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Towards Gender Equality in Africa: A Review of Aspiration 6 in Agenda 2063

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Abstract

Agenda 2063 –The Africa We want, is both a vision and an action plan. It is the platform where the united voices of Africa have painted a picture of what they desire for themselves, for future generations and for the continent. Enshrined in the agenda are seven aspirations expressed by the people of Africa of the Africa they want. This paper is based on Aspiration 6 which calls for an Africa whose development is people-driven and one that relies on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth and cares for its children. It focuses on the African woman and the quest to cement her in her rightful roles in society and ultimately bridge the gender gap in Africa. This paper first examines the status of women in Africa as well as contributive factors to their continued low status in society. Furthermore, this paper proposes the concept of *aggressive womancentrism* as the way forward and highlights ways in which the African woman can be empowered to unlock her full potentials and be placed on an equal footing with men. This paper is qualitative one and utilizes an interpretivist paradigm.

Keywords: *Africa, Aspiration 6, Women, Youth, Aggressive Womancentrism*

1. Introduction

As a young girl growing up in Freetown, Sierra Leone, I realised from an early age that men and women were not treated the same. The women always seemed to be involved in household chores and taking care of the children, whilst the men tend to go out to work and seem to have a lot of free time on their hands when they are at home. Women were usually

the first to wake up and they had to get their children ready for school, prepare breakfast, clean the house and compound, fetch water and do the bulk of the house chores. Even till late in the evenings, the women were still busy doing chores like bathing the children, preparing dinner and washing up. In addition to all the household chores, some had to go to work or to their various small businesses. The women were literally the first to rise and the last to go to bed.

As I became older and more informed, I realised that the divide between men and women was greater than I thought. Most people in Sierra Leone shunned away from renting houses to women. They were usually instructed to bring a man to stand as guarantor for them. Promiscuity was accepted in men but not permissible in a woman. She will be regarded as a 'loose woman'. In fact there were local *krio* proverbs to substantiate this, such as '*Koba u hen, me kak go waka free*' (confine your girl (hen) and leave my boy (cock) to roam free). I grew up witnessing women being beaten by their husbands and boyfriends. It was accepted as a norm and an expression of love and jealousy. In the Northern parts of Sierra Leone, women were even forbidden to become chiefs and men often quote the following to justify it - 'A hen cannot crow', meaning that a woman has no say or power.

Moving away from my country of birth to other parts of Africa, it is also apparent that the divide between men and women is still operative. Many African countries are mired in tradition and cultures that promotes discrimination and abuse of human rights, especially women's rights. Against this background, this article will first of all explore some of the contributive factors for women's low status in Africa. It must be borne in mind though that the status and subjugation of African women differs as a result of factors like class, religion, nationality, ethnicity, race, age, education and others. In fact, some African women have actually broken *glass ceiling*s and have become very successful. This however does not erase the fact that the status of African women is low as compared to men. The main aim of this article however is to look at ways in bridging the gender divide between men and women in Africa and actualising Aspiration 6 of Agenda 2063: The Africa We Want. Agenda 2063 is both a vision and an action plan and a call for action to all segments of African society in working together to build a prosperous and united Africa (African Union, n.d). The aspirations of the Africa We Want, was expressed by African people themselves.

2. Methodology

I have employed a qualitative methodology for this study as it emphasizes the importance of interpretation and observation in the social world (Snape and Spencer, 2003). Within this qualitative study, I employed an interpretivist paradigm as it provides an opportunity for the voice, concerns and practises of research assistants to be heard (Weaver and Olson, 2006). As the interpretivist paradigm allows researchers to be co-creators of knowledge (Henning et al, 2004), I brought in my own positioning as an African woman and a gender studies researcher to help shape the study. Also, as an African woman, my social world is similar to that of many African woman and this has put me in good stead to make meaning and contribute to the study. I therefore write from an emic perspective. I also write from a womancentric standpoint as this paper centres around and focuses on women. As a result of the use of the interpretivist method, I was also able to engage in self-reflexivity to contribute to this study. Reflexivity is a continual consideration of the ways in which the researcher's social identity and values affect the data gathered and a picture of the social world produced (Reay 1996, pp.59-60). I was, therefore, better placed to engage with my subjectivity to structure my study. This article provides the academic space to examine aspiration 6 of Agenda 2063 and a voice for those African women denied of their human rights.

