



ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Does financing benefit African women?

New initiatives to track the gender impact of development funds

By Michael Fleshman


Decades after the world officially recognized a human right to gender equality, women remain largely excluded from the upper ranks of government and business, earn less than their male co-workers and face an array of customs, traditions and attitudes that limit their opportunities. Are governments, businesses and the international community putting money behind their resolutions calling for women's advancement? Are international aid budgets, government funds and private sector resources being spent in ways that narrow economic, social and political inequalities between men and women?

The answer, notes Jacinta Muteshi, the former chair of the Kenyan government's Commission on Gender and Development, is generally "no." While there has been some progress in women's political representation, advances have been limited in the economic realm, for poor women in particular. That is because disadvantages "are often anchored in social institutions, macro-economic policies and development strategies that have not adequately recognized that women are important agents of economic development and poverty reduction," Ms. Muteshi told *Africa Renewal*.



In UN Women's 2010-11 annual report, Executive Director Michelle Bachelet expressed concerns with the pace of progress: "It is not acceptable for young girls to be taken out of school, or for women to die from childbirth complications that could be prevented, but these things continue to happen every day." In a few countries, including Rwanda and South Africa, there has been an increase in the number of female

Few women in Africa work in regular, formal sector jobs, and even those generally earn too little to escape from poverty.

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parliamentarians and other elected and appointed officials.

Poverty's female face

Economic parity seems very distant. In employment, a 2008 report asserted, gender bias has meant that "women have been more

concentrated than men in informal, subsistence and ‘vulnerable’ employment,” that is, self-employment and jobs without salaries in family-owned businesses. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), more than 67 per cent of African women work in agriculture, mostly as smallholder subsistence farmers. Fewer than one in five working women in sub-Saharan Africa receive regular wages or salaries, compared to a third of employed African men and almost 93 per cent of women in the developed North.

The extra obstacles faced by women struggling to work their way out of poverty are suggested by the World Bank. Its *2010 Enterprise Survey* found that in both the public and private sectors, only 1 in 26 salaried African women was employed in a senior management position, compared to 1 in every 6 men. That lack of opportunity at home contributes to a far higher percentage of college-educated African women, nearly 28 per cent, going overseas in search of employment, compared to 17 per cent of educated men.

A stacked economic deck

The UN Development Programme and others estimate that as many as 70 per cent of the world’s poor are women. In almost every respect, Ms. Muteshi argues, the economic deck is stacked against women. Citing UN estimates, she notes that women worldwide account for two thirds of all working hours and produce half the food, but earn just 10 per cent of the world’s income and own less than 1 per cent of the world’s property.

First and foremost, she says, this gap reflects “the absence of women in economic leadership.” African women are only rarely present among senior officials at central banks or ministries of finance, planning or trade. “The same can be said of women’s representation in the private sector.”

Employers in labour-intensive businesses often prefer women as they are seen to have fewer economic options than men and are therefore willing to accept poorer wages and working conditions. Women workers are also less likely to be members of trade unions than men.

Following the money

In the 1980s, women’s rights advocates began to scrutinize public budgets to understand how financial flows affected women. Activists initially focused on the area of most importance to women, government spending. By analysing public finance through a process known as “gender budgeting” (see *Africa Renewal*, April 2002), they hoped to ensure that women benefited fairly from national spending decisions and to improve the budget-making process itself.

In a December 2007 report to the UN Commission on the Status of Women on financing for gender equality, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon noted that 50 governments around the world, including several in Africa, used gender budgeting methods to help set spending priorities. Morocco has established gender budgeting methods as part of a broader reform of its budgetary spending process.

There have been efforts to put a price tag on gender inequality. Mr. Ban’s report

Recipients of loans from Buusaa Gonofaa, a non-governmental organization: Even a little cash can help poor women expand their economic activities.

Andualem Sisay

