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Promoting Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment for Sustainable Development in Africa

Fatai A. Lawal; Omisade E. Ayoade; and Akeem A. Taiwo

Department of Business Management,

Covenant University,

Ota, Nigeria

{fatai.lawal; omisade.ayoade; akeem.taiwo}@stu.cu.edu.ng

Abstract - Promoting gender equality is an essential component of the development strategy that seeks to enable people, both men and women, to reduce their poverty level and bring about improvement in the standard of living. An important element of sustainable development is to manage the natural resource base on which human activity depends. However, socially-constructed roles of men and women (which clearly manifest in lifestyles, consumption patterns, access to resources and power, decision-making and environmental effects) and deprivation of women due to discrimination, gender-segregated employment and traditional attitudes constitute source of concern in sustainable development initiatives. The study adopted the review of secondary data and information in exploring gender issues within and across the facets of sustainable development. Investing in girls and women (in all its ramifications), supporting their specific needs as entrepreneurs, workers, home-based consumers, producers, drivers of low-emission climate-resilient economies, and instituting sustainable development framework that confronts the discriminatory social norms and practices will promote gender equality and achieve development that is more sustainable. The study contributes to knowledge in the fields of gender studies, environment, and sustainable development where furtherance of gender-responsive policy focus, planning and implementation is the major thrust.

Key Words: *Sustainable development, gender equality, entrepreneur, natural resource, strategy.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Gender equality and women's empowerment is a fundamental development goal that is globally entrenched and envisioned for sustainable development. Women play significant and diverse roles from home, to workplace, to society, as a homemaker, societal well-being and job seeker, and job provider respectively. Promoting gender equality is

an essential component of the development strategy that seeks to enable people, both men and women, to reduce their poverty and bring about improvement in the standard of living. The role of women is of paramount interest to the economy of nations in view of their constituting about 50 % of the world population [1]. Therefore, women inclusion in all facets of economic endeavour is fundamental to bring gender inequality to a decline and promoting overall economic growth. This is in view of the ripple effects that a woman's economic empowerment has on her children and family, society and the entire nation. The crucial task for the post-2015 sustainable development agenda is to migrate from unsustainable policy outlines, towards policies that foster sustainable production and consumption, protect the most susceptible and develop resilience of nations and communities to climate and other environmental and socio-economic risks. The promotion of gender equality has dual rationale vis-à-vis entrenching human rights and social justice (equal opportunities, rights and responsibilities), and ensuring that boundless equality between men and women is a pre-condition for sustainable people-centred development [2].

According to UNDP [3], it is acknowledged that significant progress has been accomplished on many millennium development goals (MDGs) such as poverty reduction, decrease in infant and child mortality and on education but inequalities in varied dimensions including extensive environmental degradation, economic crises with gender-based inequalities being perceived as retarding progress on many development goals. A far-reaching development approach therefore involves gender-sensitive growth strategies that invest in women empowerment to effectively contribute to economic development. It is widely acknowledged that there is active participation of women as economic agents in Africa than anywhere in the world with their involvement in significant contribution to agriculture, with the ownership of one third of firms, and in some countries constituting up to 70% of employees [4]. This is without prejudice to the fact that women often face a barrage

of challenges ranging from restrictive practices, to discriminatory laws and extensively segmented labour markets. Consequently, getting rid of gender inequality and ensuring the empowerment of women has the potential to promote the productive capacity of over one billion Africans. It is apparent that in a number of African societies (as shown in diverse production systems such as pastoral / agricultural), traditional roles imposed on men and women affect greatly the role of gender and gender equality [5]. To a large extent, the traditional roles and cultural beliefs that is socially constructed lead to the acceptance and practise of gender discrimination at an early stage.

Entrepreneurship is a vital avenue by which women could empower themselves towards partaking in economic development in the absence of other forms of employment. According to Blomquist, Chastain, Tickett, Unnikrishnan and Woods [6], women own 40% of businesses less than men with a large number of men more likely starting, sustaining and growing their own businesses. The imbalance and perceived gap is attributed to differences in men and women access to human capital (skills, business knowledge and experience), financial capital (monetary resources), and social capital (access to networks, formal and informal mentor relationships). In the opinion of Blomquist et al [6], women tends to have less access to the three types of capital and hence are less able to optimize opportunities that are available to them.

