



Commonwealth Foundation

Women in sustainability: addressing the need for long-term change in Sub-Saharan Africa

I. Introduction

The patriarchal nature of societies in many Sub Saharan African (SSA) countries encourages men to dominate the social sphere, similarly extending that dominance over nature (Egbai and Uduagwu, 2018). In fact, one of the main obstacles to sustainability in this region is the pervasion of gender inequality due to engrained social constructs.

Gender Inequality

Even if the region progressed in reducing gender disparity within primary education in recent years, there is still markedly lower registration and participation of female students in secondary and tertiary education (Gasparatos et al, 2020). Furthermore, 92.3% of working women were still in informal employment, including agriculture, in 2018 (Tonuchi et al, 2019).

Who are we?

A local NGO composed of several women members fighting for change. We have succeeded in mobilising local communities on environmental conservation and friendly farming systems, empowering women in the process.

Implications for Sustainability

The low involvement of women in important facets of society limits the region's sustainability. Firstly, women's salient economic contribution goes unaccounted for. Secondly, the underrepresentation of women in decision-making impacts the effectiveness of sustainable management solutions. Lastly, the low levels of education for women bear implications regarding population growth; demographic projections show that future population growth between now and 2050 will be concentrated in nine countries, four of which are in SSA (UN, 2019).

Opportunity for Policy Action

Our organization asks UN Women to help increase women's involvement in sustainability in SSA by dissolving the social constructs that fuel gender disparity through a **regional lens**. In this policy brief, four policy recommendations will be provided that stem from the potential of regional governance.

**Policy Brief written by Annaflavia Tarullo
March 2021**

II. Issue and Context

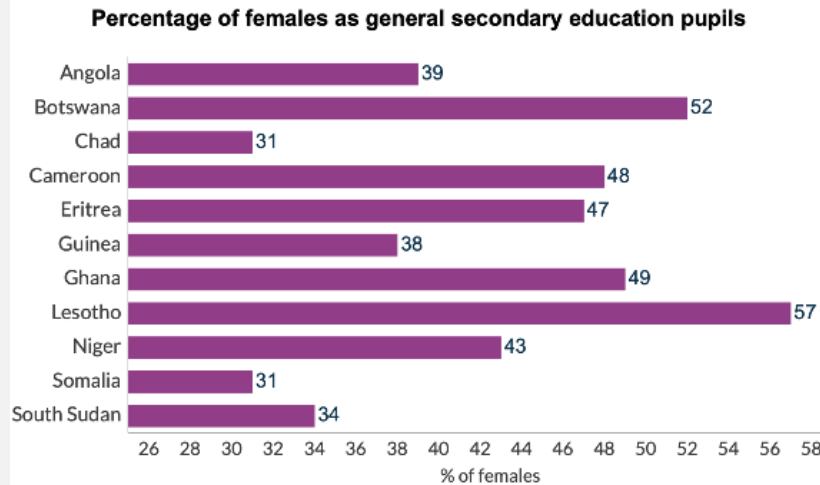
Women in SSA are crucial for the region's economy, as they contribute to one of the largest sectors here: food production (Ingwersen, 2020). Yet, their working conditions are very poor and their participation in the labor market is limited.

- SSA has one of the highest representation of women in the labor force, accounting for 61% of the total labor force (Gasparatos et al, 2020). Nevertheless, these jobs are usually under-paid, unstable, harsh, and rarely reach the managerial level (Gasparatos et al, 2020).
- Many of the women who work in agriculture are self-employed or work for family members, having very limited access to the market and being vulnerable to exploitation (The Borgen Project, 2018).
- An average of 85.7% of households rely on highly polluting fuels for energy, with devastating effects on women and girls who usually spend more time at home than men (UN Women, 2018).

