

SHAPE YOUR DESTINY: THE ROLE OF WOMEN WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF NEPAD

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Africa the least developed continent in the world has been subjected to a number of prescriptions for its economic development. None of these prescriptions have succeeded in attaining economic development for Africans, but have only served to worsen the situation. Today, half the African population live below the poverty datum line, mortality rate for children under five years is 140/1000 and life expectancy at birth Due to HIV/AIDS is only 34 years (Nyong'o, 2002). Women constitute more than 70% of "very poor" in Africa, a trend commonly known as the feminisation of poverty. In view of this grim situation for women, NEPAD would come as a welcome development since its main objective appears to be poverty reduction and economic development. But what is NEPAD? What does it offer women? What is the role of women within its framework? This article seeks to address some of these seemingly simple but very pertinent issues.

NEPAD is the New Partnership for African Development. It is an African led and African owned initiative which prioritises collective negotiation by region with the over developed world to resolve the problems of multiple reporting, tied aid on sub regional and regional projects and programs. It also values the achievement of International Development Goals (IDGs) set up by the United Nation's Millennium Declaration. It also seeks to expand the democratic frontiers and deepen a culture of human rights. The "new" partnership is based on a common vision, a firm and shared conviction that heads of states have a pressing duty to eradicate poverty and place their countries both individually and collectively on a path to sustainable growth. NEPAD is anchored on the determination by Africans to extricate themselves from the malaise of underdevelopment and exclusion in a globalising world. Women particularly

African women have an important role to play in shaping their destiny and ensuring that they do not remain at the margins of development.

NEPAD seems to make a sporadic mention of women who are supposedly meant to be part of its beneficiaries. The most detailed and telling view of the place assigned to women is to be found in paragraph 49 where it states that African leaders will take joint responsibility for promoting the role of women in social and economic development by reinforcing their capacity in the domains of education and training, development of revenue generating activities through facilitating access to credit and assuring their participation in political and economic life of African countries. For its long-term ob-

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jectives paragraph 68 states that NEPAD will seek to make progress towards gender equality and empowering women by eliminating gender disparities in the primary and secondary education by 2005, to reduce maternal mortality rate by three quarters between 1990-2015 and provide for all who need reproductive health. Loose service reference is seemingly paid to issues relating to empowering women.

Given these weak clauses in NEPAD, Can women effectively participate in NEPAD? Are these clauses sufficient to address women's interests? No doubt women need to mobilise and address the fundamental issues pertaining to their empowerment. Many critics have pointed out that NEPAD is an unmitigated endorsement of the neo-liberal agenda. It is, in other words a mere replica of key principles and parameters identified by neo-liberalist organisations such as the World Bank. There is abundant literature, which shows that neo-liberal policies only

succeeded in deepening poverty and worsening people's miseries. African women's already unequal work burden and limited access to credit have been worsened by policies. Women have had to make up for short falls in public services especially in the health arena. In many third world countries, women are shouldering the heavy burden of provision of home-based care especially for the HIV/AIDS patients.

In education, the decline in social welfare services has meant that the girl child from the poor family has lost her education because of lack of resources. Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) have resulted in increased poverty and untold suffering for those who exist at the margins of society. The girl child has ended up having to sell sex to survive. Prostitution, destitution, child labour, street kids among other social ills have resulted from these neo-liberal policies. Given this thorny side of neo liberal policies, it is imperative that African women have to take action to ensure that history does not repeat itself

NEPAD like its neo-liberal parents (SAPs) plays around with concepts to attain its objectives. NEPAD uses terms like empowerment, self-help and community participation to justify the curtailment of state's responsibility, and abandonment of state development. This is an instrumentalist definition of empowerment, which women need to critic. It is clear that women need to come out in full force to put pressure on heads of states to uphold the concept of empowerment as defined by the women themselves. Women need to engage heads of state in continuous dialogue to ensure that empowerment is clearly defined and incorporates the methods through which it will be achieved.

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In every sector addressed by NEPAD, there is a limited recognition of the systematic barriers and discriminations faced by women. NEPAD emphasises the need for self-improvement, self-development rather than the need for the removal of systematic barriers to address the systematic discrimination against women. NEPAD is thus essentially premised on the Women In Development (WID) rather than the Gender and Development (GAD) approach. Women should advocate for a GAD approach to deal with empowerment and access to resources.

