

**EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN AFRICA AND THE ARAB WORLD:MERITS,  
PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Women in Africa and the Arab world face many of the same challenges as women around the world including unequal citizenship and a lack of basic resources such as time and money. Exacerbating such challenges is the conservative nature of these societies, making it particularly difficult for women to make the decision to openly participate in politics for instance and to obtain the necessary public support to win.

History, the world over, is replete with the achievements of men folk and their contributions to the development processes and from time immemorial the position of women in the structure of society has never been considered on the same plain as that of men, they have been regarded as a second-fiddle.

It is in line with the above that Ker (1999) argued that women all over the world, and especially in the Afro-Arab states, have been categorized under the disadvantaged groups of people and society itself has systematically and consistently pursued the socialization of women into accepting the notion of disadvantaged group. Given the preponderance of this categorization of women as a disadvantaged group of people, a social reengineering process is required to introduce equality through emancipation and empowerment.

In spite of the principle of equality of men and women provided for in both the UN charter of 1945 and the UN Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, majority of nations in the Afro-Arab world are yet to fully address women's empowerment in the development process. In fact, evidence has shown that development planners in Afro-Arab states work on the assumption that programmes that benefit one section of the society (men) would automatically

trickle down to the other (women). In many African and Arab societies, there are even deliberate efforts put in place through laws, customs and traditions to orchestrate the perpetual marginalization of the female folk. Consequently, many initiatives to respond to women's concern and to address issues related to women's rights have emerged in international fora, notably the UN Women's Conference in Beijing. All of these efforts are geared towards the empowerment of the female folk in order to create the opportunity for them to realize their full potentials.

The economic empowerment of women has equally emerged as an important aspect of sustainable and accelerated development in developing countries since the Beijing Conference in 1995. The persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women is a critical concern in the Beijing Platform for Action and it is also a phenomenon addressed in the MDGs and NEPAD.

As rightly observed by the AU (2008) there is now overwhelming evidence that empowerment of women is one key variable in fighting poverty, HIV and AIDS, infant and maternal mortality, violence against women, gender discrimination as well as closing existing gender gaps and providing equal opportunities and representation. It is now clear that the achievement of the 8 MDG Goals will be greatly dependent on the achievement of Millennium Development Goal number one (MDG1) on poverty eradication and Millennium Development Goal number three (MDG3) on gender equality. The link between gender equality and economic growth is well established. Studies in India show that States that have a higher number of women in the workforce are growing faster and lifting more people out of poverty than those States that have fewer women. Indeed it is also estimated that Sub-Saharan Africa would have almost doubled its annual growth between 1960 and 1992 if it had closed the gender gap in schooling at the pace of East Asia.

## **CONCEPTUAL CLARIFICATION**

The need for empowerment arises from the inability of an individual or a group of people to actualise their dreams and reach their greatest potentials due to artificial barriers created by individuals and other groups within the same society. It is the manifestation of an incontrovertible inequality, segregation or marginalization. To Oxfam (1995) "Empowerment involves challenging oppression which compels millions of people to play a part in their society on terms which are inequitable, or in ways which deny them their human rights"

Okeke (1995) submitted that “to empower means to give power to, to give authority to, to enable a person or a group of persons gain power”. Batliwa (1995) in her definition of the term empowerment stated that:

Empowerment is the process and the result of the process whereby the powerless or less powerful members of the society gain greater access and control over material and knowledge, resources, challenges and ideologies of discrimination and subordination and transform the institutions and structures through which unequal access and control over resources is sustained and perpetuated.

The foregoing definitions show that empowerment implies that an individual or a group had hitherto lacked power or authority by circumstances, denial or default. The issue of women empowerment has become a part of popular debate. It has however been misconstrued in a myriad of ways; to a great majority empowerment suggests women’s power to fight men, including their husbands. The very mention of the term empowerment generates strong emotional connotations that construe violent revolutionary action of some sort or the other, organised by the women against the established institutions. Since the days of yore, the oppression of women has been a major global dilemma and a source of concern to many international institutions like ECOWAS, UN, AU etc. The concept of empowerment based on assuaging the oppressions of the women has led to the establishment of the United Nations development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) whose primary role is to promote the participation of women at all levels of development planning and implementation.

