

Original Article:

**AFRICAN UNION AND GENDER EQUALITY IN THE
LAST TEN YEARS: SOME ISSUES AND PROSPECTS
FOR CONSIDERATION**

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Abstract

The roles of women in all facets of life in Africa and elsewhere cannot be quantified. This has equally attracted the attention of stakeholders as all major global commitments in recent times have addressed thematic issues bothering women. Within the African space, African Union (AU) has played very active roles in addressing gender equality and women issues and without mincing words, their efforts in the last ten years is worthy of commendations. While one appreciates the roles of AU in addressing gender equality and empowerment in the last ten years, it might be interesting to explore the ways by which the Union has addressed violent conflict from women perspective. This article therefore seeks to explore the activities of AU as regards gender equality and women empowerment in the last ten years, it examines how the interventions of the union have incorporated women into addressing violent conflicts in the region and finally, it makes suggestion on how the union can improve on gender and women issues and more especially as it relates to addressing conflict within the continent.

Keywords: Gender, violence, Africa, conflict, African Union

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INTRODUCTION

Gender equality in the time past usually denoted giving men and women, boys and girls equality on issues relating to human right opportunities, conditions and other spheres of life. Recently, however, it has come to be understood that balance or equality may go beyond the areas listed above. This is because there are certain constraints making the conditions of women different from that of men. This may be due to factors relating to physiology (like child bearing responsibilities which are solely handled by women) and it is believed that this impact on the living conditions of women. Thus, the main thrust as far as gender equality is concerned is that while differences exist between men and women, it should not be a factor limiting or discriminating against women or on their living conditions. Rather, it should contribute to an equal power sharing economically, socially, and politically and in other spheres of human influence (Council of Europe, 2004).

Interestingly, gender does not only have to do with the social construct of men and women, it also explores how the society has constructed the meanings and the relationships that take place between the sexes (Omotosho, 2009). In the history of gender, the usual belief was that the relationship existing between the two sexes was that of marginalization as men seemed to enjoy and benefit more from the relationship thereby making women to be at the receiving end. Some of the reasons responsible for this marginalization were as a result of issues within the society which shall be considered in the course of this discourse. Experts (United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, UNECA, 2009) in the field have emphasized that explanations regarding gender balance must strike on the following issues as important and necessary conditions for gender equality: 1. It must accept and appreciate the differences between the two sexes; 2. It must speak of the sexes as having the right to be different and such rights must be respected. These rights must equally reflect in all the structures of the society in terms of power relations, policy formulations and elimination of hierarchies and imbalances that may exist within the socio-economic and cultural aspects of every society. 3. All societies must aspire for the continuity and protection of balance in all aspects of the society. Gender construction and reproduction takes place at the individual and societal level. At the individual level, human beings are able construct their gender identities through roles, activities and reproducing them through conforming to expectations (Council of Europe, 2004). While at the second level, policies and structures further shape the life conditions and such are usually institutionalizing the maintenance and reproduction of the social construction of gender (Council of Europe, 2004).

Gender equality attracted the attention of scholars and other stakeholders because of the perceived notion over time that women have played a second role in relation to men. These perceived inequality has been discussed extensively in all aspects of life namely religion, economy, employment and among others. Tracing the origins of gender equality and history of gender from Aristotle's perspective, it was Pythagoras in the fifth century BC who first created the concepts like masculine, feminine and neuter. However, before

this period, studies showed that Africa has a well-established explanation of gender balance. History revealed that ancient Egyptians viewed the universe as a complete duality of male and female (Fletcher, 2009). The belief was that the female deity Maat which is the symbol of harmony gave balance and order to the sexes. Thus, pharaoh had no option to rule based on the Maat description and instruction (Fletcher, 2009). From this, one thing becomes clear; gender distinction was aimed at distinguishing between male and female. However, this distinction has brought a social construction coupled with responsibilities and roles attached to the social construct of each sex.