A. Statement of the Problem

Women often encounter an array of challenges (such as work hour restriction, and the type of job they are permitted to engage in), thus depriving them of the need to harness opportunities in being a completely productive members of the labour force. The often omission of women from the green economy as a result of decreasing access to green opportunities in primary, secondary and tertiary sectors owing to discrimination, gender-segregated employment, and traditional attitudes also constitute source of concern in sustainable development initiative. It has been reported that Africa is leading in the world averages in relation to women participation in politics with seventeen countries now having quotas for women at the national and sub-national levels. Records has it that amongst 30 countries in the world with at least 30% women representation in national parliaments, 10 are African countries with Rwanda breaking the records in 2013 with 63% of her parliamentarians being women [7]. Also many Africa countries have made giant effort in bridging gender gaps (especially in primary education), though still lagging behind other continents of the world. Despite these feats, the developments have not translated into improvement in women's decision-making capacity and economic empowerment.

B. Objective of the Study

This strategic focus of the study is to explore the facets of gender inequality and over-arching consideration on sustainability with a view to establishing the extent to which women empowerment can complement sustainable development in Africa. Consequently, attempt will be made

to proffer answers to the following research questions as offshoot of problems hitherto identified:

1. What is the relationship between gender equality and sustainable development?
2. How impactful are women towards sustainable development?
3. What strategies can be deployed towards bridging gender inequality and promoting women's empowerment for sustainable development?

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A. Concept of Gender and Gender Equality

According to Oakley (1972, cited in Shava and Rungani, [8]), gender refers to involuntary grouping of humanity into "masculine and "feminine". This involuntary grouping often imbue multi-dimensional behavioural perceptions being ascribed to male and female with the masculine positioned to have domineering role over women. Gender is thus seen as a social construct that assigns diverse qualities and rights to women and men irrespective of individual capability or desires [9]. Ojalamm [5] viewed gender as social attributes (learned through association), relationship, and opportunities associated with being male and female. OSAG [2] emphasised that the concept of gender refers to the consideration of both men and women, the relations existing between them and not a situation where gender is interchangeable with women. Hence promoting gender equality concerns and engages men as well as women.

It is a universal phenomenon to see women perform substantial work at home without pay while men obtain these services and are still ascribed the headship role and family providers. Consequently, understanding gender denotes proper dimensioning of opportunities, constraints and the effects of change as they impact on both men and women. Tchouassi [10] sees systematic discrimination against women in social groups as a manifestation of power structure that causes some degree of imbalance, conflict, suffering, and marginalisation. He further stress that the concept of gender is not restricted to men and women only but the relationship of power between them and other groups that are marginalized such as the handicapped. Gender and gender power become manifested throughout the strata of society, with women shouldering responsibility for health and social care domestically and at the workplace, while men are at liberty to utilize a significant proportion of leisure time to chase careers/work and to partake in decision-making at all levels of public life.

Gender equality denotes a state of affairs in which men and women experience the same opportunities in all walks of life and similar consideration in terms of allocation of resources and rights. Johnsson-Latham [9], in his study on gender equality as a prerequisite for sustainable development cited Sweden as a typical nation that has successfully incorporated gender equality in her sustainability programme, guaranteeing women the right to their own body, to own land, to sexual and reproductive health and rights, financial equality with men as well as the

right to have equal say as men in decisions impacting any facet of sustainable development.