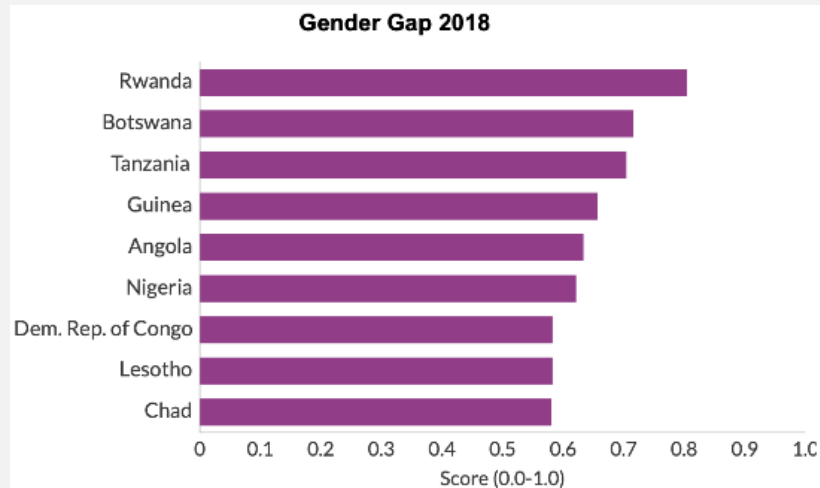
Furthermore, SSA has the world's highest prevalence of adolescent pregnancies, and 40% of girls marry before being 18; this hinders women's employment opportunities further (Human Rights Watch, 2017).

Regional Understanding

Although there are differences in socio-economic contexts and progress between countries, a cohesive regional approach can be applied to analyse the status of gender inequality here:



Graph 1: Percentage of females as general secondary education pupils (World Bank, 2020).



Graph 2: Gender Gap Score 2018 (Gender Gap Report, 2018).

The variation in Gender Gap scores is largely due to the difference in gender-based access to education. The Global Gender Gap Report of 2018 states the region is facing a widening of its gender gap again after making progress for six consecutive years.

III. Current Policy Situation

Sub Saharan Africa

Limitations within the current policy situation include **discriminatory laws and labor markets** which marginalise women from society (Wester, 2008). These comprise a lack of legal rights, land tenure, sexual and reproductive health services, and constraints regarding freedom of mobility (Gasparatos et al, 2020).

Women's under-representation within nation-states that implement human rights standards leads to weak policy action concerning the violence towards them (Wester, 2008). States in SSA have plural legal systems, which incorporate both traditional African customs and Western-style legal courts from former colonial authorities; these systems were formed without women's input, neglecting gender as a category for analysis (Wester, 2008).

Women produce most of the food with **no proper management practices and little to no external inputs** (Global Agriculture, 2018). This, together with the widening gender gap, is increasing the exposure of women to the effects of climate change on agriculture, and soil degradation due to population growth, placing food security largely at risk (Global Agriculture, 2018).

Abundant aid from international entities has had two main results: 1) dependency on foreign help (Park, 2019), and 2) the imposition of programs mainly geared towards objectives defined by the givers

rather than the recipients (Ogundipe et al, 2014). This aid-oriented approach has often increased the tension between communities, limited the economic potential of the region, and shifted the focus away from gender inequality.

UN Women

Women's Empowerment through Climate-Smart Agriculture is one of UN Women's Flagship Programming Initiatives. This project focuses on increasing women's land tenure security and their access to climate-smart information, finance for investing in climate-smart agriculture, and to higher-added value markets (UN Women, 2016). This is being implemented with support from key partners, including UN agencies, while maintaining close partnerships with national governments (UN Women, 2016).

The focus on these actors' support can lead to a **Samaritan's dilemma**: countries receiving help perceive the problem as mitigated, likely causing a lack of incentive to continue the development themselves (Pedersen, 2001). If gender equality is not a priority on countries' political agenda, these ambitious projects might be taken for granted and long-term change could be hampered.

UN Women aims at reforming public institutions and advocating for transparent and adequate public financing mainly through local governments, civil societies, and parliamentarians (UN Women). Nonetheless, a regional focus is somewhat lacking among this range of actors/stakeholders and

cooperation between similar nations is underestimated. The Global Policy Project that assists the above-mentioned Initiative includes the goal of building regional partnerships (UN Women, 2016), however, it requires stronger emphasis.