## **OVERVIEW OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN AFRO-ARAB WORLD**

The issues of women have been viewed differently in social relations including economic activities. This has formed a barrier even when democratic movements have sought to extend the base of participation of women. It will be fallacious to assume that the problems of Afro-Arab women have been totally solved through the various emancipation initiatives (Beijing conference 1975; 1985; 1995, International decade of women, Strategy for the Acceleration of Girls Education etc) or through the collaborative efforts of the various Government and Non-governmental Organisations. Certain inequalities and segregations, which have been established over the ages and reinforced

through the male-dominated structures, still persist in spite of the various instruments of the United Nations and the concerted efforts of the Afro-Arab governments and a number of NGOs on alleviating women discrimination.

Many Afro-Arab women and their communities are worse off today than they were a decade ago in spite of the Beijing Platform for Action and subsequent governmental commitments made at international conferences or ratification of United Nations and regional bodies like the African Union and declarations by member states. For millions of afro-Arab women, hunger, violence, poverty, exclusion, deprivation and discrimination are their everyday realities.

Afro-Arab women have not realized meaningful gains from the sustained growth of their national economies in years past. Deregulation and privatization, labour migration patterns and the resulting changes in family structures have further marginalized women. Today, they are the backbone of the informal economy, especially in the agricultural sector. They lack access to productive resources, including credit, land, and technical and support services.

Where Afro-Arab countries have made remarkable strides is in increased women's political participation resulting from government quotas or reserving seats for women in national and local legislative bodies. The share of parliamentary seats held by women in Africa for instance, increased from 7 percent in 1990 to 17 percent in 2007 (UNIFEM, 2008), in line with the global average. Rwanda now ranks first among all countries of the world in terms of the number of women elected to parliament, and where women outnumber men in parliament, as provisional election results indicate. In the same vein, Africa has produced its first female president in Liberia in the person of President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf. More African women have made significant electoral gains in the levels of decision-making. Prominent women leaders include the Deputy President of South Africa, Ms. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, and the Prime Minister of Mozambique, Ms. Luisa Diogo. While some have served as acting presidents in both Burundi and Guinea-Bissau, the 2006 election of Ellen Johnson Sirleaf as President of Liberia is, perhaps, the most significant milestone for women at the highest levels of politics in Africa.

Nearly all the Arab countries have extended electoral franchise to women. It is only in Saudi Arabia and United Arab Emirate that women are not allowed to vote or be voted for because the two nations lack elected legislature. The situation has somewhat improved in Kuwait following the recent electoral victory of a woman in that country.

However, the UNDP Arab Human Development Report 2005 observed that the political process in Arab nations is still far from representative of women and their needs and concerns. The report further contends that women participation in senior levels of government remains largely cosmetic, with few women in high-profile positions without much real power. The report asserts that real decisions in the Arab world, at all levels, are in the hands of men. Women's role, the report argues, are symbolic—one or two female ministers in most cases; limited to smaller portfolios like women's/social affairs ministries; and conditional : dependent on internal and external pressures at the time of appointment and subject to the whims of male leaders.

The report further maintains that some Arab governments resist empowering women because expanding the participation of women in politics will disperse power more widely throughout society, reducing the dominant current leaders. Same thing obtains in Africa.

In most societies all over the world, and for centuries, the political domain is defined and controlled by powerful men. The absence of women in established political structures and is attributed to the forces of patriarchy, feudalism and capitalism that kept women out of the public sphere and confined them to work within the family and lowest-paid non-prestigious occupations. Studies also point to colonialism as a factor in women's subordination and their exclusion from politics.