In modern era, based on the advent of westernization, explanations regarding gender was seen and discussed as imbalance; usually explained through physiology, religion and society and culture. For instance, while explaining gender imbalance from religious perspective; Christian literature (Holy Bible: Eph. 5: 22-24 (NIV)) describes the relationships existing between male and female as thus: “wives (depicting females), submit yourselves unto your own husband (depicting the male) as unto the lord... for the husband is the head of the wife... so let the wives be to their husbands in everything. Feminists have also argued about the disadvantaged position women find themselves. Much of these explanations about women oppression have also been popularized by anthropologists. The assumption behind these explanations is that women are weaker in terms of physical strength compared to men. This is the assertion put forward by Levi Strauss as put together by Smith (1997):

“human society...is primarily a masculine society, the exchange of women is practically universal feature of human society, in which men obtain women from other men-from fathers, brothers and other male relatives. The deep polygamous tendency, which exists among all men, always makes the number of available women seem insufficient. Therefore, the most desirable women must form a ministry. Because of this, the demand for women is an actual fact, or to all intent and purposes always in a state of disequilibrium and tension.” (Sexist Neanderthals?, para. 4)

Equality between men and women was officially recognized as a global issue in the charter of the United Nations (1995). Subsequently, it was confirmed in several treaties, conventions agreements. One of the notable agreements was the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, Beijing Platform for Action, endorsed at the fourth World Conference on Women: Equality Development and Peace, which was held in 1995 (United Nations, 1995). The ‘platform’ believed that gender equality is a human right and it has implications on development. In 2000, attempt to address gender issues became more pronounced when for the first time in the history of the United Nations, a special session of the Security Council came up with the theme: “Women, Peace and Security”. Some of the notable events surrounding the session were

the recognition of women roles in addressing conflict empowerment and equal participation in decision making among others. This was reflected in the resolution of the General Assembly as it reaffirms the 50/50 gender distribution in all categories of its workforce and this was further reaffirmed at the General Assembly Session in October 2001.

In Africa, several efforts are being made to address gender balance within the continent. . One of the agencies in the continent that has made serious efforts in this regard is NEPAD (The New Partnership for Africa's Development). Their efforts and actions have also reflected in regions across the continent. For instance at the regional levels, ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), SADC (Southern African Development Community), EAC (East African Community), IGAD (Intergovernmental Authority on Development), ECCAS (Economic Community of Central African States), COMESA (Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa) have adopted gender policies and declarations in their policies and they have also taken seriously the issue of human right of women seriously. The major body for the continent AU (African Union) is not relenting in its efforts in addressing gender balance as well. AU has set up different policies and legal documents promoting the right of the woman in the continent. For example, 53 member states in the continent have ratified the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and most of these countries have incorporated them into their national legislations. Further, some of the AU's policies and protocols addressing women and their rights in social, political and social include The Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of the Women in Africa (the African Women's Protocol) which was adopted in 2003; this legal document addresses issues relating to women in the areas of harmful practices like girl child, widows, elderly; unequal rights in marriage, unequal treatment of women in land distribution, exclusion from decision making among others. Aside this, AU Head summit adopted a Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA) in order to promote and expand gender parity principle, active promotion and protection of the human right of the women and girls, legislation in favour of women rights as it relates to land property, housing land and among others. We shall take a further look at one of the most recent policy documents made by the AU to address gender equality and empowerment within the continent.

AU Gender Policy

The process (African Union Gender Policy, 2009) began as early as 2006 with the plan to present the policy to the African Union summit in 2007. The policy was rooted in the African charter on Human and Peoples Rights, Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of women in Arica, the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA) and the Post Conflict Reconstruction and Development which the Heads of State and Government adopted in 2006 (Olga, 2013). Some of the decisions made in the policy were a reflection of the 1948 UN charter and the

Universal Declaration on Human Rights emphasizing on the freedom of humans irrespective of sex differences AU Gender Policy, 2009). According to AU, it has participated in almost all the activities and sub division of the UN which has made it understand the complexities and dimensions of women empowerment.

Taking a look at the policy, it is divided into four parts. Part one deals with the historical background to gender issue in Africa, part two deals with the policy goals, principles and targets while part three presents the commitment of the policy; and finally, part four explores and explains the institutional framework for the implementation of the policy (AU Gender Policy, 2007). As regards the policy commitments, it is based on the pillars of AU and international gender equality instruments targeting four commitment areas namely; AU Organs Will, The Commission Will, Regional Economic Communities Will, and Member States Will, Based on these commitments, the policy set targets for the actualization of the policies between 2009 and 2017. For instance, it set for itself the need to achieve parity targets between 2010 and 2015; achieve full implementation of the protocol on the rights of Woman in Africa by 2015 and domestication by 2020 among others (AU Gender Policy, 2007). In achieving all these objectives, the policy provided an institutional framework (Gender Mainstreaming System GMS) that will enable it achieve them. The aim of GMS is to work with structures and institutions at all levels in order to achieve gender balance, AU alongside its organs and structures set for itself the actualization of GMS guidelines through enabling structuring namely:

