

Women and Socio-Economic Development in Africa: The Wangari Maathai Experience

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Abstract

It is often argued that the role of women is in the kitchen and that they (women) have no business in nation building and development. It is in the light of this assertion that this study strived to unravel the actual contribution of women to the socio-economic development of states in Africa with specific reference to Wangari Maathai of Kenya. The study made use of secondary data and structural functionalism as its theoretical framework. Data analysis was based on the qualitative method via content analysis. Findings from the study show that social, political, cultural and religious factors hinder women from participating and contributing to the development of their societies. The study also revealed that few women including Wangari Maathai have defied cultural and institutional barriers and have contributed tremendously to the rapid development of their societies. It is therefore imperative to state that if the potentials and resources of women are to be fully utilized, African states and governments must address the issue of gender inequality and discrimination of women by men in Africa.

Keywords: *Women, Socio-economic, Development, Africa and Wangari Maathai.*

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Background to the Study

The erroneous impression that women have no role to play in the socio-economic development of the society prompted this study hence, with specific reference to the contributions of Prof. Wangari Maathai; this paper examined the role of women in socio-economic development of Africa. From Nigeria, Kenya, Togo, Somalia, Ghana and Zimbabwe, the challenges confronting women are enormous and complex in nature hence, the challenges vary from society to society. In the case of Nigeria for instance, the challenges facing women are cultural, religious and political. This explains why the level of political participation among women in Africa is low and unimpressive. However, in spite of the challenges and problems confronting women in Africa, a few women have been able to rise above existing barriers by contributing effectively towards the development of their environment, state and nation. It will be recalled that during the 2008 global financial crisis, the income of women helped to keep many families afloat. Thus, it is instructive to state that empowering women to use their talents and skills can boost a country's competitiveness and growth. Despite the fact that Prof. Wangari Maathai was humiliated, beaten, tear-gassed and arrested by the Kenyan government, the peaceful protest she led no doubt became a rallying point for women activists, environmentalists and civil society advocates in Africa. The contributions of Wangari Maathai towards the socio-economic development and advancement of Kenya and Africa forms the major thrust of this paper.

Theoretical and Conceptual Analysis

Structural functionalism was applied in this study in order to explain the challenges and problems confronting women in the process of political participation in Africa. Functionalist theorists view the society as being made up of interdependent parts called social structure and that each part of the social system exists to serve some basic function for the society or system to survive. Structural functionalists therefore regard society as a system since it comprised of inter connected and inter-related parts. This clearly imply that the basic unit of analysis is the society while social institutions such as the family, religious, economic, educational and political institutions are analyzed as part of the social system. This theory is relevant in the context because women constitute a large proportion of Africa's population hence, their exclusion or alienation from the political process could distort the social system and lead to crisis and instability which will no doubt affect the socio-economic development and growth of the continent.

Oluyemi-Kusa cited in Gaya Best (2009) argued that in spite of the Beijing declaration on affirmative action, women in Africa are not yet in the mainstream in the political, social, economic, as well as peace and conflict related issues. Thus, there is a strong case for gender equity on the continent, especially in the peace and conflict resolution sector. The contention here is that the vast majority of those affected by any armed conflict, including refugees and internally displaced persons (IDPs), are women and children. Besides, women represent more than half of the world's population; hence, factoring in women's talents and insights would lead to responses to peace and conflict resolution issues that are more people-centered and therefore more sustainable (Gaya Best, 2009). However, in his work "Gender, peace and conflict in Africa" Dayo Oluyemi-Kusa (2009) contended that women and gender relations

can be examined from the social, psychological, economic and political perspectives. He added that during economic restructuring and democratization male politicians always convince women that their interests were served while at the same time they deny women additional benefits. In his words: this has pushed women towards greater boldness in addressing the economic and political elements that determine and affect their status in societies that have distinct cultural traditions and historical experience. African women need to be more involved in the political process. Specifically, more women need to become politicians because it is by being involved that they can contribute directly to decisions in the area of conflict prevention, management and resolution. Eze (2014) maintained that African women have been marginalized since their inception but in the recent times, the problem of violence appears to have increased dramatically hence, he attributed marginalization and violence against women to the following factors: inequality, bride-price (dowry), polygamy, adultery, extended family relationship, and economic support. In his words: when African men become the chiefs, kings and leaders of their families, they are regarded as super powers, autonomous, controlling because they provide necessities for their families. The norms of African society are that men are traditionally superior and valued over females...