B. Gender Equality and Sustainable development

Sustainable development is often considered as varied interaction between social, economic and ecological dimensions of development. It is more importantly being perceived primarily as environmental sustainability with gender concerns often neglected. Achieving sustainability depends on paying equal attention to social, economic, and environmental factors and their harmonisation through sustainable development strategies. Green economy initiatives, a sustainable development strategy aimed at creating more environmentally-sound economies may not fully include basic and essential social requirements such as job quality, income equity, and gender equality. The Brundtland Report [11] provides the most quoted definition of sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own need”. According to World Bank [12] (cited in Tchouassi [10]), development is concerned with societal well-being (in terms of access to safe water, rate of poverty, access to health care services, access to sanitation, life expectancy at birth, infant and maternal mortality rate, population estimate, and the process of achieving transformation of the society, adult illiteracy, population estimates, and gross domestic product. More succinctly, sustainable development is conceptualised as lying on three inter-related pillars: social development, environmental protection, and social development, with a fourth pillar – the preservation of cultural diversity [13]. As further highlighted by UNECE [13], a key objective of sustainable development is the need to satisfy the present, while calling for impartial distribution of resources amongst those living today. This is without undermining the strategic perspective to give account for what men and women are bequeathing for the next generation.

Sharma [1] opined that in many countries, the pillars of sustainable development are not sympathetic to the plight of the female party from the perspective of the society where an individual inhabits, propagates and practices culture on the following grounds, thus not projecting the tenets of sustainable development:

- Global data reveals that 35% per cent of women worldwide have experienced violence either physically and/or sexually more than once in their life.
- Women are far low in education, economic participation, physical safety and health.

The prevailing patterns and forms of production, consumption and distribution worldwide are heading towards unsustainable direction. The significant diminution of vital habitats and biodiversity occasioned by pollution of land, seas, and the atmosphere, floods, droughts and other forms of natural disasters add to poverty and inequality for people that depend on natural resources for their well-being and also a threat to future generations [14]. Also human interaction with the agitated environment, producing extraordinary stresses and shocks (due to devastated rural

and urban landscapes) creates unsustainable patterns of development with girls and women often affected disproportionately economically, socially and environmentally. Thus, the raving international debate now focuses on the need to move societies and economies by enabling prosperity through green economies or avert catastrophe and crisis.

C. Concept of Empowerment

The meaning of the term empowerment varies and it depends on the political, cultural and socio-economic context in which it is represented. Empowerment is a multi-faceted social process that assists people to have control over their own lives, communities, and societies (EP Report, 2016). World Bank [12] defines empowerment as “the expansion of freedom of choice and actions and increasing one’s authority and control over the resources and decisions that affects one’s life.” Thus by extension, women’s empowerment implies women gaining control and power over their own lives such that their rights, opportunities and responsibilities will be independent of whether they are born female or male. Women’s empowerment is deemed important in achieving gender equality. According to OSAGI [2], an empowered woman possess a sense of self-worth, has the capability to define her own choices, has access to resources and a wide array of opportunities she can pursue as well as being able to persuade the direction of social change to fashion a more just economic and social order locally and internationally. OSAGI [2] further maintain that empowerment is not a zero-sum game where women’s gain automatically translate to losses for men, but rather a phenomenon where men are brought alongside women in the change process. Thus, the empowerment of women is needed in so as to narrow the gender gap and establish a level playing field between men and women for gender equality to be reached and maintained [13].

D. Issues in Gender Inequality

Gender inequality has been the conception as far back as the era of Aristotle (Greece ancient philosopher) when women are being perceived as weak, cautious, and only good to be domesticated for home comfort, with men being considered as the strong, independent, adventurous, active, and rational. The practice is still the norm in some societies till today and the implication is the undermining of level of women participation in socio-economic activities which is considerable especially in entrepreneurship development. Women are adjudged to be the most underutilised resources in the world going by the lower level of participation in the labour force relative to men even when they constitute half of the world’s human capital. According to OECD [19], the employment gender gap is more prominent in OECD countries like Mexico, Italy and Greece with fewer than 50% women in paid employment, working part-time and earning less than men due to persistent gender wage disparity. Women undertake chunk of unpaid care work across all cultures and economies. More importantly, this is noticeable in many societies where existing norms command that women and girls shoulder the main responsibility for caring for children, the sick, elderly, as well as household runs providing water, energy supplies and cooking [7]. This

undercuts their possibilities of schooling or being able to harness and secure incomes and better working conditions on their own productive activities. The fact remains that there would be significant contribution to GDP if the bulk of household activities and childcare are valued to form part of national accounting.