In response to women's lack of power, the concept of 'empowerment' has become a central issue in the feminist definition of politics. Empowerment is taken as a process by which an oppressed person gain some control over their lives by taking part with others in development of activities and structures that allow people increased involvement in matters which affect them directly. By socially empowering women they will be released from the traditional tedious work focussed on the household and with time they will be involved in political power that will effectively advocate their interests at local, national, and international levels of politics. The process of generating and using power to bring about social change is a political activity.

Meaningful development is not possible when women—normally half the population, and in the case of Southern Sudan about 60%--are excluded from power. Their needs and requirements are not adequately represented and decisions are not taken with their interests in mind. Women should continue to overcome new challenges to strengthen their power and position even though the political opportunity is still slim. While, their presence alone does

not guarantee change for women, it allows them to demonstrate sound political leadership, an awareness of women's needs and the importance of gender equality, all of which will open doors for the next generation of women leaders.

Considering the health situation of Afro-Arab women in the light of international human rights standards on the right to health, it can be clearly seen that women's rights to health have been violated and ignored. In Sudan for instance, the civil war and human rights abuses have contributed to chronic famines, economic crises, and loss of many lives and spread of diseases. The unavailability of medicine and medical care facilities has made matters worse. Women have borne the brunt of these crises. Although the health of all people is affected by the consequence of war, women's health is more affected. For example, if children or elderly members of the family fall sick, the burden is usually placed on the women who have to take care of them. Since access to proper medical care is difficult due to the isolation of the South and it is difficult to reach health centres due to lack of proper means of transport, the health situation of people deteriorate. As such women continue to suffer both mentally and physically.

The situation is blatantly contrary to the provision of Article 16(1) and (2) of the African Charter on Human Rights and Article 12(1) and (2, d) of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

Every culture has its own norms and taboos. It is a common feature of African cultures to impose taboos on women, particularly during pregnancy. These tend to disadvantage the women. For example, in some cultures women are not allowed to eat eggs while they are carrying children in their wombs for the reason that they are protectors of life.

In some cultures it is a custom for women to marry very young, so that they start having sexual intercourse at a very early age, even before their reproductive organs are fully developed. This jeopardises their health and even their lives during pregnancy and after delivery. The cultural requirement that one must have a son in order to secure the family's future encourages women to have many children, giving birth frequently before they have regained their health properly. This has serious repercussions for women's health. But birth-related illnesses are not adequately recognised in traditional Afro-Arab societies.

Many cultures do consider a woman as a junior partner in a marriage. Whatever a woman possesses is regarded as belonging to her husband and his family. In the past this used to be protective for women, in the context of a functioning extended family structure. Today, when property ownership have been individualised, and hence poverty has been individualised too, women find themselves marginalized although they are key producers of agricultural commodities.

For a long period women have been depending on men and regarded them as their sole source of security. This is now changing as more women find themselves heading households and have to provide all the income and services required for their families. In such families, the health of all family members becomes at risk if the woman has no access to health care for whatever reason.

Article 26(1) and (2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 13(1) of the International Covenant of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, highlights the right of everyone to education. They further call on the government to make education available to all. However, considering the situation of Afro-Arab women in the light of the provision of the agreements, one can argue that their rights to education have been violated. Without gainsaying, illiteracy remains at the centre of women empowerment problems in Africa and Arab nations. Majority of the womenfolk and a large number of girls in these areas are still grappling with the problems of basic reading and writing skills (Unicef 2003). The gross enrolment rate (GER 2001) indicated that 71percent of out-of-school children are girls. According to ARFOL (2000) the literacy rate for males is 58 percent but only 41 percent for females in Nigeria. The Human Development Report 2002 published by the United Nations development programme puts the statistics of illiterate women in at 57 percent as against male's 43 percent. As seemingly insignificant as this difference may appear, it is completely unacceptable, if the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) must be achieved. In Nigeria, girls and women comprise about 49.69 percent (SAPA 1993) of the total population. Incidentally, about 61percent of the total female population are reported to be illiterates as against 37.7 percent illiterate male population. Women are discriminated against in access to education for social and economic reasons. The most egregious segregation is probably the prevention of girls to go to

