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Expert Group Meeting

‘Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls’

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It’s just location:
Examining the intersectionalities of rural women

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* The views expressed in this paper are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of the United Nations.

“There is no thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives.”

~Audre Lorde

African economies have grown progressively over the last decades and now rank among the fastest growing economies of the world¹. However, not all segments of the African population has benefited from this growth as inequality seems to grow in tandem with economic growth. Gender inequality alongside income inequality remains highest on the list of outcomes of Africa’s economic growth. The trickle down narrative where a focus on economic growth leading to some of it trickling down to the bottom doesn’t seem to be working. Distributive policies and issues of inequality are slowly taking centre stage in the realm of development. There is a slow turning of tide that is beginning to centre the focus around human rights and inherently dignity. There are more and more questions around all citizens having equal resources, respect and voice. These conversations however must be inclusive and just for both genders. One could argue that the Agenda 2030 and especially Goal 5 is an ambitious attempt at setting a global policy framework that looks towards achieving gender equality in a transformative manner if fully implemented. However despite this, social dimensions such as access to health care, education, sanitation and the general quality of a life of a woman still have a long way to go in terms of creating a level playing field that is inclusive and equitable.

Slightly over an average of 60% of the population of Africa lives in rural areas and women account for 43% of the agricultural labour force according to FAO². With rural communities already marginalised, women who live in rural areas are marginalised in different and marginalised – as is manifested in their lack of access to resources, public services, opportunities and representation.

African women who live in rural areas have been termed as custodians of land, seed and food. They are however more than that. The narrative where rural women are ‘tied’ to the land excludes them from being recognised as agents of transformation within their communities and by society at large. They are full citizens of states who should also share in the social contract between state and citizen. This means that all their needs and interests must be holistically taken care of and not be relegated to farm inputs, access to water, land tenure and cheap free labour. Although it is recognised that the right to land, water and agriculture are central to rural women as outlined in BPFA and Maputo Protocol, it is important to use a rights based approach when examining the issues faced by rural women. This paper will highlight the intersectionalities of rural women with an emphasis on exclusion of rural women and the economic, social cultural and political blockages that persist in the fight for gender equality in rural settings. It builds on the narrative that rural women are full citizens and issues affecting them have to be addressed simultaneously.

Securing economic justice for rural women through shifting investments from just micro to include macroeconomic interventions

With regard to women’s economic empowerment, there has been a trend to relegate the issue to micro level economic analysis and intervention. This trend has also played out for women living in rural areas. Women’s economic empowerment must be understood as far more than womens’ ability to compete equally in existing markets, or as the beneficial outputs of their contribution to growth. It

¹ UNECA Background paper on the sub-theme: “Promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls”, 3rd session 17-19 May 2017

² The role of Women in Agriculture <<http://www.fao.org/docrep/013/am307e/am307e00.pdf>>

must include women's access to and control over economic resources to include land, access to decent work, control over their own time and meaningful participation in economic decision-making at all levels from the household to international institutions and policy spaces. Interventions towards rural women many a time do not approach the issue from this perspective. The approach to mainstream economics remains excessively narrow and continues to reinforce gender inequality rather than try and solve it – with examples of “production” definitions and analysis not including care work and instead systematically undervaluing and most times erasing it from contributions to GDP. More so for rural women who collect firewood and water, cook, take care of the children and the elderly – yet all these activities are not remunerated let alone recognized as productive economic activities.

To address these challenges, there is need to invest in building the capacity of women living in rural areas to actively participate in the formulation of inclusive economic and development policies. In particular, is the need for women to effectively engage with and influence macro-economic policies as they shape and have a direct impact on access to economic opportunities and resources including limited participation in leadership and politics, access to sexual and reproductive rights, violence against women and overall discrimination against women thus having impact on their lives in rural areas. Macro-economic policies shape and inform priorities in key social and economic sectors such as agriculture and natural resource extraction, health, education etc which are the key sectors that have disproportionate impact on women and girls. Macro-economic policies should make specific considerations on making meaningful investment in rural women beyond tokenism and extractive investments by large cooperates which is characteristic of the current trends.

Tax Justice

Taxation is universally agreed to be one of the most sustainable and predictable source of financing for the provision of public goods and services as well as being a vital mechanism for addressing inequality, including gender inequality. As Africa continues to look at sustainable and stable sources of revenue to fund development, Illicit Financial Flows (IFFs) are increasingly recognized in their role in undermining the possibility to close financing gaps especially for gender equality and women's and girl's' rights. IFFs also have a negative impact on vertical equity and the progressiveness of tax systems that again disproportionately affect women³. When IFFs are rampant in a country, they contribute to preventing governments from fulfilling their human rights obligations and specifically to women and girls by limiting their resource base.

There are existing arguments that curbing these Illicit Financial Flows doesn't necessarily mean that there will be an automatic investment in the lives of African women and girl – which is true. The counter argument to this however is if Africa manages to plug the leaks, there is a better fighting chance for access and equitable distribution that includes women and girls to a pool of financing that would not have been there. For rural women, this would mean possible finances available to provide a myriad of services specific to their priorities. These would include: bringing health care closer, providing social services that rural women and girls currently provide without recognition or remuneration; such as child care and care for the elderly and sick, etc. It is for these reasons the priorities of rural women and girls must be present through their own representation in policy spaces that are strategising on pushing for tax justice to ensure these processes are inclusive.