According to AfDB [7], gender equality is both a development goal on one side and a pre-condition for the attainment of other development outcomes on the other side. Equally, it is an issue of human rights and that of smart economies. Gender inequality remains an important hindrance towards achieving economic growth and poverty reduction as evidence in many societies where girls and women do not have equal rights, opportunities, responsibilities and access to services as boys and men. AfDB reports [7] attest to the fact Africa trails other developing regions in poverty reduction with the poor constituting about 50% in Africa, whereas 15.8% worldwide in 2010. Growth within the African continent is significantly hindered as a result of alarming unemployment and the failure of GDP growth to reduce gender disparity. Women across Africa are at a disadvantage both in statutory and customary law. The issue of women's inheritance to land and other properties (as entrenched in the marriage law in Cote d'Ivoire) where the husband is the head of the household in charge of all assets including land is a clear manifestation of this development (BBC News 12 June 2013, cited in AfDB [7]). Thus in the event of the demise of the husband, the male relatives take possession of the land leaving nothing behind for the woman to thrive on. Though government of Cote d'Ivoire have made attempts to change the law to reflect joint ownership between husband and wife, education and sensitisation is needed especially in the rural areas where social norms and custom still dictate that women are men's property.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, there are several issues which raise concern for women including exclusion of women from land ownership, polygamy, existence of patriarchal systems, female genital mutilation, and early marriages [24]. The pervasiveness of female genital mutilation in many African countries (especially among illiterates in rural areas) and HIV/AIDS pandemic affecting young women is a major issue of concern. AGI [4] provides an elaborate perspective on phenomenon of gender inequality in Africa and reiterates the fact that though Agriculture is the backbone of Africa's economy, providing 70% employment (with women playing major role and constituting up to two-third of the work force), women farmers have less access to farm inputs such as land, credit, fertilizers, extension services and new technologies, thereby making their yields significantly lower than those of male farmers.

Women expend less hours in paid employment than men, working part-time in order to harmonise their family responsibilities and employment, and therefore accumulate less income than men in their lifetime. The discrepancies in earnings often increase women's vulnerability to poverty and economic dependence on the male breadwinner. In a related development, World Bank Study (2001) pointed out the following:

- Women utilises more of their time caring for others than men, thus suffering a greater deal of time poverty than men (i.e. men have more leisure time than me).
- Women give priority to others, while men invest more resources in them-selves.
- To enable women take on paid job, they often depend on external child care and men do not.
- Women give more priority than men to take care of interests and needs of the family, expending chunk purchasing convenience goods, while men's incomes are deployed for capital goods.

E. Contributions of Governmental and Non-Governmental Agencies towards Promoting Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment.

The central role of gender equality, the realisation of women's rights and women's empowerment in attaining sustainable development has been consistently recognised judging from a number of international norms and agreements entered into by governmental and non-governmental organisations. Amongst the recent developments include:

- Principle 20 of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (adopted in 1992 by member states) which makes it clear in its statement and communiqué the full participation of women as being critical to actualising sustainable development [14].
- The 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action (BDfA) that launched the concept of gender mainstreaming with 12 key areas flagged, emphasising the need for urgent action to ensure greater opportunities and equality for women and men (EP report, 2016). The twelve critical area of concern highlighted are: women and poverty, education and training of women, women and health, violence against women, women and armed conflict, women and the economy, women in power and decision-making, institutional mechanisms for the advancement of women, human rights of women, women and the media, women and the environment, and the girl child.

F. Women's Concern towards Sustainable Development

1) Women Entrepreneurship

Women play an important role in African economies with high presence in the micro and small business sub-sector with majority of them engaging in low income generating self-employment especially non-agricultural and agricultural activities with low growth prospect. The contribution of Women entrepreneurship to income generation and poverty alleviation is quite significant in both least developed and most developed economies. According to OECD [19], the number of businesses owned by women in developed economies of USA and Canada is overshadowing those owned by men, notwithstanding the observed inadequacies inherent in the regulatory, legal and

administrative context which engenders gender bias against women's involvement in economic activities. A handful of these biases are premised on tradition and socio-cultural frameworks vis-à-vis: rights to own land, rights to inheritance, and right to set up business in own name.

