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Achieving Gender Equality and Empowering Women in Africa: Contemporary Approaches

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Research Article

ABSTRACT

Given the need to achieve sustainable development goal five which focuses on gender equality, this paper examined contemporary challenges and opportunities, activism, and advocacy efforts towards advancing gender equality in Nigeria. While highlighting the significant roles activism and advocacy have played, it examined different forms of gender disparities; and identified barriers and prospects for gender equality. Using intersectional feminism as a theoretical framework, the paper argued for inclusive spaces supporting biological male and female gender roles in governance and development. It also argued that gender inequality cannot be fully understood without considering the overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination and disadvantage that affect individuals and groups differently. The data collected through secondary sources reveal diverse and complex ways in which gender and cultural identities intersect. In this regard, it is recommended that Governments provide necessary legal and policy reforms that support the rights of women; they should also implement comprehensive anti-discrimination policies that recognize and protect the constitutional rights of women. Other recommendations include engaging communities and media in discussions about gender diversity in roles; this will help to foster understanding and acceptance.

Keywords: Activism, advocacy, challenges, gender equality, opportunities

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Introduction

Gender equality is an important issue in international discourse. It is among the Sustainable Development Goals approved by the United Nations in September 2015. It is both a fundamental and constitutional right as it is required to build a just and equitable society. The recent appointment of Dr. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala as the first woman and first African to head the World Trade Organization (WTO) has sent a powerful message to the world that there are very capable and qualified women, especially of African origin who have the pedigree to aspire to the highest echelons of public office even within international organisations. The appointment also lends credence to the fact that women can effectively be recruited into the development and governance process, thereby setting an example of the possibility of ensuring equal opportunities and access and thereby reducing gender exclusiveness.

Given the continuous marginalisation and low representation and participation of women in national, societal, and global leadership, several scholars, non-governmental organisations, and supra-national organisations such as the United Nations including the African Centre for Gender (ACG), a regional arm of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), have emphasised the need to address this gender inequality and empower women through the formulation and implementation of relevant gender-related policies. Several factors have also been identified that account for gender disparity including but not limited to, traditional beliefs, obnoxious cultural practices, educational constraints, corruption, and others. Women are therefore under-represented in government particularly in Africa, as a result of unequal opportunities to participate in striving for political rights and power in Legislative Assemblies, and other arms and institutions of government (Africa Gender Index, 2005; Doss, 2005;

Jacobs, 2002; Sharma, 2016; Dejene, 2003; Heyzer, 2005; Hussain, 2007; Ogato, 2011; Zewdu, 2002). The role played by the African Centre for Gender (ACG) in ensuring greater and fair representation and participation of women in political leadership and social development cannot be over-emphasized. *The African Women's Report and Gender and Development Index*- an initiative of ACG showcase this gender gap and the need for urgent attention. The contributions of ACG, scholars and organisations notwithstanding, the predicament is yet to be overcome, as 66% of the World's illiterate people are women. In comparison, women's participation in managerial and administrative posts is around 33% in the developed world, 15% in Africa and 13% in Asia and the Pacific (Hussain, (2007).

The World Economic Forum (2023) revealed that despite different efforts to promote gender equality, gender disparities persist in various spheres and circles, including but not limited to economic participation, education, political representation, and social norms. Other scholars and authors who share this view include Tang (2000), Turkelsson (2003), Kabeer (2005), Upadhyay (2005), and Wahaji and Hartl (2007). These studies show that despite the potential role of women in nation-building, their inclusion in social development, political leadership, and decision-making processes particularly in Africa is still limited. Given this position, the questions that demand answers are: What are the contemporary challenges to achieving gender equality? What opportunities exist for advancement, and the critical role of activism and advocacy in promoting gender equality? Whereas scholars like Turkelsson (2003), Kabeer (2005), Upadhyay (2005), Wahaji and Hartl (2007), and Sharma (2016), among others, have focused on different dimensions of gender inequality and disparities including economic participation, education, political representation, and social norms, there is a

gap left in the literature, which this research is set to fill. Consequently, this paper investigates the contemporary challenges to gender equality, the opportunities for advancement, and the critical role of activism and advocacy in promoting change.

The paper is divided into five components. The first part of the study seeks to conceptualise gender and gender equality. The second part provides theoretical legitimacy to the study. The third part is methodology. The fourth section will take us through the challenges of achieving gender equality in Africa, while the fifth section will focus on opportunities, activism and advocacy efforts thereafter, some conclusions will be drawn and recommendations provided.