3. An Overview of Aspiration 6

Like the majority of African women, I find myself in a space where I have to contend with gender challenges and discrimination and long for an Africa where women will be treated equally like men. This can only be made possible if serious attention is paid to the aspirations enshrined in Agenda 2063. Enshrined in Aspiration 6 of the Africa desired in the Agenda is that of an Africa with the following characteristics: An Africa where development is people-driven and the potential of its women and youth is unleashed and cares for its children; An Africa where no child, woman or man will be left behind or excluded, on the basis of gender, political affiliation, religion, ethnic affiliation, locality, age or other factors; An Africa where women are empowered and play their rightful role in all spheres of life and full gender equality is maintained in all spheres of life.

Furthermore, no 48 -50 in Aspiration 6 encapsulates the rights and the status that the African woman is entitled to as outlined below:

The African woman will be fully empowered in all spheres, with equal social, political and economic rights, including the rights to own and inherit property, sign a contract, register and manage a business. Rural women will have access to productive assets, including land, credit, inputs and financial services.

All forms of violence and discrimination (social, economic, political) against women and girls will be eliminated and they will fully enjoy all their human rights. All harmful social practices (especially FGM and child marriages) will be ended and barriers to quality health and education for women and girls eliminated.

Africa of 2063 will have full gender parity, with women occupying at least 50% of elected public offices at all levels and half of managerial positions in the public and the private sector. The economic and political glass ceiling that restricted women's progress would have been shattered. (Agenda 2063, p.10)

In her 2016 African Day speech, the Chairperson of the African Union Commission (AUC), HE Dr Nkosazana Dlamini –Zuma stated that Agenda 2063 - The Africa We Want, provides a clear sense of where Africans want to go. In addition, she notes that the focus for the year is on women's rights as it is a fundamental obligation and because it makes economic sense. Thus, the 2016 theme is "Year of Human Rights with particular focus on the Rights of Women;" a theme which the chairperson notes is both an opportunity and a challenge for all Africans. Indeed this is a challenge when one considers that strides have been made over the years by various African countries to enhance the status of women, yet African women still experience various forms of discrimination and inequalities. A number of African countries have even ratified and domesticated charters and treaties that promotes equal rights for women such as the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa**.** Even countries that rank top in the African Gender Equality Index (2015) such as South Africa, Rwanda, Namibia, Mauritius and Malawi have still not been able to achieve full gender equality as yet. It is therefore as the AUC chairperson expressed in her 2016 African Day message, time to ask "ourselves critical, legitimate and tough questions as we embark on the fulfilment of the AU's vision for an integrated, prosperous and peaceful Africa."

4. Gender Politics in the African Landscape

Understanding the cause of the continuous low and unequal status of women in Africa is pivotal in the way forward. I advance that culture and religion are the two main contributors to women's continued low status in Africa and form the root of the African woman's oppression. According to Raday (2003), religious norms impose patriarchal regimes that disadvantage women and these include mandatory obedience to their spouse, inequality in inheritance rights and division of matrimonial property, non-eligibility for religious offices and little or no rights over their own bodies Although religion varies, the ideology of men being the dominant sex reverberates in most religious discourse and this is used as a vehicle to mobilize women's suppression (Hingston 2014). Hingston's (2016) study of gender and religious practises of Nigerian migrants in Durban is a good example of how religion is used by men to keep women in subordinated positions. Culture like religion is also used to suppress women. Africa like any other society has its own share of cultures and traditions and as stated earlier, some of these violate the rights of women. Many cultures condone or at least tolerate a certain amount of violence against women (UNFPA, 2000). According to the African Gender Equality Index (2015), African women face an array of barriers to achieving their full potential, from restrictive cultural practices to discriminatory laws and highly segmented labour markets. Practices such as early marriage, forced marriage, female genital mutilation, widow inheritance, wife assault, denial of education to girls, preference for sons and discriminatory treatment of women is rampant in many African countries and they are simply classed as cultural traditions (Hingston, 2014). These practices however have devastating and debilitating effect on women and girls and also put them on a lower status to men. Wife beating/ battering for instance is an accepted norm in many African cultures. In most areas in Africa, the right of a husband to beat or physically intimidate his wife comes out of a deeply held conviction (UNFPA, 2000). Additionally, men are seen as having a right to discipline their wives as they see fit. Negative consequences of wife beating/battering include injuries, chronic pain, physical disability, mental disability and can even result in death. Against this background, it is imperative that immense efforts be made to change the present landscape of African Women. I propose that African countries embrace a policy of what I will term as *aggressive womancentrism* (placing women at