In her work "Gender and peace process in Africa" Elizabeth Mutunga (2009) also contended that women also play a major role in the peace process across Africa. Citing the conflict in Somalia, Sudan Rwanda, and Burundi, she added that women as a united group continued to lobby for inclusion at the negotiation table and even got audiences with various stake holders. The above analysis clearly indicate that both men and women have different and complementary roles in promoting peace and socio-economic development hence, failure to involve women in the peace process will amount to a serious underutilization of available resources. In the same vein, most scholars have argued that ones' contribution to the growth and development of society should not be measured or assessed based on gender hence, both men and women owe the society and humanity a duty by making positive contributions towards the growth, development and advancement of mankind. Available records however shows that given the necessary encouragement and support, women are capable of performing exceedingly well in both social, private and in public life. While affirming this position, Wangari Maathai, first African woman to win the Nobel peace prize in 2004 for promoting environmental conservation, women's right and transparent government, throughout Africa, stated that women are responsible for tilling the fields, deciding what to plant, nurturing the crops, and harvesting the food. In her words: they are the first to be aware of environmental damage that harms agricultural production. If the well goes dry, they are the ones who are most concerned about finding new sources of water and the ones who must walk further to fetch it. As mothers, women are often the first to know when the food they feed their children is tainted with pollutants or impurities because they can see it in the tears of their children, and hear it in their babies cries.

According to the Prof. of veterinary anatomy, women have a unique connection to the environment and that human rights violation against women exacerbates environmental degradation. Through her nongovernmental organization, The Green Belt Movement over 30 million trees were planted in Africa, helping farmers, 70 percent of them women, to earn a

living through agriculture. The commitment and dedication of Wangari Maathai was tested when former Kenyan President Daniel Arap Moi decided to erect a 60 story sky scrapper in the middle of Nairobi's largest park. Maathai condemned the government decision and went ahead to organize a demonstration of women elders against several obnoxious policies and actions of the Kenyan government.

Analysis Showing the Contributions of Wangari Maathai to the Development and Advancement of Africa

This aspect of the study relied on data from secondary sources. While trying to inspire African women to rise against artificial barriers, Wangari Maathai stated that her Nobel peace price award won in 2004 will spur other women to take active role in the community and leadership. In a newspaper report captioned "Africa's first Nobel laureates dies, published in the Daily Sun Newspaper of Tuesday 27th September, 2011, she urged African women not to be deterred or feel discouraged. In her words: I hope it will encourage them to raise their voices and take more space for leadership

In the same vein, President of Liberia, Ellen Sir-leaf Johnson while commenting on the qualities of Wangari Maathai expressed shock and disbelief over the news of her death. According to her, Africa, particularly African women, have lust a champion, a leader, an activist. In her words: we are going to miss her, we are going to miss the work she was been doing all these years on the environment, working for women's rights and women's participation. Also commenting on the character of Wangari Maathai, Kerry Kennedy and President of the Robert F. Kennedy Centre for Justice and Human Rights, one of the groups that fought for Maathai's released during her trying moment, described Wangari Maathai as a woman who fought and died for the poor. In his words: Wangari Maathai was a mighty woman, creative, fearless and full of love.

While recalling his earlier meeting with Wangari Maathai before her death on 25th September 2011, Kerry Kennedy noted that he had met Maathai earlier while on a human rights mission to Kenya for the Robert .F. Kennedy Centre for Human Rights. According to him" ... and we had become instant friends, she spoke passionately about her work with rural women, and the difficulties they faced with little income, absentee husbands , a hostile government, and few resources for food, water, and firewood. Maathai worked with them to start planting trees". He therefore argued that through her Green Belt Movement founded in 1977, Wangari Maathai, a Prof. of veterinary anatomy succeeded in planting 30 million trees in Africa, helping farmers, 70 percent of them women, to earn a living through agriculture. In his words: the commitment and dedication of Wangari Maathai was tested when former Kenyan President, Daniel Arap Moi decided to erect a 60 story sky scrapper in the middle of Nairobi's largest park. Maathai condemned the government decision and went ahead to organize a demonstration of elderly women against several obnoxious policies and actions of the Kenyan government.