- The Executive Management Level (Political will)
- Gender Management Team (GMT)
- Gender Directorate/Division (the Lead Agency)
- Departmental/sector Focal Points
- Satellite Gender Focal Points in partner institutions, Centres of higher learning, Universities, Public and private sector Institutions
- Gender Commission/Expert committees/Technical working groups/ Gender Task forces
- Media (African Union Gender Policy, 2009).

It also planned to work with different structure namely all AU organs, RECs member states, Civil Societies and the Media to achieve these broad guidelines.

We have so far examined briefly, the AU policy on Gender equality and empowerment. So far and to begin with, one must commend the efforts of the AU in coming up with a comprehensive document regarding the plight of women in Africa. First and foremost, the policy recognized the importance of women and the challenges they face within the continent and the need to address this challenge. This is captured in paragraph three, page three of the policy thus:

“While it is evident that women substantially contribute to economic, social and political development as well as in environmental management, they have not benefited from economic growth and development, continue to be outside the decision making sphere and barely enjoy any human rights. Progress must be made through fruitful dialogue between civil society and governments, backed by political will, reflecting in changing constitutional, legal and social platforms through which more women can exercise voice and accountability in decision-making that affects their well-being. Nonetheless, women still face discrimination, exclusion, and marginalization and do not share equally the benefits from production.”

(African Union Gender Policy, 2009, p. 3)

Aside this, the policy clearly explains the peculiarity of African woman based on the social, political and cultural milieu they find themselves and the need to address these issues within these constraints. Further, the document explains the purpose of the policy which was to “...establish a clear vision and make commitments to guide the process of gender mainstreaming and woman empowerment to influence policies, procedures and practices which will accelerate achievement of gender equality, gender justice, non-discrimination and fundamental human right in Africa” (African Union Gender Policy, 2009, p. 9). Without mincing words, the documents captured all the relevant issues that relate to equality and empowerment within its policy. The policy recognized the importance of both male and female involvement in the liberation of the continent and believed (AU) that, women too should be allowed to conveniently play mature role in this regard. The policy implications of this are obvious among member states in recent times. For example, in Nigeria, the president while campaigning for office promised the inclusion of women by at least 30 percent in his cabinet, and upon assumption of office, he made good his promise in this regard. Other African countries have also followed this direction. The commitment of the AU regarding gender equality was further confirmed through the quest for the mainstreaming of the policy into all AU organs, REC and member states. The essence was to lead by example and its impact has been seen among member states in the formulation of committees and groups. In sum, the policy is a welcome development considering its focus, description and packaging. Never in the history of AU has women been given such attention.

However, like other policies of the AU, it raises fears in one’s mind regarding implementation. One of the challenges the AU faces regarding its policies usually have to do with implementation. While seventy percent of member states have ratified this document, one is curious about the implementation. Evidence available regarding the commitment of the policy among member states in practical terms is still not encouraging. For instance, a large number of women in African countries are still marginalized based on religion and cultural factors. Further, the policy also set 2011 as the date for actualization

of many parts of its policies. For illustration, in its commitment Number Four where the Union claimed to

“...ensure that all develop and enforce explicit gender policies (aligned to the UN and AU gender policies) emphasizing gender justice, gender accountability and transparency principle reforms emphasizing elimination of all forms of discrimination and violence against woman, gender mainstreaming, and recognize differences in responsibilities between men and woman at all levels by 2011.”

(African Union Gender Policy, 2009, p. 17)

A large number of African leaders have not allowed women participation significantly in leadership capacities. A look at the report below further attests to this argument as women participation in leadership position may not be all that encouraging.

