

The Status of Women in the Approach to Sustainable Development in Africa: From Empowerment to Positive Discrimination

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Abstract

The issue of sustainable development is considered a sensitive topic, particularly in light of the transformations occurring across political, economic, cultural, social, and technological fields. This has made attention to human resources today as a strategic force for the advancement and progress of nations through the utilisation and development of various means and skills, as well as the provision of favourable conditions to that end. Women are regarded as active elements in society, not only because they are responsible for shaping future generations but also because of their evident contribution to sustainable development in various forms. This is most often referred to as women's empowerment. This paper highlights the significance of women in sustainable development between empowerment and positive discrimination, with the aim of identifying alternatives and solutions to strengthen their role while clarifying the main challenges that hinder it.

Keywords: sustainable development, women's empowerment, reality and challenges.

Introduction

Sustainable development, with its various environmental, economic, social, political, and even cultural dimensions, represents a new vision of development that respects both the individual and the environment alike. This perspective requires the provision of a set of tools and mechanisms for every individual to obtain equal and equitable opportunities, thereby laying the foundations for a better society and ensuring the fair distribution of resources and wealth among different groups. It is based on productivity, social justice, sustainability, and empowerment. Empower refers to the provision of diverse material, educational, and cultural means that enhance individuals' capacities by involving them in decision-making processes.

Accordingly, the achievement of development necessitates a comprehensive transformation within environmental contexts, making women's empowerment the fundamental groundwork for building competitive and resilient societies and economies on a sustainable basis. However, despite the progress achieved, women still face discrimination, marginalisation, and exclusion. Although equality between men and women is among the universal principles recognised by the international community, real-world practices often reveal a discrepancy between normative commitments and lived realities.

This underscores the importance of establishing an organised legislative framework to regulate women's empowerment, granting them their rightful status to enable their effective contribution to sustainable development. Within this context, the following research question is posed:

First: Defining the Study's Key Terms

Sustainable development

The International Union first used the term *sustainable development* in 1980, defining it as “development that takes into account the environment, the economy, and society.” Subsequently, the National Charter for the Environment and Sustainable Development defined it as development without which the risks of environmental degradation, imbalances in natural systems, depletion of natural resources, and the exacerbation of

health and poverty problems would increase, thereby undermining the requirements of economic development. Thus, improving the living conditions of all people within a framework of justice and social equity without excessive exploitation of natural resources by adopting balanced patterns of production and consumption is needed (Ismail, 1993, p. 4).

Sustainable development may, therefore, be described as the rational utilisation of resources in a manner that ensures their continuity and long-term sustainability while striking a balance between the needs of the present generation and those of future generations. Its main features include the following:

- Long-term development that takes into account the fate of current generations.
- Equality and fairness between present and future generations under the principle of equitable distribution of natural resources.
- An interrelated, multidimensional process based on planning and coordination between economic and social development plans, on the one hand, and environmental development, on the other hand.
- Humans are both the means and the primary objective of sustainable development.
- Linking modern technology to society and employing it in its service.
- There is a striking balance between economic development and controlling environmental problems.

To reconcile economic, political, and social development with environmental preservation, the United Nations Declaration of 1991 included three key axes (Abdullah, 2005, p. 25):

- Achieving an adequate level of employment.
- Increasing growth.
- Ensuring an appropriate level of food security.

Women's Empowerment

The concepts and definitions of empowerment are diverse, and we refer to some of them regarding this relatively recent concept within the field of management.

Bruce and Manuela describe empowerment as an administrative approach through which managers and other organisational members participate in influencing the decision-making process.

Randolph and Sahkin define empowerment as the recognition of an individual's right to freedom and control, which a person possesses by virtue of independent will, experience, knowledge, and internal motivation.

Shackleton defines empowerment as a philosophy of granting greater responsibility, authority, and decision-making power to individuals at lower organisational levels (Khawla & Souad, 2019).

Thus, empowerment can be understood as liberation from constraints and the granting of a degree of freedom to individuals. It is an administrative activity whereby organisational members and employees are involved in decision-making.

Women's empowerment, however, has been closely linked to development and has evolved through three main approaches. The first is the *Integration of Women in Development (IFD)* in 1973, which called for the inclusion of women in various sectors and their assumption of positions involving decision-making power that could enhance women's working conditions. This approach also sought to introduce legal and administrative changes to integrate women into economic development better.

Owing to the lack of a solid foundation for equality in the first approach, the second approach, *Women and Development (WED)*, emerged. This phase focused on devising ways to develop technologies that would reduce the burden on the family, thereby providing women with time to engage in productive work. However, its shortcomings include the emergence of conflicts regarding the multiple roles that women are expected to perform simultaneously.

This led to the development of a third approach, *gender and development (GED)*, which emphasises sustainable development and social justice. It argued that inequality stemmed from the privileging of men's waged labour over women's unrecognised social contributions. From this perspective, the *GED* approach sought to achieve women's empowerment by regarding women not only as beneficiaries of development but also as active agents of change.