school in some communities. This has probably led to the greatest social harm of the twentieth century, when a whole group of females were denied access to education, on the basis of gender differences. There is palpably a deluge of problems besetting Afro-Arab women, but all of them arise from illiteracy. This suggests therefore that a large part of the empowerment process is associated with education of the women themselves. The root of the problem is the degree of importance women themselves have attached to education. Many of them believe that the life of a successful woman revolves around her children, her husband and domestic chores. This lack of personal ambition prevents her from thinking about pursuing other educational goals, which may have great influence on her life. In the case of the workingwomen in the cities, there had been a gradual predilection to abandon further training because of the demands of work and family as well as the huge costs associated with pursuing higher studies.

The general idea of education and political participation of women on equal footing with men makes men believe that women are their rivals and women are not willing to maintain the traditional role of child bearing and household responsibilities. This misconception has even made men reluctant to marry educated women and they prefer to marry wives with little or no education with a strong orientation towards the home. For example there was a fear that when a girl is allowed to join school for education, she may not respect the societal moral standards and that will bring shame to the family. In addition, girl children often have heavy responsibilities in the household, for helping their mother with child care, food preparation, cleaning and washing, etc.

## **MERITS AND PROSPECTS OF WOMEN EMPOWERMENT**

Promoting the gender equality and empowerment of women benefits the economy and the society at large. Women are equally as competent as their male counterparts with requisite knowledge and experience. We know the critical role that women play in the progress of our societies. Though their efforts are sometimes invisible in the larger world, they are often the real change agents in society struggling daily to feed and educate their children and improve the lives of the people in their communities.

More than 800 million women are economically active worldwide. They have better negotiations skill and are able to manage their homes with moderate

revenue. Income in the hands of women though small has had a dramatic impact on the well being of their families. Women spend a significantly higher proportion of their income on children's food, health, and education, ensuring that the next generation will have a better future. Women also bring a different set of concerns to the political process by virtue of their roles and status in society. Thus, if women are able to successfully make sound policies in managing their homes, it is logical that they can equally make effective and efficient use of a nation's resources through good decision- making.

As was noted earlier, AU (2008) rightly observed that there is an overwhelming evidence that empowerment of women is one key variable in fighting poverty, HIV and AIDS, infant and maternal mortality, violence against women, gender discrimination as well as closing existing gender gaps and providing equal opportunities and representation. It is now clear that the achievement of the 8 MDG Goals will be greatly dependent on the achievement of Millennium Development Goal number one (MDG1) on poverty eradication and Millennium Development Goal number three (MDG3) on gender equality. The link between gender equality and economic growth is well established. Studies in India show that States that have a higher number of women in the workforce are growing faster and lifting more people out of poverty than those States that have fewer women. Indeed it is also estimated that Sub-Saharan Africa would have almost doubled its annual growth between 1960 and 1992 if it had closed the gender gap in schooling at the pace of East Asia.

In many countries of Africa gender inequalities and gender based discriminations are perpetuated by customary practices. There is the need to enhance awareness about the disadvantages of these discriminations not only to women and girls but to the community at large.

There are indications that women empowerment could receive a boost in the nearby future in Afro-Arab nations. Below are indicators to that direction;

- In Africa 13 countries have specifically incorporated gender concerns into their plans, out of 48 countries that have national action plans for implementing the Beijing Platform for Action.