the centre of all spheres of life in an aggressive way). The next section highlights ways in promoting *aggressive womancentrism*.

5. Aggressive Womancentrism Tactics

One of the first *aggressive womancentrism* tactic that should be employed is redoubling efforts in addressing religious and cultural factors that negatively affect African women. Starting with religion, it is important not only to draw attention to how religion is used to socially control women, but it is also essential that theological doctrines be reconstructed within new paradigms to promote gender equality (Hingston, 2014). Furthermore, religious leaders should be engaged in meaningful conversations to explore ways in working towards gender parity without overly compromising religious beliefs. In terms of culture, attempts by African states to introduce legislation that upholds human rights above customs and cultural traditions have not been successful. This indicates that formal legislative enactments alone cannot change pervasive cultural attitudes (Ibawoh, 2000). Despite the tendency to portray culture as stubbornly resistant, it is subjected to change and this offers hope. According to Ibawoh (2000), community involvement offers the best prospects for a culturally sensitive solution in resolving the conflict between national human rights and cultural traditions. Efforts to change harmful traditions are most effective when they originate within the culture that practices them (Hersh, 1998). African Governments should therefore enlist the cooperation of community leaders and traditional leaders to alter or eradicate harmful traditional practises. This is vital as these leaders are influential enough to convince their people to abstain from or alter harmful traditional practices. Legislation however should not be thrown out of the window. These efforts must be complemented by legislation to ensure the upkeep of resolutions reached. It is certain that efforts to eradicate some of these harmful traditional practises will be met by stiff opposition by members of society, largely men, but also from some women as well. It is a fact that women themselves can be active supporters of traditional harmful practises. For instance, 80 per cent of women surveyed in rural Egypt justified wife beating, especially if the woman refused to have sex with her partner (UNFPA, 2000).

There is bound to be arguments favouring cultural relativism (the ideology that every culture should be respected and have a right of expression) when cultural practises that impact women negatively are challenged. As Raday notes (2003), cultural practises have been

frequently invoked in international and constitutional law as a form of defence against gender equality claims even though they impinge on human rights and preserve patriarchy at the expense of women. There will also be a tendency for arguments about African culture being measured by a western lens to ensue. The imposition of universal human rights is at times interpreted by some as a western concept undermining Africa culture. Whilst I agree that cultural traditions have every right of expression and that each culture is unique, it should be within a human rights framework and certainly not at the expense of women. As Zechenter (1997) admonishes, in retaining the uniqueness of every culture, it is also necessary to retain human rights.

As part of the *aggressive womancntrism tactics*, education should be a must for the girl child and an enabling environment must be put in place to support this. It should be backed by a legislation wherein a penalty will be levied for failure to send a girl child to school. Free education and provision of uniforms, books and food to girls from poor families should be instituted. In addition, the concept of positive discrimination can be applied wherein girls are given priority in the awarding of scholarships and other educational aid. In a nutshell, an enabling environment should be put in place that will assist girls in going to school and pursuing higher or tertiary education once they leave school. Further *aggressive womancentrism tactics* are outlined below.

Gender or women studies should be taught in African schools from an early grade. Both boys and girls should be exposed from an early age to the fact that although they differ biologically, they should be treated equally. This will go a long way in changing mindsets of the upcoming African generation. In addition, Gender and Women's studies with an emphasis on accelerating aspiration 6 should also be instituted as a core subject in tertiary institutions, at least for a term. This will provide the opportunity for all who go through tertiary institutions to engage with issues affecting women and explore ways to address them. It will also put them in a better position to be able to identify and address inequalities in their workplaces.