³ Curbing Illicit Financial Flows and dismantling secrecy jurisdictions to advance women's rights
https://www.globaltaxjustice.org/sites/default/files/20160818_iff_grondona-bidegain-rodriguez.pdf

Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights

The journey towards Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights (SRHR) despite some movement in the right direction, still remains extremely slow. SRHR is a subject that remains polarising in many contexts resulting in very little progress, especially in rural settings. Due to infrastructural barriers, high illiteracy rates and overall inequality in distribution of health resources, rural women and girls are unable to access comprehensive SRHR information and services. SRHR is inextricably linked to the attainment of broader developmental goals whether it is within Agenda 2030 or Africa's Agenda 2063 towards structural transformation and inclusive development for all.

There is a need for safe spaces for women and girls living in rural areas to access SRHR services that are affordable. Access to these services in terms of distance still remains a challenge across rural Africa as well as their health seeking behaviour influenced by cultural practices can also affect their seeking SRHR services. Take for example services such as maternal care, contraception, safe abortion and assistance in case of sexual and gender based violence. These barriers are linked to an amalgamation of culture norms, a lack of targeted policy, a lack of resources and overall gender inequality themes that run across.

Political Participation

Representation of women in the political and decision-making space still falls below the African Union call for 50:50 representation. While women in general face a multitude of barriers to enter the political space, rural women are likely to face double given the layers of patriarchy, stereotypes, access to resources and information in general. Decision-making is multi-level in nature and takes place in different spaces. For gender equality and women's economic empowerment, it is crucial that women occupy meaningful space across different levels and spheres of decision-making including private and public spheres and national, local and household levels. In some countries for example women face double barriers when they want to compete in their constituency as they have to prove that they belong to that particular time or community by birth and not through marriage- and when they attempt to contest in their birth area they are questioned on how sustainable it will be since they will be married and represent another tribe.

It is important to remember our colonial history and what effects it had on political participation for women living in rural areas. Colonialism brought with it Victorian views and norms on gender roles which meant women were "best suited" to more domestic roles. Men on the other hand did the more "serious work" of politics and economics. This in turn meant that pre-colonial roles of women and the governance structures they existed in were replaced by hierarchical and male dominated systems of oppression for women.⁴

This cuts across an entire country where it is more likely for women to enter political spaces in urban spaces as a result of less conservative gender roles. Moving from that, there is indeed a strong positive correlation between women's share in parliament and local councils. With countries in Africa having dismal female representation in parliament, it means there is even less political participation at local levels and rural areas.

⁴ Celebrating African Rural Women, African Biodiversity, < <http://africanbiodiversity.org/>>

Progress/Steps towards inclusion of rural women in development

The concept of human exclusion comes to the fore when discussing the holistic and systematic discrimination faced by African women and girls who live in rural areas. The African Social Development Index (ASDI) defines human exclusion as the result of social, economic, political, institutional and cultural barriers that are manifested in deprived human conditions and that limit the capacity of individuals to benefit and contribute to economic growth. Research shows that human exclusion is predominantly a phenomenon felt by women especially in rural areas. All citizens need to be part of the growth process, and benefit from it – regardless of where they are located.

Patterns of exclusion are influenced by the geographical location in which an individual is born and lives. People living in rural areas especially women and girls are often found to be deprived of the minimum social and economic infrastructure – including limited access to basic social services (education, health and sanitation) and decent job opportunities – that would allow individuals to develop adequately and to their full potential⁵. It is with this lens that issues affecting rural women and girls must be addressed. The complexity of holistic approach ensures that we are making progress on all aspects of their lives.

The major concern here is the fact that data on rural self-employed women is extremely scarce. A drawback is that the key data sources pertain to non-agricultural economy around urban centres.

Data and policy influencing are key to ensuring rural women are not left behind

Given the share of unemployed women in rural areas, it becomes paramount that data collection efforts do not leave most women behind. Two areas stand out in with regard towards progress and these include data and policy influencing – which also speaks to dimensions of meaningful representation and participation.

Data is key to getting an accurate picture of what exactly the gaps are and where they lie. It makes it easier for policy interventions to be impactful, relevant and meaningful in the most effective and efficient manner towards development for all. Data on rural women on the African continent however has been greatly lacking. Data is hardly disaggregated by sex and hardly ever tells a gendered story. What data that does exist tends to be heavily quantitative and without qualitative data, the lived realities of the women and girls of rural Africa go untold. The investment into data collection and analysis may seem expensive to governments, however the return on that investment will be fruitful. Globally, there is the call for a “data revolution” tied to the agenda 2030 process. Africa has the Africa Data Consensus which is the continents response to how it will approach the realm of data. It pushes for a stronger approach to inclusive data that begin to inform policy makers. Additionally, there are emerging initiatives such as Equal Measures 2030⁶ – of which FEMNET is a founding member of. Equal Measures 2030 works to ensure that there are connections made between data and evidence regarding the lives of women and girls connects with and informs advocacy and action.

⁵ The African Social Development Index Measuring human exclusion for structural transformation, UNECA 2015
<<https://www.tralac.org/images/docs/7120/african-social-development-index-issues-paper.pdf>>

⁶ <http://www.equalmeasures2030.org/>

Conclusion

Social, economic, political, institutional and cultural barriers can be remedied through the right policies and legislation and have a direct impact on the lives of rural women and girls. Tied to data is policy influencing right from local village levels through to national, regional and global levels. It is in these spaces that the voices of the women and girls from rural Africa must be heard. These voices are of the citizens who best know their lives, their problems and what they need to make them better. The lack of resources to effectively mobilise at the most local level remains a key challenge. Dr. Ambedkar's famous thoughts on educating, agitating and organising cannot be achieved without proper resourcing. Additionally there needs to be proper mechanisms for structural linkages for policy influencing right down to village levels for policy development to be inclusive and equitable. FEMNET is beginning an annual African Feminist Macroeconomic Academy which will work towards building capacity of women's rights organisations (including rural womens' organisations) to articulate their issues and work towards shaping macroeconomic global, regional and national policy processes.