- Some improvement in education was noted, as enrolment ratios for both girls and boys increased in various countries, while in others there was parity of the sexes at secondary level.
- African and Arab countries have strengthened their legal and policy frameworks. However, the enforcement of existing legislation remains low.
- Although some countries have paid increased attention to reproductive health rights, the rates of maternal morbidity and mortality are the highest in the world and access to comprehensive health services continues to be a major challenge.
- Several countries have increased the level of women's representation in parliament, but women continue to be under-represented in most structures of power and decision-making.
- Most countries have established national gender machineries, but these mechanisms remain weak and lack adequate capacity, authority and funding.
- Most countries have established a National AIDS Commission to address the HIV/AIDS pandemic and its link to poverty.

## **CHALLENGES**

Some of the factors militating against women empowerment in Africa and Arab nations include but are not limited to the following;

### **1. Labour Burden**

Studies have shown that women have higher labour burden as opposed to men. (Dejene, 2006) Family and community responsibilities take a lot of women's time that could be applied for improving their income generating efforts. Their responsibility for child care limits their mobility and obliges them to generate income in less conducive environment for business. Although statistical data are not available on the share of children attending early childhood education, there is greater shortage of affordable child care and preschool programs even in urban areas in many parts of Africa. Women's responsibilities for child care are often cited as reasons for women's low participation in skills training and literacy programs, which are crucial for building business management skills of female enterprises.

## **2. Skills**

Lack of adequate skills are other constraints faced by female entrepreneurs. The coverage and quality of agricultural extension services in processing, preserving and packaging food is limited in many African countries. Training for women often focuses on "traditional female skills" in tie and dye, basket making etc. for which the market is saturated. Women's high illiteracy rate also limits the types of vocational and skills training they can be offered.

## **3. Access to Financial Resources**

Women's lack of assets, due to the gender discriminatory property and inheritance practices in many of the African countries limit women's access and control over resources specifically land. For example, female headed households in Uganda claimed that their inability to finance their start up capital prevented them investing in businesses and trade activities (Dolan 2002, cited in USAID 2005). The lack of both start up and working capital limits the size, type and location of income generating activities. In recent decade micro-credit institutions have gained greater prominence in filling in the financial resource gaps to the poor in general and to poor women in particular. While some of the successes of micro-credit institutions has gained recognition over the years, the unmet credit needs of men and women in many parts of Africa remains big.

## **4. Weak Infrastructure**

The low development of roads and lack of transport affects both male and female entrepreneurs. But, a closer examination at the gender differentiated impact of weak infrastructure on women and men and their respective income generating activities tells a different story. Women who live in communities with low infrastructure, (transport, water and sanitation and energy) are worse affected. Studies have shown how women's time burden is affected by inadequate transport systems. A World Bank study (Calvo, 1996, cited in Crown. C, et al 2005) reported that 87 percent of trips in rural Africa take place on foot. Of this, the time women spent accounts for more than 65 percent of the household's time and effort put on transport. The study also found that the average daily load of women carried was 20 kilograms for 1.4-5.3 kilometers). Some studies suggest that access to roads can improve women's income – in Cameroon women in a village on a main road earned more than those located 90 minutes away from the road (Lovell, 2000, cited in Grown, C. et al 2005).

Collecting fuel-wood is a predominately female responsibility in most of African countries. A study conducted in three countries reported that women spend up to 300 hours a year in Ghana and Tanzania and 800 hours a year in Zambia collecting fuel wood (Calvo, 1994).

Women and girls spend more time fetching water compared to men and boys. The study cited above reported that women spent more than 700 hours a day fetching water in Ghana, 500 hours in Tanzania and 200 hours in Zambia. Water is a main ingredient in food processing and other major household and market economies in which women are engaged. The limited access to water by communities, not only exacerbates women's and girls' time and labour burden, it also affects their livelihoods disproportionately. Hence an improvement in the infrastructure is needed to take into account women's needs and their participation is essential for the success of initiatives in the sector.

