



# Bridging the inequality gap in Africa for sustainable development: Assessing the role of women

Andrew Enaifoghe<sup>1\*</sup>, Celestina Brown<sup>2</sup>, Tafadzwa C. Maramura<sup>3</sup>, Salamat A. Ajede<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Department of Public Administration University of Zululand, KwaDlangezwa, South Africa

<sup>2</sup> Department of Human Services and Social Work University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

<sup>3</sup> Public Administration and Management University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa

<sup>4</sup> Department of Sociological Studies, College of Management Sciences, Tai Solarin University of Education, Ijagun, Ijebu-Ode, Ogun State, Nigeria

## Abstract

Promoting equal access to economic opportunity remains a struggle for many African leaders and the representation of women in the socio-economic and political structures. It is not surprising how many African countries have struggled to find stability and sustainable economic development. Research has provided solutions to the democracy problem in Africa, one of the often-heard arguments is that if more women were in positions of power, democracy could become a reality to closing the gender imbalance gap. Ensuring sustainable democracy will become incomplete without policy measures and practices that ensure the reduction in gender inequalities in all spheres of life. Improving the position of women in the world stays high on the quest for sustainable economic development and the political agenda. This study finds a low representation of women in socio-economic and political issues in Africa which may have a close link to socio-cultural factors. Economies cannot realize the full developmental potential where only half of the population is disregarded through the gender gap. The need to include women in the dynamics of sustainable development has significant implications in reducing poverty and promoting economic growth. This study utilized a qualitative approach for data collection and analysis.

**Keywords:** Colonialism; Development; Equality; Gender gap; Representation; Sustainable

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\*Corresponding author. E-mail address: [andyransey@gmail.com](mailto:andyransey@gmail.com)

## 1. Introduction

The objective of the study explored the role of women in bridging the inequality gap in Africa for sustainable development. Gender remains a significant consideration in the quest for sustainable development on a global level. It is a systematic way of looking at how various socio-political, cultural norms and dynamic power structures impacts lives and access to opportunities that are available to different social groups of both men and women in modern societies. Enaifoghe (2018), defines gender equality refers to having equal rights to opportunities and outcomes for both girls and boys, women, and men. Gender equality does not necessarily mean that both women and men are the same. However, their rights, responsibilities, and opportunities do not depend on whether they are born female or male. Kangas et al. (2014) highlight that women are also seen to be less likely than men to receive basic education and to be appointed to a position of power nationally or internationally. Globally, more women live in poverty than men, hence promoting gender equity and women's representation in socio-economic and political structures (Enaifoghe, 2021; Enaifoghe and Idowu, 2021; Kornegay, 2000). Hence, the adoption of gender equality is the key to achieving sustainable development and eradication of poverty in every member state including South Africa by the United Nations (Kornegay, 2000).

The definition of goals aimed toward achieving gender equality is guided by a vision of human rights, which incorporates the acceptance of equal and inalienable rights of all women and men (Kornegay, 2000). There is, however, an increasing rise in the level of inequality in the distribution of economic opportunities among people, which is well-documented and displays the appearance of a lack of development (Enaifoghe, 2021). This is a major problem that calls for attention to address, as the trend has "affected large numbers of countries, ranging from the poorest to the most affluent, in the past two decades" (United Nations, 2006). The current inequality gap between the rich and the poor in many developing countries and many African countries are measured in terms of national per capita income, which is growing as well. This has led to the quest to advance structural economic opportunities and sustainable development. This, therefore, motivated the need to call for equal participation of women in all spheres of government in this paper. This is achievable through the implementation and enforcement of policies that provide equal representation in all political structures, by providing access to economic opportunity for women and participation for all.

## 2. Research methodology

This study adopted a content analysis method that allows researchers to study, consult, and make sense of written materials or documents which may be available either in the public or private domain. The authors studied various literature that were collected through a desktop approach with written documents that were available in the public or private domain. Document analysis is a form of qualitative research that uses a systematic procedure to analyze documentary evidence and answer specific research questions (Frey, 2018). Similar to other methods of analysis in qualitative research, document analysis requires repeated review, examination, and interpretation of the data to gain meaning and empirical knowledge of the construct being studied (Frey, 2018). Document analysis can be conducted as a stand-alone study or as a component of a larger qualitative or mixed methods study, where it is often used to triangulate findings gathered from another data source (e.g., interview or focus group transcripts, observation, surveys) (Frey, 2018). When

used in triangulation, documents can corroborate or refute, elucidate, or expand on findings across other data sources, which help to guard against bias. Through a systematic review of the material collected, the researchers determine the relevance of the documents that they consult based on their significance to the study. Sileyew (2019), noted that there are several approaches used in research as a method and design. The selected method for this study was documentary analysis, which creates the criteria for the researcher to select different documents while focusing on extracts that should reflect the issues on which the researcher is seeking evidence. This method made it possible for the researchers to explore the fundamental objective of the study that could help address the issue of the gender inequality gap in African polity for sustainable development.