In furtherance of this discourse, one is also curious to understand how the issue of equality and empowerment of women addresses violence and conflict in the continent and how AU policy on gender addresses this. This becomes important based on the fact that in the last few years (until recently), Africa probably suffered more from armed conflict than any other continent. One therefore becomes curious of how the policy addressed equality and empowerment more especially during and after the post conflict periods (Kishor & Johnson, 2004). Between 1960 and 1998, there were thirty two wars in Africa, seven million lives were lost and over nine million people became refugees, returnees or displaced (Anker, Chenyshev, Egger, Mehran and Ritter, 2002). In 1996 alone, fourteen out of the fifty three countries of Africa were afflicted by armed conflicts, accounting for more than half of all war-related deaths world-wide (Anker et al., 2002; Buvinic & Morrison, 2000; Economic Commission for Africa, 2009). The crisis in the Democratic Republic of the Congo alone has involved a dozen states and over fifty million people of the Great Lakes region. This development no doubt has undermined social and economic prosperity of the continent, stability and wellness, human rights, gender equality among others (Buvinic & Morrison, 2000; Economic Commission for Africa, 2009). In Ethiopia and Eritrea for instance, an estimated total of eighty per cent of their national budgets were diverted to defense which was claiming hundreds of lives (Global Monitoring Report, 2007). Recently, in Nigeria, a large proportion of its budget was diverted to security issues in the country in these events studies show that women were greatly affected (Buvinic & Morrison, 2000).

Global Monitoring Report (Global Monitoring Report, 2007) has further showed that a majority of efforts and documents addressing conflict do not address it from gender perspective. This is not restricted to AU alone, and Arnson (2005), argued that gender policies and actions do not emphasize on women. Paying attention to conflict in gender matters is very essential considering the strong link between gender inequality and risk of

conflict; gender inequality and severity of violence (Caprioli & Boyer, 2001; Caprioli, 2003). Equally, studies have proved the relevance of women economically during conflict periods than that of men in Africa United States Agency for International Development (USAID). Also, going by the definition of empowerment as defined by USAID, further attention, more especially in the area of implementation is still lacking. Presently, women's inequality and empowerment is hampered due to the poor level of education which affects the women in terms of knowledge, perception and practice of the opportunities created by the agency. Currently in Africa, the level of education shows that it is low. This has further increased the poverty level. The current poverty level in the continent for women is nothing to write home about; this therefore makes it difficult for women to access all the opportunities available for them. Rather than reduce them, it is further worsened by the activities of government and key position holders among member states. Thus women can play important roles in this regard. But nothing much has been seen in this regard. For example regarding the Boko Haram issue in Nigeria, nothing spectacular has been done to incorporate women in addressing this challenge. Women are mothers, wives, friends and daughters of these faceless people, if their abilities are properly harnessed, they (women) have the ability to strike a balance that will bring an end to this ugly scenario.

USAID published the results of a two year study, which examined and analyzed the impact of conflict on women in six countries namely Cambodia, Guatemala, El Salvador, Georgia, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, the study concludes that there are five major impacts of intrastate conflict on women and gender relations: (1) violence against civilians, of which ninety five percent is female; (2) internal displacement, of which ninety percent is women and children; (3) redefinition of female identities in the society, both as victims and as perpetrators; (4) increased poverty and starvation, as result of targeted destruction of civilian property; and (5) communal violence leading to lasting bitterness, anger and hatred (Kumar, 2001). The study concludes that in all six countries, the most traumatizing factor for women in conflict is the lack of physical security, both during the conflict and the post conflict demobilization of the militia (Kumar, 2001). It keeps women trapped in their homes, not being able to move around freely. Rape was used as a systematic tool of warfare and torture in all six case countries (El-Bushra & Sahl, 2005).

Aside this, Scheper (2002), argued that family structures were damaged through death and trauma, resulting in women becoming heads of households and an increased incidence of domestic violence; many women are forced to engage in prostitution in the post conflict era, as only available means of income. Furthermore, during and after the conflict, women became confronted with economic restrictions and lack of property rights such that female-headed households lost their land, and access to bank loans became impossible. In all case countries, the number of women entering the labour market increased during and after the conflict, though many lost their jobs in the formal sector once the ex-combatants returned to civilian life. Increased poverty hit the female population hardest: they were most malnourished and often deprived of basic education

and health services. The impact is still strong on women as violence is on the increase within the continent and women often bear the brunt.