UN, Martine Perret

IV. Recommended Policy Actions

A regional focus is especially important in a world of manifold global environmental agreements, where feasibility and implementation are becoming harder to achieve (Balisger and VanDeveer, 2012). Initiatives with a regional basis may benefit from (Balisger and VanDeveer, 2012):

- greater familiarity between key actors/stakeholders
- emphasised commonalities within an environmental challenge
- enhanced participation in international environmental cooperation from broader access to non-state actors and subnational governments.

Furthermore, neighbouring countries interact with each other through aspects such as intraregional migration; gender equality within the region determines the opportunities and living standards women encounter when migrating. Patterns of SSA migration show that it occurs mainly within the region (IMF, 2016). Thus, having a regional improvement in gender equality allows women to have equal opportunities also outside their home country, benefitting economies too.

Policy Recommendations

1 **Discourse around regional cooperation in SSA for gender equality and women in sustainability during the General Assembly needs to be increased.** Regional cooperation, especially among developing countries, has the potential to support national development plans by involving actors/stakeholders with a similar level of development (UNCTAD, 2007). Collaboration between actors from SSA would occur more easily, allowing them to solve the according issue in a more deliberate and efficient way. This would indirectly increase their participation in international environmental cooperation (Balisger and VanDeveer, 2012) also by increasing pool efforts in areas like research (UNCTAD, 2007).

2 **The introduction of a more regional focus in the aforementioned Flagship Programming Initiative is needed.** As countries here have similar social constructs, a regional perspective could identify common root problems that hinder gender equality, and knowledge spillovers between countries' actors/stakeholders could

catalyse strong solutions. The Program's objectives would be achieved on a larger scale, reinforcing women's representation in markets, the use of natural resources, and environmental projects.

3

A regional integration approach to environmental education for women is critical. Perceived divisions between countries impede flows of knowledge and ideas, also restricting sustainability and its influence (World Bank, 2021). A regional campaign on environmental education programs – focused on sustainable farming – for smaller communities could be introduced, with help from local NGOs like us that exert strong influence on local spheres (Kari, 2008). By providing more women with environmental education, in remote areas too, harmful social constructs will be diluted and gender gaps will contract.

4

Strengthening collaboration between UN Women and smaller NGOs is necessary: local NGOs can enable access to and mobilise communities, provide cost-effective services, and influence national policies (Kari, 2008). Additionally, a larger pool of local/regional experts will more easily enable future sustainability at the country level (Odusote, et al, 2012). Our NGO has hosted numerous workshops on sustainable farming systems integrated with women's rights, and has distributed equipment to facilitate organic farming and

access to public resources like water. Therefore, our organisation would like to initiate regional cooperation in SSA with UN Women's support, to include as many stakeholders as possible who can provide greater insights into the regionally shared issue of gender inequality.



Figure 1: a local NGO distributing farming equipment (ROWODO, 2021).

Implications for Actors/Stakeholders

Governments: governments will play a key role as they will be the forefront of the communication processes between countries. They need to be willing to cooperate with each other and be open to the discourse of gender inequality in their country. Many governments in SSA have already addressed this issue, and this has led to some visible improvements such as the reduction in gender gaps. Nevertheless, these improvements are now retreating and the role of women in sustainability has yet to be acknowledged to a greater extent.

Local communities: local communities as a whole will have to be further educated on the potential of women regardless of the social constructs faced daily. Achieving this

will create a more supportive environment for women and girls, as their valuable input to society will be acknowledged and rewarded. The tensions regarding what are often seen as foreign impositions will be reduced, and the potential for conflicts too. Overall, deeper social change will be produced, also ensuring intergenerational improvement in life quality for women.

UN Women: major focus on perhaps new key partners will be needed, such as regional development organisations/banks and smaller NGOs that stretch across SSA. Greater trust has to be given to deep-rooted social change arising from the understanding of communities towards the necessary justice for women. Furthermore, collaboration and communication with smaller NGOs like ours will be needed to ensure the maximum amount of effort.

Implications for SDGs

In relation to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the following SDGs will benefit from the suggested policy recommendations.