### 3. Literature consideration

The need to advance sustainable development through gender equality and representation in all structures requires the advancement of feminist agendas in African politics. The aim of this paper looked at the role of women in bridging the inequality gap in African politics for sustainable development. The quest to achieve sustainable development has led to the promotion of gender equality around the world and in Africa. This was occasioned by the principles of democracy, which is not without policy measures and practices that ensure the reduction in gender inequalities in all spheres of life. The United Nations (UN) through the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2006), revealed that “up to the 1980s, since the Second World War there has been a general narrowing of differences in the economic opportunities and income available to individuals and families.

The socio-economic related inequalities which are notably ranging from the ownership of capital resources and empowerment, services and benefits, and in the personal security that money can buy, are growing” (Rai and Waylen, 2008: 2). There comes the issue of larger inequalities in terms of the distribution of socio-political and socio-economic opportunities for women in the remunerated occupation, with deteriorating high levels of unemployment and underemployment in Africa as well as other parts of the world (Enaifoghe, 2018: 3). This issue of high levels of unemployment and underemployment in Africa has affected a “disproportionate number of people at the lower end of the socio-economic scale” (Rai and Waylen, 2008: 2). The authors explored the different efforts made by several institutions to advance gender equity to realize sustainable economic development and democracy in Africa. Enaifoghe (2018: 4), articulated that much research has provided solutions to Africa’s democracy and development problem but has failed to address the issue from the root cause. As one often heard, the argument is that if these countries were to include more women in politics, democracy could become a reality of economic development while closing the gender imbalance gap.

This study, therefore, argued that including women in all the dynamics of sustainable development has significant implications in realizing poverty reduction and promoting economic growth. In the past few years, there has been a low representation of women in political issues in Africa which may have a close link to socio-cultural factors, before the emergence of democracy. A scholar like Enaifoghe (2018), articulated that it is not surprising that many African countries have struggled over the past few years to find political stability and sustained economic development due to the inherited colonial legacy in Africa. Moreover, the past apartheid regime in South Africa before the advent of democracy (Enaifoghe, 2018). As democracy is

projected to transmute power relations amongst men and women by promoting equal power sharing and influence (Enaifoghe and Maramura, 2018). Therefore, over the years improving the position of women in the world stays high on the quest for sustainable economic development and the political agenda.

According to Enaifoghe (2019), gender equality features conspicuously in the new global development goals. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the continued plea for gender equality are not only the right thing to do, but from a “human rights perspective, it is arguably also a smart thing to do” (UNDP, 2016). Progressive economies cannot realize their full potential, in terms of development where only half of the population is disregarded by the gender gap. The inclusion of women in all government structures for an inclusive gender proficiency in government is of great significance, which has substantial implications in realizing a poverty reduction to promote socio-economic growth and development. Enaifoghe (2018), highlights that there has been a low representation of women in political issues in Africa, which may have a close link to socio-cultural factors before the emergence of democracy, such as South Africa. The scholar further states that “South Africa in 1994 for instance, had merely only 2.7% representation of women in parliament; since then, things have changed.”

Rwanda despite of being one of the poorest countries on the planet has 68% of women in parliament in its political structures; this ground-breaking record happens to be the highest achievement in the history of politics both in the developed and developing nations around the world (Enaifoghe, 2019). The International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) (2018) noted that the issue of “gender inequality has always impeded development,” and that 2018 demonstrated to be a year where assessments of gender parity spurt forth into the mainstream more than ever before.” Against the global background, the IISD continues to spotlight gender concerns in sustainable development. For example, two recent reports of the International Institute for Sustainable Development revealed how “gender, water and climate change are interwoven in policies” that are specifically springing from the governments of the Ugandan and Kenyan institutions (IISD, 2018a). These issues of gender inequalities have greatly proved that women are the adopters of new agricultural and energy technologies, educators of the young and main users of water for household needs, who offer valuable understandings and elucidations into better managing the jeopardies of climate change (United Nations, 2010; UN, 2009).

