

A Pan-African Feminist Macroeconomic Analysis Of The Beijing Platform And Declaration For Action

**30 Years
Later...
Where
Are We?**



The African Women's
Development and
Communication Network



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DEVELOPMENT
FUND

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Butterfly Stuck In A Cocoon

The dawn of Beijing in 1995,
A new beginning,
Renewed hope.

A promise that I can leave my cocoon
To fulfil my destiny as a butterfly.
To spread my wings,
To share my beauty,
To live, to be free.

Yet, in the prison of my cocoon,
Though I cannot fly, I am safe.
Safe from violence, war and abuse.
Safe from injustice, inequality, inequity.
Safe from austerity and inflation.
Safe from a failing economy and poverty.
Safe from death.

Beijing+30,
A renewed promise,
A struggle continued.
A time of reflection and appreciation
For the women who dared to fly,
Finding paths, where there was none.
We salute you.

We too, must leave our cocoons,
To fly, to fight, to WIN!

Fly, butterfly,
Fly and fulfil your destiny.
Fly and spread your wings,
Fly and share your beauty,
Fly and live,
Fly and be free.

by Juliet Tembo

Introduction

Years on, the demand and advocacy for gender equality have gained remarkable momentum. From calls to end gender-based violence, to the push for women's access to education and healthcare, the progress made is evident, with more achievements yet to come. With a registered increase in the number of women and girls assuming leadership positions at all levels, to those soaring in entrepreneurship, backed by those joining the growing campaign for gender equality, the victories are tremendous, and are a cause for celebration.

A major milestone in the advancement of gender equality and push for the realisation of women's rights across the globe was at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, during which the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) was adopted. Crowned as the blue print for women's empowerment, the BPfA directs attention to 12 critical areas of concern namely (1) women and poverty; (2) education and training of women; (3) women and health; (4) violence against women; (5) women and armed conflict; (6) women and the economy; (7) women in positions of power and decision-making; (8) institutional mechanisms; (9) human rights of women; (10) women and media; (11) women and the environment and lastly (12) the girl child.

The year 2025 marks 30 years since the adoption of the BPfA. As the international community gears towards the Beijing +30 review, we are reminded that gender equality is not only a goal, but a means for achieving all other goals on the global agenda. Now, more than ever, urgent and sustained action is needed to transform the structures, institutions and norms – economic, political and social – that are holding back progress on gender equality.

To inform the Beijing +30 review and ensure that the voices of African women and girls are represented in the process, the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) brought together 12 alumni from its African Feminist Macroeconomic Academy (AFMA) to jointly develop a compendium offering a macroeconomic analysis of progress across the 12 critical areas of the BPfA. The analysis examines the impacts of among others, financialisation, austerity measures, privatisation, labour market dynamics, and fiscal and monetary policies on economic growth and development- and crucially on the advancement of gender equality.

Presented as a compendium of 12 analytical pieces, each piece applies a unique comprehensive, gendered macroeconomic lens to examine the interconnections between care work, labour, poverty eradication, and development financing. The analysis serves as a valuable resource for promoting gender-inclusive, responsive, and politically relevant macroeconomic policies in Africa and beyond.

We hope this compendium will be a practical reference for gender and women's rights champions as they navigate the complexities of demanding for economic policies that spur gender equality.

Happy reading!

CRITICAL AREA 1:
Women and Poverty

How the current financial system is undermining gender equality

Lucia Makamure

Biography

Lucia Makamure is a fiscal justice campaigner and gender expert with over 15 years of experience in gender and fiscal justice across civil society organizations. She is currently the Operations and Programme Quality Lead at International Development Economics Associates (IDEAs). Previously, she led the Debt Sustainability Portfolio at Open Society Africa and served as the Gender Specialist at the Graça Machel Trust. She has also worked with Gender Links on gender policy advocacy and research. An experienced researcher, she has co-authored seven editions of the SADC Gender Protocol Barometer. Lucia holds an MA in Public Policy and Management from the University of York as a Commonwealth Scholar and is an Atlantic Fellow at LSE, pursuing a Postgraduate Certificate in Social and Economic Equity.

Abstract

More than 40 percent of women in Africa live in extreme poverty 30 years after the Beijing Platform for Action (The Platform). The Platform has led to significant advancements, with countries in the region recognising gender equality as an essential human right and a key component for the realisation of regional integration, economic growth and social development. However, the persistent poverty and inequality levels between men and women; between and within countries in the region underscore the need for renewed commitment and transformational sustainable solutions. In this essay I share my reflections on the Platform focusing on poverty reduction looking at how the current International Financial Architecture (IFA) has become a key driver of poverty among women. The essay will conclude with key recommendations on reforming the IFA and a call to African governments to unite and resist any macroeconomic policy recommendations that require cuts on social spending.

Introduction

More than 40 percent of women in Africa still live in extreme poverty¹ 30 years after the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (The Platform). The Platform has led to significant advancements and has pushed most countries in the region to recognise gender equality as an essential human right and a key component for the realisation of regional integration, economic growth and social development. However, the growing poverty and inequality levels between men and women; between and within countries in the region underscore the need for renewed commitment and transformational sustainable solutions.

One of the most significant barriers to reducing poverty among women in Africa is the current International Financial Architecture (IFA) characterised by an outdated structure born out of a post war period. This structure is no longer fit for purpose for a world grappling with modern challenges such as climate change and growing inequalities. The IFA also entrenches the already existing distribution of resources, high borrowing costs for countries in the global south, which is eroding investments in essential services such as education, social protection and health. This results in persistent bias in African governments developmental policies that favour the needs of their creditors over the needs of their most vulnerable citizens. Studies carried out by FEMNET², and other feminist groups have shown that the current IFA exacerbates inequalities and limits the effectiveness of poverty reduction programmes.

¹ <https://data.unwomen.org/features/poverty-deepens-women-and-girls-according-latest-projections>
² <https://www.femnet.org/thematic-areas/economic-justice-and-rights/#overview>

Background

Adopted in 1995 and endorsed by 189 countries, [the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action](#) (The Platform) is an inclusive policy framework aimed at advancing gender equality and empowering women globally. It is considered one of the most progressive blueprints for women's rights, recognising women's rights as human rights and providing a detailed roadmap for achieving gender equality globally.

The Platform explicitly recognises women's rights as human rights and sets out a detailed roadmap for achieving equality between women and men. It identifies 12³ critical areas of concern where urgent action is needed to ensure greater equality and opportunities for women and men, girls and boys; Women and Poverty, Education and Training of Women; Women and Health, Violence Against Women, Women and Armed Conflict, Women and the Economy, Women in Power and Decision-Making, Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women, Human Rights of Women, Women and the Media, Women and the Environment, and The Girl Child.

In the last three decades, the Platform has provided a comprehensive and actionable framework shaping governments, civil society, and other stakeholders' agendas on promoting gender equality and gender justice. Today, the Platform remains an essential tool for gender equality and gender justice advocacy and accountability ensuring that women's human rights remain central to the global developmental agenda.

Achievements

Following the adoption of the Platform most leaders on the Continent have committed to removing all forms of gender inequality at regional and national levels through ratification of international women human rights instruments⁴, promulgation and adoption of legally binding treaties at continental and regional levels, as well as persuasive soft law instruments including declarations, agendas, policies, goals and actions. Globally there has been improvements in the development of national gender policies, structures, guidelines, action plans and programmes addressing gender inequities, raising awareness on gender equality, gender analysis, and mainstreaming of gender at both national and regional levels.

The goals of the Platform also informed the Millennium Development Goals (2000) and subsequently the [Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\)](#) which were adopted in 2015. The SDGs call for accelerated efforts to close the gender equality gap in light of persistent emerging threats such as climate change, appalling levels of poverty, HIV and AIDS, gender-based violence and trafficking in persons. The [African Union Agenda 2063](#) raises the bar for gender equality and especially empowerment of women. Aspiration 6 calls for an Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of its women and youth. Furthermore, it emphasises the need for gender equality in all spheres of life to ensure that no one is left behind.

Education is a powerful tool for ending poverty in women and the building of sustainable societies. As such, access to education increases women's employability and earning potential which ultimately lead personal financial security and economic growth. It also fosters intergenerational benefits, as educated parents invest in their children's education, creating a cycle of improved opportunities. Other notable strides have been made in girls' access to education since 1995 and these gains continue to play a central role in reducing the high poverty rates among women. There has been a significant rise in girls enrolled in primary school across the continent. By 2015 the net enrolment for girls had increased to

³ <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/women/beijing1995>

⁴ Maputo Protocol and SADC Protocol on Gender and Development.

80 percent from 47 percent in 1995⁵, the same for secondary and tertiary education. A steady increase has also been recorded in women's literacy rates which by 2018 had gone up to 58 percent from 47 percent in 1995⁶.

With women's participation in the economy being one of the pillars in eradicating poverty, many countries in the continent have made commendable progress in improving women's access to economic resources. As of 2020 women's labour force participation had risen to 64 percent from 57 percent in 1995⁷. It is also worth noting that there have been some sectoral shifts⁸ with more women making inroads in previously male dominated industries where they have a chance to earn higher salaries. Multiple entrepreneurial initiatives targeting women with small and medium-sized enterprises (SME)s have been implemented over the last three decades⁹.

Challenges

Despite these efforts, implementation of the Platform still falls short of the stated commitments because of the unequal and unjust IFA which each year is pushing millions of African women into poverty. As shared by the United Nations Secretary General, António Guterres in 2020 at a UN Women High Level meeting in Addis Ababa, poverty in the continent continues to have a woman's face. A political economy analysis of Sub-Saharan Africa and North Africa (MENA) region shows that women continue to bear the brunt of global economic, environmental and health shocks. Generally, women and girls who already face a myriad of obstacles in accessing domains of power, legal rights, education, health and economic resources find themselves at the coalface of these shocks. As a result, progress achieved in the last 30 years to advance gender equality and gender justice ends up being under constant attack.

Currently the Continent finds itself at the epicentre of a debt crisis with many countries at moderate or high risk of debt distress. At least 22 African countries were either in debt distress or at risk thereof as of 2022¹⁰. The affected countries are facing significant challenges in managing their debt which has a negative impact on their economic stability and ability to develop. The debt crisis on the continent has been made worse by the COVID 19 pandemic. According to a Christian aid report, African countries are spending at least 85 billion in debt repayments¹¹ resulting in massive cuts in public spending. This disproportionately impacts women by increasing their unpaid labour and leading to cuts in essential services. As we have seen with the Ghana and Zambia¹² experiences, the policy conditions linked to the provision of new loans and debt relief by the international financial institutions often have a negative impact on efforts to reduce poverty among women, as they force cuts in government spending and limit investments in social services such as education and health.

As part of debt restructuring efforts in countries such as Ghana, Kenya, and Zambia, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) has implemented austerity measures. These include reductions in government spending on public services, public sector wage freezes or

5 [summary_report_for_beijing_review_25.pdf \(uneca.org\)](#)

6 [1776The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action turns 20.pdf \(un.org\)](#)

7 [Labor force participation rate, female \(% of female population ages 15+\) \(modeled ILO estimate\) - Sub-Saharan Africa | Data \(worldbank.org\)](#)

8 [Figure of the week: Labor trends for women in Africa \(brookings.edu\)](#)

9 [Momken platform provides over 1,000 job opportunities for women at the Women's Employment Forum \(zawya.com\)](#)

10 <https://theconversation.com/debt-distress-in-africa-biggest-problems-and-ways-forward-182716>

11 <https://www.msn.com/en-us/money/markets/without-debt-relief-africa-is-fighting-climate-change-with-its-hands-tied/ar-AA1r7WNm?ocid=BingNewsSerp>

12 Ghana and Zambia are currently undertaking debt restructuring using the G20 Common Framework.

ceilings, public sector job cuts, and the introduction of user fees for basic social services. Additionally, there has been privatisation of state-owned enterprises, such as electricity and water utilities, and liberalisation measures, including the elimination of import barriers, removal of subsidies, and scaling up of exports. Structural reforms have also been introduced, such as the implementation of value-added tax and other regressive taxes, tax holidays for foreign corporations, and labour market reforms that make employment more flexible, often leading to increased unemployment rates for marginalised groups, including women.

In June 2024 widespread protests erupted across Kenya as citizens responded to a controversial Finance Bill proposing significant tax hikes. Such austerity informed policies tend to affect the most marginalised and vulnerable citizens who are mostly women. In addition to tax hikes, austerity measures target public social services and programmes that are likely to affect women¹³ who are the majority group dependent on social welfare or lacking access to social services. In some cases, governments are forced to privatise social services, which leads to price hikes that further exclude the poor from accessing services such as basic education, water, electricity, health, transport infrastructure and entrepreneurial opportunities, all of which are key levers in ending poverty.

Recommendations

The IFA urgently needs to be reformed. Its current approach to assisting countries in financial distress is exacerbating their ability to recover from crises and to restructure their debt. To tackle the persistent high poverty levels among women in Africa, it is essential that more efficient and fair mechanisms for debt restructuring are adopted to ensure that countries can manage their debt burdens without compromising essential public services.

The reforms require a multifaceted approach that includes the recapitalisation of development banks, enabling them to provide more substantial and effective support for global development initiatives. At the same time, there is a need to regulate finance at a global level, ensuring that financial flows are monitored and managed to prevent crises and promote stability. Most importantly there is a great need to ensure that African countries have a stronger voice in international financial institutions, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, to better reflect their needs and perspectives.

On their part, African governments need to allocate more resources to essential social services such as education, healthcare, and social protection programmes that benefit women, whilst ensuring full implementation and enforcement of laws and policies that promote gender equality in all sectors, including education, health, and economic participation. At the continental level there should be a political stand against cuts in public spending on social services, even in times of economic distress.

As has been observed over the last 30 years, management of gender data on the continent is still very poor, and as such there is an urgent need to improve data collection on gender disparities to inform policymaking and track progress. This data will play a key role in identifying and addressing specific barriers faced by women.

¹³ Daisy Sands, 'The Impact of Austerity on Women,' Fawcett Society Policy Briefing, March 2012 <www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/Handlers/Download.ashx?IDMF=f61c3b7e-bod9-4968-baf6-e3fa0ef7d17f> accessed 20 September 2021.

Conclusion

Although considerable progress has been made since the adoption of the the Platform, women in Africa continue to face high levels of poverty which ultimately widen the inequality gap. The IFA in its present form exacerbates these issues by prioritising creditor interests over the needs of African citizens. To achieve lasting gender equality and to reduce poverty among women, there is an urgent need for comprehensive reforms in financial policies, increased investment in social services, and stronger gender-responsive policies. It is only by addressing these challenges through coordinated efforts at national, regional, and international levels, that more women on the continent can be lifted out of poverty.

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CRITICAL AREA 2:
Women and Education

30 Years of Beijing: Girls' Access to Education in Kenya Compromised by Policy Changes

Wambui Esther Kimani

Biography

Wambui Esther Kimani is Pan African Feminist thought leader and the founder/director of Zamara Foundation, a feminist organisation working towards strengthening the voices of young women and girls in marginalised communities to challenge and transform the status quo. She has extensive experience in feminist leadership development, reproductive justice, movement building for social change, advancement of women's and girls' rights and advocacy. Wambui is a trained psychologist.

Abstract

Thirty years after the adoption of the most progressive framework the Beijing Declaration Platform for Action access to education for girls in all their diversities in Kenya and as a right remain hindered by policy shifts in higher education. Acknowledging that Kenya has made progress through different initiatives such as free primary education the recent reform to Higher Education Loans Board (HELB) threaten to reverse these gains on access to education in higher institutions of learning. The paper examines the gendered impact of Kenya's evolving higher education funding model, which disproportionately affects girls and young women due to existing socio-economic and cultural barriers. It highlights how changes in loan accessibility, the shifts to grants and and increased reliance on family financial contributions exacerbate gender disparities in university enrollment. Drawing on feminist analysis and statistical data this paper underscores the urgent needs for inclusive policies that maintain flexible needs based financial support for girls. It further argues that the Beijing inspired vision of gender equality and equity in education can only be realized through deliberate equity driven reforms that truly acknowledges and address the lived realities and experiences of Kenyan girls and young women in all their diversities.

Introduction

A girl born in 1995 turns 30 years old this year. While the Big Thirty is a monumental time for girls growing up, it is also when the Beijing Declaration Platform for Action (BDPfA) turns thirty. BDPfA is a monumental framework that sets forth an agenda for action on the realisation of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls, including access to education for all. The progressive agenda envisioned a society where girls would have access to, thrive and complete education, among other rights. While this is an ambitious agenda, progress in ensuring girls' access to education, particularly in higher learning institutions, has been painfully slow. Education access for all, especially girls, plays a major role in the growth and progress of society. Education is a crucial factor that can significantly influence the advancement of a culture. In particular, girls' education is very important for the country's development. An educated woman has the skills, information, and self-confidence that she needs to be a better parent, worker, and citizen. An educated woman will also be more productive at work and better paid. Indeed, the dividend for educational investment is often higher for women than men.

According to a UNICEF report dubbed "Reimagining Education¹," emphasis should be

¹ <https://www.unicef.org/reports/reimagining-girls-education>

placed on investing in girls' education because positively changing communities, nations, and the world's landscape is possible when we all consciously and deliberately invest in girls' education. UNICEF reports asserts that educated girls are less likely to get married early and more likely to lead healthy and productive lives. They earn higher wages, exercise their right to make decisions that affect them directly and create positive futures for themselves and their families. This enhances economies and closes gaps.² Education for girls is not just about attending school. It is about making sure that girls and young women are safe in educational settings and get the assistance they need in the subjects and professions they select, especially those in which they are underrepresented. So we ask ourselves 30 years later, how has access to education changed for Kenyan girls in all their diversities? How has the policy change that supports access to education, such as the Higher Education and Loan Board, affected access to education for girls, especially in universities in Kenya?

In Sub-Saharan Africa, only 7.19 percent of women are enrolled in universities and colleges compared to 10.41 percent of males . These startling statistics are lower when compared to the global average for women, which is 41.66 percent³. This shows that girls are far less likely to attend school at any level, especially in universities and colleges. The statistics are not far off in Kenya, where only 39 percent of girls can access public universities compared to 61 percent of boys, according to the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics in the report Women and Men in Kenya Facts 2022⁴.

Gendered Impact of Higher Education Reforms

Kenya has committed to the right to education for all, especially girls. The country has programmes such as free primary and secondary education, which have increased girls' enrolment and transition rates. Kenya seems to have achieved close to gender parity in enrolment, especially in primary school according to the Kenya Institute for Public Policy Research and Analysis (KIPPRA)'s analysis on gender equality in Kenya's education systems.⁵ This could be attributed to the implementation of free primary education, which reduced the cost of access to education, therefore sparing girls the discrimination they faced when families had to decide on whether to educate boys or girls with their meagre resources. However, these changes with higher institutions of learning and the evolving policy landscape, including the recent reforms to the Higher Education and Loans Board (HELB), exacerbate barriers to education for girls in Kenya. With already fewer girls and young women having access to tertiary education, HELB support ensures access, and each policy change affects the accessibility of learning in higher institutions, especially for girls.

Kenya changed their HELB policy in 2021.⁶ The policy subsequently went through a legislative process as an amendment Bill, which, when it was enforced, meant stopping

² <https://www.unicef.org/education/girls-education>

³ <https://essa-africa.org/node/1421>

⁴ <https://new.knbs.or.ke/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Women-and-Men-in-Kenya-Facts-and-Figures-2022.pdf>

⁵ <https://kippra.or.ke/towards-attainment-of-gender-equality-in-kenyas-education-sector/2/>

⁶ <http://www.parliament.go.ke/sites/default/files/2021-09/Report%20on%20the%20Higher%20Educations%20Loans%20Board%20%28HELB%29%20%28Amendment%29%20Bill%20No.%2037%20of%202020.pdf>

HELB from benefitting self-employed loan recipients because they had not secured formal jobs”. This is against the very essence of why HELB started financing the TVET programme for the purposes of skills development for self-employment and job creation. The government, through the President of the Republic of Kenya, on 3rd May 2023⁷, introduced a new funding model that is supposed to be student centered, on a need basis, and based on family income. This turned out to be challenging for most students who used the HELB loan to stay in school and pay tuition. The initial idea behind HELB was to increase parity in education, especially in higher institutions of learning, and these abrupt changes in policies disproportionately affect girls and young women. Girls and young women are less likely to be supported by family members when it comes to financial access to higher education. This is emphasised more in the findings of a study by Dr Renis Auma Ojwala titled “Unravelling gender and ethnic bias in higher education”⁸. The study stresses the need for provision of financial aid to girls and young women. Further that female university students were less likely to be supported by family and parents than their male counterparts. Most of her female respondents in the research told Ojwala that they rely on government loans from the Higher Education Loans Board, or HELB, which they must start repaying one year after completing their studies⁹. This really shows that girls and young women relied on HELB and these changes impacted them more than boys as families and society at large supports boys more than girls, especially when it comes to access to education.

The changes to the HELB structure in Kenya is concerning because under the new funding models, students will no longer receive loans but grants based on their household income. While this approach may aim to make higher education more equitable, implementation poses many risks, especially for girls and young women from low-income households. Firstly, the grant application process is tedious and lengthy, and it relies on robust data collection to assess financial needs. However, many families, especially those living in rural areas and informal settlements, lack formal records, which might disqualify deserving students. Girls are often marginalised within households, and are more likely to be deprioritised during the application process. Secondly, the new model caps funding based on household income. Family resources are often allocated to boys in a patriarchal setting, leaving girls at a disadvantage. Many girls will be at risk of dropping out or foregoing higher education without proper and adequate financial support.

Additionally, the removal of the loans affects the financial freedom that students used to have. In the past, HELB loans helped female students to pay for tuition, accommodation and other expenses associated with learning, thus reducing their financial dependence on their families who may not support their learning as much. This is because the shift to grants and scholarships is rather uncertain, as such funding is usually limited and biased, which may exclude girls who do not have access to other resources that could help them fill out complicated applications. For girls from vulnerable backgrounds, including single mothers and GBV victims, the elimination of HELB loans means they can make their own educational decisions. While grants may have come with conditions that were more difficult for girls in precarious situations to meet, thus forcing many to drop out, girls did not have to pay for their books and meals, as they would be required to with loans.

7 <https://www.hef.co.ke/>

8 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10734-024-01198-x#:~:text=The%20findings%20revealed%20an%20underrepresentation,to%20their%20ethnicity%20and%20gender.>

9 <https://www.universityworldnews.com/post.php?story=20240311112736745>

Conclusion

It is 30 years, and the spirit of Beijing is deflated especially in terms of access to education for girls and young women in higher institutions of learning. To safeguard the gains already made for girls, Kenya must address these systemic gaps. The country must maintain loan-based financial support alongside grants to ensure flexibility for students who may not qualify for scholarships. There is need to reassess higher education funding policies to ensure that the proposed changes do not inadvertently widen the gender gap. Kenya has witnessed progress in advancing education for girls and young women. However, the journey is still fraught with many issues. The dream of Beijing is a world and a Kenya where every girl has access to quality education at all levels of learning, from primary and secondary to tertiary levels. This can only be realised through inclusive, deliberate, and equity-driven policymaking that aligns with the lived realities of girls in Kenya.