Conceptualising Gender and Gender Equality

It is important to provide a brief clarification of the key concepts that appear in this study. This becomes necessary because concepts in the Social Sciences are often subject to varied definitions and interpretations, depending on the perspective and perception of the scholars and analysts involved. The concepts that need clarification in this regard are gender and gender equality. In popular usage, gender is commonly understood from the perspective of role expectations, behaviours or behavioural patterns, activities, and attributes that a given society considers appropriate for men and women (World Health Organization, 2021). Unlike biological sex, which focuses on the physical differences between male and female bodies, gender is differently conceived, it is more of a social construct, and it varies depending on culture and location (Butler, 1990). Gender equality on the other hand is not complex to understand, it could be defined as the state in which people's access to rights, responsibilities, and opportunities is unaffected by gender

(United Nations Development Programme, 2020). Implicit in this definition is the fact that gender equality ensures that all genders have equal opportunities to contribute to and benefit from cultural, economic, social, and political developments (Kabeer, 2005; Wahua, 2018). The diversity in conceptualising these terms notwithstanding, it is imperative to recognize that these definitions will shape the scope and focus of discussion in this paper. Consequently, clarifying these concepts at the beginning allows for a more precise analysis throughout the paper.

Theoretical Framework

In gender studies, although different theories offer opposing and complementary views on the subject, this study adopts Intersectional Feminism as its theoretical framework. Crenshaw (1989) is often credited for coining the term "intersectionality," Crenshaw's work was foundational in developing the concept. Her influential writings include the seminal article *Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex*, where she explored the unique experiences of Black women in the legal system. Other eminent scholars associated with this perspective include Collins (1990), Lorde (1984), and Hooks (1981). These scholars and their works have been instrumental in redefining what is now known today as Intersectional Feminism, providing theoretical tools and useful insights into gender and gender studies. Essentially, this framework examines the different ways in which various social identities, such as gender, race, class, sexual orientation, and disability, intersect and interact to produce unique experiences of oppression and privilege. As a theory, it emphasises that gender inequality cannot be properly discussed without considering the intersecting and interdependent systems of discrimination and disadvantage that affect individuals and groups differently.

Using the lenses of Intersectional Feminism, particularly within the context of activism and advocacy, promoting inclusive spaces will address the needs and concerns of all marginalised groups, ensuring that equitable and representative solutions are considered. In such a situation, there will be no discrimination between biological male and female genders in governance and development. It is, therefore, an important need to eliminate all different forms of gender disparities and identify barriers to advancing gender equality with the view of also eliminating them. People must treat gender rights as a fundamental and constitutional right. It is this culture that is required to build a just and equitable society. This will ensure inclusive spaces that support both the male and female genders.

Methodology

This study utilised qualitative data and theoretical analysis to discuss contemporary challenges and opportunities, activism, and advocacy efforts to advance gender equality. Content analysis was chosen in the analysis of the qualitative data. Excerpts from the literature were also used to investigate the motives and cure for this trending phenomenon in our political history. According to Bhattacharjee (2012:115) content analysis “is the systematic analysis of the content of a text (regarding who says what, to whom, why and to what extent and with what effect)”.

Contemporary Challenges to Gender Equality

Following the United Nations Convention on Political Rights of Women and the 1995 Beijing Declaration in which all governments were urged to allocate 30% of positions in parliament to women as well, as the 2004 Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa, and the Protocol to the African Charter on Human

and People’s Rights, one would be thinking that issues of gender inequality have been sufficiently addressed by these interventions. The above interventions notwithstanding, women continue to face different forms of gender inequality and disparities, manifesting it in different dimensions. Given the nature and character of the African States and the traditional belief system which sees women as subordinate to men, women continue to be marginalised and discriminated against. The most recent or contemporary challenges which continue to serve as roadblocks to advancing gender equality are further explained in this section.

First on the list of these challenges is economic inequality. Economic inequality remains a major barrier to gender equality. Women are poorly represented in leadership positions and overrepresented in low-wage sectors. This gender pay gap persists, with women earning, on average, 77 cents for every dollar earned by men (International Labour Organization, 2022). Closely related to these are the structural barriers, such as unpaid care work and lack of access to financial resources, and lack of economic empowerment opportunities for women. All of these further exacerbate the already existing disparities (UN Women, 2022).

Gender-based violence, intimidation and discrimination are other major contemporary challenges to achieving gender equality. Women and girls in Africa face different forms of violence, and intimidation including domestic violence, sexual harassment, and human trafficking. Any act that causes damage or targets a person or group especially because of their gender or the perceived expectations that they have about their gender is considered gender-based violence. It includes but is not limited to coercive control or discrimination that suspiciously impacts people based on their gender identity or expression, or other physical, sexual, emotional, and economic forms of

violence. Furthermore, intimate partner abuse, sexual harassment, rape, human trafficking, and customs like child marriage and female genital mutilation are just some of the few ways that gender-based violence manifests itself in Africa. It is based on this unequal power relation between the sexes that often serve to uphold and support discrimination against women as well as gender inequality. These forms of violence are often under-reported and inadequately addressed, perpetuating a cycle of abuse and discrimination (World Health Organization, 2022).