Efforts should be made by African governments and other stakeholders to place more women in leadership positions in the social, political and economic arena as well as in both the private and public sphere. This should be done not only to bridge the gender gap in leadership but also because research has shown that women can be good leaders and may even be better and effective leaders than men (See Adam and Ferreira 2009; Eagly, 2013; Eagly and Johannesen –Schmidt, 2007;

Goetz, 2007). According to a study by Development Dimensions international (DDI, 2014), the companies that perform best financially are the ones that have the greatest numbers of women in leadership roles. Even, within their traditional roles as caretakers, nurturers and custodians of indigenous knowledge, African women have shown leadership qualities and are central to the household economy and the welfare of their families (African Gender Equality Index 2015). The promotion of female leadership in Africa will evidently result in the continent's sustainable development. Above all, it will enable African women to have a say in issues affecting their lives and provide the opportunity for them to redress it.

Community Conversations are also useful as they bring the people in the community together to discuss and dialogue about issues affecting their lives and to find a way forward. These conversations should involve men particularly as they are usually the stumbling block in women's emancipation. The statement by the AUC chairperson, that investing in African women is a guarantee for sustainable peace, community stability and cohesion and contributes in the prosperity of families, communities and the continent as a whole should be constantly reiterated in these gatherings.

6. Conclusion

The media has the power to influence attitudes and behaviour. This power could be exploited in favour of women's empowerment. African nations should therefore embark on massive mass media campaigns and advocacy to drive home female empowerment, women's rights and the importance of affording women equal opportunities with men. Journalists, media personnel and all media houses should be involved in this campaign. Public and private institutions should also be persuaded to do their bit. They should be encouraged to institute centres in their organisations that will focus on promoting women's rights and providing an enabling environment for empowering women in diverse ways. The Centre for Women Leadership at the Management College of Southern Africa is one such attempt by a private institution to promote women leadership.

I further propose the setting up of government or independent gender/women's commission in all African countries. These will be instrumental in monitoring the status of women in the workplace and their communities and addressing existing inequalities. These

commissions should also provide a platform for women to express their concerns or make a complaint. Furthermore, all African countries should have a Women Affairs ministry that will focus solely on women's issues and their empowerment. It should also provide legal assistance for women when needed. Furthermore, this ministry should be instrumental in rolling out nationwide workshops and seminars that focuses on empowering girls and women and to expose girls to successful women who will serve as role models for them. Mentoring and coaching programmes for girls and women can also be instituted as it is vital for growth and development.

Aspiration 6 and all other aspirations of Agenda 2063 could be greatly fast tracked if African governments emulate Malawi's example of embarking on a campaign to push for accelerated efforts in implementing AU charters and protocols. The 'My African Union' 2015 campaign launched in Malawi aims at bridging the gap between Malawian citizens and the African Union and provides a platform for all stakeholders to work together in implementing the African Union instruments. Initiatives could be taken by other African countries to implement a similar campaign or a process that will accelerate the aspirations of Agenda 2063.

Borrowing the words of the AUC chairperson in her 2016 African day message, Aspiration 6 and all the other aspirations in Agenda 2063 cannot happen without a strong commitment to the principle of African solidarity which was demonstrated in Africa's liberation struggles and the recent fight against Ebola. Also, the journey towards aspiration 6 cannot be completed without the collaborative efforts of the Government, Civil Society Organisations and other stakeholders. In light of this, it is important that all stake holders come on board to make aspiration 6 a reality. Above all, African women as the ultimate beneficiaries should be the key players in the realisation of this aspiration. It is therefore time for all African women to figure out and implement what they can do individually and collectively to achieve aspiration 6 in Agenda 2063. I argue that if all African governments embrace and implement the concept of *aggressive womancentrism*, then Aspiration 6 in Agenda 2063 is on the road to reality. As the nurturers and caretakers in society, it goes without saying that when women are empowered, they in turn are able to unlock the potentials of youths and care better for their children, thus fulfilling the aim of aspiration 6. Finally, based on the above arguments and suggestions, I argue that *aggressive womancentrism* is the key to achieving gender equality in Africa.

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