With the increasing rise of movements supporting women, women's issues have gained increasing attention across the world and are not limited to certain countries. This necessitated the convening of specialised conferences and forums, beginning with the first World Conference on Women (1975–1985), during which the United Nations adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women in December 1979. This was followed by the Beijing Conference in 1995 and, later, the New York Conference in 2000, as part of the growing concern with women's affairs. Consequently, numerous laws were enacted to improve women's conditions and status, whereas research and specialised studies flourished in support of women and in highlighting their role.

Empowerment thus emerged as one of the most significant concepts affirming women's role and status. Development discourse increasingly began to focus on expanding women's choices and levels of productivity as individuals, particularly within international organisations. With the convening of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, the empowerment of individuals and groups became a key step in development programmes (Muneera, 2016).

Accordingly, women's empowerment has come to be recognised as a novel concept, expressing the necessity of women's contributions as agents of change in development. Women's empowerment can therefore be defined as the integration of women into core development activities to increase their economic, political, and social participation. This is achieved through providing them with equal opportunities in education and training, equal access to and control over resources, the right to participate in authority and

decision-making, and recognition of women as integral components of the development framework rather than as supplementary elements.

Women's empowerment thus encompasses three dimensions: economic empowerment, social empowerment, and political empowerment.

Focusing on economic empowerment, this term refers to increasing women's participation in economic activities by removing obstacles that prevent them from fulfilling their economic role and engaging effectively with state economic policies. Its most important components include equal access to economic resources as well as the provision of training and knowledge that strengthen women's economic standing.

Characteristics of Women's Empowerment

The characteristics of women's empowerment, as outlined by some scholars, include the following:

- **Self-determination** refers to the freedom of working women to choose their work methods, weigh alternatives, and make their own decisions.
- **Self-worth**: Denotes women's awareness of their status, roles, and responsibilities; their consultation in decision-making; the significance of their contributions; and the attention they receive.
- **Self-confidence**: Working women recognise their abilities, potential, and talents and have confidence in their capacity to accomplish assigned tasks, relying on themselves to face challenges.
- **Ability to influence**: This ability reflects women's belief in their ability to play an active role in the institutions to which they belong, as well as the recognition and consideration of their opinions and suggestions by others and the ability to derive benefits from them (Al-Nuaimi & Al-Zakrous, 2018).

Second: Women's Economic Empower and Economic Development

Interest in women's empowerment, gender equality, and relationship with economic growth began in the 1980s. During this period, the majority of economic studies focused on linking gender equality indicators to macroeconomic indicators such as trade, investment, and economic growth to devise economic policies that are responsive to and have a positive impact on women's issues.

These matters generated considerable debate between those who emphasised the importance of empowerment and equality in achieving economic development and those who minimised this role. Some argue that, while empowerment and gender equality are indeed important as human rights or humanitarian issues, their economic significance in improving efficiency, raising welfare standards, and achieving development remains limited. They contend that such benefits are more closely associated with fragile economies that require comprehensive structural reforms extending beyond, but not confined to, issues of equality.

On the other hand, the second perspective asserts that achieving gender justice and women's empowerment has a significant effect on macroeconomic indicators, particularly economic growth. Reducing disparity and achieving empowerment have long-term effects on labour market efficiency and assist in attaining complete employment levels that utilise all available energy and potential within the country. However, this impact depends on several factors, including the nature of the country's economic structure (whether advanced or underdeveloped, industrial or agricultural) and the sources of disparity (income, education, property rights, etc.).

The main channels through which women's empowerment and the reduction in gender disparities influence economic growth and development can be summarised as follows:

1. Higher education rates among women are strongly associated with lower fertility rates and increased household savings.
2. Women's ability to make economic decisions within the household is linked to a greater proportion of spending being directed towards children's essential needs, such as education and health.

3. Through their impact on education and savings rates, women's empowerment and improved gender equality positively affect labour supply characteristics, productivity, and investment in the long term.
4. Women's empowerment fundamentally facilitates the utilisation of productive capacities that already exist in society but remain unexploited, thereby increasing efficiency in the use of available production factors.

The economic empowerment of women is, therefore, one of the fundamental pillars for achieving sustainable development and inclusive growth. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report, women perform approximately 66% of the world's labour and produce 50% of the food. However, their share of income does not exceed 10%, and their share of assets is only 1%. This necessitates that any strategy aimed at achieving development, poverty reduction, or food security must prioritise women's empowerment as a principal partner. This empowerment yields external benefits related to development processes that go beyond economic growth, such as improvements in education, health, and nutrition indicators.

Thus, recognising the vital role of women in economic development, women's empowerment and gender justice have become central components in achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. These goals emphasise gender equality and women's empowerment, not only as human rights but also as essential to global sustainability. This includes ensuring women's equal access to education, healthcare, decent work, and participation in political and economic domains.