While we applaud the different forms of activism and advocacy efforts that have led to the progress that has been made in closing some of the gender gaps in primary education, disparities remain very high in higher education and the area of skills development, especially in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). Cultural norms, negative perceptions, perspectives and stereotypes often discourage women from chasing careers in these fields, limiting their opportunities and perpetuating gender imbalances (Global Education Monitoring Report Team, 2023). Negative perceptions and perception about politics are yet another contemporary challenge to advancing gender equality. In this regard, women continue to be underrepresented in political and leadership positions globally. As of 2023, women held only 26.3% of parliamentary seats worldwide (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2023). Factors such as gender bias, discriminatory practices, and lack of support systems contribute to this under-representation, limiting women's influence in decision-making processes (Paxton & Hughes, 2022).

Opportunities for Advancing Gender Equality and the Role of Activism and Advocacy

The current outlook for achieving gender equality in Africa may appear not to be very promising, but there are still

many opportunities for ending gender inequality and disparities. Digital platforms and technology offer one of these opportunities. There is no doubt that the digital age has opened new opportunities for advancing gender equality. Technology and digital platforms tools could be utilised for advocacy on gender-based violence, gender inclusion, education, and women's economic empowerment. There is a need to leverage online campaigns and social media movements, this will yield tremendous results by helping to amplify women's voices, raise awareness, and mobilise support for gender equality issues (Gonzales & Rodríguez, 2023).

The private sector serves as yet another opportunity for advancing gender equality. In recent times, the private sector has also played an important role in advancing gender equality through gender inclusion and the implementation of gender policies. Private companies are now increasingly adopting diversity and inclusion initiatives, reducing gender disparity in leadership, and addressing workplace discrimination. These practices contribute to creating more equitable and inclusive work environments thereby sending a strong message to the larger society (McKinsey & Company, 2023). The different legal and policy frameworks put in place by government and international organisations continue to serve as opportunities for advancing gender equality. Governments and international organisations have made significant strides in enacting laws and policies to promote gender equality. These include anti-discrimination laws, gender quotas, and policies aimed at closing the gender pay gap. What is however required is the political will to effectively implement and enforce these policies. Implementation is crucial for achieving the desired change needed for social transformation (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2023).

With respect to activism and advocacy, grassroots movements and community-based organisations have also been very instrumental in advancing gender equality. These groups often address issues specific to their communities, advocating for policy changes and providing support services. Examples include the #MeToo movement and campaigns against gender-based violence (Htun & Weldon, 2022). International organisations, such as the United Nations, and regional bodies, such as the African Union, have also played a crucial role in advocating for gender equality. These organisations set global standards, monitor progress, and provide platforms for collaboration and dialogue (True & Mintrom, 2023). Advocacy efforts should however be channelled towards recognizing the importance of intersectionality in addressing gender inequality. This approach considers how factors such as race, ethnicity, class, and sexual orientation intersect with gender, creating unique experiences of discrimination and privilege (Crenshaw, 2022). Intersectional approaches ensure that advocacy efforts are inclusive and address the diverse needs of all women.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The struggle for gender equality is an ongoing trend that needs sustained efforts by stakeholders. Whereas some significant progress has been recorded, several challenges still persist; and they include economic disparities, issues of underrepresentation in leadership, and the prevalent gender-based violence and intimidation. Nevertheless, there are also many opportunities for advancing gender equality through existing robust legal frameworks, different inclusive policies, technological innovation, and very effective advocacy. No doubt, activism and advocacy usually play an essential role in challenging the status quo and pushing for system transformation. The role of

different grassroots movements and international organisations is crucial for driving this kind of change and ensuring that all girls and women benefit from advancements in gender equality. Going forward, it is important to continue to advocate for an inclusive solution that addresses the root causes of gender inequality. Together, we can create a just world where everyone has the opportunity to succeed, regardless of gender orientation. To achieve gender equality, it is recommended that existing legal and policy frameworks be strengthened and allowed for their effective implementation. Governments at all levels must prioritize closing legislative gaps that allow gender discrimination and violence to continue to be the order of the day. Furthermore, policymakers should consider gender-responsive budgeting that allocates resources in a way and manner that directly benefits women, the marginalised and issues of exclusion. Another important recommendation is investing in the education and skills development of women and girls. This is vital for reducing gender disparities. More to this, attention should be given to promoting STEM education for women and girls, as these fields often offer higher-paying and more secure career opportunities. Different educational institutions and businesses should partner to provide mentorship, internships, and scholarships to encourage female participation in STEM. Equally, increasing women's representation in leadership positions is essential for the promotion of diverse perspectives and unbiased decision-making. Organisations and governments should implement measures like gender quotas and leadership training programmes to encourage women's participation in politics and corporate governance. There is also a need for advocacy and policy initiatives to be inclusive and representative of all women, and ensure that the most marginalized voices are heard and addressed.

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