## **5. Limited Access to Markets**

Studies reported women's micro and small entrepreneurs often complaining about the lack of demand for their products. (DAI, 2005). There are various factors that limit women's access to markets. As noted earlier, women disproportionately experience limited mobility due to various factors linked to either their family responsibility or cultural practices. Those who can travel lack the market information on products and inputs, thus become dependent on the middle traders who buy their products at relatively lower than the market price. Because women often produce small amounts, they are limited to the local village markets, where the market for their products and services are already saturated. Other factors such as improved technology for preserving and storage facilities close to market areas are some of the constraints related to marketing of goods. In addition limited access to input markets, due to shortage of raw materials and high price of imported inputs such as chemicals for batik work and tie and dye can constrain their productivity.

## **6. Weak Business Organizations**

African women have various types of informal and semi-formal economic and social associations where they pull labour and resources together to maximize labour productivity and social networks. However, the capacity of these associations is weak and they more concerned with their social interest instead of looking at what they can do to support their businesses economically.

## **7. Little Technology Transfer**

Technology is the key to economic development. At the moment technology transfer into Africa continues to be in the form of consumer technology which only allows people to learn what technology to consume and how to consume it. Africa does not have the environment for creative innovations and does not support the same. If it continues so, Africa will remain technologically backward in a world where technology dominates commerce, politics and even culture.

## **8. Destructive Style of Political and Economic Leadership**

Africa has suffered from lack of enlightened leadership and a bad style of political and economic guidance. While African leaders could have excused themselves for being unable to protect their people from the exploits of colonial empires in the 19th and 20th centuries, they can hardly escape blame for allowing neo-colonial exploitation which continues to reduce many of their people into paupers in their own countries. During the past three decades, Africa suffered lack of visionary and altruistic leaders committed to the welfare of their own people. They were persuaded to accept the development model of the West, borrow capital from the West and be guided by experts from the same West.

This was partly possible because the colonial administration deliberately destroyed and discredited the traditional forms of self governance in Africa. While the colonial form of governance was being put in place, the western religion and values were being imposed on those who converted into Christianity.

Just before independence was granted, young Africans were promoted to positions hitherto unoccupied by the local people and they were trained by colonial masters to take over power from the colonial administration. Many of these African recruits were politically naive and uninformed. Their employment into the prestigious administrative positions previously reserved for the colonial masters was a manipulative ploy. It blinded them. So fluttered by the new-found power and prestige in their new state, many Africans became sucked into a mechanism which facilitate the continued exploitation of Africa and the African people. It was easy for the new rulers to be blinded with material wealth and privileges associated with wealth and political power because they were naive and inexperienced.

This development allowed the beginning of a small group of African elites who were in liaison with the rich to continue the exploitation of the African resources while ignoring the fate of the impoverished majority. With that bad beginning, leadership in Africa became characterized by opportunism, personal advancement and enrichment at the expense of the masses. And thus was laid the foundation for the present political, economic and social crisis in Africa.

The few African leaders who have demonstrated visionary leadership have been misunderstood and unsupported at home due to naivety and ignorance about the political forces at play in Africa. They also received no support from the international community. Instead, corrupt and unpopular African dictators received huge support especially in form of military aid which sustains them in power. These dictators built up massive armies, police forces and huge networks of secret service whose main preoccupation was, and still is, to spy on and terrorize their own citizens. Uninformed and even misinformed, the African community remains marginalized politically and economically.

One cannot over-rule the presence of external forces and factors because, a weak, disunited and war-ravaged Africa will even be easier to control and exploit.

## **9. The Absence of Peace and Security**

Peace and security are a prerequisite for development and all human beings aspire and deserve them. All people also aspire for happiness and a quality of life devoid of poverty and indignity. Yet for the last three decades many African states have hardly enjoyed internal peace and security. State oppression by dictatorial rulers, gross violations of human rights, civil wars, diversion of human and material resources towards the wars and internal security of those in power, have destroyed millions of lives in Africa.