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CRITICAL AREA 3:
Women and Health

Lost in Translation: A Stock-take of 30 years of the Beijing Platform for Action and Women's Health Financing Crisis in Uganda

Labila Musoke

Biography

Labila Musoke is a social justice activist and a lawyer. Presently, she works as the Program Officer on the Right to Health at the Initiative for Social and Economic Rights. Her role allows her to actively work toward ensuring equitable access to healthcare for all. Additionally, Labila serves as a board member of the Medicus Mundi International Network, where she contributes to global advocacy efforts aimed at decolonising international corporation, accelerate access to medicines, and meaningful participation of the Global South in international spaces. Labila also coordinates the Reclaim Public Service Coalition in Uganda, a space that strives to revamp and enhance the quality public service delivery in critical sectors like education, health, and social protection.

Abstract

The upcoming 30th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action offers an opportunity for global health actors, activists, economists, and scholars to reassess the commitments made in this historic document. This article examines how Uganda has operationalised these commitments to advance women's health and wellbeing. The chapter focuses on the challenges posed by the rising external debt burden and chronic underfunding of public health systems, with Uganda as a case in point. It critically evaluates existing healthcare financing frameworks, particularly public-private partnerships (PPPs), through a feminist macroeconomics lens. By exploring the human rights impacts of macroeconomic policies on women's access to quality healthcare services, the chapter proposes alternative financing approaches for advancing women's equitable access to quality healthcare in Uganda.

Introduction

Uganda's growing debt crisis¹ significantly undermines public financing for women's health initiatives as vital resources are increasingly diverted to debt repayments.² The recent COVID19 pandemic spotlighted the detrimental impact of this de-prioritisation, highlighting significant gaps in health financing³ and compromising the realisation of health for all as envisioned by the Alma Ata Declaration's commitments to Primary Health Care and resource allocation for universal health coverage.⁴

¹ Office of the Auditor General Uganda, *Auditor General Report Financial Year 2022/2023 (2023) 21-22* <<https://www.oag.go.ug/viewmegareport/33> > accessed 29th September 2024. Uganda's public debt has increased by approximately 111.7 per cent in the last five years and now stands at 52 per cent of the gross domestic product (GDP).

² Initiative for Social and Economic Rights, *Uganda's rising debt and public services: A Human rights Impact Assessment* (2022) <https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Ugandas_rising_debt_and_public_services.pdf> accessed 29th September 2024.

³ International Monetary Fund, *World Economic Outlook: Navigating Global Divergences* (International Monetary Fund 2023) <<https://www.imf.org/en/Publications/WEO/Issues/2023/10/10/world-economic-outlook-october-2023>> accessed 2nd October 2024.

⁴ World Health Organization, *Declaration of Alma Ata, Primary Health Care, WHO Technical Report Series No. 625 (1978)* <https://cdn.who.int/media/docs/default-source/documents/almaata-declaration-en.pdf?sfvrsn=7b3c2167_2> Paragraph V 'Governments have a responsibility for the health of their people which can be fulfilled only by the provision adequate health and social measures'

Dambisa Moyo's 2009⁵ critique of Africa's overreliance on debt remains relevant for Uganda, where escalating debt, often under predatory borrowing terms, strains the national budget. This fiscal pressure forces government to divert resources from critical public sectors like health to cover debt repayment obligations. As a result, these austerity measures disproportionately affect women's health, which is already underfunded,⁶ exacerbating existing disparities⁷, and undermining Uganda's commitments made under the Beijing Platform for Action.⁸

The global geopolitical landscape compromises Uganda's ability to prioritise women's health financing. A scenario that President Lula da Silva describes as 'a *Marshall Plan in reverse where the poorest nations finance the richest*'⁹ perpetuating dependency and exploitation. This reality is evident¹⁰.

In 2023 alone, Uganda's external debt increased by USD 1.42 billion, from USD 12.82 billion in FY 2021/22 to USD 14.24 billion in FY 2022/23.¹¹ Also, only USD 816 million (4.1 percent of the budget) was allocated to the health sector. This means that a meagre USD 5 will be spent on every Ugandan's medication for the entire financial year¹². Yet a staggering USD 11.3 billion was allocated towards^{13,14} with catastrophic out-of-pocket expenditure to meet their healthcare service needs¹⁵,¹⁶. This is the harsh reality for a country whose poverty levels stand at 40.1 percent. A critical stocktaking of the 30 years since the birth of the Beijing Platform for Action is imperative to address the human rights impact of the growing debt on women's health financing.

⁵ Dambisa Moyo, *Dead aid: Why aid is not working and how there is a better way for Africa* (Macmillan 2009)

⁶ Only 100 billion Ugandan shillings were allocated for access to medicines out of a total health budget of 2.946 trillion shillings for the fiscal year 2024/2025. This is particularly concerning given that 57% (41.7 trillion shillings) of the total national budget (72 trillion shillings) was allocated to debt repayment. Initiative for Social and Economic Rights, *Key Takeaways from Uganda's 2024-25 National Budget* (2024) <<https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Key-Takeaways-from-Ugandas-2024-25-National-Budget.pdf>> accessed 1st October 2024.

⁷ World Bank, *Uganda Economic Update. Improving public spending on health to build human capital* (23 Edition, 2024) 'Over one million Ugandans fall into poverty each year due to health spending' <<https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099061524162537650/pdf/P179840113885f023197581a7754744a89f.pdf>> accessed 2 October 2024.

⁸ The Fourth World Conference on Women, *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* (1995) <<https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20E.pdf>> accessed 28th September 2024

⁹ H.E Lula da Silva, President of Brazil, *United Nations General Assembly, UN Press Release GA/12633*, (24 September 2024) <<https://gadebate.un.org/en/79/brazil>> accessed 2 October 2024.

¹⁰ Office of the Auditor General Uganda (n 1).

¹¹ Ministry of Finance Planning and Economic Development, *Debt Sustainability Analysis Report FY2022/2023* (December 2023) 2. <<https://mepd.finance.go.ug/documents/DSA/DSA-FY202223.pdf>> accessed 30th September 2024

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Initiative for Social and Economic Rights, *Key Takeaways from Uganda's 2024-25 National Budget* (2024) <<https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Key-Takeaways-from-Ugandas-2024-25-National-Budget.pdf>> accessed 1st October 2024.

¹⁴ 50.45% of the population in Uganda is female; Trading Economics, *Uganda: Female population (% of total)* (2024) <<https://tradingeconomics.com/uganda/population-female-percent-of-total-wb-data.html>> accessed 1st October 2024

¹⁵ World Bank Group, Meta data Glossary. 'Out of pocket expenditure is any direct outlay by households, including gratuities and in-kind payments to health practitioners and pharmaceutical suppliers, therapeutical appliances, and other goods and services whose primary intent is to contribute to the restoration of the health status of individuals or population groups' <<https://databank.worldbank.org/metadataglossary/africa-development-indicators/series/SH.XPD.OOPC.TO.ZS>> accessed 2 October 2024.

¹⁶ World Bank Group, *Uganda Overview* (2024) <<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/uganda/overview#1>> accessed 1st October 2024.

30 years of Financing Women's Health in Uganda

Over the past three decades, Uganda has ratified numerous international and regional human rights instruments that affirm health as a right. The International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), for instance, explicitly affirms health as a fundamental human right.¹⁷ Also, Uganda is a signatory to the Abuja Declaration,¹⁸ where African heads of state pledged to allocate 15 percent of their respective national budgets to the health sector. These instruments align with the Beijing Platform for Action call for progressive macroeconomic policies as critical levers for achieving women's health rights.¹⁹

However, scholars such as Atiyya Waris and Laila Latif²⁰ argue that despite Uganda's commitments under the said instruments, it struggles with insufficient fiscal power and bold political commitment to effectively implement gender responsive budgeting. Without this strong and lasting political commitment, the health financing aspirations under the Beijing Platform for Action remain a distant reality considering the country's growing debt obligations.²¹ Consequently, the health financing burden is pushed onto the population, disproportionately affecting women, the majority of the 30 percent Ugandans living below the poverty line.²² The Equal Opportunities Commission's 2023 report revealed a significant disparity between Uganda's mortality rate and the Sustainable Development Goal 3 target. This alarming discrepancy was primarily attributed to the inadequate capacity of health centre IIIs²³ to manage emergencies.²⁴

The above notwithstanding, the government has consistently relegated its primary obligation to provide health care for all, leaving it to market forces of demand and supply.²⁵ Umar Trife Wamboze²⁶, a youth human rights activist and commentator, has described this narrative as a shift toward 'private services in public hospitals.' This raises critical questions on the human rights impacts of commercialisation of public services healthcare as the Initiative for Social and Economic Rights research reveals.²⁷

17 United Nations, *International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights*. (UN General Assembly Resolution 2200A, 16 December 1966) art. 1, 12. <<https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/international-covenant-economic-social-and-cultural-rights>> last accessed 30 September 2024

18 African Union, *Abuja Declaration on HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis and other Infectious Diseases* (OAU/SPS/ABUJA/3, April 2001) para 26 '... we pledge to set a target of allocating at least 15% of our annual budget to the improvement of the health sector' available <<https://au.int/sites/default/files/pages/32894-file-2001-abuja-declaration.pdf>> accessed 2 October 2024.

19 *The Fourth World Conference on Women* (n 7) paras 89, 91.

20 Waris, Attiyya, and Laila Abdul Latif, "Towards establishing fiscal legitimacy through settled fiscal principles in global health financing" (2015) 23 *Health Care Analysis* 377.

21 *Initiative for Social and Economic Rights* (n 8)

22 Atamanov, Aziz, et al. *Uganda Poverty Assessment: Strengthening Resilience to Accelerate Poverty Reduction* (English). World Bank Group, Washington, D.C., 2022. [World Bank Open Knowledge Repository] <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/099135006292235162/P17761605286900b10899b0798dcd703d85>.

23 A health facility located in every sub-county in Uganda, staffed by approximately 18 healthcare workers led by a senior clinical officer. These centers provide general outpatient services, maternity care, and laboratory services. Richard M Kavuma, Uganda's health-care system explained

(1st April Guardian 2009) <<https://www.theguardian.com/katine/2009/apr/01/uganda-healthcare-system-explained>> accessed 5th November 2024; Ministry of Health, *Guidelines for Health Centre III Health Unit Management Committees* (Ministry of Health 2019) <<https://library.health.go.ug/file-download/download/public/697>>

24 Equal Opportunities Commission, *10th Annual Report on the State of Equal Opportunities in Uganda FY 2022/2023* (November 2023) <https://eoc.go.ug/eoc/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/EOC-Annual-Report-23_.pdf> accessed 2nd October 2024.

25 Constitution of the Republic of Uganda (entered into force in 1995) National Objectives and Directives of State Policy, Clauses XV, XX; African Commission on Human and Peoples' Rights, *General Comment No. 7: State Obligations Under the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights in the Context of Private Provision of Social Services*. (October 2022) paras 43, 36 <<https://achpr.au.int/en/documents/2022-10-20/general-comment-7-state-obligations-under-african-charter-human>> accessed 2nd October 2024.

26 Umar Trife Wamboze, *Why 'resilient Africa' is but a fancy name for damage-control approach to public services*. (July 9, Daily Monitor 2024) <<https://www.monitor.co.ug/uganda/oped/commentary/why-resilient-africa-is-but-a-fancy-name-for-damage-control-approach-to-public-services-4684190>> accessed 1st October 2024.

27 Initiative for Social and Economic Rights, *The Human Rights Impact of Commercialisation of Public Services in East Africa* (2024) <<https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/The-human-rights-impact-of-commercialisation-of-public-services-in-East-Africa.pdf>> accessed 2nd October 2024.

The Cost of Public-Private Partnerships on women's equitable access to healthcare

Uganda adopted a Public-Private Partnership Policy in 2010. This decision was informed by the presumption, in favour of the private sector players, “that their well-known profit motive incentivises them to be more efficient and economical thus leading to completion of important infrastructure projects in a timely manner and within the set budget.”²⁸ The subsequent National Policy on Public-Private Partnership in Health in 2013 meant that this model was to be adopted in health as well.

Whereas the model seems to be thriving in some areas, it has also spelt complete disaster for most of the areas it has been implemented in.²⁹ The most prominent of these examples is the Lubowa hospital case. Four years after the initial funding of the PPP for the hospital project, the hospital was still at the foundation level.³⁰ In addition to this, there are questions on the legality of the project, especially as regards the approval for its funding. This has culminated in an ongoing constitutional petition on the utilisation of public funds without the requisite approval.³¹ Similar concerns have been raised in the health sector in various ongoing projects such as in Kenya, where the cost variations in the seven-year leasing of medical equipment is taking a toll on the taxpayer's money.³² This profit-driven nature of private healthcare facilities can lead to negative consequences and has cost us more than we have gained. The prevalent detention of new-borns on account of failure to clear hospital dues³³ and the denial of emergency healthcare to those who cannot afford it are all offshoots of the inherent incentive to profit within these facilities.³⁴

Worse still, some of the facilities implicated in these practices are funded by international financiers with the apparent objective of making healthcare more affordable and more inclusive. This highlights a persistent prioritisation of profit over ethical and public interest considerations within the private healthcare sector. These concerns necessitate a critical re-evaluation of private sector involvement in healthcare delivery, and establishment of mechanisms that prioritise ethical conduct and social responsibility over profit maximisation.

²⁸ Ibid 79-80; Uganda Parliamentary Committee on Health, *A Report to the Parliamentary Committee on the Ministerial Policy Statement for the Health Sector for the financial year 2012/2013* (Parliament of the Republic of Uganda 2012); Jude Byamukama, 'Evaluating the Efficacy of the Legal Framework for Transparency in Public-Private Partnerships (PPPs) in Uganda: A Case Study of Lubowa Hospital Construction Project' (Master's thesis, Makerere University 2023) I. <<https://jbyam.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Final-LLM-Thesis-Jude-Byamukama.pdf>> accessed 1st October 2024

²⁹ *Asasira* (n 24) 81-82.

³⁰ Initiative for Social and Economic Rights, *A False Promise! The Lubowa International Specialized Public Private Partnership (PPP) Hospital Will Not Deliver Universal Health in Uganda* (2023) I <<https://iser-uganda.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/A-FALSE-PROMISE.-The-Lubowa-Hospital-PPP-Project-will-not-deliver.pdf>> accessed September 30, 2024.

³¹ *Initiative for Social and Economic Rights v Attorney General* [2024] UGCC 07 [2019] <<https://ulii.org/akn/ug/judgment/ugcc/2024/13/eng@2024-05-13>> accessed 1st October 2024. Whereas the constitutional petition was dismissed, ISER is appealing the decision in the Supreme Court.

³² IEA Kenya, *Eight Facts on the Medical Equipment Leasing Project in Kenya* (February 2020) <<https://ieakenya.or.ke/download/eight-facts-on-the-medical-equipment-leasing-project-in-kenya/>> accessed 2nd October 2024.

³³ Labila Sumayah Musoke, *Stop Holding Indebted Women And New-Born prisoners in Uganda's Healthcare Facilities* (July 18, New Vision 2024) <https://www.newvision.co.ug/category/blogs/stop-holding-indebted-women-and-new-borns-pri-NV_192420#google_vignette> accessed 2nd October 2024; Initiative for Social and Economic Rights, *Failing to Reach the Poorest?: Assessment of the World Bank Funded Uganda Reproductive Health Voucher Project* (July 2020)

³⁴ Initiative for Social and Economic Rights, *Profiteering off A Pandemic: Private Sector and Health Services in Uganda during Covid 19* (June 2021) <<https://iser-uganda.org/publication/profiteering-off-a-pandemic-private-sector-and-health-services-in-uganda-during-covid/>> accessed 2nd October 2024; Anna Marriott, 'Sick Development: How rich-country government and World Bank funding to for-profit private hospitals causes harm and should be stopped.' (2023).

Conclusion

In this article the central argument is that the only way women in Africa will benefit from new models of healthcare funding such as PPPs is when international financiers such as the World Bank prioritise human rights, equity, and sustainability. By adopting human rights-based financing models, ensuring equitable distribution of resources, investing in long-term public health systems, strengthening legal frameworks, and collaborating with local stakeholders, PPPs can become powerful tools for advancing women's health and promoting social justice.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Building a public health system that places women's health priorities at the centre

- *The need for the government to seek a restructuring of its debt with its lenders to allow room for more resources that can be allocated towards health.*

The government should advocate for and negotiate a plan to restructure Uganda's external debt to free up resources that can be directly allocated to health programmes. This could involve negotiating more favourable terms with lenders or exploring debt relief initiatives. This should be complemented with a review of government spending and reduction of spending on non-essential programmes.

- *Government should refrain from austerity measures that impact health interventions.*

Government and stakeholders should oppose austerity measures because they disproportionately impact health interventions, especially those related to health. Austerity measures can lead to cuts in essential services, such as maternal healthcare, which can have devastating consequences. There should be increased advocacy for a prioritisation of essential public services, including health, during times of economic hardship. This may involve making difficult choices about where to allocate limited resources.

- *The need to ring-fence health financing*

An 'only-health' financing mechanism ought to be established. The fund accruing to this mechanism should be protected from budget cuts and other forms of interference. This could involve establishing a health trust fund or committing a specific percentage of the national budget to health for an agreed period of time.

- ***Implement prudent taxation, investments and debt management regimes that protect and promote women’s health and well-being.***

The existing tax exemptions should be reviewed and modified to generate additional revenue for healthcare. Public investments should align with national health priorities and deliver maximum returns, including investments in infrastructure, human resources, and essential equipment. Additionally, the government should strengthen tax administration and compliance to increase tax revenue. By implementing responsible debt management practices, the government can avoid excessive debt burdens that could jeopardise future investments in health and other essential sectors. These measures will create a more sustainable and equitable funding environment for maternal and other women’s health priorities, improving the health and well-being of women and their families.

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CRITICAL AREA 4:
Violence Against Women

Beijing Platform for Action + 30: What strides to Eradicate Violence against Women and Girls?

Violet Yigba Fokum

Biography

Dr Violet Yigha Fokum is a Lecturer at the University of Bamenda and also doubles as the Executive Director of the Center for Human Rights and Democracy in Africa. She has over 10 years' experience working on ensuring gender equality in fragile settings, social and economic development of Cameroon.

Abstract

The Beijing Platform for Action, considered a landmark document in the history of the United Nation's work on gender equality and women's empowerment, has served as a foundation for many UN and other regional initiatives, agreements and policies (with SDG included). However, socio-cultural norms and traditions, patriarchal societies that still value men over women and unequal power relations between men and women continue to reinforce violence perpetrated against women and girls. These violations are further exacerbated by the lack of gender responsive budgeting by African nations and gender insensitivity in macroeconomic policies as far as addressing violence against women and girls (VAWGs) is concerned. Through desktop review of related literature and statistics on the strides in the achievement of the mandate to end VAWGs through financing and its incorporation in macroeconomic policies, findings reveal that despite the adoption and ratification of key frameworks and commitments by African states, VAWGs is still the unfinished business of our time. Lack of political will, insensitivities in macroeconomic policies, the gap in gender responsive budgeting in responding and preventing SGBV, the precedence of customary laws over statute, constitutional and international law still expose the gaps in the realisation of critical area four in the BPEFA on VAWGs.

Violence against Women and Girls (VAWGs) is a human rights violation as it impairs and nullifies the enjoyment of women and girls' rights when they are not adequately protected (BPEFA, 1995). Viable, recent statistics on the prevalence and types of VAWGs show approximately 35 percent of women worldwide experiencing physical and or sexual violence from an intimate partner and or sexual violence from another individual (Ndiaye, 2021)³⁵ mostly as a result of harmful traditions, customs or cultural norms and perceived roles for boys and girls; men and women in the community that increase vulnerability to violence. These traditions and customs have resulted in behaviors that are highly patriarchal, discriminate against women and girls, and result in misogyny.

Women experience barriers in owning land and other resources, cannot easily inherit property, and are often considered as property-objects. The socialisation process recognises and gives the husband the right to 'correct' the wife and maintain discipline in the household. Interventions from outside the home to address or prevent domestic violence are regarded as interference in private issues; there is a persistent perception that the domestic sphere is private and distinct from the public domain. The situation has been further exacerbated by the outbreak of armed conflicts, social cohesion and unrest in Africa which has caused a general breakdown in law and order and a collapse of traditional protection mechanisms.

Displacement has led to an increase in all forms of violence. The tension of conflicts, and the frustration, powerlessness and loss of traditional male roles associated with displacement are being manifested in increased incidences of domestic violence against women. The underlying acceptance of violence against women which already existed has

³⁵ Ndiaye, N. (2011). *Gender Based Violence in West Africa. The case of Senegal, Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger*. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung Peace and Security Competence Center sub Saharaan Africa empowerment.

become more outwardly acceptable in conflict situations. It is a continuum of the violence that women are subjected to in peacetime.

In sub-Saharan Africa especially, women and girls are at increased risk of experiencing violence due to socio-cultural norms that value men over women, giving room for perpetration of VAWGs, with imbalance of power between women and men as a root cause of VAWGs. Being patriarchal societies, VAWGs remain a tolerated cultural practice, exposing women and girls to various forms of violence because her decision-making power is quite minimal, with limited bargaining power. This is happening at a time when we are celebrating the upcoming 30 plus years after the adoption of the BPFA, whose aim was to eliminate VAWGs through the establishment of frameworks for action at the global, national and local levels. This paper assesses the BPFA in the context of VAWGs thirty years after its implementation, from a macroeconomic policy and financing perspective.

The BPFA, adopted in 1995 at the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, serves as a landmark document that highlights a wide-ranging, inclusive and transformative agenda for combating VAWGs, achieving gender equality, empowering women globally. It is not only a key document for the United Nations' Decade for Women, established in 1975, but it serves as a blueprint for advancing women's rights and development. It provides a comprehensive framework for action as it addresses the multifaceted nature of VAWGs, calling on coordinated and sustained efforts at all levels to eliminate it. The BPFA lays emphasis on integrating a gender perspective into macroeconomic policies for a holistic approach to achieving gender equality and protecting women's rights by addressing various aspects of women's empowerment, inclusive of VAWGs.

The BPFA defines VAW as 'any act of gender-based violence that results in or is likely to result in physical, sexual, or psychological harm or suffering of women' (BPFA, 1995)³⁶. This is inclusive of threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, be it in public or private life. VAWGs encompasses, but is not limited to; domestic violence, physical violence, sexual assault, human trafficking, harmful traditional practices, including but not limited to female genital mutilation, marital rape, sexual harassment, forced pregnancy, violation of the human rights of women in conflict, systematic rape, among others (BPFA, 1995).

The BPFA calls for both short and long-term actions to protect women and girls from violence. The short-term actions include providing legal aid, medical care, shelter, counselling services, and law enforcement of both laws in place and persecution of perpetrators, among others. The long-term measures involve the allocation of adequate resources within government budgets and mobilisation of community resources for activities related to VAWG; integration of gender perspectives into macroeconomic policies, including poverty reduction strategies in order to address the root causes of violence; promoting education and awareness raising to transform minds and attitudes towards gender equality; reinforcing the capacities of service providers such as law enforcement officers, health providers, social workers, etc. to better respond to cases of violence; collecting and analysing data on VAWGs in order to monitor and identify gaps; establish national reporting mechanisms to track incidence and effectiveness of intervention; encourage international cooperation in addressing VAWGs. These should be implemented with adequate follow up with National Plans of Action to combat VAWGs, follow up mechanisms to review state progress in implementing recommendations, including but not limited to the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979) Committee.