SDG 1 - No Poverty: women will be provided with equal rights and access to economic resources. This will alleviate a major proportion of the region's poverty. Focusing on regional cooperation can also achieve economic development quicker and more homogeneously (UNCTAD, 2007).



SDG 4 - Quality Education: increasing regional cooperation allows for better investments and allocation of resources for improving women's education. Through a regional campaign, gender biased expectations and formal/informal laws will be diluted, allowing for almost all targets of SDG 4 to be reached – some as an indirect result of others.



SDG 5 – Gender Equality: through the breakdown of discriminatory social constructs, harmful practices and violence against women will be reduced by the strengthening of policies and greater representation of women regionally. Women will be safer throughout SSA, allowing greater freedom of mobility and equal socio-economic opportunities.



SDG 7 – Affordable and Clean Energy: women, who are often the primary household energy managers, will have greater access to cleaner, more sustainable energy, allowing the region to develop sustainably. The support and collaboration between countries will provide a greater amount of resources, including research and technology (UNCTAD, 2007).



SDG 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities:

by increasing women’s inclusion, more people will have access to safe and affordable transport systems, public spaces, housing, and basic services. Fast growing cities will become more inclusive and sustainable, benefitting the socio-economic, political, and environmental spheres. This also applies to the increasing frequency of natural disasters in the region, such as droughts and flooding.



SDG 12 – Responsible Production and Consumption:

equitable ownership and use of property/resources would be achieved. Women would have greater knowledge on sustainable farming practices and access to the market, making the overall economy of the region shift to more sustainable production processes (Global Agriculture, 2018).



SDG 13 – Climate Action: with greater representation of women in environmental projects and planning, sustainable development would become more equitable and legitimate. Regional governance on the transboundary issue of climate change would make cooperation between countries easier and more efficient, increasing the pace at which societies adapt to and mitigate a changing environment.



SDG 14 - Life Below Water: the share of women involved in unskilled, poorly regulated, and low-paid maritime jobs – such as fish processing/marketing – would decrease, allowing them to enter a more stable industry. As such, women in ocean-based livelihoods would be empowered, and unsustainable practices such as overharvesting would be reduced.

V. Conclusion

This Brief has shown the importance of regional cooperation when dealing with gender inequality and sustainability in SSA. Through regional partnership, countries with similar levels of development can more deliberately collaborate to address this issue, enabling UN Women to attain greater involvement from actors and more abundant resources. Grounding interventions and women’s environmental education on a regional focus, with local NGOs’ help, would ensure long-term development. This is becoming more urgent in a world full of global environmental agreements, where weak compliance and justice issues are increasing (Balisger and VanDeveer, 2012).

Reference List

Borgen Magazine (2018). The State of Female Employment in Sub Saharan Africa. Retrieved March 16, 2020, from <https://www.borgenmagazine.com/the-state-of-female-employment-in-sub-saharan-africa/>

Bonnett, F., Vanek, J., Chen, M. (2019). Women and Men in the Informal Economy: A Statistical Brief. Manchester, UK: WIEGO. https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/publication/wcms_711798.pdf

Diagana, B. (2003). Land degradation in Sub Saharan Africa: What Explains the Widespread Adoption of Unsustainable Farming Practices? Department of Agricultural Economics and Economics, Montana State University. http://binet-repository.weebly.com/uploads/2/1/0/0/21005390/land_degradation_in_subsaharan_africa.pdf

Gasparatos, A. et al (2020). Sustainability challenges in Sub-Saharan Africa I. Science for Sustainable Societies. <https://link.springer.com/content/pdf/10.1007%2F978-981-15-4458-3.pdf>

Global Agriculture (2018). Empowering Africa's rural women will help fight hunger, study. Retrieved March 28, 2021, from <https://www.globalagriculture.org/whats-new/news/en/33410.html>

Gonzalez-Garcia, J. et al (2016). Sub-Saharan African Migration. Spillover Notes International Monetary Fund, 9. https://www.elibrary.imf.org/view/IMF062/23789-9781475546668/23789-9781475546668/23789-9781475546668_A001.xml?language=en&redirect=true