Women encounter different challenges at different stages in entrepreneurship process (e.g. opportunity identification, exploitation and fund-sourcing). OECD [19] identifies such obstacles militating against greater entrepreneurship involvement by women to include unsuitable educational background, dearth of role models, the gendering of entrepreneurship, feeble social status, competing demands on time – particularly connected with family concerns, and inadequate access to finance. Consequently, the extent for women to realise their potential as entrepreneurs is a function of both the status and role of women in society, coupled with the forces operating within the society which influence entrepreneurship.

Individuals with significant prior managerial business ownership and industry experience can contribute remarkable proficiency in diverse business functional areas such as decision making. A number of evidences support the fact women who own businesses possess the capability to improve the economic fortune of the firm's performance with the tendency to adapt to continually changing marketing environment via excellent negotiating and superb team building skills. Studies conducted by Catalyst [15] shows that Fortune 500 firms with board of directors consisting of more women posted improved financial performance including higher returns on capital invested (66%), equity (53%) and turnover (42%) respectively (66%). Likewise, large organisations with top management positions occupied by higher proportion of women validated outstanding performance within the parameters of innovation, accountability, work environment and profits [18].

A number of factors identified by Das [16] as having influence on entrepreneurship activities and success (which affects men and women differently) based on research from western nations includes the following:

- antecedent influences (i.e., background factors such as family influences and genetic factors that affect motivation, skills and knowledge),
- the "incubator organization" (i.e., the nature of the organization that the entrepreneur was employed in prior to starting a business, the skills learned there)
- environmental factors (e.g., economic conditions, access to venture capital and support services; role models).

Das [16] further established that women entrepreneur in developing countries (like India) were able to achieve some level of success due to lower level of work-family conflicts (i.e., stronger family support system), access to paid household helps, and strong government funding programmes specially set up for women entrepreneurs which accounts for the reason why a number of women were able to have access to start-up capitals different from those from outside funding agencies.

2) *Women and Agricultural Activities*

According to AGI (2015) report, it has been observed that women are more active as economic agents in Africa than anywhere across the world, performing significant proportion of agricultural activities, having ownership of one-third of firms and constituting about 70% of employees in some countries as well as playing central household economic roles and seeing to the welfare of their families. Women own up to 62% of businesses in Cote d'Ivoire even though they are micro-enterprises with low value added potentials of marginal returns. Their entrepreneurial pursuits are more of necessity than opportunity driven.

3) *Women and Eco-Consciousness*

Women have been shown to demonstrate the propensity to demonstrate eco-conscious attitude in their household purchases. Within the context of the environment, studies of household behaviour carried out by OECD [20] revealed the more inclination of women to buy eco-labelled, recyclable and energy-efficient products than men with women now responsible for buying some 80% of household items in developed countries. According to Stevens [23], quite a number of studies based on Sweden emphasise that women devote more time than men looking for information on sustainable consumption lifestyle options such as purchasing green, eating organic foods, and recycling at a higher rate than men. In the same vein, studies show that Japanese women are more eager to pay more for sustainable products, thus showing more concern than men on environmental issues.

4) *Women and Care*

Women play a powerful role in educating and socialising their children in addition to teaching them responsibility and care with respect to the use and protection of natural resources. Thus adequate recognition must be accorded their contribution to sustainable development with the deployment of their skills and knowledge.

G. *Strategies for Promoting Gender Equality and Women Empowerment*

The process of empowerment rest on women themselves and it encompasses raising consciousness, participation, and organizing themselves. It can also be facilitated through education, capacity building, training and other measures with change happening in the structures and legal frameworks (property rights, family laws etc.) so as to make the self-transformation process of empowerment sustainable (World Bank 2001).