36 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, 1995

Strides have been made since Beijing 1995 by many African countries and institutions to ensure that VAWGs is not only reflected in national documents. But their budgets actually reflect the efforts to ensure that prevention is effective. Among these documents are; the AU Agenda 2063 adopted in 2015, Agenda 2030, Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol ,2003), Regional Actions Plan for Africa on Ending Violence against Women and Girls adopted in 2017, African Union Gender Strategy adopted 2018, the Gender Observatory adopted in 2009, AU campaigns to end child marriage -2014 and the AU initiative on the Elimination of Female Genital Mutilation adopted in 2012.

At least thirty-two (32) African countries have adopted the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 and developed National Action Plans for its implementation, with some in their second stage. Of note are collaborations with key stakeholders such as Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and investment and collaboration with key ministries of Women's Affairs/Promotion/Gender for the realisation of UNSCR 1325. Among key issues highlighted in the different National Action Plans of countries that have adopted USCR 1325 are; gender responsive budgeting, protecting and rehabilitating women and girls who have been victims of crisis, equality/equity in women and men's participation in decision making and peace consolidation mechanisms, mainstreaming gender in humanitarian response, among others.

Despite strides made, gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls are still the unfinished business of our time and the greatest fundamental rights challenge facing the world today (UN Secretary General, Antonio Guterres message during his 2018 International Women's Day Message in New York). There is an increase in reports of gender-based violence across Africa, with gender inequalities reaching very high levels. Sub-Saharan Africa experiences one of the highest levels of male dominance with their Gender Inequality Index at rock bottom of the overall global rating (UNDP Gender Inequality Index, 2017).

Many African countries have signed and ratified the Maputo Protocol (2003) (though some did with reservations) with commitment to effect the principles stated therein to enhance gender equality, there continue to be significant gaps between its provision and the domestication at the national level. Violations against women and girls are still at their peak, rigid gender roles, stereotypes, patriarchy, and the socialisation process are still being justified on grounds of African tradition and cultural values; in times of political unrest and conflicts, rape is still being used as a weapon/strategy of war - a deliberate tactic to dehumanise the victim and an attack on women and girls' honor.

Disparity between men and women is still very acute with GBV still on the rise. Issues of socio-cultural practices and the conflicts plaguing most sub-Saharan African countries with the dire need for humanitarian assistance begs the question regarding the effectiveness of VAWGs mechanisms being implemented. In Burkina Faso for example, protection is still a very big challenge due to the escalation of forced population displacement as a result of violence since 2019. At least 44 percent of women in Burkina Faso marry before 18 years compared to men (OECD, 2018; Ndiaye, 2021). From a statistical survey, between 2010-2013, at least 565 schoolgirls are victims of forced marriage with the law accommodating the practice by allowing girls to get married at 17 (Ndiaye, 2021). Early marriages have consequences on their health as most of them end up being teenage mothers, with some of the pregnancies ending in obstructed labor.

Female genital mutilation (FGM) is still very common within sub-Saharan Africa, at least 63 percent of women between 15-45 years in Burkina Faso have been cut, similarly for 89

percent of Malian women aged 15-49 years; 24.0 percent of women and girls in Senegal aged 15-49 years have undergone genital mutilation. Despite the 1999 law banning the practice alongside public denunciation sessions with women practitioners of FGM in the affected regions. Sexual violence is still the order of day, especially in conflict-affected situations. More than 35 percent of Malian women have experienced sexual violence at least once in their lives (Ndiaye, 2021).

Borwankar, Diallo, and Sommerfelt (2008)³⁷ in their review of gender based violence (GBV) in sub-Saharan Africa (Cameroon, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Uganda, Zambia, Zimbabwe) based on the first and second generation of Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP), highlight that five of the six PRSPs reviewed had reference to GBV, among them, only two countries discussed GBV in detail (Kenya and Malawi). Cameroon, Rwanda and Zambia had minimal discussions on GBV issues. Among the four National Plans of Action reviewed, Uganda and Zambia's approach to GBV was more comprehensive than in their PRSP. Kenya did not discuss GBV at all. Overall, GBV is not addressed across multiple sectors, and is only discussed under cross-cutting areas such as gender, security, and law enforcement. Most of the documents did not link GBV to HIV/AIDS. Also, despite the exacerbated rate of school-related GBV, this was barely mentioned. These governments' limited efforts to address GBV through well-defined policies and strategies across the different sectors show lack of commitment to finance or allocate adequate resources to achieve the reduction of GBV in a systematic manner.

Laws, policies, programmes, interventions tend to have detrimental effects on women and girls when they appear to be gender blind or neutral. The shrinking space for effective humanitarian response has accentuated women's vulnerability as circumstances have made them *de facto* heads of households, responsible for providing for their families' basic needs. Women are compelled by this situation to change their perceived roles within the family/communities without any safety nets/protection to fulfil these roles. Aid policies that distribute benefits to heads of households most often do not benefit women equally, since men are often regarded as heads of households in different cultures.

There are now provisions on sexual violence and GBV, economic, social, political and cultural rights and the principle of equality and rights to nondiscrimination in national constitutions, policies and legislation. In the sphere of political participation, female representation in decision making positions such as the legislature have increased with Rwanda standing at 63.3%, ranked as the first in the world, with Senegal and South Africa among the top 10. However, a large body of literature points out that women's representation in politics on paper does not necessarily translate to substantive representation. Fokum, Fonjong and Adams (2020)³⁸ provide sufficient evidence to show that this representation of women in the Cameroonian parliament as reflected on paper is necessary, but not a sufficient, condition for the substantive representation of women's issues. Women are still constrained by socio-cultural norms and norms related to party loyalty among others. The findings also challenge linear accounts of representative institutions found in much of the literature on women and political representation, particularly critical mass theories, by demonstrating that beyond numbers, it takes specific actors and an enabling structural and institutional environment for political representatives to commit to an agenda that promotes women's issues in parliament. Even if gender representation matters, it does not guarantee that women will view their role as that of

³⁷ Borwankar R., Diallo R., and Sommerfelt A.E. 2008. Gender -Based Violence in sub-Saharan Africa: *A review of Demographic and Health Survey findings and their use in National Planning*.

³⁸ Fokum, V.Y., Fonjong, L., Adams, M. (2020). Increasing women's representation in the Cameroon Parliament: Do numbers really matter? *Women's Studies International Forum*, 80(102369)

women's representatives or that they will prioritize specific issues since women are not a homogenous group.

While international frameworks like UNSCR 1325 advocate for women's inclusion in peace processes, implementation remains weak, and women's roles are often symbolic rather than substantive. Armed conflicts exacerbate these issues, as women bear the brunt of violence, including SGBV, yet are often sidelined from formal peace negotiations. This exclusion ignores the vital role women play in rebuilding communities and addressing the socio-economic grievances that fuel conflicts. Also, humanitarian assistance during such conflicts is such that gender specific needs are continuously ignored despite the fact that most of the National Plans of Action stipulate mainstreaming gender in humanitarian interventions. This is reiterated by Menino, Fokum and Mingho (2024)³⁹ in assessing the gender dimension of the Government Emergency Humanitarian Assistance Plan (EHAP) by the Cameroonian government during the on-going Anglophone crisis. It was concluded that interventions undertaken within the crisis, especially in this programme, were too generic without any focus on the immediate needs of men and women displaced from the crisis. This raises the question regarding the government's commitment in its Plan of Action to integrate a gender dimension in emergency aid during reconstruction, in the course of, and after armed conflict as well as the management of conflict.

As communities increasingly shift from physical spaces to virtual platforms, social media has emerged as a powerful tool for challenging long-standing cultural norms and fostering inclusive narratives. Unlike face-to-face interactions where patriarchal values can be difficult to confront, social media allows for the creation of new, dynamic spaces where gender equality can be promoted. These platforms provide women with opportunities to voice their concerns, share their stories, and advocate for leadership roles, often reaching global audiences in ways that would have been impossible in traditional settings.

Online movements today highlight the transformative potential of social media in mobilising support for women's rights and leadership. By amplifying women's voices and connecting them to like-minded individuals across borders, these movements challenge the socio-cultural norms that have historically excluded women from decision-making. The beauty of building digital communities is that they offer a clean slate—without the entrenched hierarchies found in many physical societies—allowing for the rapid deconstruction of discriminatory beliefs and practices. In these virtual spaces, women can lead discussions, influence narratives, and build solidarity networks that can pressure policymakers to enact reforms supporting gender equality and inclusion. However, while social media offers unprecedented opportunities for women's engagement, it also presents significant challenges, particularly in the form of online harassment and abuse. Women in leadership, especially those advocating for peace and gender equality, are often targets of cyberbullying, hate speech, and threats. These forms of GBV online can have devastating effects, silencing women and discouraging them from participating in public debates and peacebuilding initiatives. The anonymity of online platforms often emboldens perpetrators, leading to an environment that can be as hostile as any traditional space, if not more so.

Moreover, the digital divide poses a significant obstacle for many women, particularly in rural areas across Africa. Governments' inadequate financing in key sectors have led to unequal access to the internet and digital technologies, combined with limited digital literacy, resulting in many women being unable to participate fully in online discussions

³⁹ Mengnjo T., Fokum V. Y., Nchofon, M. (2024). Gender analysis of Government Humanitarian Assistance within the Anglophone crisis in Cameroon.

or leadership initiatives. This exclusion exacerbates existing gender inequalities, as more political and peacebuilding conversations move online, leaving behind those without the resources to engage. The divide creates a new form of digital marginalisation, where only a small subset of women is able to benefit from the opportunities social media offers for leadership and peacebuilding.

Women's land rights are fundamental for women's empowerment. However, increasing nationalisation, commercialisation and the private ownership of customary land are exerting much pressure on land and a threat to women's access to land title and usufruct rights (Fonjong, 2017)⁴⁰. Global financial and food crises coupled with the drive for cleaner energy created new dynamics for land rush termed Large Scale Land Acquisition (LSLA) (Fonjong, 2017)⁴¹. However, the lack of proper mechanisms defining women's land rights particularly in sub-Saharan Africa created situations where communities lost their very source of livelihood to these land deals. Land, being an umbilical cord and the essence of power of a rural woman especially in sub-Saharan Africa, an example is Cameroon, where a woman is affected by fluidity in her rights of ownership. Section 1(2) of Ordinance No 74-I of 6th July 1974 makes the state sole guardian of all land. This is compounded by section 1 of Decree No 76/165 of 27 April 1976 individualising land rights. With such sweeping powers of the state and compounded with patriarchy and gender-neutral macroeconomic policies, these women who rely on land for their survival have now been turned into tenants at sufferance.

Macroeconomic policies are mostly focused on the monetised economy with little attention to the impacts of policy changes on the unpaid reproductive economy; in effect assuming an unlimited supply of reproductive labour and gender dynamics (Gunselli, Van der Meulen & Yana, 2007:6)⁴². Women and men endure macroeconomic shocks, neoliberal policies and the forces of globalisation in very different ways. Such programmes are likely to have two particular outcomes that have deleterious effects on the well-being of women in particular. These outcomes are the "deflationary bias" of macroeconomic policies, which tends to hurt women through shrinking budgets for basic services, while the "commodification bias" means that women have to increasingly rely on cash incomes to provide for their families (Gunselli et al., 2007:7)⁴³.

The lack of integration of intra-household gender relations in macro-economic frameworks puts in question the relationship between women's participation in trade and the utilisation of the benefits therein. Feminist theorists argue that the neo-classical theory of gender equality through free trade is overly reductionist and ultimately misleading. The empowerment of women cannot be achieved through trade openness without measures to ensure that women can access and utilise the benefits of trade (Özay, 2011)⁴⁴. Women's economic work continues to be unrecognised and undervalued with inadequate disaggregated data, coupled with the lack of gender mainstreaming within trade theories and agreements. Neoclassical economists argue that entering paid employment would allow women to challenge the power structure and the gender stereotypes in their society (Cagatay, 2005), this has not been the case from findings and literature as stated by Chiliya

40 Fonjong, L. (2017). Women's Land Rights and working conditions in large scale Plantation in sub-Saharan Africa. *Africa Development*, XLI (3) 49-69. Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa.

41 *ibid*

42 Gunselli, B., Van der Meulen, R. Yana. (2007). *Engendering development strategies and macroeconomic policies: What's sound and sensible?* Working paper

43 *ibid*

44 Özay, O. (2011). Implications of Trade Policy Changes on Gender Inequalities. *Fe Dergi*, 3(2), 33-53, 2011

et al. (2011:4)⁴⁵ in Zimbabwe and Fokum (2019)⁴⁶ on a study on women's involvement in informal cross border trade along the Cameroon Equatorial Guinea borders. Women still face gender specific challenges such as sexual harassment and this is still very much linked to their reproductive roles. As criticised by feminist economists (Elson, 1999)⁴⁷, entering paid employment is no guarantee for women's emancipation as it may not change the division of household work disproportionately shouldered by women, which increases the time burden faced by them. The benefits of paid employment will not always be accessed and controlled by women who may have to hand over their income to their parents or husbands (Elson, 1999)⁴⁸.

Social relations are viewed as having an important effect on economic processes and outcomes which are often ignored by macroeconomic policies. Gender relations are manifested in both intra and extra household processes; the household constitutes an important institutional site where such relations are nurtured and transmitted from one generation to another (Ozay, 2011). Studies have portrayed that gender relations in the household shape the manner in which women engage in processes and activities beyond the household (Kabeer, 1999)⁴⁹.

The fact that gender responsive budgeting, including in relation to responding to and preventing SGBV, is yet an issue to be effectively implemented in most African countries corroborates the gender insensitivity of most macroeconomic policies that continue not only to reinforce existing stereotypes but strengthens cultural norms and traditions that exacerbates violations against women and inequalities. The fact that some African countries (for example Niger) still give precedence to customary law over statute, constitutional and international laws that clearly articulate gender equality norms and standards, limits the scope of gender equality and its applicability enshrined in these laws.

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CRITICAL AREA 5

Women and Armed Conflict

African Feminism Macroeconomic Analysis on the Progress of the Beijing Platform for Action: Focus on Women, Peace, and Security

Khouloud Ben Mansour

Biography

Khouloud Ben Mansour was appointed by the African Union Commission in 2021 as the Youth Ambassador for Peace, representing North Africa in advancing youth participation in peace and security. She focuses on the intersection of migration, climate change, and peace and security, addressing these interconnected challenges through a holistic approach. With a strong background in conflict resolution and the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, she works closely with diplomatic missions across Africa to promote inclusive participation in multilateral processes. A dedicated advocate for environmental sustainability, she represents several green movements and serves as an Advisor to UN Women through the African Women Leaders Network, supporting the Office of the AUC Chairperson's Special Envoy for Women, Peace, and Security.

Abstract

As Africa continues to grapple with persistent conflicts and socio-economic inequalities, the intersection of women's and girls', peace and security demands urgent attention. The approaching 30th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) provides a critical moment to reflect on progress and gaps in advancing gender equality and women's rights. This article presents a feminist macroeconomic analysis of women's peace and security in Africa, motivated by the need to assess the region's strides in areas such as violence against women, women's roles in conflict prevention, and economic empowerment in post-conflict settings. By applying a feminist lens, the article critiques existing macroeconomic policies, highlighting the limitations in addressing the unique challenges African women face in these contexts. It underscores the urgent need for stronger financial commitments and accountability to promote sustainable peace, security, and gender equality. This analysis contributes to the ongoing discourse on achieving these goals in Africa as the global community reflects on the BPfA's legacy.

Introduction

The Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA), adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995⁵⁰, remains one of the most comprehensive global frameworks for advancing women's rights. Nearly three decades later, it is crucial to assess the progress made in key areas of concern for women's rights, especially in Africa. One of the significant aspects is the nexus between women, peace, and security, framed within the broader context of feminist macroeconomic analysis.

The BPfA emphasizes women's empowerment in public and private spheres, recognizing that gender equality is both a fundamental human right and essential for sustainable development. However, economic, social, and cultural barriers continue to undermine women's participation in decision-making, particularly in peace and security processes. This article aims to provide a feminist macroeconomic analysis of the current progress in implementing the BPfA, with a focus on how economic policies and gender-sensitive frameworks can contribute to peace and security across Africa. Feminist macroeconomic theory is used as the guiding framework.

⁵⁰ BDPF (Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action). 1995. *Mission Statement from Chapter One of the BDPF*. <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/>

The following chart highlights the key factors that contribute to sustainable peace through women’s empowerment. The percentage impact of each factor was derived using a weighted formula that reflects the relative importance of each factor in fostering peacebuilding.

The formula used is as follows:

$$\text{Impact (\%)} = \frac{(\text{Factor Value} \times \text{Weight})}{\text{Total Weight of All Factors}}$$

Where:

- **Factor Value** refers to the quantifiable contribution of each factor (such as women’s participation in political leadership, access to education, or economic independence) to sustainable peace.
- **Weight** represents the relative significance assigned to each factor, based on existing research and its potential impact on peace processes.
- **The total Weight of All Factors** is the sum of all individual weights, ensuring that the percentages add up to 100%.

For example, **women’s economic empowerment** was given a higher weight due to its proven link to both social stability and peace. The final percentages illustrate how each factor contributes to the broader goal of sustainable peace through women’s empowerment.

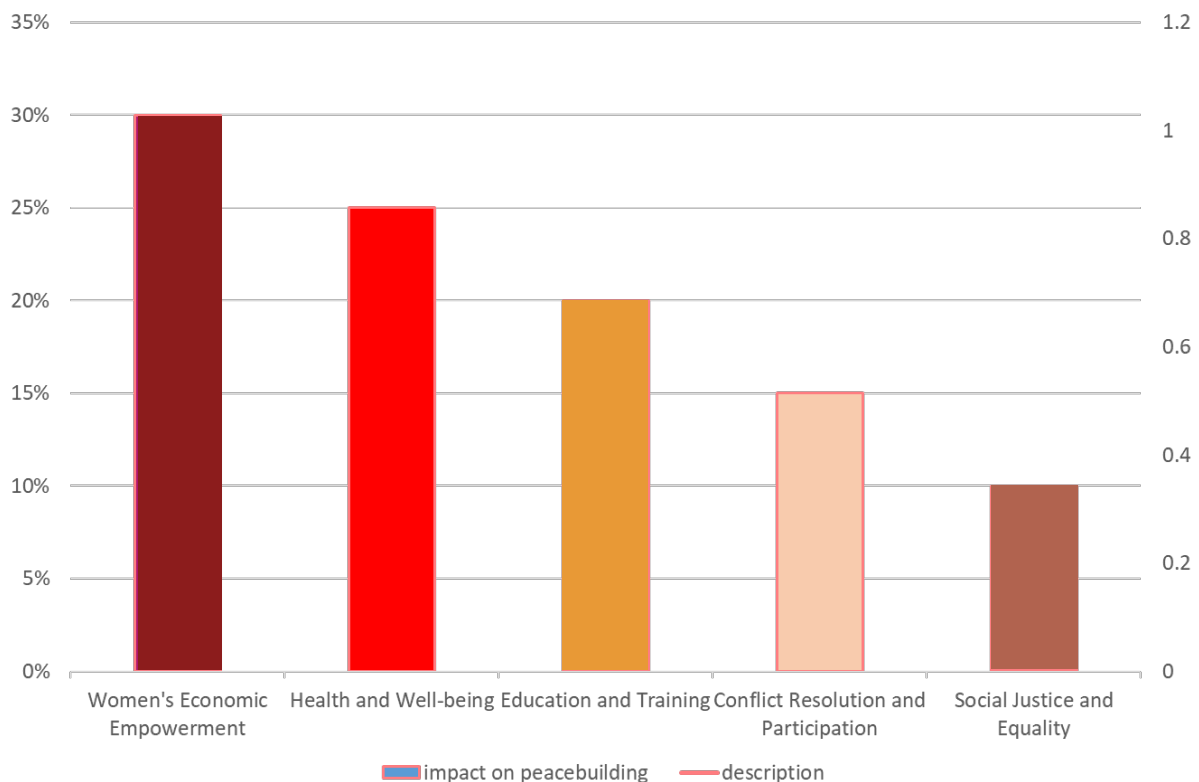


Figure 1: Key factors contributing to sustainable peace through women’s empowerment

For instance, women's economic empowerment plays a crucial role in enhancing stability and reducing poverty, accounting for 30% of the impact on peacebuilding. Health and well-being, which significantly improve community resilience, follow closely at 25%. The data underscores the essential nature of education and training, conflict resolution, and social justice in fostering an environment conducive to lasting peace. This holistic approach emphasizes the need for integrated policies that support women's active participation in all spheres of life

Traditional economic models often fail to consider the unique experiences of women, especially in conflict and post-conflict environments. Feminist economists, such as Diane Elson and Naila Kabeer, argue that economic policies must be gender-sensitive and include women's voices in peacebuilding and economic recovery efforts. In this article, the focus is specifically on African women in post-conflict settings, an area that has received limited attention. It highlights the need for gender-responsive policies to achieve lasting peace and security.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: Feminist Macroeconomic Perspectives

At its core, feminist macroeconomics highlights how conventional economic policies fail to account for women's unpaid labor, limited access to resources, and exclusion from formal economic processes. Key scholars, such as Diane Elson and Nancy Folbre, have advanced this critique by emphasizing that macroeconomic policies are not neutral; they often reflect and reinforce existing gender inequalities. Elson's concept of "gendered budget analysis" explores how government budgets can be structured to either perpetuate or address gender disparities. This approach is particularly relevant in post-conflict settings, where women's economic empowerment is crucial to rebuilding stable, peaceful societies⁵¹.

The Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda, shaped by the United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325, further underscores the importance of integrating gender perspectives into peace and security efforts. However, much of the literature on WPS focuses on women's roles in political peace processes, with less attention to the broader economic structures that sustain peace and security. This gap is where feminist macroeconomic theory becomes essential, advocating for economic policies that support women's active participation in post-conflict recovery. Feminist theorists such as Cynthia Enloe and Sylvia Walby also highlight the intersectionality of gender, conflict, and economics, arguing that women's experiences of conflict and post-conflict recovery are shaped not only by gender but also by race, class, and other social factors. This intersectional approach is vital when analyzing the unique challenges faced by African women in conflict-affected regions, where economic policies are often designed without their input or consideration.

Filling the Gap in Feminist Literature

While feminist scholarship has extensively critiqued the exclusion of women from peace negotiations, less focus has been placed on how macroeconomic policies influence women's roles in post-conflict recovery. Existing feminist literature tends to concentrate on women's

⁵¹ Elson, D. (2006). Budgeting for Women's Rights: Monitoring Government Budgets for Compliance with CEDAW. United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM)

political and social empowerment, but the economic dimension, -particularly in Africa, - remains underexplored. Macroeconomic policies such as government spending, trade agreements, and foreign aid, must be reformed to prioritise gender equality. Without addressing these economic structures, sustainable peace and security for women cannot be achieved.