## **10. Limited Enabling Environment**

Governments in many part of Africa recognize the role micro and small enterprises can play for employment generation and poverty reduction. However, creating a more enabling environment for promoting micro and small businesses and transforming the informal economy into a dynamic economic sector has been a challenge. The absence of statistical data to determine the size characteristics of the informal sector operators and the capacity of the institutions with which they interact limits the ability of governments to make informed policy measures. Reforms are also needed in

business registration to allow for joint registration so that women are equal owners of household enterprises. Because joint registration is often not practiced in many parts of Africa, in time of divorce or death of spouses, women lose the businesses they help grow.

Some African countries have made concerted efforts to promote micro and small enterprises through policy measures, institutional development in micro-credit and training. Some of them have also integrated the promotion of micro and small enterprises into their Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers. For example, the Kenya Development Plan (1997/2001) envisioned the development of micro and small enterprises by developing and reviewing legal framework and regulatory environment, formulating programs to improve access to credit and finance, supporting women and youth involvement in the small/medium scale and informal sector through special programs, encourage strong background linkages with the manufacturing sector, and reviewing and harmonizing licensing procedures for informal sector enterprises (Chen, et al 2003). Implementation of the plan was, however, has been slow.

## **11. Corruption**

Corruption is a serious cancer in Africa and it is eating into every aspect of life and into every socio-economic group. It brings a lot of misery to ordinary Africans and gives an opportunity to non Africans to exploit Africa.

## **WAY FORWARD**

The Seventh African Regional Conference on Women recommended that greater efforts be deployed to promote gender equality. It outlined several key actions to be taken, particularly in the crucial areas of health and education. The recommendations included mainstreaming gender issues into economic analyses and poverty reduction strategies. Affirmative action should be strengthened to boost women and girls' access to education and training programmes, particularly in mathematics, science and technology. In the field of health, governments, NGOs and the private sector should come together to provide accessible sexual and reproductive healthcare services and education to reduce maternal mortality. The rate of HIV/AIDS infection is much higher among women than men and in this regard, governments must establish and monitor strict legal frameworks to address the vulnerability of women and girls. Furthermore, access to anti-retroviral treatment should be ensured.

It is widely recognized that women's empowerment requires a higher rate of involvement in governance and decision-making. To this end, the conference called for institutionalizing policies that guarantee gender equality and replicate the African Union principle of 50/50 gender parity. It also recognized the role the media can play in promoting equality, and suggested that Africa support women's press and communication initiatives as well as making use of new information technology to promote women's activities. Women should also be allowed to have a prominent role in formulating and implementing environmental policies.

Women's rights begin with the girl-child, who must be protected against discrimination, ill health, malnutrition, violence, FGM, forced marriage and exploitation. Direct advocacy to achieve this should start with the parents, traditional and religious leaders and parliamentarians. And all too often, women are the main victims of war and conflict, so governments should ensure that measures are in place to ensure the role and rights of women during the negotiation, transition and reconstruction phases. The conference called on countries to sign and ratify the protocol to the African Charter promoting women's rights as soon as possible.

Finally, men and boys must be involved in the promotion of gender equality and women's empowerment through innovative rights-based and culturally sensitive programmes.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, women should open their eyes to wider national issues that affect their lives in important ways. When rights are violated or conflict begun, women's rights are the first to be affected. It is important that women should mobilise to promote democracy and human rights.

Women should be equal to men and involved in institutions at all levels: local, national and international. In future afro-arab women should be able to play the role as agents of change, to help solve old problems and achieve new goals. Women could become the eliminators of corruption, eradicate poverty, control population growth, increase human rights awareness, reduce violence, make peace, and improve education. A women's coalition could be formed to visit illiterate women and organize workshops—giving lectures to create awareness on the importance of women's role and participation in national activities. The focus should be on young women and girls, bringing them into contact with ideas of women's rights from around the world.

Previously, the central role of all afro-arab women was to preserve their traditions, national heritage and cultures, and also to instil in their children respect for customary values and history. Women have come to realize that they are still traditional yet they have to remove the barriers that hinder their advancement.

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