Women's Empowerment in Africa

In Africa, women play a pivotal role in economic activity. Women in Africa bear primary responsibility for most agricultural activities, with their contribution to agricultural labor reaching approximately 70% in some African countries. They constitute approximately 66% of the informal agricultural workforce. Despite the significant economic role of women, indicators of women's empowerment still show imbalances, most notably forms of discrimination, particularly regarding ownership and access to productive assets,

participation rates in formal government economies, access to production inputs and assets, disparities in education indicators, and wage levels between women and men. These findings have been confirmed in human development reports. The economic empowerment of women is a fundamental basis for achieving sustainable development and inclusive growth. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) report, women perform approximately 66% of the world's work and produce 50% of the food. However, they receive only 10% of their income and hold just 1% of their assets. Therefore, any strategy targeting development, poverty reduction, or food security must prioritise women's empowerment as key partners, given the external benefits associated with development beyond economic growth, such as improvements in education, health, and nutrition indicators.

Recognising the importance of women's role in economic development, women's empowerment and gender justice have become central to achieving sustainable development goals (SDGs). These findings stress the achievement of equality between women and men and the empowerment of women, not only as a human rights issue but also as essential for global sustainability. This includes equal access for women to education, healthcare, decent work, and participation in political and economic fields.

Women's Empowerment in Africa

In Africa, women play a pivotal role in economic activities. Women shoulder most agricultural tasks, contributing approximately 70% of agricultural labor in some African countries and constituting approximately 66% of informal agricultural employment. Despite women's significant economic contribution, empowerment indicators reveal persistent imbalances, especially forms of discrimination related to ownership and access to productive assets, participation in formal government economic sectors, access to production inputs and assets, and disparities in education and wage levels between women and men. Human development reports corroborate these issues.

This leads us to assert that the status of women's empowerment in Africa is governed by a set of indicators, among which the most important is the Gender Development Index

(GDI) (Samar, Women's Empowerment for Achieving Sustainable Development in Africa, 2019). This index, developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), expresses gender justice across the three dimensions of the Human Development Index (health, education, and economic opportunities). It is measured through expected income for both males and females.

Considering the value of this index in sub-Saharan Africa, it is evident that women have achieved approximately 70% of what men have accomplished in terms of human development outcomes. Although this figure is higher than that in other regions, such as South Asia and Arab countries, it still reflects the absence of gender equality between men and women in Africa.

The second indicator is the Gender Inequality Index (GII), which focuses on three dimensions: reproductive health (maternal mortality rates, adolescent birth rates), empowerment (the proportion of parliamentary seats held by women and the proportion of women with secondary and higher education), and economic activity (the proportion of women in the total labour force). The closer the value of this index is to zero, the greater the degree of gender equality.

The third index for evaluating the status of women in Africa is the African gender equality index (AGEI). The African Development Bank developed this index to assess the status of women in Africa across three points: economic opportunities, human development, and legislative frameworks. The index values range from zero to one hundred, with higher values indicating better conditions for women. This index expresses the concept of women's empowerment, as it includes detailed indicators beyond health and education, encompassing economic and noneconomic measures (economic equality index, human development index, and institutional and legislative indices) (Samar, Women's Empowerment for Achieving Sustainable Development in Africa, 2019).

Fourth: Efforts to Empower Women in Africa

Given the importance of women's empowerment in achieving sustainable development and its goals in Africa, the African Agenda 2063 has emphasised this importance through

the formulation of its objectives and strategies. Adopted by the African Union in 2015, Agenda 2063 affirmed the essential and effective role of women in achieving African development by enhancing their capacity to participate in productive processes, including improving their access to productive assets and credit facilities. It also seeks to improve and strengthen women's capabilities by promoting female education and providing healthcare services. Furthermore, it aims to reinforce legislative and legal frameworks that guarantee women equal legal and constitutional rights as men do, as well as their participation in political processes.

Fifty African countries have ratified International Labour Organisation (ILO) Conventions No. 111 and No. 100, which address gender equality in work, equal pay, and the prevention of discrimination in employment and occupation. In this context, many African countries have initiated legal and legislative reforms to promote women's economic empowerment. For example, South Africa has imposed financial penalties on companies practising discrimination, reaching up to 10% of their annual profits. Moreover, gender equality employment policies have been issued in countries such as Tanzania and Liberia, aiming to align their policies more closely with the aforementioned ILO conventions and enhance consistency in legal reforms concerning women's employment and maternity rights (Samar, Women's Empowerment for Achieving Sustainable Development in Africa, 2019).

Conclusion

The role of women's empowerment in any strategy aimed at achieving sustainable development has become clear, given its contribution to increasing economic productivity and fostering economic growth. Africa represents a special case regarding women's empowerment and its associated developmental effects because of the pivotal role African women play in the continent's economies and societies.

This paper has concluded that the issue in Africa is not women's economic participation per se but rather their inability to reach their full potential and achieve the required levels of productivity. This is primarily due to economic and legislative obstacles, especially

those related to the ownership of productive assets and access to financing, as well as the need to enhance their capabilities through adequate education and training to improve their productivity.

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