By situating itself at the intersection of feminist economics and the WPS agenda, the argument is for economic policies to play a central role in peacebuilding efforts. This expands on the work of scholars such as Elson and Enloe by focusing specifically on Africa, where post-conflict economic policies have often overlooked the needs and contributions of women:

a) Women's Role in Peacebuilding

One of the core tenets of the BPfA is that sustainable peace cannot be achieved without the active involvement of women in conflict prevention, resolution, and post-conflict recovery. Women's leadership in peace processes is not only an issue of equality but also a practical necessity for lasting stability. Research has shown that countries with greater gender equality are more likely to resolve conflicts without violence and are less likely to use military force to resolve international disputes (*CFR study on women inclusion in peace processes*)⁵²

The BPfA underscores that women are central to advancing peace at local, national, and global levels. Despite this recognition, women remain underrepresented in formal peace processes. Feminist macroeconomic analysis sheds light on the structural factors that marginalize women, including economic disempowerment, which limits their capacity to engage in peacebuilding activities. Integrating gender-sensitive economic policies is crucial to ensuring women have the resources and opportunities to participate in peace processes fully.

There is a need for inclusive and equitable fiscal policies. Women, particularly in post-conflict settings, often face disproportionate economic burdens, including unequal access to resources, healthcare, and employment. Feminist economists argue that addressing these inequalities is key to achieving gender-just peace.

Progressive fiscal tools, such as debt restructuring and gender-responsive budgeting, offer pathways for governments to support women in rebuilding economies after conflicts. By addressing structural barriers, these economic policies can create an environment where women can thrive, thereby contributing to more effective post-conflict recovery. In many regions, including Africa, feminist economic policies have been proposed to ensure that the economic dimensions of peace processes are inclusive and that women benefit from recovery efforts.

b) Health and Economic Stability as Foundations for Peace

The BPfA and the Maputo Protocol (2005) highlight the importance of ensuring women's access to health services, particularly in rural and conflict-affected areas. Women's health, especially reproductive health, is essential to their ability to contribute meaningfully to society, including in peace and security contexts.

In many African countries, inadequate health services for women in conflict zones continue to be a barrier to their participation in peacebuilding and decision-making

⁵² Council on Foreign Relations. (n.d.). *Women's inclusion in peace processes: A study of global trends*. Retrieved from <https://www.cfr.org>

processes. Without addressing women's health needs, particularly in terms of sexual and reproductive health, efforts toward peace and security remain incomplete. From a macroeconomic perspective, investing in women's health is not only a matter of human rights but also an economic necessity. Healthy, empowered women are better positioned to contribute to peacebuilding, economic recovery, and national development.

c) Economic Justice and Women's Empowerment in Peace Processes

Economic justice is a critical component of feminist macroeconomic thought. Traditional economic models often overlook the unpaid and informal labor that women contribute, particularly in post-conflict recovery. Feminist frameworks emphasize the importance of recognizing and valuing these contributions, as well as implementing policies that address gender-specific economic inequalities.

For peace processes to be truly transformative, economic policies must be designed with gender in mind. This includes ensuring that women have access to financial resources, education, and decision-making roles in economic reconstruction efforts. A feminist macroeconomic approach advocates for trade policies, progressive taxation, and public investment that prioritize women's economic empowerment, which, in turn, strengthens their capacity to lead in peace and security contexts.

The following are case studies of African countries where women's participation in post-conflict recovery has been shaped by macroeconomic policies. These examples demonstrate how feminist macroeconomic theory can be applied to real-world settings, providing evidence for the need to rethink economic strategies to achieve sustainable peace and gender equality.

Case Study - Rwanda: Post-Genocide Economic Recovery and Gender Inclusion

Rwanda's post-genocide recovery highlights how feminist economic policies can lead to broader societal changes. For example, women's involvement in the economy was strengthened through initiatives such as access to microfinance and land ownership reforms, which benefited women. These economic opportunities empowered women, leading to their increased political participation. Rwanda now has one of the highest percentages of women in parliament globally with 63.75 percent in the Chamber of Deputies and 53.8 percent in the Senate.

Despite Rwanda's progress, challenges remain, particularly in the informal sector, where many women work under precarious conditions. Women in this sector often face unregulated employment, which means they lack job security, formal contracts, and legal protections. Many work as street vendors, domestic workers, or in agriculture, often earning very low wages without access to social security, health benefits, or maternity leave. Additionally, working hours can be long, and the work itself can be physically demanding and unsafe, with few workplace safety measures in place. These conditions make women vulnerable to exploitation, and they are often at risk of economic instability and social exclusion.

This case study demonstrates both the potential and limitations of macroeconomic policies in addressing gender disparities in post-conflict settings.

Case Study - Liberia: Women's Role in Peacebuilding and Economic Reform

Liberia's experience with post-conflict economic reform provides another compelling example. After 14 years of civil war, Liberia's peace process was significantly influenced by the leadership of women, most notably through the efforts of groups such as the Women of Liberia Mass Action for Peace. While women were instrumental in securing peace, their participation in post-conflict economic recovery has been constrained by macroeconomic policies that have not adequately addressed gender inequality.

Under the leadership of Africa's first female president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Liberia made strides toward gender equality, particularly in the public sector. However, the country's macroeconomic policies, heavily influenced by international financial institutions, did not fully integrate gender-sensitive approaches to economic development. As a result, women, especially those in rural areas, faced significant financial barriers. Under the leadership of Africa's first female president, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, Liberia made strides toward gender equality, particularly in the public sector. However, the country's macroeconomic policies, heavily influenced by international financial institutions, did not fully integrate gender-sensitive approaches to economic development. As a result, women, especially those in rural areas, faced significant economic barriers. For example, many rural women struggled to access credit and financial services due to collateral requirements they could not meet. Additionally, limited access to education and vocational training hindered their ability to transition into more sustainable forms of employment. This case illustrates the need for more comprehensive feminist economic policies in post-conflict recovery. While women's political and social participation was acknowledged, the lack of targeted gender-responsive economic reforms left many women economically marginalized, highlighting the importance of incorporating gender analysis into all aspects of economic policy.

Conclusion

The BPfA laid a comprehensive framework for women's empowerment in peace and security, yet significant challenges remain in realizing its goals. Feminist macroeconomic analysis provides valuable insights into how economic policies can either hinder or enhance women's participation in peacebuilding and post-conflict recovery. To ensure that women's contributions are recognized and supported, governments must adopt gender-responsive economic policies that address structural inequalities and provide women with the resources they need to participate fully in peace processes. Only through inclusive economic systems can lasting peace and gender equality be achieved.

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CRITICAL AREA 6

Women and the Economy

30 Years On, Why Are The Cracks So Deep?

Eunice Asiedu

Biography

Eunice Asiedu is an Economic Policy Analyst whose interest spans inclusive socio-economic transformation, social equity, environmental sustainability and sustainable transformation of economic systems. Through her work, Eunice has contributed to promoting climate-just communities, gender inclusiveness in economic policy formulation, and stimulating debates on sustainable development and decent employment creation in Africa.

Abstract

After decades of contending against inequality and subjugation, this article analyses the socioeconomic and structural obstacles impeding women's economic participation in Africa. The emphasis is on the intrinsic barriers and disparities hindering women's full economic participation. Despite the odds, women continue to experience structural discrimination, limited resource access, and restricted economic independence. This is in the face of recent economic growth in several African nations and marginal improvements in their labour market participation rates. The analyses additionally reveal how the implementation of neoliberal economic policies exacerbate the disparity gap and displace women in the economy as they are exposed to unstable employment, inadequate legal protection, financial exclusion, unpaid care-work, and educational barriers. The article highlights the pressing need to formulate, adopt, and implement policies sensitive to the intersectionality of women's needs and fully harness their potential to contribute towards sustainable economic growth and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is proposed that such comprehensive policy reforms can promote equitable economic growth and accelerate women's economic independence, acknowledging the resilience and strength of women in the face of discrimination.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Economic Growth and Structural Transformation in Africa

African economies have seen substantial growth in recent years⁵³, with certain countries achieving remarkable progress in infrastructure, manufacturing, and technology. Nevertheless, its structural transformation has been slow and uneven⁵⁴. There are still significant disparities, particularly as regards women's participation in the economy and enjoyment of the benefits therefrom. Africa continues to be the second most unequal continent in the world. Wealth is concentrated in the hands of a select few, with the majority – including a disproportionate number of women – living in extreme poverty due to economic marginalisation. The widening disparities are attributed to the economic policies and measures mainly formulated and inspired by neoliberal ideologies of the International Monetary Fund. Regardless of all the long-standing exclusions and

53 African Development Bank Group; African Economic Outlook 2024
54 *ibid*

vulnerabilities, African nations continue to cede their sovereignty to multinational corporations, leaving them helpless as they find themselves in a form of civilisation dominated by unstoppable forces in the global markets, escalating the suffering of women who are at the bottom of the development pyramid.

1.2. Impact of Structural Discrimination on Women's Socioeconomic Position

The structural discriminations that linger in African economies, where control and capital are still distributed unequally, are the primary topic of the spectrum of interest. The existing disparities have been worsened by many governments' failure to adopt economic policies that reflect the needs of diverse members of society, mostly women. Critical public services such as healthcare and education have seen drastic cuts due to the government's excessive borrowing, accumulating national debt, and high-interest payments. Owing to the sociocultural composition of African nations, women and girls are particularly adversely affected by these neoliberal policies because they are denied access to vital resources that are needed to enhance their standard of living (Silva, 2022).

Even though 2023 marked the twentieth year of the Maputo Protocol's adoption, only 44 out of 55 African Union (AU) member states had ratified it, reflecting the continent's varying commitment to gender equity (AU, 2023). Despite this gloomy economic outlook, there has been some commitment to women's empowerment, such as the ratification of the African Union Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa (2003) and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW, 1979) by most countries.

Also, according to UN Women, there have been modest improvements in women's economic position, with an increase in women participation in paid wage and salary employment to 50 percent from 40 percent in the 1990s⁵⁵. The improvements made are nonetheless brittle and uneven across industries and regions, as women still encounter major hurdles to leadership, decision-making, and economic participation (UN Women, nd-a).

2. WOMEN'S ECONOMIC RIGHTS AND INDEPENDENCE

2.1. Significance of Women's Economic Participation

Women's economic participation is a crucial and essential driver of growth and development (Ngoa and Song, 2021). It increases labour inputs at the macro level and helps families escape poverty at the household level by increasing incomes and consumption of basic goods and services (Verick, 2018)⁵⁶. Even with the meaningful contributions of women to the economy, women are, to date, not included in economic decision-making processes,

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<https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/csw59/feature-stories>
Verick, S. 2018. Female Labor Force Participation And Development. *Iza World Of Labor*.

and even when women make it to the decision-making tables, they are practically muted (Ilesanmi, 2018)⁵⁷. This disparity in economic participation underlines the increasing incidence of widening gender pay gaps. According to the United Nations women earn 10-30 percent less than men⁵⁸, regressive taxes (often against women), unpaid care work, and higher absorption of women in precarious forms of employment exacerbate their position.

2.2. The Informal Sector and Vulnerability of Women

Women permeate the informal sector of African economies, spanning agriculture, fisheries, and micro, small, and medium-scale enterprises. Largely, the lack of equitable access to economic opportunities and viable alternatives for women has led to this situation (Khan, 2020)⁵⁹. Nevertheless, women's few avenues for income generation are also threatened by many global occurrences, including the climate crisis, digitalisation, exchange rate volatilities, and increasing debt effects, thereby worsening their economic plight. Additionally, women are exposed to heightened risks in the informal economy due to the lack of secured jobs, limited or no social protection, low productivity, unstable income streams, and widespread discrimination (Malta et al., 2021)⁶⁰.

Conversely, though women in formal employment benefit from comparatively secure employment, they face challenges such as low pay, unprotected jobs, and poor working conditions (Elson, 2017)⁶¹. Some of the women have had to accept job offers that also have limited opportunities for career advancement against their will due to harsh economic conditions (Verick, 2018)⁶². Sadly, corporations have taken undue advantage of this vulnerability and hired women under cheap contractual terms, which reinforces the gender pay gap. These challenges have been heightened because governments' interventions remain skewed and not far-reaching. Amid these challenges, some women have used legal means and trade unions to mount pressure on employers to improve working conditions, while others faced job losses for their active participation in advocating for rights (Schulze-Cleven and Vachon, 2022, Fearn-Banks and Burford-Johnson, 2014)⁶³.

Women across Africa have also had to suffer the brunt of economic restructuring processes. In the formal sector, for instance, conditionalities attached to structural adjustment programmes led to some women losing jobs since they occupied lower positions in the job hierarchy (Karademir, 2016)⁶⁴.

2.3. Trade and Employment Dynamics in Globalisation

In as much as economic liberalisation has created some employment opportunities for women, the pre-existing inequalities coupled with downturns associated with globalisation have further restricted women's ability to fully engage in the economy. Women face numerous challenges in fully integrating into decent trade opportunities

57 Ilesanmi, O. O. 2018. Women's visibility in decision making processes in Africa

58 <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/infocus/csw59/featurestories#:~:text=The%201995%20Beijing%20Platform%20for,countries%20to%20bring%20about%20change>

59 Khan, T. 2020. Young, Female And African: Barriers, Interventions And Opportunities For Female Youth Employment In Africa

60 Malta, V., Kolovich, L., Leyva, A. M. & Tavares, M. M. 2021. The Close Relationship Between Informality And Gender Gaps In Sub-Saharan Africa.

61 Elson, D. 2017. Recognize, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care work: how to close the gender gap. New Labor Forum

62 ibid

63 Schulze-Cleven, T. & Vachon, T. E. 2022. The Future Of Work And Workers, Global Labour Journal

64 Karademir, A. The Effects of Structural Adjustment Programs on Women in Developing Countries.

(der Boghossian, 2023)⁶⁵. For instance, the inter and intra-trade agreements have increased the incidence of informal cross-border trading, exposing women to varying challenges such as cumbersome customs procedures, extortion, and sexual harassment (Vhumbunu, nd). Other developments, including the gig economy⁶⁶, have introduced women to new types of employment and related circumstances. The gig economy offers some flexibility but replicates many of the risks associated with conventional precarious employment, including poor wages, problems with workplace health and safety, violations of human rights, and unstable employment (Hunt et al., 2019)⁶⁷.

Supportive and effective workplace laws guarantee that gender disparities are closed, which enables women to make constructive contributions to economic development (Newiak, 2024). However, the laws that protect women's and men's rights at work are applied inconsistently. These laws cover gender discrimination, equal pay for equal work, equal night work hours, equal access to hazardous jobs, equal entry to the same industries, paid maternity and paternity leave, and a restriction on dismissing pregnant women.

According to a report⁶⁸ on Laws on Workplace Equality in Africa, of the 37 countries evaluated in Africa, only 5 have all workplace equality rules in place, while the other 32 have only 1 to 5 of the 7 workplace laws in place. Additionally, 17 of the 37 African nations that were the subject of the study had legislation that forbade discrimination in the workplace based on gender⁶⁹. Even with laws, rules, and processes in place in some countries, women still face discrimination in the workplace and have limited access to economic opportunities and security.⁷⁰

3. EDUCATION, TRAINING AND SKILLS ACQUISITION

3.1. Educational Barriers for Women in African Economies

Education and relevant skills training remain critical in hiring, promoting, and determining labour remuneration. However, women in African economies still experience various forms of restrictions in taking up education. Many are either dropping out of school at some level to give way for the education of male siblings or due to socioeconomic reasons such as economic constraints, teenage pregnancy and early marriage.

Data from the World Bank shows that approximately 34 million adolescent girls of secondary school age in Africa remain out of school due to poverty and violence (Hassani, 2024). Further statistics show that in sub-Saharan Africa, more than 6 million pregnant and

65 Der Boghossian, A. 2023. Gender social norms: new trade barriers addressed by policy

66 The gig economy involves the exchange of labour for money between individuals or companies via digital platforms that actively facilitate matching between providers and customers, on a short-term and payment-by-task basis. [What is the gig economy and what's the deal for gig workers? | World Economic Forum](#)

67 Hunt, A., Samman, E., Tapfuma, S., Mwaura, G., Omenya, R., Kim, K., Stevano, S. & Roumer, A. 2019. Women In The Gig Economy

68 Factsheet: Laws on Workplace Equality in Africa by FEMNET and Equal Measures 2030

69 ibid

70 The score represents the percentage score of the sub-regional compliance of the workplace equality rules which consist of gender discrimination, equal pay for equal work, equal night work hours, equal access to hazardous jobs, equal entry to the same industries, paid maternity and paternity leave, and a restriction on dismissing pregnant women

parenting girls (aged 10–19) are out of school⁷¹. These restrictive norms and financial constraints embedded in African economies, if not curtailed, would continuously widen the educational gap and lead to perpetuation of gender inequity.

3.2. Impact of Socioeconomic Responsibilities on Women's advancement

Considering the patriarchal nature of African economies, women typically shoulder a greater share of the childcare and other domestic duties, which leaves them with little time to take advantage of opportunities when they arise. As a result of the militating factors mentioned earlier, the ability of women to participate meaningfully in the labour market is constrained. Working women who try to improve their livelihood and advance in their careers get this effort thwarted due to women insensitive and stringent organisational regulations.

For instance, more training in automation, digitisation, and new technologies has become increasingly necessary. However, women still encounter obstacles in their training as technology developers and users, which worsens the gap between men and women regarding income, wealth, and leadership. Due to low education and training, women's meaningful participation in the labour market and economic policy formulation and implementation processes is constrained (Russo et al., 2023)⁷².

The global shift towards technology, the pervasive patriarchal structure and systemic limitations in organisational policies to account for the unique challenges faced by women consequently exacerbate the gender inequities in all facets of African economies.

4. ACCOUNTING FOR WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTION TO THE ECONOMY

Despite the high levels of precarity in women's work, their contribution to the economy is not in question. Though women find themselves more in the informal economy, temporary, casual or multiple part-time jobs, their incomes are used to finance many household activities (Verick, 2018). It is important to note that women's contribution includes unpaid work, such as caring for children and adults, maintaining the environment, and cooking for the family. These efforts are frequently underreported or not reported at all, and the valuable work hours that women spend providing care are not quantified and included in national accounting, which does not accurately reflect the full contribution of women to the economy.

71 <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/supporting-education-and-health-young-mothers-africa>

72 Russo, M., Giugliano, A., Flenghi, G., Carnevali, L., Martone, M., Marrella, A. & Sapio, F. 2023. Augmented Geometry In University Education. *Inted Proceedings*, 1787-1796

5. CONTROL AND OWNERSHIP OF RESOURCES

The foundation of economic autonomy is the ownership and control of productive resources and assets, including land. However, a lack of land ownership and control over capital and inputs prevents many women from accessing loans, technology, and other resources that might increase their production even where women have land user rights, thus keeping them impoverished (Kuusaana et al., 2013)⁷³. Loan rejection rates for female entrepreneurs exhibit systematic biases (Morsy et al., 2019).

Most African women do not own or control land and other resources, and so, women entrepreneurs' loan applications are frequently declined based on their lack of collateral. Owing to this, women have occasionally chosen not to apply for loans because they believe they are not credit worthy⁷⁴.

To minimise the obstacles to women's financial inclusion, some African countries such as Zimbabwe have introduced financial packages that facilitate funding access. The Reserve Bank of Zimbabwe designed suitable financial instruments that make access and use of financial services extremely reasonable, realising that women's empowerment cannot be accomplished without guaranteeing access to affordable loans. Given that women make up the bulk of Zimbabwe's population—roughly 52%—the action was extremely important. In view of this the lack of access to finance could affect their contributions to the well-being of families, communities and the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals. Setting up a National Financial Inclusion Strategy, the Reserve Bank established the \$15 million Women Empowerment Fund in 2017 to enhance access to funding for women owned businesses⁷⁵. Kenya has also put in much effort to reduce the gap in financial access between men and women as the statistics show that this gap has been dropping from 8.5% in 2016 to 4.2% in 2021⁷⁶.

All these steps would enable women to contribute meaningfully to economic growth and development of African economies.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

Women's role in Africa's economic transformation cannot be understated; they should therefore not be seen as spectators or recipients of benevolent spillovers but as actors who have the power to effect changes in economic management and control of resources. Hence, it is imperative for women's participation and, more broadly, gender concerns to be integrated into agreements with African governments and multilateral institutions to ensure that women equitably and fully participate in African economies without any barriers. Intersectional needs should be taken into consideration before agreements with the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and other multinational corporations are reached, and not *vice versa*, as these often leave women on the dark side of development.

73 Kuusaana, E. D., Kidido, J. K. & Halidu-Adam, E. 2013. Customary Land Ownership And Gender Disparity-Evidence From The Wa Municipality Of Ghana

74 ibid

75 https://www.rbz.co.zw/documents/bank_sup/financial-inclusion-women.pdf

76 <https://www.fsdkenya.org/blogs-publications/blog/putting-women-at-the-centre-of-inclusive-finance/>

At the same time, economic policies should not be devoid of the different needs of various economic actors. Economic policies should satisfy the needs of not a few but the needs of everyone, ensuring that no one is left behind in Africa's economic development. Reviewing national laws, policies, and practices in compliance with international human rights law, many African governments have made investments in bolstering or establishing autonomous national institutions for the defense and advancement of women's rights. 89 percent of Southern African nations, 73 percent of East African nations, 71 percent of North African nations, and 43 percent of Central African nations uphold the principle of non-discrimination⁷⁷

In the face of global shocks such as the climate crisis, African governments should take women's concerns into consideration. Women and men experience these shocks in differently and to increase their resilience, appropriate reaction mechanisms are required. Gender equality has been incorporated into the climate action agenda of African nations such as Ethiopia and Benin. To guarantee that women's voices are heard, and their demands are met, these nations have taken part in regional and global climate discussions.⁷⁸ About 150 women activists and community leaders from 14 West and Central African nations gathered recently in Dakar, Senegal, for the third Women's Climate Assembly (WCA). Addressing the effects of the climate issue in Africa was the main goal of the summit. One of the main decisions reached was the creation of an African women's climate justice day⁷⁹.

Again, women's unremunerated work should be quantified and properly accounted for to improve women's social stature, accurately reflect women's participation in the economy, and ensure fair sharing of responsibilities on the household and national levels. Efforts must also be intensified to remove all barriers to the engagement of women in paid work.

Though there is proof that certain African nations are making genuine attempts to reduce the gender inequality gap, these initiatives are progressing slowly. Since empowered women will translate into economic growth and development, all African nations must work together to advance this agenda as soon as possible.