Human Rights Watch (2017). Africa: Make girl's access to education a reality. Retrieved March 17, 2020, from <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/06/16/africa-make-girls-access-education-reality>

Ingwersen, A. (2020). Women in agriculture – with focus on Sub-Saharan Africa. The Sustainable Development Goals in Context, 710-0900. <https://wp-prd.let.ethz.ch/WPO-CIPRF91243/chapter/women-in-agriculture-with-focus-on-sub-saharan-africa/>

IUCN (2020). Gender and the environment: What are the barriers to gender equality in sustainable ecosystem management? Retrieved March 16, 2020, from <https://www.iucn.org/news/gender/202001/gender-and-environment-what-are-barriers-gender-equality-sustainable-ecosystem-management>

Kari, A. (2008). Supporting Local Ownership and Building National Capacity: Working with Local Non-Governmental Organizations. Save the Children. <https://www.savethechildren.org/content/dam/usa/reports/advocacy/local-ngo-brief.pdf>

Ogundipe, A., Ojeaga, P., Ogundipe, O. M. (2014). Is Aid Really Dead? Evidence from Sub-Saharan Africa. International Journal of Humanities and Social Science, 4, 300-314. <https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/32225525.pdf>

Park, J. (2019). Assessing the Role of Foreign Aid, Donors and Recipients. Re-Inventing Africa's Development: Linking Africa to the Korean Development Model (37-60). Cham, Switzerland: Springer International Publishing. https://link.springer.com/chapter/10.1007/978-3-030-03946-2_2

Pedersen, K. R. (2001). The Samaritan's Dilemma and the Effectiveness of Development Aid. International Tax and Public Finance 8, 693-703. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1012839126094>

The World Bank (2021). Regional Integration. Retrieved March 31, 2021, from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/regional-integration/overview>

The World Bank Data (2020). Secondary education, general pupils (% female) - Sub Saharan Africa. Retrieved March 10, 2021, from

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SE.SEC.ENRL.GC.FE.ZS?locations=ZG>

Tonuchi, E. J., Chinedu, M. N., Chinyere, U. N. (2020). Informal Economy and Gender Inequality. Research Square. <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-64173/v1>

UNCTAD (2007). Regional cooperation among developing countries can help accelerate industrialization and structural change. Trade and Development Report 2007. <https://unctad.org/press-material/regional-cooperation-among-developing-countries-can-help-accelerate>

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2019). Growing at a slower pace, world population is expected to reach 9.7 billion in 2050 and could peak at nearly 11 billion around 2100. Retrieved March 10, 2021, from <https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/news/population/world-population-prospects-2019.html>

UN Women (2018). Turning Promise into Action: Gender Equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. UN Headquarters. <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2018/sdg-report-fact-sheet-sub-saharan-africa-en.pdf?la=en&vs=3558>

UN Women (no date). Women and Sustainable Development Goals. Retrieved March 15, 2021, from <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2322UN%20Women%20Analysis%20on%20Women%20and%20SDGs.pdf>

UN Women (2013). Gender equality: A governance matter. Retrieved March 19, 2021, from <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2013/12/un%20womenlggovernancebriefusweb%20pdf.pdf?la=en>

UN Women (2015). Women's empowerment through climate-smart agriculture. Flagship

Program.

<https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2015/fpi%20briefagriculture%20localusweb.pdf?la=en&vs=3547>

UN Women (2018). Turning promises into action: Gender equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Retrieved March 15, 2021, from <https://www.unwomen.org/-/media/headquarters/attachments/sections/library/publications/2018/sdg-report-fact-sheet-sub-saharan-africa-en.pdf?la=en&vs=3558>

Wester, K. B. (2008). Violated: Women's Human Rights in Sub-Saharan Africa. Topical review Digest: Human Rights in Sub-Saharan Africa. <https://www.du.edu/korbel/hrhw/researchdigest/africa/WomensRights.pdf>

World Economic Forum (2018). Global Gender Gap Report 2018: Results and Analysis. Retrieved March 14, 2020, from <https://reports.weforum.org/global-gender-gap-report-2018/results-and-analysis/>