The United Nations and IDEA (2013) argued that “the pursuit of democracy is incomplete without policies, measures, and practices that seek to reduce inequalities between men and women in all spheres of life. As democracy is expected to transform power relations between men and women by promoting the equal distribution of power and influence, it is imperative to ensure that gender equality is integrated into a democratic building. Chaban et al. (2017), noted that properly addressing issues related to gender equality and the political empowerment of women is key to the consolidation of strong democracies. The scholars further state that it has become more evident with the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, particularly with the strong commitment that the global community has made on the advancement of SDG 5, to achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls. Beyond this exceedingly specific goal, the UN agenda on SDGs, in transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, noted that

*Gender has been recognized globally through agreements and legal instruments as a cross-cutting component that is crucial to creating an enabling environment for achieving sustainable development and strengthening democratic institutions at the global, regional, national, and local levels.*

In this background, all actions by the states aimed at achieving economic prosperity, security, political and socio-economic stability, as well as encouraging “the protection of our valued natural and human resources must be mainstreaming gender equality” (Bäthge, 2010). This is seen as a key component of successful realization in all these endeavours. In recent times, giant strides have been made to improve women’s economic and political participation in Africa. One of the notable moves is the adoption of the African Union Gender Policy, which coincides with phase two of the review of the implementation of Horizon 2004–2007, in which the Gender Policy both guides the Commission’s revised phase of the implementation of all its programs, as it also constitutes the Gender Action Plan. The Commission’s motivated plan to create gender management systems call for programmatic tools and mechanisms needed to raise principles for not tracking but to eliminate gender discrimination and other inequalities (Favaro et al., 2016; Gender Equality, 2016).

It is for this cause therefore that the Commission established the gender assessment of the African Union Commission, whose aim is to carry out “Gender Audits” in other African Union Organs and Institutions. With this Gender Policy and its Action Plan in place, the Commission, with other African Union Organs, including the Regional Economic Communities and the Member States can ensure the promotion of gender equality, human dignity, and peace for all and in so doing fulfil the vision of the AU (Hekman et al., 2017). The accomplishments in attaining gender equality have been positive in impacting human development in Africa. Research conducted in 2015 showed that at least “one out of three African countries have achieved medium to high human development compared to one out of five in 2000.” Nevertheless, gender equality is a “critical accelerator and enabler of all development” (Reeves, 2016).

However, the UNDP (2016), articulated that “there are lower levels of discrimination in social institutions which lead to lower gender inequality, which in turn results in higher human development outcomes for women relative to men”. The higher human development for women relative to men, Reeves recommended strategic pathways to achieve gender equality. The enforcement of effective implementation of both legal, regulatory, and policy frameworks is central to building a critical mass of women in decision-making. This is by going beyond small scale and silo-bound gender initiatives; guaranteeing greater access for women to assets and resources which increases overall human development (Reeves, 2016: 6). According to the African Union, the “region is committed to socio-economic development which takes into account the diversity in a social, cultural, and traditional setting, and is making efforts to address cultures and practices which militate against the enjoyment of freedom and rights by women and girls” (Gender Equality, 2016). As indicated by the African Union, Gender Equality (2016), stated that the union on the implementation of Gender Policy commitments will be used to provide the foundation that will help eradicate the barriers to achieving gender equality in the African continent. This commitment to the policy is also expected to be a guide to gender equality actions for the African continent in implementing other global commitments on gender including MDG 3 targets.

#### **4. The role of women in sustainable economic development and poverty reduction**

The quest to realize the achievement of sustainable economic development and to reduce poverty, by increasing women in economic activities through gender equality, will help women contribute to economic development in numerous ways. This necessitates the direct pathway functions through the education of



women with their full and equal participation in the labor market. Findings show that “gender inequality in education and employment adversely affects economic growth by reducing the average amount of human capital in a society and thus harm economic performance” (Klasen, 1999, 2002). Other scholars like Dollar and Gatti (1999), Esteve-Volart (2004), support the above notion that gender inequalities affect economic growth by preciously limiting the pool of ability or women’s skills in which an employer could draw from, thus decreasing the typical ability of the workforce. This also impedes the advancement of new ideas, that are critical for entrepreneurship and as well as the diversification of the economy, which are the essential drivers of sustainable economic growth (Herrington and Kew, 2017; Kazandjian et al., 2016).