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⁷⁷ United Nations (2021), Economic and Social Council - [h12001089.pdf](#)

⁷⁸ [CSW66: African Countries Agree on Common Position to Integrate Gender Equality in Climate Action Agenda | UN Women - Africa](#)

⁷⁹ [African women's assembly unites for climate justice - Conservation news](#)

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CRITICAL AREA 7:

Women in Power and Decision Making

Gender, Power and Decision Making: An Urgent Agenda That's Always Marking Time

Schaeffer Okore

Biography

Schaeffer Okore is a seasoned global policy and strategy director with over a decade of experience in global development, applying a feminist lens and praxis. She specializes in leading and optimizing policies, programs, and strategies with deep insight into gender, governance, and global development. A feminist politician turned global development strategist, she is currently a trustee at Malaria No More, Womankind Worldwide, and Glitch Charity in the UK, as well as a member of the G100 Pay Parity and Corporate Transformation Advisory Council. She is an inaugural Goalkeepers Advisory Group Member at the Gates Foundation (Emeritus), a former board member at She's The First (New York), and an Advisory Council member at the Center for Feminist Foreign Policy (Germany). An inaugural Obama Foundation Africa Leaders' Fellow (2018), she has been recognized by the ONE Campaign as one of their global women of 2018 and was named among the 100 Most Influential Young Africans (Governance & Law) and the 100 Most Influential Kenyans in 2018. She is also a socio-political columnist with *Nation Africa*.

“Women are half the society. You cannot have a revolution without women. You cannot have democracy without women. You cannot have equality without women. You can't have anything without women”

-Nawal El Saadawi

Introduction

Thirty years after the original launch of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPFA) at the 4th World Conference on Women⁸⁰, the translation of “gender issues” has been conflated to mean “anything to do with women”, despite three decades of attempts to mainstream this conversation. The message being communicated in the subtext is that women are inconveniencing wider human progress and development because of their “women things” that are holding everyone else back.

How can women fail to read this when they are continuously being urged to wait and put aside their very real and urgent needs? In liberation movements women are told to focus on the deaths of all, and not femicide as a particular pandemic.⁸¹ Women are told that everyone is poor, despite their being forced to live in so much poverty that it is described as a gendered experience.⁸² The list of yellow lights goes on. The truth is that there are no women’s issues, just issues that have always been deprioritised in resources and action when it comes to women.

Current estimates, considering hard data elements such as economic participation, health outcomes, political participation, and education statistics, posit that all things held constant, gender equality may take another 80 years or so to achieve.⁸³ It is a proven fact that gender inequality is at the root of why wider human crises, such as war, medical pandemics such as COVID-19, famine and more have such disproportionately high effects on women.⁸⁴

The Beijing Declaration (the Declaration) makes the point that “inequalities between women and men have persisted, and major obstacles remain, with serious consequences for the wellbeing of all people”.⁸⁵ Despite this, it remains such an elusive, aspirational goal that it is usually discussed in terms of a nameless, distant future and not the real challenge to be fought against urgently now.

⁸⁰ The United Nations (n.d.). *United Nations Conferences | Women and Gender Equality | Beijing 1995*. Retrieved October 8, 2024, from <https://bit.ly/3zRsarU>

⁸¹ Irakoze, J. (2018, October 28). *Our revolution is not a battle of fine phrases*. Retrieved October 8, 2024, from <https://bit.ly/3BEYmPV>

⁸² SDG Action (2023, March 6). *Poverty is not gender-neutral*. SDG Action | Practical Knowledge for a Fairer, Safer, Sustainable World. Retrieved October 8, 2024, from <https://bit.ly/4eyZe73>

⁸³ Gates, M. F. (n.d.). *Gender equality depends on women having power, not just “empowerment”*. Retrieved October 8, 2024, from <https://bit.ly/3ZXWaxo>

⁸⁴ Zarenda, H. (2024, January 19). *How gender matters in a time of crises*. CGIAR | Gender Impact Platform. Retrieved October 8, 2024, from <https://bit.ly/3YeL5pT>

⁸⁵ The United Nations (1995, September 15). *The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*. Retrieved October 8, 2024, from <https://bit.ly/3U4fvsK>

“Power and Decision Making”: An erroneous analytical frame

The immediate reference for power and decision-making in the Declaration focused on government participation and specifically political life, ranging from the voting process to the political party level, all the way to active inclusion in public governance. It further asserts that the potential of women to “find the time and develop the skills required for participation in decision-making in wider public forums” has been limited.⁸⁶

As such, the Declaration lends itself to several false and unoriginal assumptions that patriarchal ideology makes about women. One is that women would need to embody special skills for literacy and understanding as regards public decision-making. This assumption is upheld by other tacit beliefs, including that by some miracle of birth or nurture men already have these skills and do not need this extra support.

It is of course not true that women neither have power nor make decisions. Where, then, is their capacity for these matters allowed and exploited? It happens in the home, a private and limited arena presumed to be under overall individual male leadership. This space is deputized to women because the menial, manual labor required to run it is exhausting, time-consuming and unpaid.⁸⁷ It thus remains comparatively undervalued when compared to “real work” out in the world’s industries and sectors.

Based on the premise of their perceived disempowerment there is an urge to “empower” women, which is a wrong solution to a non-existent problem. Women are already critical power players in countless intangible ways. This is despite the intentional limits, erasures and barriers placed on them by individual men and similarly positioned persons in their lives and a myriad of socially accepted behavioral norms. Women therefore do not need to be given power from some secret hidden source; instead, we need to question the people and frameworks preventing their full use and exercise of any power they already possess.⁸⁸ Further still, this specific government and governance linked spaces for the exercise of authority should be called “public leadership” as a proper definition of the sector where these specific political representational gaps exist, instead of seeking progress under the blanket fabrication that women have skills gaps in decision making and in wielding power.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Actionaid | Learning Platform (n.d.). *Unpaid care and domestic work | Who it affects and why it's a problem*. Actionaid. Retrieved October 8, 2024, from <https://bit.ly/3U2gPMG>

⁸⁸ Salami, M. (2015, September 7). *Repowerment rather than empowerment*. Retrieved October 8, 2024, from <https://bit.ly/3BDkrhI>

Women in public leadership: Struggling upwards

There has been notable progress in the arena of women's representation and participation at increasingly high levels of public leadership all over the world. For instance, the total percentage of women parliamentarians in single or lower houses are now just below 27 per cent, up from a paltry 11 per cent 30 years ago.⁸⁹ However, in modern history, there have never been more than 17 countries under female leadership in the same year (out of a current total of 193 UN member states).⁹⁰ Further, currently only about 13 out of these member states have a woman leader.⁹¹

This glaring lack of women leadership extends beyond government towards the corporate arena, religion and culture, areas of human life often at odds with each other; the one position they agree on being the limitation of women's freedoms and opportunities. Household and care-oriented decision making is rarely, if ever, considered useful in the political arena beyond "pink" or softer dockets, which are also understaffed and under resourced. These include family and children affairs, social inclusion and development, social protection and social security, and Indigenous and minority affairs.⁹²

Women experience such limitations in power and decision making spaces that this calls for a true examination of the "one man, one vote" ideals of democracy as a system of government, reflecting on whether the same access is afforded to women. When we consider, for instance, how much child, elder, sick, community and domestic care work women do that holds the household together, one wonders where they are supposed to find time to attend political rallies (where their safety is at risk because of vulnerability to various kinds of assaults) and be active political party members.

Women further struggle as political candidates, simultaneously having their abilities doubted while they take on the mummified role of therapists to address the public's political woes. They are still vulnerable to attacks by the same public, the media and their opponents on the campaign trail. Rampant dehumanization of those who make it to the top is the dubious reward for their herculean efforts. They constantly answer questions not about their leadership process, but about how it feels to be a woman in leadership.

When a woman does secure a position of power, it is demanded of her that she be a mentor to the rest of the waiting throng of women; of course because aspiring male leaders cannot be mentored by women. The tyranny of being among the first is forever upon the women who find themselves in leadership, leaving little room to make mistakes which would project failure on the entire gender, or even ask for help without being viewed as weak. The glass cliff phenomenon also remains, wherein women are only given leadership opportunities during times when failure is almost certain due to contextual crisis, and someone is needed to blame.⁹³

⁸⁹ UN Women (2024, October 2). *Facts and figures: Women's leadership and political participation*. Retrieved October 8, 2024, from <https://bit.ly/3XWTMUv>

⁹⁰ O'Neill, A. (2024, September 12). *Number of countries with women in highest position of executive power 1960-2024*. Retrieved October 8, 2024, from <https://bit.ly/4eTodiQ>

⁹¹ Clancy, L., & Jackson, A. (2024, October 3). *About a third of UN member states have ever had a woman leader*. Retrieved October 8, 2024, from <https://bit.ly/4eY5O7g>

⁹² UN Women (2024, October 2). *Facts and figures: Women's leadership and political participation*. Retrieved October 8, 2024, from <https://bit.ly/3XWTMUv>

⁹³ Oakes, K. (2022, February 7). *The invisible danger of the 'glass cliff'*. Retrieved October 8, 2024, from

The acts of violence women experience during their leadership tenure become acceptable sacrifices to wider society, as ways for them to prove their worth over and over. In addition, the issues that contribute to the minority of women in public leadership are many, layered, systemic and multigenerational. A common myth is that the woman leader in a term or two of office will do the job she was elected for, as well as be the sole equality warrior in gender and all other matters, while achieving long-needed progress, as all other leaders, especially men, remain neutrally objective on these matters.

The idea that women being present in public leadership equals a transformative agenda is questionable. Women exist in the context of society, and society always completes its vicious cycles. If society is not inherently supportive of this kind of progress, leaders of whatever gender will not last long, and their brief time in leadership will be filled with obstacles, sabotage and burnout, before inevitable career eulogies that relegate them to the faint praise of being “before their time”. In addition, society requires women to take on the labor of being morally and politically “better” and more civilized.⁹⁴ However, the same toughness in their work that would be lauded in men is heavily criticized in them by those who somehow have marking schemes for uncharted paths.⁹⁵ There is thus no way for women to win.

Beijing at 30: What way forward?

Several significant factors have changed now three decades after the Beijing conference. These factors are slowly creating the evolving environment to catalyse change in our current circumstances. Increased access to global connectivity via the internet has digitised conversations about women’s equity on all fronts, as well as achieved a secondary effect of being borderless across creed, class, ethnicity and more.

Contributions of women to global bodies of work and arguments have become more visible, cited, celebrated and amplified in countless forums where women have historically been denied space. Media literacy among media practitioners and consumers is increasing, with the public resisting the allure of being able to rage bait publications⁹⁶, challenge misogyny in public discourse, and convince each other both online and off about wider gender equality issues.

Far away from problematic Bretton Woods assertions that power for women is “smart economics”,⁹⁷ or earnest treatises that progress is not possible as the world continues to leave women behind⁹⁸, we must take issue with the idea that gender equity can only be attractive if the wider system can see a gain in it, especially for those currently benefiting from male dominance and hegemonic leadership.

<https://bit.ly/3YcakJz>

⁹⁴ PM&C Office For Women (n.d.). *Foundation: Gender attitudes and stereotypes*. The Australian Government. Retrieved October 8, 2024, from <https://bit.ly/3TX5AFh>

⁹⁵ Schramm, M., & Stark, A. (2020, May 21). *Peacemakers or Iron Ladies? A Cross-National Study of Gender and International Conflict*. Security Studies. Retrieved October 8, 2024, from <https://bit.ly/4gTezB3>

⁹⁶ Goitia-Doran, S. (2024, September 9). “Rage Bait” is making users mad and content creators money. The Hilltop | The Nation’s Oldest Black Collegiate Paper. Retrieved October 8, 2024, from <https://bit.ly/3NeqoEu>

⁹⁷ Revenga, A., & Shetty, S. (n.d.). *Empowering Women Is Smart Economics*. IMF | Finance and Development. Retrieved October 8, 2024, from <https://bit.ly/3Ng2SHh>

⁹⁸ Sakho, S., Caruso, G., & Acuña, M. (2020, March 9). *Progress without women is not possible*. World Bank Blogs. Retrieved October 8, 2024, from <https://bit.ly/48I7GcV>

To ground the high aims to achieve gender equality in public leadership in the truth of who we are at present requires that we ask ourselves some very hard questions. Is the world truly so willing to deny itself good leadership or continue defending sub-par leadership because of the genitals of the humans it is attached to? How long do we keep silent as entities such as ethnic councils of elders, spiritual leaders and others continue to uphold the patriarchal norms and values that stand in the way of women's political power? How long can we act as though the solution will be yet another capacity-building process or yet another global conference? Is this truly a problem only governments and institutions can solve, or are there grassroots solutions we are still ignoring? Finally, are we willing to face the possibility that the world is not prepared to do what it would take to achieve this? What would happen next, if so?

As the Beijing Conference marks this significant 30-year anniversary, with critical analysis of gains, and realistic reflections on disappointments, it is long past time to bring the almost utopian ambitions and agendas it pioneered home globally. New ways of engaging with these important matters across generations must be evolved from the working action points of the present to build success on a sustainable foundation.

We cannot abdicate this work, or wordlessly hand over systemic issues to the next generation, taking advantage of their righteous fire and anger. The urgency of this matter calls for a multigenerational approach across the usual divides that plague our society, such as class, faith, nationality, continent, GDP level and more.

In many ways, the Declaration still reads as high-level UN theorising and not a true people's agenda. It behoves us to explore what is needed to embody it in our lived aspirations and grassroots action, beyond logos, cute infographics and high-level technical strategies.

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CRITICAL AREA 8

Mechanisms for the advancement of women

Beijing+30: Reflecting on Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women

Juliet Tembo

Biography

Juliet Tembo is a pan-African feminist currently working as a lecturer and researcher at the University of Zambia, in the Department of Media and Communications Studies. She is a highly experienced communications and outreach consultant who has worked extensively with the media in Zambia. She is passionate about business, financial and economic journalism; feminist macroeconomics; climate change; and smart cities and digital surveillance. She is currently engaging in research in these thematic areas. Juliet is committed to ensuring that the capacity of media is built around the areas of economics in order to ensure that ordinary citizens get news and information on business and economics that will enable them to make informed decisions.

Abstract:

This article will outline my reflections on the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) and will focus on critical area number eight which articulates the importance of institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women¹. Outlining the gains and challenges Africa has faced in developing and implementing institutional mechanisms, I make a case that going forward, that institutional mechanisms should be implemented using feminist macroeconomics as a means to attain gender equity and equality.

Introduction

I sit under the shade of an umbrella tree, grateful for the soft gentle blowing breeze. It's hot. I think to myself that hot is good, so we can have a good rainy season after suffering a drought last year. I begin to think about the interconnectedness of life, how one drought can affect an economy. I think about the women, who one year ago had been so hopeful for a better year, but they find themselves struggling against food insecurity, high inflation, an energy crisis, climate crises and the list goes on. And it is not just women in my country Zambia or Southern Africa that are struggling, but women all over Africa. In the tree above me, the birds are singing, flying and playing around. Their freedom reminds me of the aspirations lifted at the 1995 Beijing Conference, a moment I glimpsed as a high school girl dreaming of a world where all women could soar. Little did I know then that economic systems, not just dreams, would shape that future.

I sit back and think of the year 1995, and what the mood and expectations were at the Fourth World Conference for Women in Beijing, China. I was in high school then, a young girl in the 11th grade, with my own expectations too. My dreams were valid, as I was getting closer to completing high school in a rural girls boarding school. I wanted the opportunity to go to university, to get good grades, to get a good job, to do well for myself and provide support for my parents and family. I wanted to be safe while living my dreams, I wanted to be happy, successful and impactful. I didn't want these only for myself, but for all girls! And now, as we reach the 30-year mark, my list of expectations is even longer.

¹ <https://asiapacific.unwomen.org/en/news-and-events/stories/2015/03/b20-12-critical-areas-of-concern>

Institutional Mechanisms for the Advancement of Women's Rights and Gender Equality

The BPfA, adopted in 1995, remains a pivotal framework for promoting gender equality and women's empowerment globally. The eighth critical area emphasises the importance of institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women, calling for the establishment and strengthening of structures that support gender equality at all levels². In Africa, progress has been made, yet challenges persist.

The BPfA call for institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women is based on the premise that women's interests in all areas and sectors of policy, law and strategy at all levels should be institutionalised. At national level the institutional machinery should work to promote women's advancement and ensure that women fully enjoy their human rights³. In other words, the machinery comprises mechanisms, structures and systems through which gender mainstreaming takes place, and outline the processes of gender mainstreaming in national policies⁴. Institutional mechanisms include ministries or departments dedicated to women's affairs, gender equality commissions as well as other governmental and non-governmental organisations⁵.

It is important to note here, that prior to the BPfA, the establishment of gender ministries in African countries was not as widespread as it is today. While exact numbers are difficult to pinpoint, a few countries had already started to recognise the importance of institutional mechanisms for gender equality. For instance, South Africa and Uganda were among the early adopters of gender-focused ministries or departments⁶⁷. Analysing institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women using a macro feminist lens is critical as macroeconomic policies usually fail to integrate gender perspectives and therefore, continue to disadvantage women socially and economically.

Progress in Establishment and Implementation of Institutional Mechanisms

Establishment of Gender Ministries and Agencies

Many African countries have established specific ministries or agencies focused on gender issues. These institutions are tasked with implementing policies, monitoring progress, and advocating for women's rights. For instance, countries such as Rwanda and South Africa have made significant strides by institutionalising gender equality within their governmental frameworks. In Rwanda, gender parity in the national parliament is among the highest globally, partly due to strong institutional support⁸.

² <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/beijingatto/H.%20Institutional%20mechanisms%20for%20the%20advancement%20of%20women.pdf>

³ summary_report_for_beijing_review_25.pdf (uneca.org)

⁴ [PDF] [Institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women](#) | Semantic Scholar

⁵ <Mapping-Femonomics-Final-pages.pdf> (femnet.org)

⁶ [Re-Thinking Gender Mainstreaming in African NGOs and Communities on JSTOR](#). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20053150>

⁷ <https://genderjustice.org.za/article/south-africas-gender-equality-struggles-30-years-on/>. Genderjustice.org.za

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Policy Frameworks and Legal Reforms

The development of gender-sensitive policies and legal frameworks has been crucial. Many African nations have enacted laws addressing gender-based violence, discrimination, and economic empowerment. For example, the African Union's Agenda 2063 explicitly prioritises gender equality, urging member states to integrate gender considerations into national development plans.

Gender mainstreaming in constitution reforms is crucial as it provides for gender sensitive constitutions that clearly provide strong legal framework to protect women's and girls' rights and promote gender equality. The constitution will then guide in ensuring gender responsive laws and policies, ultimately leading to social change. A gender responsive constitution implemented effectively can lead to tangible improvements in women's lives, such as improved access to education, health care and employment.

In the same light, adopting and/or ratifying international instruments by African governments is equally crucial as these instruments set international standards for human rights, good governance and sustainable development and they provide a strong foundation for national policies and practices. Suffice to say that international instruments also provide legal obligations that benefit citizens. Some examples of international instruments include the African Charter on Human and People's Rights (1981), the African Charter on Democracy, Elections, and Governance (2007), the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, 1979) and the Maputo Protocol (2003).

Economic Empowerment Programmes

Several countries have initiated programmes aimed at improving women's access to economic resources, including credit, land, and education. For example, Kenya Women's Enterprise Fund (KWEF), Ghana's Livelihood Empowerment Against Poverty (LEAP) Program, and South Africa's National Treasury's Women Empowerment Fund. Microfinance initiatives have been particularly notable in empowering women entrepreneurs. However, these programmes often lack adequate funding and infrastructure, thereby limiting their effectiveness.

Challenges

"While commendable progress has been achieved ... in setting up and strengthening national gender machineries in almost all countries in Africa, such institutions require extensive support as they lack adequate resources to make the requisite impact needed for achievement of agendas 2030 for SDGs and the AU 2063"⁹. One of the major challenges has been implementation. UN Women reports that while many countries in Africa have established national machineries, the effectiveness of these machineries leaves a lot to be desired. They are faced with inadequate financial and human resources and lack of political will¹⁰.

The low rate of women in political and decision-making positions leaves out the critical voices of women in policy and decision making¹¹. Increased political participation gives women the opportunity to influence policies that affect their lives. A good example is Rwanda, which has one of the highest number of women in parliament, subsequently leading to the advancement of gender equality¹².

9 [summary_report_for_beijing_review_25.pdf \(uneca.org\)](https://www.uneca.org/sites/default/files/summary_report_for_beijing_review_25.pdf)

10 <https://africa.unwomen.org/en/get-involved/end-violence-against-women/2014/mechanisms>

11 https://www.africa.upenn.edu/Urgent_Action/apic_9496.html

12 <https://africa.unwomen.org/en/get-involved/end-violence-against-women/2014/mechanisms>

Institutional Weakness

Many gender ministries operate with limited budgets, personnel, and political backing. This hampers their ability to effectively implement policies and programmes. In some cases, these institutions are side lined in broader economic planning and development agendas. One example of a gender ministry in Africa that operates with poor funding and support is the Ministry of Gender, Children, and Social Protection in Liberia. Despite its crucial mandate, the ministry has faced significant challenges due to limited financial resources and inadequate support. This has impacted its ability to effectively implement programmes aimed at promoting gender equality and protecting vulnerable groups¹³.

Socio-Cultural Barriers

Deep-rooted patriarchal norms and cultural practices continue to impede women's advancement. Even where policies exist, societal attitudes may hinder implementation. For instance, women may face resistance when they seek to engage in traditionally male-dominated sectors. Cultural barriers are another major challenge in Africa where cultural beliefs and stereotypes hinder any meaningful progress. This can be seen in the rising cases of violence against women, including femicide.

Economic Inequalities

Macroeconomic factors, including poverty, unemployment, and economic instability, disproportionately affect women. High rates of informal employment mean that many women lack job security, social protection, and access to benefits, exacerbating their economic vulnerability.

A case for feminist macroeconomics

It is 30 years post Beijing. We do not have another 30 years to get this right. Using the strategy of feminist macroeconomics can put us on the right path. Feminist macroeconomics will push the reset button and examine how institutional mechanisms operate and cuts across all sectors. Macroeconomic policies and institutional mechanisms play a vital role in advancing women's economic empowerment and associated rights in Africa. By addressing barriers to labour market participation, supporting entrepreneurship, ensuring access to education and healthcare, and implementing gender-responsive budgeting, African countries can foster inclusive economic growth and gender equality¹⁴.

There will be increased women participation in the formal and informal labour markets, ensuring that women directly contribute to economic development. Progressive policies will play a role in promoting equal pay, maternity leave, health insurance, while others will support women to stay in the labour force. Women who are in the informal sector or engaged in small businesses will be supported through access to finance and training. A case in point is Kenya's Women Enterprise Fund and the Zimbabwe Women's Microfinance Bank. Zimbabwe also has in place a gender responsive National Financial Inclusion Strategy (now in its second phase 2022 –2026) designed to ensure women, among others, are enabled to access finance.

Women and girls will have access to education which leads to better employment and ultimately more women participating in economic development. Access to health care

¹³ un.dk

¹⁴ Bing.com

(including reproductive health) is essential to ensure women are productive and social protection should be provided for those in need.

African women are suffering the effects of high debt due to government's borrowing and endless austerity measures that see a huge cut on social spending such as health and social services. Feminist macroeconomic approaches include gender responsive budgeting that ensures fair and equal allocation of resources, leaving no one behind.

Beijing+30 and beyond

Outlined below are some recommendations on how institutional mechanisms can be strengthened. These recommendations are made in an effort to build upon what is already existing and aim to strengthen, change, transform and/or innovate on what is already in place.

