

Economic empowerment of women is good for all

By [Kingsley Ighobor](#)

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Government staffer Souhayata Haidara enjoys talking about her life in a patriarchal society. Her career is a triumph of patience and perseverance, she tells Africa Renewal with a smile and a wink. Haidara, currently the special adviser to Mali's minister of environment and sustainable development, says she was lucky not to be married off at age 14 like some of her peers. Her father resisted pressure from suitors and relatives and insisted that the teenager be allowed to complete high school before getting married.



Image source: Gallo/Getty

“In our culture, people believe education is for boys and that the women must marry and stay at home,” she says.

Women’s economic empowerment is anchored by education, says Haidara, who earned a degree in environmental science in the US on a scholarship from the United States Agency for International Development. “I couldn’t be where I am today without education. I earn an income. I educated my three children — a boy and two girls, now grown. I have a six-year-old granddaughter who is getting the best grades in class. That makes me very happy.”

But Brandilyn Yadeta, a 32-year-old Ethiopian, missed out on education. “I had a baby at 19 and the father travelled abroad without letting me know. Since then, I continue to struggle to take care of my child, which is my priority, above my education.” She is a small-scale trader. If the father refuses to pay child support for his child, what options does a woman have? “What can I do?” Yadeta asks with frustration and regret.

Yadeta and others like her in Africa are unsung heroes, taking care of the family, a job mostly unrecognised by their society. Yet in monetary terms, women's unpaid work accounts for between 10% and 39% of GDP, according to the UN Research Institute for Social Development, which provides policy analysis on development issues.

The International Labour Organisation states that women are disproportionately laden with the responsibility for unpaid care and domestic work. It highlights this issue to make the case for economic empowerment of women, which is now a front-burner topic in development literature.

Sub-Saharan Africa leads in reforms

A World Bank report titled *Women, Business and the Law 2019: A Decade of Reform* states that sub-Saharan Africa “had the most reforms promoting gender equality [of any region]”. In fact, six of the top 10 reforming countries are there — the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Guinea, Malawi, Mauritius, São Tomé and Príncipe, and Zambia.

Despite a protracted political crisis, the DRC made the most improvement based in part on “reforms allowing women to register businesses, open bank accounts, sign contracts, get jobs and choose where to live in the same way as men”, states the report.

Mauritius introduced civil remedies for sexual harassment at work and prohibited discrimination in access to credit based on gender. The civil remedies include a prohibition of employers from sexually harassing an employee or a job seeker while an employee must not sexually harass a fellow employee. Mauritius also mandated equal pay between men and women for work of equal value.

São Tomé and Príncipe equalised mandatory retirement ages and the ages at which men and women can receive full pension benefits — a move that increased the country's female labour force participation by 1.75%.

The World Bank's report by no means suggests that all is well with women in these countries. The report merely highlights positive incremental changes countries are making.

The DRC, for example, may have implemented some pro-women's empowerment reforms, but women in that country still have no land or inheritance rights, according to the Global Fund for Women, a nonprofit.

Theodosia Muhulo Nshala, executive director of the Women's Legal Aid Centre, a nonprofit in Tanzania, tells *Africa Renewal* that “men and women [in Tanzania] have equal rights to land ownership, thanks to the Village Land Act of 1999; however, customary laws exist that prevent women and girls from inheriting land from their husbands and fathers”.

While women's participation in the labour force (mostly in the informal sector) is high in many SSA countries — 86% in Rwanda, 77% in Ethiopia and 70% in Tanzania — only in eight countries (Gabon, Ghana, Kenya, Libya, Namibia, South Africa, Uganda and Zimbabwe) do more than 50% of women own bank accounts, according to the Global Financial Inclusion Database, which regularly publishes country-level indicators of financial inclusion.



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Not a zero-sum game

Economically empowering women is not a zero-sum game in which women win and men lose, notes Urban Institute, a policy think tank in Washington, DC. Rather, by advancing women's equality, global GDP annual growth could be boosted by \$12tn or 11% by 2025, according to McKinsey Global Institute, a US-based management consulting firm.

And UN Women, an entity for gender equality and women's empowerment, states: "Investing in women's economic empowerment sets a direct path towards gender equality, poverty eradication and inclusive economic growth."

On the flip side, since 2014 sub-Saharan African economies have lost about \$95bn yearly because of the gender gap in the labour market, says Ahunna Eziakonwa, director of UNDP's Regional Bureau for Africa. "So imagine if you unleash the power, talent and resolve of women."

Experts believe that women's economic empowerment is the key to achieving the African Union's Agenda 2063, a continental framework for socioeconomic transformation of the continent, and several goals in the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. That includes Goal 1, ending poverty; Goal 2, achieving food security; Goal 3, ensuring health; Goal 5, achieving gender equality; Goal 8, promoting full and productive employment and decent work for all; and Goal 10, reducing inequalities.

Aspiration 6 of Agenda 2063 envisages an "Africa whose development is people driven, relying on the potential offered by people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children."



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Taking action

What can countries do to empower women economically?

In a blog for the World Bank, Cape Verde's minister of finance, planning and public administration Cristina Duarte and the World Bank's vice president for infrastructure Makhtar Diop recently encouraged "support [for] young women during adolescence — a critical juncture in their lives". The Empowerment and Livelihood for Adolescents programme in Uganda, which "uses girl-only clubs to deliver vocational and 'life skills' training," is a good example, according to Duarte and Diop.

The World Bank recommends, among other actions, the passage of laws that foster financial inclusion. Eziakonwa believes that countries must expunge laws that are obstacles in women's way, including those that prohibit them from owning land. South African journalist Lebo Matshego is urging women's rights activists to use social media to lobby against those customs and traditions that infringe on the rights of women.

Vera Songwe, head of the Economic Commission for Africa, the first woman to lead the organisation, says women, especially in rural areas, need access to the internet to be able to take advantage of new technologies.

The UN secretary-general's 2018 CSW report titled Challenges and opportunities in achieving gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls advises countries to "design and implement fiscal policies that promote gender equality and the empowerment of rural women and girls by investing in essential infrastructure (ICT, sustainable energy, sustainable transport and safely managed water and sanitation)".

According to Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, former president of Liberia, affirmative action is the way to go. She says that "now is the time for preferential treatment of women", such as quotas on jobs and access to credit.

UN Women supported a review of Kenyan public procurement in 2013, and Kenya now reserves a minimum of 30% of annual government spending for women. In 2017, through its Women's Economic Empowerment programme, UN Women reported successfully training 1,500 women vendors in Nairobi to participate and benefit from the government supply chain. This is one example of an action in line with Sirleaf's suggestion.

The quality of jobs that women do also matters, writes Abigail Hunt, a researcher with the Overseas Development Institute, a UK-based think tank. “Empowerment is limited when women enter the labour market on unfavourable terms. This includes women’s engagement in exploitative, dangerous or stigmatised work, with low pay and job insecurity.” In other words, women need access to high-paying, safe and secure jobs.

“The road to women’s economic empowerment is irreversible,” maintains Sirleaf. “It’s taking a while to get it, but it’s coming; no one can stop it.”

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