Policies are good if properly utilized, but the current state of knowledge regarding the plight of women in Africa is not encouraging. While series of policies and action plans have been carried out, they have not fully addressed the quandary women face as far as empowerment is concerned. In education gaps between men and women globally, women in sub Saharan Africa ranked lowest (USAID and UNDP, 2005) on the table and this is not too good as education is the starting point for empowerment. A situation where women do not fair and compete equally and favorably with their male counterparts could spell doom and a bleak future for them. Women in the rural areas which constitute a large percentage of the total population of women in Africa have not been given the required attention as well. Globally, there is increasing recognition of rural women's important contributions to eradicating poverty and hunger and to overall well-being in rural households and communities; the question is: what is African Union through its member states doing in this regard knowing fully sure that its large chunk of deprived and marginalized women are resident in this area? While there is noise among some member states regarding their efforts in addressing the plight of the women, data showing the impact and activities of intervention regarding women empowerment and equality in the continent are not easily accessible to substantiate these claims.

Further, in rural areas of Burkina Faso, Uganda, and Zambia, for instance, it was recorded that the potential time savings from locating a potable water source within four hundred meters of all households range from one hundred and twenty five hours per household per year to 664 (World Bank Indicator, 2006) - the time that could be used to work for pay; all these experiences spell imbalance for women in terms of empowerment. Equally, access to land within the continent is still hinged on culture and sometimes religion within the rural settings, where the population is typically engaged in farming and the implication is that economic rights and privileges will be titled in favor of men only. The Global Monitoring Report (2007) has shown that much of Sub-Saharan Africa, permanent land rights are held by men, typically male household heads. In terms, of credit facilities whether in the rural or urban settings, access to credit facilities are usually a difficult experience for women. In Malawi, studies revealed that women are more likely than men to face constraints to credit as compared to their male counterparts (Human Development Report, 1995).

Interestingly, there have been interventions from non-governmental bodies in addressing the challenges women face within the continent. A number of local and international agencies are all over the place to address this challenge. However, studies have pointed out that that nothing much is seen in terms of their activities in rural areas which is worst hit with this menace (Diagne, Zeller, & Sharma, 2000).

CONCLUSIONS

From all indications, it is obvious that gender equality does not necessarily connote equality of ‘outcomes’ for both males and females (African Women Report, 2009). Taking a cue from Global Monitoring Report (2007, p. 29), “gender equality means equal access to the “opportunities that allow people to pursue a life of their own choosing and to avoid extreme deprivations in outcomes”— that is, gender equality in rights, resources, and voice...” The push for gender equality is not to distort the culture of Africans; it is to ensure that both males and females have access to the basic rights and privileges that will enable them to function effectively within any social and economic spaces they occupy. It is the empowerment that can effectively facilitate that. While it is important to state that there has been a great improvement in gender balance within corporate organizations in Africa, and evidence of more commitments towards ensuring a gender balance within this setting, it is also expedient to argue that their activities have not translated to the desired change required for gender within different the spaces of the continent. More can still (and should) be done in enforcing gender balance in all structures of African society.

Achieving equality and empowerment must therefore take into consideration education and poverty. Programs aimed at equality and empowerment of women in the continent must first take into consideration the need to bring out women out of the doldrums of poverty they are currently in; a hungry man is an angry man, equally, a hungry woman is an angry and dispossessed woman. The efforts through the women leaders of the member states are a display of affluence, party loyalty and jamboree which has not actually addressed the plight of the majority of the women. In Nigeria for instance, the issue of ‘first lady’ in most instances is nothing more than an avenue to garner support for the party, reward the loyalist and increase the party membership, and different versions of such are found within different parts of the continent As regard leadership position in different countries, the current 30 percent being upheld by most member states may not be adequate. As a matter of fact a large number of countries have not attained this level. This does not speak well for the 50/50 parity level being clamored for by the AU. Efforts must be directed at utilizing the capacities of women in addressing intrastate conflict among member states in the continent. Usually, this form of conflict has ethnicity and religious undertone. It is believed that this can be achieved through a complete removal of traditional gender roles and stereotypes existing in some societies. While gender balance reflects in social, economic and political aspects, they are still limited by traditional gender roles within different societies. Equally, social environment should be more supportive of a balanced participation of men and women in decision making. This should reflect in the micro and macro levels of the society. While it is still early to strictly condemn the activities of AU regarding women equality and empowerment considering its focus in 2010 regarding the next ten years; the years 2010-2020 has been declared as the African Women’s Decade and

different promises and aspirations have been attached to it, we should be hopeful therefore that more shall be done by the union in the next 8 years to make this dream a reality.

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