- ***Strengthen and enforce institutional mechanisms***

Ministries, government departments and NGOs should be strengthened and supported. Governments should provide adequate human and financial resources to ensure effectiveness and efficiency. There is also need for continuous capacity building and training. Gender sensitive macroeconomic policies are critical for equal distribution of resources and opportunities. International donor commitment and support will ensure sustainability of programmes. Encouraging private sector involvement is a way to leverage more resources.^{15, 16}

- ***Strengthen Institutional Capacities***

Governments should allocate adequate resources to gender ministries and agencies, ensuring they are equipped to implement and monitor policies with a gender lens, for effectiveness and impact.¹⁷

- ***Strengthen and enhance legal frameworks***

Governments need to ensure that laws are informed by feminist macroeconomic perspectives, and are adequately enforced. National laws should be informed by international laws and conventions to ensure alignment with global standards.

- ***Integrate Gender in Economic Planning***

Gender considerations should be integrated into all levels of economic planning and policy formulation. This includes conducting gender impact assessments for economic policies to ensure that they benefit women equitably.

¹⁵ <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/beijingatto/H.%20Institutional%20mechanisms%20for%20the%20advancement%20of%20women.pdf>

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- ***Promoting Gender-responsive Budgets***

Governments should adopt gender-responsive budgeting practices, ensuring that financial resources are allocated to programmes that promote gender equality and women's empowerment.

- ***Monitoring and accountability mechanisms***

Holding institutions and individuals accountable is important, and monitoring and evaluation mechanisms need to be put in place.

- ***Campaigns to Enhance Public Awareness***

Societal attitudes toward gender roles need to be addressed through comprehensive public awareness campaigns that promote the benefits of gender equality for all members of society.

- ***Community engagement***

Continued engagement with communities is important for advocacy and also for behaviour change against repressive laws, ineffective policies and cultural beliefs.

- ***Leveraging Technology and Innovation***

Utilising technology can enhance women's access to information, markets, and resources. Governments and organisations should invest in digital literacy programmes for women to facilitate their participation in the digital economy.

- ***Strengthening Regional Cooperation***

Regional bodies, such as the African Union, should play a more active role in promoting best practices, facilitating knowledge sharing, and providing technical assistance to member states in their efforts to advance gender equality.

Conclusion

The journey towards gender equality in Africa requires robust institutional mechanisms that are adequately supported and effectively implemented. While progress has been made since the adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, significant barriers remain. By strengthening institutions, integrating gender into economic frameworks, and fostering societal change, African countries can create an environment where women can thrive and contribute to sustainable development. As we move forward, a collective commitment to advancing gender equality will be essential for realising the aspirations of the Beijing Declaration and achieving a just society for all. As we get to an important milestone of 30 years of the BPfA and look to the future, I look through the eyes of the young girls who are in grade II now and know that our decisions and actions will impact their future.

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CRITICAL AREA 9

The Human Rights of Women

Beijing +30 - A Focus On The Human Rights Of Women

Grace Wambui Arina

Biography

Grace is a dynamic and dedicated lawyer and researcher specialising in law and policy with over five years of career experience cutting across legal practice and policy research and creating knowledge on financial regulation and feminist macroeconomic analysis in the thematic areas of care, business and human rights, sovereign debt and tax. She has a proven track record of delivering high-quality legal documentation, briefs and research in diverse work environments, both independently and collaboratively. Moreover, she is passionate about regional and local financial regulations and how they affect people, particularly African women and girls and has great interest in working towards shaping feminist regulatory systems and structures that advance gender equality.

Introduction

During the 4th World Conference on Women in 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BPfA) was adopted, marking a significant milestone in the global advancement of women's rights and gender equality as elucidated in the Declaration.¹ Nearly three decades after its adoption by 189 UN Member States, the BPfA remains relevant to those it calls to action, including, *inter alia*, the United Nations, public and private sector actors and civil society. In light of the approaching 30th anniversary of the declaration in 2025, this article seeks to employ a macroeconomic lens to analyse the status of Critical Area 9, namely the human rights of women, which is the cornerstone of women's rights, the absence of which renders all other rights moot. The article will look at two crucial areas: women's access to justice and women's right to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy cultural, economic, political, and social development, in the African context.

1. Women's Access to Justice

"Justice delayed is justice denied," as the saying goes. Protecting women's rights requires eradicating the gender gap in access to justice. The majority of African nations have responded to the need for justice by passing legislation to that effect. However, women continue to encounter several obstacles to accessing justice, including, but not limited to, poverty, discrimination and marginalisation, illiteracy, delays in all stages of proceedings because of the high volume of cases and the limited number of courts, the use of legalese, that is, complicated legal jargon in proceedings, and the complexity of court procedures, to mention a few.² In Ghana for example, the ratio of judges and magistrates to the population in its poorest Upper East Region is 1: 171,913 compared to its capital city, Accra, which is 1: 33,416. Hence, most African women rely on informal customary and religious conflict resolution mechanisms that often settle disputes swiftly, but with little reliance on or reference to gender equality.³

Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) procedures have grown in popularity since they provide a fantastic substitute for the conventional legal system. Their cost and time efficiency guarantee that matters are resolved more quickly than court proceedings; their confidentiality guarantees that private records are shielded from disclosure requirements, and their flexibility allows parties to select their dispute resolution methods. However, ADR has been criticised for being costlier because parties have to pay for the adjudicators, the

1 United Nations, 'Report of the Fourth World Conference on Women,' (Beijing, China, 4th-15th September 1995) <[Fourth World Conference on Women | United Nations](#)> accessed 1st October 2024.

2 The Nordic Africa Institute, 'Ensuring African Women's Access to Justice: Engendering Rights for Poverty Reduction in Sub-Saharan Africa,' Policy Note No 2, 2019, 4.

3 UN Women, 'Women's Access to Justice,' (2016) <<https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2016/FPI-Brief-Access-to-Justice.pdf>> accessed 1st October 2024.

meeting/hearing room, lawyers' fees, travel, discovery, etc., and there are frequent power imbalances where the party with the most money can influence the decision. Additionally, there are fewer precedents than in traditional litigation, which typically relies on prior precedents to determine and guide proceedings and in instances where the parties choose a binding ADR mechanism they have no appellate recourse.⁴

A recent study on ADR in rural Kenya, namely the Kapsokwony Sub-County in Bungoma County, found that both women and men acknowledge the importance of women in ADR, especially at the Nyumba Kumi (community policing) level, and where there is a woman chief. There has been a slow but steady increase in women's participation in conflict resolution as compared to their previous passive role that was limited to service provision, for example, preparing food or tea when called upon. Presently, women are taking up more authoritative positions and actively participating in dispute resolution.⁵

Despite the increase in African women's awareness and utilisation of legal systems, some refrain from pursuing the litigious route due to societal or family pressures not to assert their rights, myths and misconceptions about the consequences they may face by asserting their rights, intimidation of the complex and time-consuming legal procedures, and lack of finances. However, the government and civil societies' push for legal aid and pro bono services ensure that the most marginalised and vulnerable groups have access to legal services. Moreover, evidence shows that empowerment through legal literacy programmes and media strategies translates into women asserting their rights regardless of their level of education or socioeconomic status. Human rights education for all women including information on recourse mechanisms to redress violations is crucial to achieving gender equality.⁶

In the technological era, every woman ought to be able to easily access justice. Governments should provide financing for infrastructure that ensures increased access to technologies such as mobile phones and improved internet access, particularly in remote areas and funding for the creation of mobile applications that would give all women, especially those living in rural areas and the vulnerable, direct access to legal counsel, law enforcement, and legal information. Additionally, African laws should work for Africans. The African Court on Human and Peoples' Rights (ACHPR) should allow women direct access to it to hold states responsible for their failure to protect their rights, and should work with African regional human rights institutions to facilitate this process through digitisation.⁷

Access to justice can only be achieved where women's agency and voices are at the center of decision-making processes.⁸ Governments must be prepared to make financial investments to uphold their commitments under international and regional instruments aimed at advancing women's rights, reduce delays in court proceedings by allocating resources to the courts, and expanding infrastructure such as digitised court systems. Further, they must ensure that their annual budget contains allocation toward women's access to justice, that all their programmes from water to education mainstream gender and access to justice, and they also must work to end all forms of discrimination by eradicating all customary practices and traditions that limit access to justice.⁹

⁴ Sterling Miller, 'The Problems and Benefits of Using Alternative Dispute Resolution,' (Thomson Reuters, April 29th 2022) <[Problems & benefits of using alternative dispute resolution | Thomson Reuters](#)> accessed 3rd October 2024.

⁵ Benson Mutuku Muthama, Grace Wamue Ngare & Leah Njambi Wanjama, 'The Levels of Participation for Men and Women in Resolving Community Conflicts Using ADR Mechanisms in Kapsokwony Sub-County, Bungoma County, Kenya,' (2021), 2 *Journal of Education and Practice* 1, p.11-12

⁶ BPfA, Platform for Action Chapter IV: Strategic Objectives and Actions (I), Human Rights of Women No.227

⁷ The Nordic Africa Institute, 'Ensuring African Women's Access to Justice: Engendering Rights for Poverty Reduction in Sub-Saharan Africa,' Policy Note No 2, 2019, 6.

⁸ J. Jarpa Dawuni, 'Women and Access to Justice in Africa: Women Cannot Wait Another 100 years,' (Brookings, August 29th 2023) <[Women and access to justice in Africa: Women cannot wait another 100 years \(brookings.edu\)](#)> accessed 3rd October 2024.

⁹ The Nordic Africa Institute, 'Ensuring African Women's Access to Justice: Engendering Rights for Poverty Reduction in

In Kenya women's leadership in law has made leaps and bounds thanks in part to the Constitution of 2010 which mandated women's representation in public life, culminating in the appointments of the first woman chief justice in 2022 and attorney general in 2024 as well as several other offices that are now held by women.¹⁰ Notwithstanding the foregoing developments that have been informed by legal and constitutional instruments inculcating gendered perspectives, women in Kenya continue to face wide-scale discrimination, for example, the increasing cases of femicide in the country that led to a protest in January 2024 calling for government intervention to end the epidemic of violence against women.¹¹ While Rome was not built in a day, women in leadership positions need to represent all women and ensure the eradication of all forms of discrimination against them.

2. Cultural, economic, social and political development

"Women and girls are often found in the most marginalised groups because systems of intersectional oppression converge to deprive these groups of their basic social, economic, political, and legal rights."¹² The BDPfA provides that every person should be entitled to participate in, contribute to and enjoy cultural, economic, political and social development. In many cases women and girls suffer discrimination in the allocation of economic and social resources, directly violating their economic, social and cultural rights.¹³

a. Economic Development

Economic empowerment for women benefits the family, the individual, and the economy as a whole. However, due to prevailing gender stereotypes and cultural practices, a majority of African women are limited to unpaid care work and the informal labor market, and are persistently underserved and undervalued economically when it comes to financial services and products. Globally, about 42 percent of women are outside the paid workforce due to caregiving responsibilities compared to 6 percent of men. In Kenya, while women account for more than 50 percent of the total working population, most are in the informal sector and heavily involved in care work at the household and community levels. Therefore, Kenya like other countries globally and regionally acknowledges unpaid care work as one of the barriers to gender equality.¹⁴ In response to the same, the country has taken a bold step in the right direction and will be the second African country to enact a National Care Policy, tackling the long-standing problem of unpaid care and household labor, which is primarily done by women and girls. The ground-breaking initiative, which is presently seeking Cabinet approval, challenges established gender norms while recognising, redistributing, and fairly compensating care work.

To enhance economic empowerment, governments must employ comprehensive strategies to close the gender gap, such as incorporating laws that do away with discrimination against women, encouraging equal resource distribution through gender-responsive budgeting, and making sure that all women achieve parity in agency and leadership by encouraging women-owned businesses, creating inclusive infrastructure, and allocating

Sub-Saharan Africa,' Policy Note No 2, 2019, 6.

10 J. Jarpa Dawuni, 'Women in Law and Leadership: How Kenya (Almost) Got it Right,' (IAWL) < [Women in Law and Leadership: How Kenya \(Almost\) got it Right. \(africanwomeninlaw.com\)](#)> accessed 12th October 2024.

11 Shola Lawal, 'Femicide in Kenya: What's Causing an Epidemic of Violence Against Women?' (Aljazeera, 27 January 2024) < [Femicide in Kenya: What's causing an epidemic of violence against women? | News | Al Jazeera](#) >

12 J. Jarpa Duwuni, 'Women and Access to Justice in Africa: Women Cannot Wait Another 100 years,' (Brookings, August 29th 2023) < [Women and access to justice in Africa: Women cannot wait another 100 years \(brookings.edu\)](#)> accessed 3rd October 2024.

13 BPfA, Platform for Action Chapter IV: Strategic Objectives and Actions (I), Human Rights of Women No.220

14 UN Women, 'Gender Data Shines Policy Spotlight on Unpaid Care and Domestic Work in Kenya,' (UN Women, 31st August 2022) < [Gender Data Shines Policy Spotlight on Unpaid Care and Domestic Work in Kenya | UN Women – Africa](#)> accessed 3rd October 2024.

public funds for gender equity.¹⁵ For instance, the Zimbabwean Women's Resource Centre and Network (ZWRCN), a civil society organisation, proposed the idea of implementing gender budgeting in Zimbabwe in 1999. ZWRCN aimed to reduce gender inequality, encourage gender-sensitive development and implement macroeconomic policies to help reduce poverty. Following the initial push by CSOs, the country launched the Gender Budgeting and Women's Empowerment Programme in 2006, which involved inculcating gender budgeting into public policies and ensuring resource allocation is aimed towards achieving gender equality. This helped shape the country's economic development strategy for the ensuing years, making significant strides toward achieving gender equality by influencing attitudes and enforcing gender-sensitive changes in policies and budgeting procedures.¹⁶

Additionally, financial and digital inclusion and literacy are crucial to women's economic empowerment. Traditional financial services such as banking impeded financial access to women particularly those in rural areas, due to the various restrictive requirements. Innovations such as mobile banking and fintech solutions have played a pivotal role in closing the gender gap. The ease of access has encouraged women's entrepreneurship and amplified financial inclusion.¹⁷ Additionally, financial literacy has contributed to the rise of female entrepreneurship and the growing participation of women in the workforce. When women unlock their economic potential, they gain access to equal opportunities, contribute to their community's development and participate in the country's economic growth.¹⁸ There is a Swahili proverb; "samaki mkunje angali mbichi" which directly translates to "bend the fish when it is still wet." The proverb however means that one should mold a child while they are still young. Therefore, financial education for women and girls should begin at the elementary school level as it is crucial as a lever for achieving women's economic empowerment.

b. Political Development

Politics is a dirty game wrought with corruption, self-dealing and power-plays that sometimes turn violent, and this discourages women from participation. Women's political participation is a matter of human rights, inclusive growth and sustainable development. For equality, sustainable development, peace, democracy, and the inclusion of their perspectives and experiences in decision-making processes to be achieved, women must actively participate politically on an equal basis with men. In Africa, women face a hostile political environment. For instance, the ramifications and effects of the abuses they endure are not adequately acknowledged, documented or reported in conflict areas.¹⁹

Women's political engagement is frequently influenced by prevailing societal norms such as deeply ingrained patriarchal systems where males dominate household and public decision-making and control. Rural areas in particular continue to hold strong traditional beliefs and cultural attitudes including traditional gender roles, hindering women from transitioning from their domestic responsibilities to more visible roles outside the home.

15 UNDP Africa, 'Women's Economic Empowerment: A Critical Catalyst for SDG Achievement,' (UNDP, 25th July 2024) < [Women's economic empowerment: a critical catalyst for SDG achievement | United Nations Development Programme \(undp.org\)](#)> accessed 3rd October 2024.

16 Roselyn Kapungu, 'The Zimbabwe Gender Budgeting and Women's Empowerment Programme,' *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, no. 78, (2008) pp. 68–78. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27739462>. Accessed 13th November 2024.

17 UNDP Africa, 'Women's Economic Empowerment: A Critical Catalyst for SDG Achievement,' (UNDP, 25th July 2024) < [Women's economic empowerment: a critical catalyst for SDG achievement | United Nations Development Programme \(undp.org\)](#)> accessed 3rd October 2024.

18 World Economic Forum, 'Women's Financial Literacy Benefits Us All-Here's How,' (WEF, 24th February 2022) < [Women's financial literacy benefits us all — here's how | World Economic Forum \(weforum.org\)](#)> accessed 3rd October 2024.

19 Courage Mlambo and Forget Kapingura, 'Factors Influencing Women Political Participation: The Case of the SADC Region,' (2019), 5: 1681048, < [Factors influencing women political participation: The case of the SADC region \(tandfonline.com\)](#)> accessed 3rd October 2024.

Furthermore, their socioeconomic status affects their political participation. For example, the costs associated with elections such as campaigning are extremely high, limiting women's accessibility to the political arena.²⁰

Women may further refrain from political participation due to sexual violence and violent conflict. Intimidation, persecution, arbitrary arrests, and assassinations of voters are among the methods that politicians employ to commit political violence. This can either be overt or covert, manifesting as gender-based hate speech aimed at deterring women from political participation. Some studies however show that individuals exposed to violent conflict exhibit higher civic and political engagement and are better able to rebuild their lives post-conflict, through the formation of networks and organisations advocating for their inclusion and a gendered perspective in peace negotiations.²¹

African governments need to invest in the creation of legal and policy frameworks and align their national frameworks and policies to regional and global normative frameworks on women's political participation. Regional bodies such as the African Union (AU), need to hold member states accountable for commitments made on women's political participation and ensure that perpetrators of political violence and their co-conspirators are swiftly brought to justice. Additionally, they must invest in gender-responsive election observation guidelines and strategies to promote equal participation in election processes.²² In Ethiopia, whose culture has been dominated by patriarchy, women's absence from politics has negatively affected them in the past and the need for women's representation in decision-making and political participation made clear over the years. The country has made significant progress in recent years and in 2018, parliament appointed the first woman to serve as president and the international community applauded the prime minister for promoting gender balance in his cabinet by appointing ten women to ministerial positions. Although the country still has a ways to go in achieving gender equality, the changing legal and regulatory landscape allows more women to participate in politics.²³

c. Social and Cultural Development

The UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights defines culture as that which encompasses, *inter alia*, ways of life, language, oral and written literature, music and song, non-verbal communication, religion or belief systems, rites and ceremonies, sports and games, methods of production or technology, natural and man-made environments, food, clothing and shelter and the arts, customs and traditions through which individuals and communities express their humanity and the meaning they give to their existence and build their world view representing their encounter with the external forces affecting their lives.²⁴

International and regional laws including the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) (1979), the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights (ACHPR) (1981) and the Maputo Protocol (2003) call for transforming customary and traditional practices that violate women's rights, however, women continue to be subjected to harmful practices that have long been ingrained in Africa's social fabric.²⁵

²⁰ Ibid, p5.

²¹ Ibid, p5.

²² UN Women, 'Women's Political Participation: East and Southern Africa Region,' (2022) <https://africa.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2022-09/BRIEFS_WPP_ESARO_A4_September%202022.pdf> accessed 4th October 2024.

²³ Mabel Alamu, Stephanie Arzate, Zarina Bentum & Samantha Camilletti, 'Increasing Women's Political Participation in Ethiopia: A Barriers Analysis of Women's Political Participation' Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies Report <<https://sais.jhu.edu/sites/default/files/Ethiopia-Final-Report.pdf>> Accessed 5th October 2024.

²⁴ General comment No. 21 to art. 15, para. 1 (a), of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 2009

²⁵ Temelso Gashaw, 'The Interplay Between Gender and Culture: How the African Human Rights System Sought to Accommo-

The Maputo Protocol for example prohibits and condemns all forms of genital mutilation, scarification, medicalisation and para-medicalisation of female genital mutilation (FGM), and all other practices which negatively affect the human rights of women. In addition to legislative and other measures to eliminate such practices, member states commit to creating public awareness regarding harmful practices through formal and informal information, education and outreach programmes and the provision of necessary support to victims of harmful practices through basic services including health services, legal and judicial support, emotional and psychological counselling as well as vocational training to ensure they are self-supporting.²⁶ Among the other prevalent illegal practices that have exposed African women to serious human rights violations for millennia are marital rape, polygamy, and honor killing. Furthermore, efforts to prosecute offenders are thwarted by laws tasked with preserving the community's cultural values and customs, or they are rejected because they are allegedly complicit in neocolonial ideologies.²⁷

On the other hand, the prevailing ideologies about African women's inferiority reinforce their exclusion and marginalisation in social and cultural life. For example, some women have given accounts of facing discrimination, hostility, violence and sexual harassment for taking part in or attending sporting games. One Zimbabwean woman recounts facing discrimination for bringing 'juju' bad luck to the games and vehemently warned against attending. A Malawian woman stated that in their local language, the soccer terms for kicking, playing, tackling and scoring are synonymous with hitting, sexual intercourse, penetration and violence against women. A Nigerian woman recounts media coverage about female athletes versus their male counterparts as biased and discriminatory. Another recounts how women's representation in the film industry (Nollywood) has for a long time taken the 'damsel in distress' i.e., weak, powerless, pitiable, approach in their depiction of women.²⁸

Culture has transformative abilities and the capacity to advance gender equality by imparting confidence, self-reliance, resilience and teamwork to girls and women and should be nurtured for that purpose. Social and cultural rights are empowering as they facilitate the enjoyment of other rights and can aid in overturning negative stereotypes and transforming long-perceived gender norms and roles. Realisation of equal cultural rights for women would assist in reframing gender narratives and ideologies purporting women's inferiority and subordination to men.²⁹

Conclusion

Despite African states adoption of the BPfA, their ratification of several human rights instruments to safeguard women's rights and their solemn commitment to end all forms of discrimination and harmful practices against women, African women continue to

date Universality and Cultural Relativity of Women's Rights,' (LSE, 31st August 2020) <[The interplay between gender and culture: How the African human rights system sought to accommodate universality and cultural relativity of women's rights | Engenderings \(lse.ac.uk\)](#)> accessed 5th October 2024

26 African Union, '25 Things You Need to Know About the Rights of Women in Africa,' (AU, 7th July 2023) <[25 things you need to know about the rights of women in Africa. | African Union \(au.int\)](#)> accessed 4th October 2024.

27 Temelso Gashaw, 'The Interplay Between Gender and Culture: How the African Human Rights System Sought to Accommodate Universality and Cultural Relativity of Women's Rights,' (LSE, 31st August 2020) <[The interplay between gender and culture: How the African human rights system sought to accommodate universality and cultural relativity of women's rights | Engenderings \(lse.ac.uk\)](#)> accessed 5th October 2024

28 Gender and Development, 'Gender, Sport and Development in Africa: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Patterns of Representation and Marginalization,' (2012) <[Book Reviews: Gender, Sport and Development in Africa - Gender and Development](#)> accessed 10th October 2024.