1) *Women's Education*

Sustainable development is a far reaching dream in any nation or society where participation of women is not entrenched. If sustainable development is desired, the pillars (social, societal and environment) have to be channelled in preference for women, and women education is apposite. According to [1], women education is the need of the hour that guarantees empowerment, improves economic position,

gives income through employment prospects, and improves self-confidence etc. Thus, educating women is a foremost factor that brings about gender equality and women uplifting for sustainable development. The proportion of women in leadership position is quite low, thus limiting their influence and power to affect environmental policies. About 18% of legislative positions worldwide are held by women while in some countries, there are no female representations [23]. Steven [23] further stressed that when there is representation of women on governing bodies, there is tendency for overall quality of governance to rise while levels of corruption decline. He reiterated the balance participation of women and men in public life as one of the basis of the 1979 United Nations Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination against women (CEDAW).

2) *Bridging the Gender Entrepreneurship Gap*

Economic inclusion of women in all spheres of activities is fundamental to reducing gender inequality and promoting economic growth and sustainable development as women economic participation through empowerment have ripple effect on their entire constituency (children, family, society and nation). The underlying differences in the men's tendency to start, sustain and grow business reside principally in the men's access to human, financial and social capital. According to Blomquist et al [6], bridging the entrepreneurship gap can be achieved by helping women develop Social Capital through Networks building and Mentoring so that their economic potentials could be optimised. This will enable women take advantage of benefits inherent in the power of network as follows:

- Acquiring better business ideas, developing new and improved business skills, sharing of experiences with entrepreneurs that can further lead to gaining valuable business insight, and receiving feedback on innovative business solutions, processes and ideas.
- Access to valuable business connections through collaborations that engenders credibility.
- Enhanced access to varied source of funding including micro-financing and loans from cooperative societies.
- Network provides women with emotional support in starting and sustaining their business especially that they need to maintain a balance between their ventures and family obligations.

3) *Give Women Credit*

To graduate and project women's income-earning activities from survival or subsistence level into strong and thriving businesses, women require access to complete range of credit, banking and financial facilities and services for full development of their productive assets [21]. Conservative lending practices is the pre-occupation of banks in developing countries, with small women-owned businesses facing difficulties in accessing the credit needed to invest in business expansion. Microfinance (including micro-credits) is often considered to be an instrument that promotes empowerment, providing start-up funds for

productive investment, helping poor people to even consumption flows.

4) *Access to Tools, Innovations and Agricultural Extension Services*

Access to technology (such as fuel-efficient stoves, motorised scooters, and other time-conserving products) can promote women's productivity, entrepreneurial opportunities and economic decision-making [21]. Across different countries and contexts, women have less access than men to a range of agricultural technologies such as machine and tools, pest control measures, improved plant varieties, and management techniques. Often times, tools and technologies have been adapted to men's task, thus women to use handheld tools while cultivating and harvesting.

5) *Building Women's Capacity*

One dimension of women's empowerment is the removal of obstacles militating against complete women's participation and involvement in sustainable development, while the other dimension is to focus on women directly to enable them get more involved. The tools that can be deployed to meet the needs of women towards appropriate capacity building are training programmes that guarantees access to relevant knowledge and information [13].

III. CONCLUSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Sustainable development is more of a political concept because it essentially places emphasis on good governance which will be difficult to accomplish until there is closeness to gender parity. Thus, achieving sustainable development implies reconciling economic, environmental, and social concerns and objectives. All sustainable development policies and outlines at the local, national, regional and global levels must include an explicit obligation to gender equality and the realization of women's and girls' human rights and competences. This necessitates redressing gender inequalities, disadvantage and discrimination, and addressing their connection with other inequalities. The inclusion of women in more productive roles, women's collective action and equal participation in all aspects of decision-making related to policy development will be an assured way of moving faster towards sustainability in the social, economic and environmental sense.

Women's empowerment is a process that embraces the formation of an enabling environment for women devoid of discrimination, as well as reinforcing women's capability to assume control over their own lives and contribute fully towards ushering the desired changes in the society. The empowerment process therefore needs to be pursued vigorously through concerted efforts and commitment of government, civil society and the corporate sector. Furthermore, equal participation of men and women in decision-making, an unbiased involvement of women and men in all policy sections and implementation levels will

guarantee that men and women take equal responsibility for fair distribution of resources.

Governments should remove obstacles that make it hard for women with children to work and provide other incentives to increase the female presence in the labour force.

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