In applying the economic model from the International Futures, the UNDP has conducted both global and regional analyses of the economic impacts of investing in gender equality in both the education system as well as the labor force participation, and they found significant benefits (Dugarova, 2018: 12). Notably, the scholar indicated that the results show that intercessions are arguably needed in increasing the attainment of female education as well as encouraging the participation of women in the labor force by 2030. If the above is done, it would have contributed up to 3.6%, which is about US\$4.4 trillion, to global gross domestic products (GDP) and will have reduced the share of the global population living in extreme poverty (measured at less than \$1.90 a day) by 0.5% points” (Dugarova, 2018: 12).

The highest effects on GDP were found in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and South Asia with increases of 4.1% and 4.4%, respectively, while the reduction of poverty is most pronounced in sub-Saharan Africa with a drop of 0.7% points (Dugarova, 2018: 12). This, therefore, suggests that having policy interventions in place for female education realization and their participation in the labor force increases human capital and supply of labor; this will, therefore, lead to greater productivity and promote economic growth, as well as contributing to the reduction of the poverty rate.

## 5. Gender social, cultural and ideological factors for policy interventions

There are previous studies that found similar conclusions on the affirmative effects of bridging gender gaps in both education and employment. Klasen and Lamanna (2009), found that the “combined costs of education and employment gaps in MENA and South Asia amount to 0.9–1.7 and 0.1–1.6% point differences in growth, respectively, compared to East Asia.” These findings suggest that the persistent inequality between women and men in the education system as well as participation in the labor force in the MENA and South Asia limits the development of these regions. Despite their improvement in female education over the past two decades, Klasen and Lamanna (2009: 3), argued that women in these circumstances are faced with structural barriers in both education and employment which could be linked to both economic reforms, “recession, and limited domestic and foreign investment.” This may as well be inhibited by social, cultural, and ideological factors (World Bank, 2004).

Research finds these barriers not only to be detrimental to womens empowerment, but they further damage the entire social society through abridged economic development for women. Kabeer and Natali (2013), argued that while there is strong proof pointing to the “catalytic effects of gender equality on economic growth”, however, the contrary does not automatically hold. The interrelationship between “economic growth and gender equality is mediated by various context-specific factors, including the nature of

growth strategies, the structure of the economy. However, the sectoral composition of women's employment levels of economic development, remain low due to social and cultural factors (Kabeer, 2016a: 3). This is some form of development that is premised on conserving gender inequalities, and this is through the maintenance of gender wage gaps, and rooting gender-discriminatory values and institutions (Kabeer and Natali, 2013; Seguino, 2000a; UNRISD, 2005).

Despite the recorded economic accomplishments in the East Asian countries, for example, the integration of women into the paid labor market invariably helps to maintain "gender hierarchies" and this is not in any way challenging the traditional gender norms. Moreover, even though the growth rate recorded in Africa in the past decade or thereabout has been seen to be considerable, it is primarily a result of the large upsurge in the demand for natural resources. This acknowledgement or insight does not change the status of women within the family unit and in the entire society overall in tandem with GDP growth. This is as a result of the persistent gender perception in education as well as the social norms that govern domestic work and care-giving, also the unequal access to economic assets (UNDP, 2016a), equal participation of women with men in the workplace, and the entrepreneurship opportunities, and use of natural resources (Dugarova, 2018; Braunstein, 2012; Seguino, 2010).

## 6. Women's underpaid and underemployed in the global employment

Some evidence obtained by the International Labour Organization shows that though more "women are in paid employment globally today," they remained "underpaid and underemployed", whereas they perform the bulk of part-time, short-term, and informal jobs (ILO, 2018a). The research conducted by the International Labour Organization (ILO) discovered that women virtually around the world are likely to earn on an average of 23% which is less than what men earn while giving on average, it is "three times more times than men to unpaid care work" (ILO, 2016, 2018b). An analysis of 141 countries has shown that gender inequality in earnings could lead to losses in a wealth of \$160.2 trillion, which is about twice the value of GDP globally (Wodon and de la Bri er, 2018). Besides, it is arguably evident that in developing nations, such as Africa and particularly South Africa, time-related underemployment among women (that is, working fewer hours than desired) can be as high as 40–50% (ILO, 2016).

The part-time occupation among women in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) member states on average, stood at around 26% in 2015, which is seen to be nearly 3 times greater than that of men. Dugarova, (2018: 12), establishes that even in the nations that have been perceived to be positive outliers in gender equality in the labor market, there exists a gap in terms of earnings between men and women. Notably in Denmark, the research of Kleven et al. (2018: 9), found the so-called "motherhood or child penalty" -that is, the share of losses accruing to women's earnings after childbirth, increased dramatically from 40% in 1980 to 80% in 2013. Dugarova, (2018: 12), articulated that "the penalties in earnings have been attributed to considerable impacts of children on women's occupation, sector, and firm choices, and the persistence of such penalties has been explained by the inter-generational transmission of behavior."