29 United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 'Women's Cultural Rights: Empowering and Transformative,' (OCHR, November 8th 2012) <[Women's cultural rights: empowering and transformative | OHCHR](#)> accessed 10th October 2024.

experience human rights abuses and violations hence much remains to be done to realise the human rights of African women.³⁰ However, the impact the BPfA has had on informing policies globally and regionally and the strides made by various African nations to bridge the gender gap, the subject of discussion in this article, must be acknowledged. The governments that adopted the BPfA committed to ensuring the implementation of the human rights of women and the girl child as inalienable, integral and indivisible and asserted that women's rights are human rights. In its mission statement, it asserts that it is an agenda for women's empowerment aimed at removing all barriers women face in all spheres of public and private life and commits itself to ensuring equal participation in all spheres through a full and equal share in economic, social, cultural and political decision-making.³¹

However, the current policymaking approach, that is, gender mainstreaming as introduced at the World Conference on Women in Nairobi, Kenya, in 1985 and established as a strategy in international gender equality policy through the BPfA was meant to be transformative and to change the values, policies, institutions and development priorities to actively promote gender equality. It further emphasised equal participation of women and men in decision-making processes and agendas to eliminate discrimination. Its main shortfall, however, is that it is centered on moral and political commitments of national governments that are not explicitly grounded in the human rights principles of "claim holders" and "duty bearers."³²

The BPfA is considered the most comprehensive global policy framework for women, recognising women's rights as human rights and setting a roadmap for achieving equality between men and women. Perhaps the issue is not in the policy *per se*, but in its implementation at the state level. Incorporating a rights-based approach (RBA) to policymaking would enhance the level of responsibility to states that other approaches just don't because the conception of a claim as a human right elevates the level of recognition by state and international parties from the sphere of mere good faith to legal entitlement.³³

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3. BPfA, Platform for Action Chapter IV: Strategic Objectives and Actions (I), Human Rights of Women No.227

³⁰ Manisuli Ssenyonjo, 'Culture and the Human Rights of Women in Africa: Between Light and Shadow,' (2007) 51 Journal of African Law, 1, 39.

³¹ BPfA

³² Powell Marie, 'A Rights-Based Approach to Gender Equality and Women's Rights' (2005) 608-613 Canadian Journal of Development Studies, < <https://doi.org/10.1080/02255189.2005.9669101>> Accessed 10th October 2024.

³³ Ibid, 613.

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5. Courage Mlambo and Forget Kapingura, 'Factors Influencing Women Political Participation: The Case of the SADC Region,' (2019), 5: 1681048, < [Factors influencing women political participation: The case of the SADC region \(tandfonline.com\)](#)> accessed 3rd October 2024.
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CRITICAL AREA 10

Women and the Media

Moving forward or going backwards? The Role of Media 30 years after adoption of the Beijing Platform for Action

Lunga Izata

Biography

Lunga Izata, a young Angolan woman, holds a Masters degree in Managing Peace and Security in Africa from Addis Ababa University, a Postgrad Diploma in Media Management from Rhodes University, and a Bachelor of Arts in Public Relations from Leeds Beckett University. Over the years, she worked for UNICEF, UNHCR, and the African Union, contributing to different Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). As a blogger and an author, she also invested her time and dedication in promoting development through creative writing. She has self-published different novels touching on racism, depression, African tradition, ethnicity, tribalism, climate change, refugees, and crimes against women.

Abstract

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPfA) covers 12 critical areas of concern, including women and media. Media has been a forbearer of gender equality, through women empowerment and women representation in the media landscape. It has allowed women to be at the fore front of decision making, providing an environment for them to make informed decisions and use their voices in the public sphere. This critical area of BDPfA has made women more active and motivated, and willing to fight for their rights. Although media has become an ally of civil societies and a driver of development in different communities, it has also become patronizing force against women, through trying to silence their voices, and instigating a culture of liberalization of crimes to women and diminishing their value. This article will focus on women and media, and it will also briefly touch on other critical areas due to its cross-cutting nature.

Introduction

Thirty years after the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPFA, 1995) was adopted by more than 150 Member States in Beijing, China, its significance as a roadmap for the achievement of gender equality remains imperative. The BDPFA is a blueprint for the achievement of gender equality and the most comprehensive policy framework and a global source of information on gender equality and human rights (UN Women, 2014).

Since 1995, governments, civil society and other stakeholders have sought to mainstream gender equality in all aspects of their work and activities and have recognized the potential of media to catalyse the advancement of women (UN Women, 2014). According to AKAS 2023 study (Addy Kassova Audience Strategy Ltd), in Kenya and in Nigeria, 1 in 5 Editors-In-Chiefs are women, representing 19% and 18% respectively. And in South Africa, 40% of the editors are women and 13% of women in Kenya are holding the position of an editor.

Indeed, more women are involved in careers in the communications sector, having the opportunity to advance their voices and speaking about issues that directly affect them. Media is empowering women everywhere, allowing them to participate in different conferences abroad, representing their countries and attending several trainings that enhance their knowledge (The Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany, 2022). This

new “era of the conferences” has resulted in many women journalists being away from home, resulting in the men stepping up. This has heavily influenced relationships and challenged men to accept their new role. The trend is intrinsically linked to the long-awaited change of the narrative that women belong in the kitchen, especially African women.

Thanks to the ‘business of development’, journalism has become a game changer for women. It has put women at the decision-making space and able to influence different policies (UN Women, 2014). However, the competitiveness of the sector has sometimes pitted women against each other, and portrayed them as “difficult” and hard to work with. This gender-based stereotyping hinders the notable progress in the critical area of women and media.

In Angola, journalists emphasize the non-negotiable importance of freedoms, defending the crucial role of journalism in promoting press freedom and defending constitutional values. They are also calling for the dissemination and defense of women’s rights, especially in the workplace, where they often face unfavorable conditions (Jornal de Angola, 2022).

The profession of journalism in Angola is extremely challenging and full of risks. It is also considered one of the most difficult in the country and with the lowest salary. For women, these challenges can be even more complicated, due to the persistent and combative nature of journalism. A case in point is Zimbabwean women and their media scene, where women journalists complain about nepotism in the newsroom and are given less important stories. There is constant sexual harassment in the workplace, and different cases of men giving stories to women, in exchange of compromising favors (Zvinavakobvu, 2024).

When women finally acquire a name for themselves and excel, this is instantly associated with them having affairs with a man in a higher position. For years headlines have pushed the narrative of women using sex to go further in life, instead of men being accountable for abusing women. “In addition, violent and degrading or pornographic media products are also negatively affecting women and their participation in society.” (UN Women, 2014). According to the Mozambican blog MozLife, in 2021, news circulated about different cases of prostitution of women in Dubai where young women from Angolan, Ghana, Nigéria, Senegal and various countries travelled there and escorted wealthy men in exchange for sexual intercourse and other humiliating activities, such as zoofilia (forcing people to have sexual intercourse with animals). Videos circulated about the shameful acts, and instead of holding the men accountable, the media portrayed women as shallow opportunists and sex objects.

Media has offered the public different avenues to mourn, persecute and shame women. The shaming agenda has intensified with the use of social media, where people continue to share inflammatory material and crucify women. Although social media has been heavily criticized for shaming women and sharing fake news, it has been a mirror of women’s struggles and has given them a voice. In May 2024, a young Angolan woman accused a member of the band Moikano of sexually assaulting her (Chocolate Lifestyle¹, 2024). The case gained national coverage and divided the public, some in favour of the woman and others supporting the singer and dismissing the alleged victims claims. This case became a case study of how media empowers women to hold their abuser accountable, while on the other hand it also showed how women can be easily silenced.

Women grew up being constantly silenced by their elders and carrying generational trauma. Different social media outlets such as Facebook, Instagram, Tik tok, Twitter have given women a platform to expose and document abuse, making media an ally on advocating against domestic abuse and similar violations (UN Women, 2014). The entertainment industry has also advanced the gender equality agenda and contributed to increasing and sharpening the profile of women and facilitating in-depth coverage on women's rights through the portrayal of women's involvement in different programmes.

In 2021, the Korean series "The King's affection" premiered on Netflix, it is set during the Joseon dynasty and tells a love story that transcends hierarchy and gender. It addressed the historical fact that women were killed for being born a woman. This trip to the past solidified how far women have come and how media arts can instigate the public to reflect (Deok-hyun, 2022). Today the public still consumes narratives that downgrade women, not only through fiction but through the political sphere. The recently elected President of Senegal is married to two women, enhancing the narrative of women as half of a person, or less than human. In different societies men are encouraged to marry in order to be eligible to a certain position, depicting women as an accessory. The VOA² (2024) highlighted the Senegalese President as "Polygamous President-Elect of Senegal Presents Two First Ladies to the Public". VOA's choice of words, referring to Bassirou Diomaye Faye as "polygamous" stirred controversy and received different reactions. The news went viral and aggravated Senegalese women. Many Senegalese women say they find polygamy hypocritical and unfair, while the UN Human Rights Committee 2022 report highlighted that polygamy amounted to discrimination against women and should be ended.

In Malawi actions have been taken to address the media portrayal of women and girls in a discriminatory and/or gender biased manner. The Media Institute of Southern Africa (MISA) Malawi chapter in collaboration with Gender Links has provided training to 12 media houses in the country on gender responsive and non-stereotyped reporting (Malawi Country Report³, 2024). According to the Malawi Ministry of Education, Science and Technology⁴ (2021), "Malawi has undertaken several initiatives to enhance women's access to expression and participation in decision-making in the media (...). These actions align with the Beijing +30 agenda, focusing on political empowerment and increasing the presence and influence of women in media."

The media landscape is constantly changing, especially in Africa, where media is so political. It is necessary for women journalists to continue to challenge negative societal narratives and adapt to the ever-changing media landscape. In order for women to shape public opinion, they need to constantly stay abreast of political, social, economic and cultural developments that have an impact on gender equality and seek out training opportunities. The African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) has been at the forefront of training women journalists, bloggers, editors, and producers working in print, broadcast, and online media, by enhancing their capacity to report with feminist lens, analyze and report on issues such as macroeconomic and financing instruments, including Special Drawing Rights (FEMNET, 2024).

The audacity of media has made it the rapporteur on why macroeconomic policies need to incorporate gender perspectives to advance women's economic empowerment, and how the overall economic environment is a crucial enabler of gender equality (UN Women, 2017)¹. In essence, advances in information technology have facilitated a global communication

¹ UN Women office publishing: UN Women Headquarters. 2017

network that transcends national boundaries and has an impact on public policy, tax, economy and behavior (UN Women, 2015). The resilience and determination of women journalists to overcome obstacles and make a significant contribution to building a more inclusive and representative profession has been fundamental in promoting long-term change in society and achieving the objectives set in the BDPFA.

Conclusion

Women in the media and its role in shaping the gender equality agenda have shown progress over the years with the advancement of technology and the existing diverse media channels. Media has supported in making visible other critical areas of the BPfA such as violence, education and training, economy, power and decision-making. In spite of this, however, media in most countries does not provide a balanced picture of women; culture and traditional values. It plays a big role on how communication is received, and the continued perpetuation of negative and degrading images of women in media communications - electronic, print, visual and audio must be changed.

Women must continue to be empowered by enhancing their skills, knowledge and access to information technology. This will strengthen their ability to combat negative portrayals of women and to challenge instances of abuse of the power of the media industry. Self-regulatory mechanisms for the media need to be created and gender-sensitive approaches must be developed to eliminate gender-biased media programming.

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4. Malawi Country Report, August 2024, Implementation of the Beijing declaration and platform for action (1995) and the outcomes of the twenty third special session of the general assembly (2000) in the context of the of the thirtieth anniversary of the fourth world conference on women and the adoption of the Beijing declaration and platform for action 2020
5. Ministry of Gender, Community Development and Social Welfare, 2014
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CRITICAL AREA 11
Women and the Environment

A lens on women and the environment

Anne Songole



Biography

Anne Songole is a climate justice, energy and gender practitioner whose feminism is anchored on ecofeminist principles that frame emancipation of the environment and that of women and the most vulnerable as similar struggles with similar outcomes. She has 15 years of experience in social service provision, policy development and advocacy across Africa.

Abstract

Implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in Africa has faced some hurdles. Structural Adjustment programmes left countries with a debt burden that reduced public support for social protection leaving a legacy of austerity and financialization that impact women's well-being. Actions on the environment and women in economy areas in South Africa and South Sudan demonstrate political commitment despite a roll-back on human rights and highly paternalistic economic systems. South Africa has well documented data that demonstrates increasing progress in delivering women's empowerment through job creation in the energy sector, institutionalizing a women's department, among other measures. South Sudan has also passed useful climate and environment legislations, and has a gender department, despite being highly dependent on development aid for publicly delivered women's environment and climate initiatives. There is an opportunity for continued progress as both the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change complement each other, with the Convention providing financing in addition to a platform for women's empowerment, growth and documentation of gender actions.

Introduction

UK Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in 1990 raised the alarm on climate change and issued a call to action during the second World Climate Conference in Geneva, Switzerland. In her address to policy makers, she cited research by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change¹ which had established that “carbon dioxide reaching the atmosphere each year from natural sources is some 600 billion tonnes, while the figure resulting from human activities is only 26 billion tonnes” noting that the real danger was that these emissions were compounded by environmental issues². Her call to action was for all countries to come together and form a global framework convention on climate change to establish binding precautionary commitments. By 1992, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change had been signed (the Convention). This was one of three Rio conventions³ that received political buy-in due to its scientific imperative, which was the critical role certain human activities, like burning of fossil fuels, play in increasing greenhouse gas emissions. The Beijing Declaration that came thereafter in 1995 was therefore a timely platform for elevating women's issues at a time when climate change had partly been attributed to human actions that were also causing women's disempowerment.

Structural adjustment and austerity

At the back of these multilateral initiatives, and as the Beijing Declaration was gaining political momentum, there were challenges that newly independent states in Africa were facing. Multilateral development banks had in the 80s instituted ‘Structural Adjustment Programmes’ (SAPs) which they purported would improve growing states' economies. The Washington Consensus, as these SAPs came to be known, were top-down measures including conditional loans to newly independent states to deal with a growing debt

1 (IPCC, 2024) <https://www.ipcc.ch/>

2 (Margaret Thatcher Foundation, 2024) [Speech at 2nd World Climate Conference | Margaret Thatcher Foundation](#)

3 (UNFCCC, n.d.) <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/the-rio-conventions>

crisis. Ironically, some of the loans contributing to this debt were inherited from colonial governments⁴. The policy impact of these SAPs included privatization of public services, cutting public support for public services, among other measures, that brought in an era of austerity⁵. In addition, these measures yielded financialisation and the sharp influence of international finance institutions on state operations. The impacts of SAPs have been documented as detrimental to women's well-being, for instance a greater domestic burden and reduced economic security, and the Beijing Declaration recommends remedies for this. At the same time SAPs 'diffuse innovations' through top-down measures that ignore contexts and issues of developing states, while giving leverage to holders of power and capital. Oxfam established that "under structural adjustment, state intervention was to be reduced to a minimum, and the impetus for economic growth was to come not, as in the past, from the domestic market, but from closer integration into the world economy"⁶. In addition to this, and as a factor that perpetuated this inequality, the focus on economic growth of a country was measured through a binary metric 'Gross Domestic Product' that does not consider important non-market elements like social, environmental and political measures that make up the heart of a nation.

The Beijing Declaration

The political support for the Beijing Declaration was essential as it put women's issues on the table unequivocally, while casting light on failing state protection for women, and a lack of prioritisation of women's human rights. Alongside the Declaration, the Convention brought to the fore issues such as climate resilience that have in the last 30 years proven to be critical to the well-being of women. Indeed, the Convention also recognised the role of the developed world in driving climate change, obligating them to provide funding for mitigation and adaptation actions for developing countries. Financing is part of measures referred to as means of implementation.⁷ The difference between the Convention and the Declaration is that the means of implementation for the Convention are clear and the obligations for who should provide the financing are spelt out. The question is not whether the Declaration and Convention have been impactful, because they have shifted financing, policies and women's leadership positively. However, there are questions as to how impactful they have been considering the continuous prioritisation of masculine systems that favour economic growth thereby catalysing capitalism, while increasing systems of financialisation that commodify public services and in turn act as a lever for capitalism.

The Beijing Declaration highlighted that *the eradication of poverty based on sustained economic growth, social development, environmental protection and social justice requires the involvement of women in economic and social development, equal opportunities and the full and equal participation of women and men as agents and beneficiaries of people-centred sustainable development*. This was further expanded on in the Platform for Action which had sections on Women and the Economy as well as Women and the Environment.⁸

The Women in Economy section of the Beijing Platform for Action recognises two key issues. One is women's equal access to markets and trade, and the other is women's economic rights in general. Women's bargaining power is indicated as an important area for women and the economy, in addition to impacts of unpaid care work. Of note is the fact that there is little choice, especially at household level, for women on whether to take up remunerated or non-remunerated work. The issue of just transition – provision of jobs and social protection measures as we shift from economies reliant on fossil fuel to those reliant on renewable and sustainable systems - is also an important aspect of economic

4 (Chiponda & Songole, 2023) https://wedo.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/ActionNexus_TripleCrisisBrief_EN.pdf

5 (Weider, 2024) <https://sites.lsa.umich.edu/mje/2024/04/29/structural-adjustments-complex-legacy-in-sub-saharan-africa/>

6 (Oxfam, n.d.) <https://oxfamlibrary.openrepository.com/bitstream/handle/10546/122886/bk-oxfam-poverty-report-ch-iii-iv-010195-en.pdf;jsessionid=D9801015ED674D7D2511CF6DE7C80089?sequence=20>

7 (UNFCCC, n.d.) <https://unfccc.int/process-and-meetings/what-is-the-united-nations-framework-convention-on-climate-change>

8 (UN Women) <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20E.pdf>

empowerment for women within the era of global warming. The Platform for Action further identifies gender analysis as a measure that aids decision making.

Women have special relationships with the diverse environments in which they live, and the Beijing Platform for Action called on governments to recognise the role of women, especially those from indigenous communities, in managing the environment in which they live while also instituting precepts of the Biodiversity Convention⁹. In addition to this, the Platform called on governments to improve women's well being in light of increasing environmental challenges, calling on all actors to involve women, use a participatory approach and incorporate gender perspectives in environmental matters.

BPFA progress:

Case Study - South Africa

Between 2015 and 2019, South Africa's review of the progress in the implementation of the BPFA¹⁰ determined that their democratic government had between 1995 and 2015 established successful structural and institutional mechanisms for advancing women's empowerment. These include increase in women in leadership. Alongside the Beijing Declaration, they cited the 2030 Action Agenda for Sustainable Development as further buffering efforts for women's empowerment that yielded economic growth leading to an increase in jobs and opportunities for women within the growing labour market. However, for jobs in climate related fields, men far outnumbered women. For example, in the country's energy sector utilities¹¹, men outnumbered women by a ratio of 2.5 to 1. The report further established that women's salaries are still dominating the bottom range. Women still lagged when it came to sciences which are key to the Just Transition; this is the economic, social and political shifts that are needed to move to a low emission pathway i.e. one that is less or not at all dependent on energy produced by fossil fuels. Indeed, with the world of work changing, there is need for a just transition, and especially for a fossil-reliant economy like South Africa's. Women have some social safety nets – through a social grant, which more women than men receive, in addition to access to basic services such as electrification, water and sanitation.

The South African government in 1998 passed a law that recognised the role of women in planning, preservation and management of the environment. This made the mainstreaming of gender actions easy. On the climate front, the country has supported women's leadership, and the South Africa Petroleum Industry Association has data showing a slow increase in the number of women in top, senior and middle management in that industry. This is in addition to the social measures which increase resilience of women to the impact of climate change, and the increased evidence base on the intersection of women and climate change. The country has shown improvement in the adoption and enactment of gender policies and laws respectively, as well as institutional arrangements for these, including a fully-fledged gender department in one of the ministries. The government has also increased women's access to disaster relief services through initiatives such as the Poverty Relief Programme, where most opportunities go to women. This is critical, as climate

9 (UN Environment Programme) <https://www.cbd.int/convention>

10 (South Africa: Department of Women, 2021) <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/za/4a3b8a6ab-cf1619e66d2bcddb269662cde1e5da8202a765e2b75e73f324eae9c.pdf>

11 (International Labor Organization, n.d.) <https://www.ilo.org/industries-and-sectors/utilities-water-gas-electricity-sector>

change has increased the frequency and severity of climate-induced disasters. One of the levers for data availability in the South African context is the establishment of an inter-agency coordination mechanism on gender statistics that had an institutional and documentation mechanism.

When considering the kind of strides made by South Africa, it is important to note that it is the richest country in Africa¹², as at 2024, by GDP. These strides, are, however marred by a string of cases of violence against women, which make it one of the most unsafe countries for women. However, in relation to other countries, South Africa is ahead of its peers in mainstreaming the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.

Case Study - South Sudan

South Sudan is a country that faced civil strife for many years upon its secession from the Sudan. As a result, citizens of the country have faced human rights abuses including forced displacement and continued ethnic violence. In their report on the Beijing Platform implementation in 2024¹³, they cite a quota of 35% for women in the Revitalised Agreement on the Resolution of the Conflict in the Republic of South Sudan (R-ARCSS), as an achievement that is yet to be realised. Women's active participation in policy discussions is also a key achievement. The country has faced drawbacks especially when it comes to the insurgency which has heightened gender-specific vulnerabilities. In addition to this, they cite budget shortfalls which limit the scope and extent of their work, while indicating that the poverty rate in the country is at 84.3 percent. Through programmes for poverty eradication in partnership with the development sector, they have rolled out targeted livelihood enabling activities for women, but still indicated that they need to address social protection through additional policy measures.

Accordingly, environmental conservation, preservation and rehabilitation is one of the areas of focus in the South Sudan report. They have various policy frameworks including a 2023 Environmental Bill. The country's climate focus is on building resilience in the agricultural sector. The country also has a climate change centre in one of their universities. Further, there are initiatives and other measures in the pipeline which the report does not delve into. Positively, the country has a ministry of gender which has some responsibility over several environmental activities which aim to build the resilience of women.

What we can learn from these cases

30 years after adoption of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, the contrast in domestication and delivery is seen in the two cases of South Africa and South Sudan. Where there is peace and freedom, and where there are adequate resources to mainstream and domesticate the BPF, then recommendations are adopted. Again, environmental matters are contextual, and the country's economy and population size further determine the type of interventions that are put in place.

Many of South Sudan's interventions are supported by external partners, bringing in the challenge of sustainability. Again, issues of gender-based violence are hampering social protection efforts in South Sudan, while in South Africa, the same gender-based violence does not hamper the delivery of the efforts, but impacts overall the well-being of women.

¹² (Statista, n.d.) <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1120999/gdp-of-african-countries-by-country/>

¹³ (Republic of South Sudan, 2024) https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/2024-09/b30_report_south_sudan_en.pdf

For these countries, the climate impact is experienced differently. South Africa is one of Africa's highest Green House Gas emitters on the continent, relying on fossil fuels for electricity and energy production. On the other hand, South Sudan is the youngest state in Africa, and one of the least electrified on the continent, whose production of energy is mainly from fossil fuels. Yet while there are upcoming jobs in line with a just transition in South Africa, this is not the case in South Sudan.