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In issues to deal with peace, security and political governance, NEPAD has been gender blind. It has focused on the former Organisation of African Union (OAU)'s mechanism for the prevention and management of conflict resolution. There is need to mainstream gender within the structures, mandates and operations of this mechanism and also to lobby for the inclusion of the former OAU's committee on women and peace. In economic governance, NEPAD states the need to develop partnership with the private sector. Critics of NEPAD have pointed out that there is no distinction between the African internal private sector and the external private sector. Although no mention is made of the informal sector, women have to take a proactive role in ensuring the small size enterprises within which they predominate benefit from the implementation of NEPAD. Wanyeki

(2002) points out that on the level of regional development NEPAD places the implementation of the objectives in the hands of Heads of States. The scarcity of female heads of states in Africa provides a challenge for women. In such a scenario, can NEPAD be made to attain gender justice? Clearly, a heavy burden falls on civil society, particularly women's autonomous organisations to form strategic alliances with governments, intergovernmental agencies and other Non Governmental Organisations to ensure their voices are heard and acted upon by heads of states.

NEPAD also discusses culture. Culture, particularly African culture is glorified and romanticised as if it were absolutely good in society. While NEPAD recognises the historical and colonial effects of African culture it uncritically calls for the need to return to "African culture". What would this return to culture mean for African women given the fact that in many African countries cultural laws have been used to justify gender inequality and oppression. This can also be said of land redistribution and rights in Zimbabwe. The government of Zimbabwe has pledged to allocate 20% of all redistribution land to women. Why allocate only 20% of the land to a group, which constitutes 52% of the total population? This appears to have been a move made to pacify militant women's land lobby groups rather than addressing gender inequalities. The logic behind this appears to be the old fashioned and deeply rooted patriarchal assumption of the family as a male headed institution. The male head of household is assumed to be an altruistic individual who will share his resources equitably with his wife and children. However statistics reveal that 30% of rural populations are female headed and that male heads of household are far from being altruistic. If women do not pressurise the state and regional initiatives such as NEPAD to recognise this state of affairs then women will continue to be marginalized in land allocation.

Zimbabwe has recognised that land redistribution could be an effective means of

raising the standards of living and eradicating poverty, through increased productivity and smallholder commercial agriculture. However women continue to face structural barriers in accessing smallholder plots, as they are likely to be allocated land under the model A1 scheme rather than A2 model. Under A2 model applicants are expected to write a project a "backable" proposal, something that many women cannot do because of their low education. Land rights are gendered and legitimated by cultural and traditional arguments. NEPAD needs to take this into consideration as land redistribution may end up having gendered beneficiaries who will invariably be male. In Zimbabwe, cultural arguments have sometimes been used to justify, tolerate and condone domestic violence and sexual abuse. Can women merely sit back? No! African women should shape their destiny! This can be achieved if women advocate for the need for a reinterpretation of African cultural documentation from a gender perspective.

The idea of a regional partnership is noble, however the entire process leading to the production of the document has been bereft of public debate and consultation within Africa. Kanbur (2002) has pointed out there is no doubt that NEPAD constitutes a serious departure from participatory methods of policy formulation because it was formulated by few heads of states and therefore is a Governmental affair. The dilemma of NEPAD is that it advocates for democracy yet its origins are neither liberal nor democratic. The process of its formulation marginalized most of the peoples of Africa and represents a top down somewhat gendered approach to policy formulation. How can women play a proactive role in policy development? Women need to form political and economic alliances with other marginalized groups both within their countries and on a regional level to enable their voices to be heard.

The Zimbabwean situation as elsewhere in Africa is a case in point where women are under represented in decision-making. However research has shown that women have gained significant power in the civil society organisations. Women can use their influential positions in civil society to serve Zimbabwean development. There is need for regional alliances with other African countries to ensure that women in Africa participate in regional economic and political development. Affirmative action in both the political and economic sphere is also necessary to make up for the systematic discrimination that has been faced by women since colonial times and during the implementation of SAPs

Conclusion

Can women successfully enter the corridors of economic and political power? It is largely the responsibility of women to pursue their strategic interest. It is clear that women cannot achieve empowerment both at the individual and collective level alone but need to work with other organisations, institutes and groups. The state has a responsibility to look at the needs of women. However history has shown that unless women take radical positions to shape their future, they will forever remain the background of economic and political lives of their countries. We would not agree more with Graca Machel's observation that NEPAD is but a baby, which should be developed in a way that truly reflects what women want it to be.

Kanbur K 2002 *Organisation of change in Africa*, IAD Occasional paper Series, Cornell University, New York, USA.

Nyong'o P N 2002 *Unity or poverty: the dilemmas of progress in Africa since independence*, AAS, Nairobi, Kenya.