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Women Push Onto Continent's Agenda

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Rwandan members of parliament taking oath of office: Nearly half of the country's legislators are female.

The status of women in many African countries is improving. "Africa is in a period of great experiment," says Ms. Anne Marie Goetz, who heads the governance, peace and security division at the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM). "Things are starting to change, as countries see a window of opportunity to create ways for women to contribute their skills and talents to national development."

And women themselves are driving that change, notes Ms. Goetz. "Women, through their groups, are making it clear they are not putting up with the status quo anymore." Women are demanding, among other things, laws that guarantee their rights to manage economic resources and that protect them from violence. Such pressure has pushed governments to be more responsive. Countries have begun to respond with commitments to reduce maternal deaths, get more girls into school, give women rights to own land on a more equal basis with men and ensure that a minimum number of women get into key positions in government.

'Don't just complain'

When African heads of state originally launched their continental development plan, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD), in 2001, women's organizations banded together to protest the initiative's seeming lack of sensitivity to gender issues. They demanded that NEPAD's proponents ensure that women were not frozen out of the social and economic benefits promised by the initiative. Ms. Litha Musyimi-Ogana, an advocate for women's rights, was among those in the forefront asking for change.

"I got the NEPAD foundation document into my hands," recalls Ms. Musyimi-Ogana. "I rushed to the goals and the second one said that empowering women was a priority. I got excited. Then I flipped the pages to find a plan of action that said concretely what NEPAD would do - one, two and three - for women. There was nothing there."

The once skeptical activist is today part of NEPAD's management structure, heading the Gender and Civil Society Organizations Unit formed in 2004 to bring women's issues into policies, programmes and activities related to the initiative. The unit, based at the NEPAD Secretariat in Johannesburg, South Africa, was created in direct response to recommendations by women's groups, civil society organizations and other stakeholders.

"Our attitude in protesting was: If you see something missing, help add to it," Ms. Musyimi-Ogana reflects. "Don't just complain. While the NEPAD declaration was far from perfect, I saw a commitment, I saw a spirit in it. It is the first time heads of state are committing to Africa voluntarily. This is historic. I said to myself: 'I am going to support this vision and change things from within if necessary'."

Monitoring rights

In one of NEPAD's most innovative initiatives, the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), African governments carry out periodic reviews of the policies and practices of participating countries to assess progress in promoting democracy, good governance and economic management. Among other indicators, countries participating in the peer review are required to demonstrate the measures they have taken to promote and protect women's rights, as well as the laws they have adopted and other steps they may have taken to enhance the participation of women in society. They are expected to back up their claims with figures on the percentages of women in decision-making positions, parliament and so on.

Rwanda has been a leader in the number of women elected to parliament, notes UNIFEM's Ms. Goetz. The constitution mandates that at least 30 per cent of parliamentary deputies be women, but the strong push to support women candidates during elections has resulted in women holding 49 per cent of seats.

Women dig irrigation canals in Rwanda: NEPAD acknowledges that women play the predominant role in food production.

NEPAD's peer review report on Rwanda, released in 2006, found that in addition to constitutional provisions, "Rwanda has created a plethora of institutions and development programmes to enhance the status and welfare of women in all walks of life." Inheritance, land, labour and family laws were reformed to address discrimination against women.

Despite the huge strides, the APRM's country review team reported that women still face many hurdles. For married women to carry out commercial activities, for example, they still need their husband's permission. Rwanda was advised to address such disparities.

Similar reviews, accompanied by proposals to improve women's status and opportunities, as well as other recommendations, have also been carried out for Ghana and Kenya. Two dozen other countries are also part of the APRM, and await peer reviews.

Hands on the purse strings

Overall in sub-Saharan Africa, an average 16.8 per cent of parliamentary seats are held by women, close to the world average of 17.1 per cent, according to estimates by the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), an international body that serves as a forum for dialogue among legislators.

"Getting women into key positions is critical," Ms. Goetz points out. "If you have women in public office - though not always the case - they tend to be more sensitive to the needs of female citizens." The ability of women deputies to bring about real change, however, depends on the stance of their parties and the calibre of the representatives themselves.

Occupying top government posts does not necessarily translate to influence. It is disappointing, the IPU reports, that women are still less likely than men to hold an economic portfolio or to be a country's top foreign affairs representative.

"The question of women keeps coming back," notes Augustin Wambo, an agriculture policy expert at the NEPAD Secretariat. He argues that noble goals will be meaningless unless those in positions of power are made aware of women's needs.

"No matter how many pledges are made," Mr. Wambo stresses, "unless we empower law-makers to unblock resources from national budgets and put in place the necessary means and policies to support women, the initiative is not going to fly."

Producers and entrepreneurs

NEPAD's Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Programme (CAADP), completed in 2003, argues that "special attention must be given to the vital food-producing and entrepreneurial roles of women in rural and urban African communities." The CAADP adds, "African women account for substantial amounts of production in both the informal and formal sectors," while women entrepreneurs "not only invest in their business but also place high value on social investments in their communities."

It is estimated that women produce more than half the food crops in most African countries. Studies by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) have found, however, that despite women's dominant role in food security, contemporary laws and traditional customs make it difficult for them to own land or acquire credit. Women also get only a tiny fraction of the professional training provided by agricultural institutions.

In March 2007, the NEPAD Secretariat organized a Southern African regional conference to brief members of parliament on the role they can play in their constituencies to achieve NEPAD's agriculture goals. The conference emphasized the significance of gender and what can be done to support women farmers.

Networks and think tanks

To ensure that issues affecting women are better reflected in policies and programmes, the NEPAD Secretariat consults with pools of experts across all sectors. In 2005, for example, at a meeting organized by the Kenya-based African Women's Development Communication Network (FEMNET), representatives from over 40 countries called for a mechanism to respond to gender and civil society matters.

As a result of further consultations, the Civil Society Organizations Think Tank, comprising 60 gender experts from all regions of Africa, was created that same year. Its members are experts in NEPAD's various priority themes, such as agriculture, education, transportation and health. These experts work with women on the ground, and thus have a good understanding of what ordinary women most need.

Such willingness to consult gender experts, notes Roselynn Musa, a member of the think tank, shows that African leaders now realize that NEPAD's goals cannot be achieved unless women and girls are able to participate to the best of their abilities. Ms. Musa, a programme officer at FEMNET, believes this is the beginning of a new type of partnership between NEPAD and African women.

"The think tank shows that the NEPAD leaders are aware there was a gap in how they initially planned to do business," Ms. Musa told Africa Renewal. "They are now trying to fill that gap." By having a positive impact on daily lives, Ms. Musa adds, NEPAD will become more credible and relevant to African women.