It is worth noting that in the mainstreaming of the Declaration and Platform of Action there is no one-size-fits-all formula, therefore data availability is necessary for demonstrating progress, and for future planning.

Opportunities for continued action

As the Beijing Declaration turns 30, there needs to be greater cohesion with regard to climate, development and gender planning. The Gender Action Plan¹⁴ by the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Action (UNFCCC) is a functional opportunity for generating an increase in gender data to enhance reporting on climate change as gender will be negotiated for another 5 years during annual climate conferences.

Additionally, development banks such as the World Bank provide substantial funding for climate related initiatives. This needs to be scrutinised with a view to enhancing social protection and improving the lives and livelihoods of women. Funds such as the newly established Loss and Damage fund need to be fully utilised to support social protection initiatives that can be harvested during the 30th anniversary and beyond. It is important to entrench this practice especially for bank funded projects and public private partnership initiatives to ensure they are people-centred and that gender considerations are prioritised. The move to reform global financial infrastructure ensuring concessional financing is truly concessional should be fully supported.

There are climate adaptation initiatives that countries are implementing in various sectors. These are expected to enhance social protection in addition to improving development outcomes. Mitigation initiatives should also be reported on due to the role they play in job creation and in climate proofing of infrastructure. Themes such as appliance energy efficiency¹⁵ which can improve household outcomes for women e.g. reducing drudgery and cost, and saving time, should also be reported on.

There are concerns about the fact that in the climate sector, many partnerships that create solutions for communities, enhancing access to electricity, improving the agricultural sector, and making positive changes to land use practices are private sector-led, or led through private-public partnerships¹⁶. Such concerns were dealt with most recently at the climate conference in Azerbaijan (COP 29, 2024), where a kitty known as the new collective quantified goal on climate finance¹⁷ generated resistance because the pot of funding included private and philanthropic sources, blurring the line between how climate finance will be delivered through the public sector. There is, therefore, need for greater scrutiny and analysis, to identify and call out anomalies that may prioritise profits in the delivery of public services and increase negative gender and social impacts arising from financialisation.

¹⁴ (United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, n.d.) <https://unfccc.int/topics/gender/workstreams/the-gender-action-plan>

¹⁵ (Koojman, Corry, & Ireri, 2020) <https://www.clasp.ngo/research/all/the-role-of-appliances-in-achieving-gender-equality-and-energy-access-for-all/>

¹⁶ (Kuntner, Osawa, Songole, Aragon, & Pearce, 2024) [Delivering renewables in Africa: The African Development Bank - Christian Aid](#)

¹⁷ (United Nations Convention on Climate Change) [New Collective Quantified Goal on Climate Finance | UNFCCC](#)

The global Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated that capital can be mobilised if a crisis is existential, that is, *where there is a will there is a way*. The same is not extended to gender issues, as observed in the gender negotiations at COP 29, where financing for gender activities was not agreed on. Yet financing is critical for domestication of BPPFA recommendations for climate measures as the climate crisis is an existential one that disproportionately affects Africa and its people, especially women, vulnerable, marginalised and indigenous populations. Such messaging is important.

Conclusion

The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action has been instrumental in ensuring efforts are made and accelerated to empower women in different sectors. The rollback on human rights¹⁸ in the free world has led to increasing jitters about the future of the women's movement. Such regression demonstrates how systems and structures of oppression are linked to politics, and that they morph as the world changes. Therefore, a feminist analysis must be prioritised, frequently recognising both progress and political dynamics that try to retain the *status quo*.

There is a role for continued advocacy in multilateral spaces to both understand and chip away at oppressive and paternalistic systems. This is not always easy, and many times those in the struggle may feel like abandoning the cause. A feminist ethic of love, care and well-being can keep the movement motivated during such times and should be prioritised, as we recognise that jointly we will get closer to driving women's empowerment in tangible ways across the continent.

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CRITICAL AREA 12
The Girl Child

Leaving No African Girl Behind?

Valarie Waswa



Biography

Valarie Waswa is a Public Policy Analyst, Gender and Tech Lawyer, and one of the leading advocates for women's and youth rights in Africa. She is also a proud 2020 alumna of the African Feminist Macroeconomic Academy by FEMNET, where she gained invaluable skills and knowledge on feminist macroeconomic analysis, advocacy strategies, and policy reform aimed at promoting gender equality and empowering women and girls across Africa. Valarie's notable achievements in advancing the rights of women and girls in Africa include the Afri Girl Rise Podcast, which she hosted and has over 30 episodes on conversations around young women and girls in Africa. She is also the Founder of She Goes Digital, a social enterprise that seeks to bridge the gender digital divide among adolescent girls and young women in rural communities in Kenya.

Abstract

This article offers a feminist macroeconomic analysis of the progress made toward advancing the rights of the girl child in Africa, as is grounded in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPfA). It examines the critical barriers—such as child labour, period poverty, violence, and limited access to education—that continue to marginalize girls. The article underscores the urgent need for action by drawing on regional and international frameworks, as well as reports and key policy documents. It further highlights how structural inequality, underfunded public services, and harmful social norms disproportionately limit the realization of basic human rights for girls in Africa. The paper calls for African governments, civil society, and international partners to prioritize girls' rights, ensuring no girl is left behind in Africa's development.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Across Africa, millions of girls face daily struggles that deprive them of their basic rights, including education, healthcare, and protection from violence, just to mention a few. These challenges are not just personal tragedies, they represent systemic failures that entrench gender inequality and economic disparity on our continent. As we approach the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDPfA), it is imperative to reflect on the progress made and the gaps that persist.

A desk review approach was employed, drawing from key reports, policy documents, and scholarly articles on gender, education, healthcare, economic exploitation, and violence. This synthesis enabled the development of actionable, context-specific recommendations.

This article relies on the BDPfA as the key guiding framework. A special focus is on the intersection of the BDPfA with regional frameworks, such as the Maputo Protocol (2003)¹⁹ and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990)²⁰, as well as with

¹⁹ African Union. (2003). Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa.

²⁰ African Union. (1990). African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child. Retrieved from https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36804-treaty-african_charter_on_rights_welfare_of_the_child.pdf

global commitments such as the sustainable development goals (SDGs). Reports such as UNICEF’s “Violence Against Girls” (2023) and the IMF’s “Economic Toll of Gender-Based Violence” (2021)²¹ highlight the persistent challenges of education, healthcare, and violence in sub-Saharan Africa. A 2024 report by TaxEd Alliance²² identified economic barriers such as school fees as a limiting factor. These studies underscore the necessity for enhanced enforcement and tailored strategies to address entrenched social and economic disparities. However, the review identified a notable lack of data from Northern and Saharan Africa, as well as from the least developed countries, which resulted in a primary emphasis on Sub-Saharan Africa

The analysis in this article is grounded in feminist political economy, which emphasises the role of macroeconomic policies in shaping gendered social outcomes. There is an exploration of how concepts such as structural inequalities, financialisation, and austerity measures disproportionately impact girls’ rights. The analysis provides a basis for advocating for collaborative, community-based approaches that leave no girl behind, as enshrined in the Ubuntu philosophy of interconnectedness. It focuses on four sub-themes: The Girl Child and Education, The Girl Child and Healthcare, The Girl Child and Economic Exploitation, and The Girl Child and Violence

2.1 Girl Child and Education

The BDPfA and the Maputo Protocol both emphasise the importance of education as a fundamental right for girls. The key questions to respond to are what hurdles do African girls face in their quest for knowledge, and how do these obstacles shape their educational journey? Further, how do cultural traditions and economic realities intertwine to influence girls’ educational outcomes in African nations? Global and regional gender equality instruments call for universal and equal access to education, the elimination of gender disparities, and the inclusion of gender-sensitive teaching materials. SDG 4 reinforces these goals, specifically calling for equal access to free primary and secondary education for all, especially marginalised groups such as the girl child. It also encourages the availability of scholarships for girls in developing nations. Despite advancements in certain African nations, the education crisis for girls continues. Around 50 million girls in Sub-Saharan Africa are still out of school, grappling with obstacles such as poverty, early marriage, and cultural prejudices²³. Additionally, A 2024 report from TaxEd Alliance²⁴ revealed that more than 18 million girls remain out of school because of unaffordable fees and additional costs.

²¹ Ouedraogo, R., & Stenzel, D. (2021). The heavy economic toll of gender-based violence: Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa (IMF Working Paper No. 21/256). International Monetary Fund

²² TaxEd Alliance. (2024, February). Transforming education financing in Africa: A strategic agenda for the African Union year of education.

²³ UNESCO. (n.d) Global Education Monitoring Report. Retrieved from <https://education-estimates.org/out-of-school/>

²⁴ Ibid, fn No. 4

Furthermore, restricted access to quality education in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) fields places girls at a disadvantage in areas essential for economic growth. Education budgets in the region face significant strain from national debts, while global tax policies frequently redirect public funds away from essential educational initiatives. (Transforming Education Financing in Africa Report 2024). In Kenya, for instance, its national budget is under extreme pressure, with about 46% of its 2024/2025 revenue (Ksh 1.35 trillion) dedicated towards debt repayment²⁵. This leaves very minimal funds for critical sectors like education. Consequently, such huge debts limit the country's full potential to invest in schools, teachers, and educational resources.

Moving on to Ghana, Ghana's free secondary education policy has faced serious challenges tied to the country's economic struggles. The ongoing debt restructuring process, including managing \$5.4 billion in external debt, has tightened public spending. This has resulted in overcrowded classrooms, teacher shortages, and delayed delivery of essential resources in schools²⁶. The "free financing model" covers tuition but fails to address critical infrastructure needs like sufficient classrooms, dining facilities, and teaching materials²⁷. These shortcomings have disproportionately affected girls, particularly in rural areas, who are already vulnerable to systemic inequities.

Other countries such as Kenya and Uganda have also made notable progress in abolishing school fees and offering free primary education to their citizens. The Kenya Basic Education Amendment Act²⁸, which mandates the provision of sanitary pads to schoolgirls, has been a vital measure in tackling school absenteeism. However, it's clear that more action is needed to ensure that girls can obtain quality secondary and tertiary education, particularly in rural and marginalized communities.

Concerning the Southern African region, Zambia has made great strides. Zambia's 2024 national budget marks a significant effort to improve education, especially for girls. With a 1.5% increase in the allocation to the education sector, the government is focusing on expanding access and improving the quality of education. Notable initiatives include the employment of 4,200 teachers, the construction of new secondary schools, and the expansion of the Girls' Education and Women's Empowerment Project. This project alone is estimated to increase access to secondary education for over 129,000 girls across 81 districts by 2024, helping to break down barriers to education in marginalised areas.²⁹

²⁵ Awich, L. (2024, February 21). Treasury allocates Sh1.3tn to debt in 2024-25 budget: It is the highest allocation on debt repayment in the past five years. The Star. Retrieved from <https://www.the-star.co.ke/news/2024-02-21-treasury-allocates-sh13tn-to-debt-in-2024-25-budget>

²⁶ ISS African Futures. (2024, December 6). Hana Geographic Futures (IFs v8.2) [Website]. ISS African Futures. Retrieved from <https://futures.issafrica.org/geographic/countries/ghana/>

²⁷ Acquah, A., Attila, F. L., & Yalley, C. E. (2024). A CRITICAL REVIEW OF THE FREE SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL POLICY IN GHANA WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF DEVELOPMENT OF CURRICULUM. *Journal of Advance Research in Social Science and Humanities* (ISSN 2208-2387), 10(5), 23-28. <https://doi.org/10.61841/fkfr6k15>

²⁸ Basic Education (Amendment) Act No. 17, Laws of Kenya (2017). https://kenyalaw.org/kl/fileadmin/pdfdownloads/AmendmentActs/2017/BasicEducation_Amendment_Act_17of2017.pdf

²⁹ Zambia National Education Coalition. (2023, October 3). The press statement on the 2024 national budget to the education and skills sector. ZANEC. Retrieved from <https://zanec.org.zm/2023/10/03/the-press-statement-on-the-2024-national-budget-to-the-education-and-skills-sector/>

2.2 The Girl Child and Healthcare

The BDPfA highlights the disparities in healthcare access for girls, particularly in sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services. The Maputo Protocol requires states to ensure that girls have access to reproductive health services, including family planning and menstrual health management³⁰. SDG 3 focuses on ensuring healthy lives and promoting well-being for all, with an emphasis on maternal and child health. Pertinent questions with respect to the girl child are: what specific health challenges do girls confront in accessing healthcare services in Africa, and how do these disparities impact their overall well-being? Also important is the issue of how the lack of access to menstrual hygiene products limits girls' education and overall health and what can be done to address this issue.

Access to healthcare, particularly menstrual health management (MHM), remains a significant challenge for girls across Africa. Period poverty continues to force many girls out of school, with menstrual products often unaffordable due to high taxes and lack of access. In 2022, a study was conducted by the World Bank Group and Global Water Security & Sanitation Partnership (GWSP) which revealed that 65% of girls and women in Kenya struggle to afford period pads owing to the high cost, consequently leading to missed school days and health risks as they resort to cheaper, unsafe alternatives³¹.

Many girls in Africa still struggle to find basic hygiene supplies such as soap and clean water, putting them at risk of infections and health problems³². Also, issues like endometriosis and dysmenorrhea often get ignored due to a lack of funding for research and healthcare, high diagnostic costs, scarcity of trained specialists, and patients' inability to express their symptoms due to societal taboos surrounding menstrual health³³.

Countries such as Kenya, Botswana, and South Africa have made significant strides by removing taxes on menstrual products and providing free sanitary pads in schools. Moreover, organisations such as UNICEF³⁴ have been crucial in getting menstrual hygiene products to girls in emergencies. Even with these steps, many girls across Africa still can't get the comprehensive sexual and reproductive health (SRH) education and healthcare they need³⁵. This leaves them vulnerable to early pregnancies and other reproductive health issues. First and foremost, we can't ignore the staggering levels of poverty that many families face. In a continent where so many struggle to make ends meet, education often takes a backseat. Families grappling with economic hardships might prioritise short-term

³⁰ Article 14 of the Maputo Protocol

³¹ World Bank Group, & GWSP. (2022, August). The enabling environment for menstrual health and hygiene. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/server/api/core/bitstreams/a92f6ee5-e932-4dcd-ac8d-aae-b319a72f7/content>

³² Okesanya, O.J., Eshun, G., Ukoaka, B.M. et al. Water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) practices in Africa: exploring the effects on public health and sustainable development plans. *Trop Med Health* 52, 68 (2024). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s41182-024-00614-3>

³³ Mecha EO, Njagi JN, Makunja RN, Omwandho COA, Saunders PTK, Horne AW. Endometriosis among African women. *Reprod Fertil.* 2022 Sep 26;3(3):C40–3. doi: 10.1530/RAF-22-0040. PMID: PMC9578059.

³⁴ United Nations Children's Fund, *Violence against Girls, Boys and Women in Southern Africa: A statistical profile*, UNICEF, New York, 2023.

³⁵ Ninsiima, L.R., Chiumia, I.K. & Ndejjo, R. Factors influencing access to and utilisation of youth-friendly sexual and reproductive health services in sub-Saharan Africa: a systematic review. *Reprod Health* 18, 135 (2021). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-021-01183-y>

survival over the long-term benefits of education. As a result, young girls are pushed into early marriages or relationships that can lead to unintended pregnancies. This perpetuates a cycle of poverty, robbing girls of the future they deserve.

A huge contributing factor to high levels of teenage pregnancies in Africa is education barriers for girls³⁶. Insufficient funding for schools often leads to high dropout rates among girls. When girls lack access to quality education and comprehensive sexual health education, they are left vulnerable and misinformed about their bodies. This ignorance has largely led to a cascade of unintended pregnancies that could have been avoided with proper knowledge and resources³⁷. Without easy access to contraceptive services and family planning education, young girls find themselves navigating a minefield of risks, which often results in unintended pregnancies. We must also confront the deep-rooted cultural norms that perpetuate early marriages and childbearing. In many communities, early pregnancy is not only accepted but sometimes celebrated. This normalises the cycle of poverty, limiting educational and economic opportunities for young girls who deserve so much more³⁸.

The risk of maternal mortality among adolescents in sub-Saharan Africa presents severe challenges, particularly for families and communities. Young mothers are disproportionately affected by complications during pregnancy and childbirth, leading to increased medical costs and loss of productivity. Key efforts taken by national governments to respond to these challenges include the *Not-In-My-Village* campaign by the government of Zimbabwe in partnership with UNFPA³⁹.

2.3 Girl Child and Economic Exploitation

The BDPfA, along with the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child and the ILO Convention on Worst Forms of Child Labour (1999)⁴⁰, emphasise the need to protect children from economic exploitation. These frameworks call for minimum employment age laws, regulation of working conditions, and the enforcement of penalties for violators. Pressing issues include the forms of economic exploitation that are prevalent among African girls and how they impact their development and prospects. Further, another concern is how effective existing laws are in safeguarding girls against child labour and economic exploitation and the measures that can be taken to strengthen these protections.

Sub-Saharan Africa has the highest rates of child labour globally, with girls making

³⁶ Maharaj NR. Adolescent pregnancy in sub-Saharan Africa - a cause for concern. *Front Reprod Health*. 2022 Dec 2;4:984303. doi: 10.3389/frph.2022.984303. PMID: 36531444; PMCID: PMC9755883.

³⁷ UNESCO Zambia. (2024, November 19). Comprehensive sexuality education: For healthy, informed and empowered learners. UNESCO Zambia. Retrieved from <https://www.unesco.org/en/health-education/cse>

³⁸ Abera, M., Nega, A., Tefera, Y. et al. Early marriage and women's empowerment: the case of child-brides in Amhara National Regional State, Ethiopia. *BMC Int Health Hum Rights* 20, 30 (2020). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12914-020-00249-5>

³⁹ UNFPA Zimbabwe. (2024, August 26). Government of Zimbabwe, UNFPA and partners commemorate World Population Day with launch of key campaign to tackle teenage pregnancies [Blog post]. UNFPA Zimbabwe. Retrieved from <https://zimbabwe.unfpa.org/en/news/government-zimbabwe-unfpa-and-partners-commemorate-world-population-day-launch-key-campaign>

⁴⁰ International Labour Organization. (2018). *Ending child labour by 2025: A review of policies and programmes*. International Labour Office. Retrieved from www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/@ed_norm/@ipecc/documents/publication/wcms_653987

up a large proportion of those involved in hazardous and exploitative work.⁴¹ Poverty, population growth, and weak social protection systems are key drivers of this crisis. In Kenya, for example, 1.9 million children are engaged in child labour, with 30 percent of coffee pickers under the age of 15. These children frequently lose access to education, face health risks, and endure bleak futures due to exploitation in sectors such as agriculture and mining. Countries such as Ghana, Tanzania, and Kenya have launched national action plans to address child labour. However, the progress in implementing these initiatives has been sluggish, necessitating more coordinated efforts to meet the SDG 8 target of eradicating child labour by 2025.

2.4 Girl child and Violence

The BDPfA emphasizes the need for immediate actions to shield girls from violence, such as sexual abuse, trafficking, and domestic violence. The Maputo Protocol and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child emphasise the need for legislative, social, and educational measures to protect girls from all forms of abuse. Some key issues to interrogate include the forms of violence frequently encountered by girls in Africa, and the contributory factors. What measures can be implemented to enhance existing legal frameworks that provide stronger protection for girls against violence and abuse?

Violence against girls remains pervasive in Africa, with sexual violence, intimate partner violence, and harmful practices like child marriage still common. The International Monetary Fund (IMF's) 2021⁴² working paper highlighted the heavy economic toll that gender-based violence (GBV) imposes on sub-Saharan economies. In the SADC region, nearly 30 percent of girls are married before the age of 18, with many experiencing intimate partner violence. The COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns led to alarming increases in child marriage, female genital mutilation (FGM), and sexual abuse among girls. Many young girls found themselves in environments where safety was compromised, and the absence of support systems exacerbated their vulnerability.

On a positive note, several African countries have introduced National Action Plans to combat GBV. For instance, Kenya committed \$50 million to address GBV by 2026, showcasing a commitment to protect vulnerable populations. Civil society organisations, such as FEMNET, have also played a crucial role in capacity building and advocacy to ensure that governments effectively implement and finance comprehensive action plans. However, despite these initiatives, numerous countries still struggle to establish the legal frameworks and secure financial resources necessary to safeguard girls from violence. The gap between commitment and action remains significant, and without concrete steps forward, the safety and future of countless girls hang in the balance.

⁴¹ Galal, S. (2024, January 31). Female child labor in Africa 2021, by age. Statista. Retrieved from www.statista.com/statistics/1273147/female-child-labor-in-africa-by-age/

⁴² Ouedraogo, R., & Stenzel, D. (2021). The heavy economic toll of gender-based violence: Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa (IMF Working Paper No. 21/256). International Monetary Fund.

3.0 WAY FORWARD (RECOMMENDATIONS)

a. Education

National Ministries of Education should collaborate with organisations such as the African Development Bank (AfDB) and UNICEF to expand access to free secondary education and eliminate any incidental costs. Moreover, we should look to forge strong public-private partnerships that focus on enhancing STEM education for girls. These collaborations can pave the way for internships, mentorship opportunities, and valuable resources from technology companies that inspire and equip young women for the future. It's also essential to create a pan-African monitoring framework that not only tracks the progress of girls' education but also facilitates timely adjustments to policies based on real-time data and insights.

b. Healthcare

Governments need to work hand in hand with organisations such as WHO-AFRO and UNICEF to boost sexual and reproductive health services tailored for girls, especially in rural areas where access is often limited. It is crucial that these governments also expand tax exemptions on menstrual products across the continent, ensuring that they are easily available for all girls. Promoting local manufacturing of affordable menstrual hygiene products can help communities gain independence and lessen their dependence on imports, which is a vital step toward empowering young girls. Additionally, national finance ministries should partner with global organisations to fund research on menstrual health issues. This investment will improve healthcare services and help girls thrive without being held back by period-related problems.

c. Economic Exploitation

African countries must align their labour laws with international conventions and impose strict penalties on violators of child labour laws. Ministries of Labor should collaborate with trade unions and community organisations to enhance labour inspections. Concurrently, the African Union should establish a regional fund to provide **conditional cash transfers (CCTs)** that support families in keeping their girls in school rather than sending them to work. Public awareness campaigns are also instrumental in educating communities about the detrimental effects of child labour.

d. Violence

To tackle violence against girls, African governments must strengthen their legal frameworks and allocate sufficient funds to combat this scourge. Ministries of Justice, Gender, and Finance should adopt gender-responsive budgeting and use financial tools such as gender bonds to finance violence against women and girls (VAWGs) shelters, healthcare services, and legal aid for survivors. Governments and civil society organisations need to collaborate in seeking to eliminate harmful cultural norms and practices that perpetuate violence.

8.0 CONCLUSION

Investments in girls' rights are critical to achieving the Africa we want. Education, healthcare, protection from exploitation, and freedom from violence are not only moral imperatives but also economic necessities for sustainable development. African countries ought to adopt a collective approach rooted in the spirit of Ubuntu to ensure that no girl is left behind. With political will, targeted investment, and pan-African solidarity, the dream of a more equitable and prosperous Africa can be realised for future generations.

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