He reiterated that although Wangari Maathai and her companions were humiliated, beaten, tear-gassed and arrested by the Kenyan government, Wangari Maathai and her Green Belt Movement did not relent in their efforts. While corroborating the views of Robert F. Kenney,

Robert B. Zoellick former President of the World Bank Group in an article titled “Empowering Women Powers Nations” published in The Punch Newspaper of Friday 23rd September 2011, stressed the need for the empowerment of women at the global level. He stated categorically that about four (4) million girls and women got missing each year in developing countries when compared to their female counterparts in developed countries. In his words: About two-fifth are never born: a sixth die in early childhood, and more than a third die in their reproductive years. While referring to nations who discriminate against women he asked rhetorically” how can an economy achieved full potential if it ignores, sidelines or fails to invest in half (women) its population? Hence, he posited that leaders at the global level must take steps towards narrowing the gape between men and women in the area of education, health and labour markets. Citing Wangari Maathai of Kenya as a case study, he argued that women are now using their education to participate increasingly in the labour force, diversify their time beyond housework, child care and shape their communities, economies and societies. Citing the World Bank's new report, Robert B. Zoellick, former President of the World Bank Group maintained that women require support and empowerment in the following areas:

1. Addressing human capital issues such as the high mortality of girls and women through investment in clean water and maternal care and persistent disadvantages in education through targeted programmes.
2. Closing the earning and productivity gaps between women and men by improving access to productive resources such as water, electricity and child care.
3. Increasing participation by women in decisions made within households and societies; and
4. Limiting gender inequality across generations, by investing in the health and education of adolescent boys and girls hence, creating opportunities to improve their lives and also offering family planning information. The former president of the World Bank Group emphasized that the above listed measures, if applied, will empower women to use their talents and skills to boost healthy economic competition and growth at the global level hence, he cautioned that for women to continue to contribute towards the growth and development of Africa and for the continent to produce more Wangari Maathais. It is important and fundamental to ensure that women's right, productivity and incomes are not held down (abused) by market or institutional barriers, or overt discrimination.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it is unequivocally clear that several factors including economic, cultural, religious and political barriers restrict the chances of women from participating and contributing towards the growth and development of the society and the state. The study also revealed that despite these challenges and barriers, a few women including Kenya's Wangari Maathai has defied institutional limitations and measures and have contributed immensely to the growth, advancement and development of their communities, environment and the society in general through their actions and programmes. Thus, it is therefore imperative and fundamental for states and governments to address the issue of gender inequality and discrimination by bridging the rising gap between men and women in Africa and indeed the world.

Recommendations

The following recommendations will no doubt help to promote and guarantee the rights of women to enable them contribute meaningfully to the development and advancement of their community and the society in general.

1. Since women and girls are the main victims of war and insurgency, there is need for the enthronement of peace and good governance in Africa. Thus, there is urgent need for the African Union (AU) and the United Nations to intervene in the ongoing conflict in Mali, Kenya and the Southern African Republic where thousands of unarmed civilians are killed daily.
2. African states and governments including regional and international organizations should also re-double their efforts in the promotion of girl child education at all levels. Robert B. Zoellick was therefore right when he argued that empowering women powers nations". In order to produce more Wangari Maathai's, African states and governments must give the issue of girl child education a top priority in their respective budgets and policy actions.
3. Conscious efforts should be made to ensure the elimination and abrogation of all obnoxious cultural, institutional and legal barriers that hinder or limit the rights and liberties of women across the world. This will allow women and women groups and associations to express and assert themselves at any level.
4. Rather than discriminate and alienate women from politics and development, African states and governments should create a level playing field in order to ensure equal access to political participation and power. It will be recalled that Wangari Maathai through the Green Belt Movement, planted over 30 million trees in Africa and also practically touched the lives of rural farmers by encouraging them to plant protective green belts to stop soil erosion, provide shade and also earn a living through agriculture.
5. Women and women groups in Africa should also be alive to their responsibilities hence; they must not rely on their governments for everything they need. Like Kenyan Wangari Maathai, women and women groups can form cooperatives and partnerships across communities and states in order to improve their social conditions, wellbeing and at the same time contribute towards the development and advancement of the society.
6. The unnecessary rivalry and competition existing between women especially, career professionals should be checked and controlled by women themselves. It will be recalled that during the 2011 elections in Nigeria, female delegates refused to cast their votes for Mrs. Sarah Jubril, the only female presidential candidate in the People's Democratic Party (PDP). The case is the same in Liberia, Ghana, Togo and other African Countries.

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