with respect to ensuring that as a region, Africa does not engage in the proverbial quagmire of 'throwing away the baby with the bath water'. There is an emerging and growing evidence that, historically, African women were strongly involved in economic activities while still being able to manage their homes effectively (Isike & Okeke Uzodike 2011: 226-230). Women represent the heartbeat of the family in Africa. Thus, the importance of their role in the family must be better understood, appreciated, recognized and anchored as a desirable and differentiating feature of the African family -- rather than abandoned. It is important to underscore that what obtains and even works effectively in other societies, most especially in the West, may not be completely ideal, applicable or even relevant in the African societal context.

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