Women who grow up in traditional families based on the male breadwinner model are found to incur larger penalties when they become mothers themselves (England, 2010). Gender pay gaps have also been

linked to inter-generational class mobility in the labor market (Rubery and Grimshaw, 2014). The research finding by England (2010), shows that women in the United States, have had strong economic motivations to venture into male-dominated jobs or professions, and these motivations varied according to social class, as the well-educated women have a stronger impetus to be engaged in the high-paying jobs. Another research conducted in 2018 by Gould, reported that “American wage distribution has further revealed that since 2000 inequality among women has increased, with wage gaps being wider among women with less education” (Gould, 2018). Nevertheless, at every education level, women are paid consistently less than their male counterparts (Dugarova, 2018).

In summary, the call to ensure the equal participation of both men and women in the decision-making processes is significantly dynamic to realizing development goals across a spectrum of advancement including the ones that are related to the Sustainable Development Goals:

SDG 1	SDG 2	SDG 3	SDG 4	SDG 6	SDG 8	SDG 13	SDG 16
To end poverty	To improve nutrition	To ensure healthy lives	To access quality education	To provide adequate water and sanitation	To promote economic growth and employment generation	To address climate change	To foster good governance and effective institutions

*Source: United Nations (2020): Take Action for the Sustainable Development Goals*

In the above acknowledgment, when considering the participation and integration of women, it is imperative to take their full and equal representation into account, both descriptive and substantive, that is the percentage of women in elected bodies and their impact on the decision-making process. The participation of women in the formal political institutions which include “political parties, parliaments, civil service and courts, and formal processes including elections and constitutional reform, is often the most direct way to influence decision-making. Overwhelmingly, this study finds that women can shape the decisions and the behavior of power holders that are outside the public office through collective action.

## 7. Accessing south africa’s national policy stand on empowerment and gender equality

In the discourse on women’s empowerment and gender equality, it is important to first understand that men and women, boys and girls experience poverty differently. As such they tend to “face different barriers in accessing services, economic resources, and political opportunities to target interventions” (Kangas et al., 2014). In advance to undertake a gender analysis, it is important to understand “gender” as a concept. The World Development Report (WDR) (2012) defines “gender as socially constructed norms and ideologies which determine the behavior and actions of men and women.”

Therefore, “understanding these gender relations and the power dynamics behind them is a prerequisite for understanding individuals’ access to and distribution of resources” (Enaifoghe, 2018: 3). This is in line with their “ability to make decisions and how women and men, boys and girls are affected by political processes and social development” (Kangas et al., 2014: 4).

According to Kangas et al. (2014: 4), in comparison to men, “women control fewer political and economic resources, including land, employment, and traditional positions of authority.” Recognizing and integrating these “gender inequalities” into various progressive programs and evaluations is therefore exceedingly



imperative, from both the human rights angle and also to maximize the impact and socioeconomic development. The WDR highlights the prominence of directly aiming at the unrelenting constraints and obstacles that stand as barriers to women's equality, this is particularly in areas of "economic empowerment, educational gaps, household/societal voice, and violence against women" (Howe-Walsh and Turnbull, 2016). This is to improve productivity through gender proficiency and improve longer-term sustainable development outcomes.

Kangas et al. (2014), noted that pursuing gender equality is also important for sustainable peace, and there is a growing body of empirical evidence suggesting that a higher level of gender inequality is associated with higher risks of internal conflict. In accessing the South African policy stand on gender equality implementation, Kornegay, (2000: ii), highlighted that; "the Presidency, following its jurisdiction over the national gender program, proposed that Cabinet adopt South Africa's National Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality prepared by the Office on the Status on Women." The South African gender policy framework clearly outlines its vision for gender equality and how it plans to realize this ideal.

Just like every other standard policy document that may be trans-sectoral, such as the White Paper on Transforming the Public Service, it is not meant to be authoritarian or prescriptive for all various sectors of government. Rather, the South African Policy Framework for Women's Empowerment and Gender Equality details the overarching principles, which will be integrated by all sectors into their sectoral policies, practices, and programs" (Kornegay, 2000: ii). It is vitally important that all structures of government, including the President himself, should understand this fully: that freedom cannot be achieved unless women have been emancipated from all forms of oppression.

*All of us must take this on board that the objectives of the Reconstruction and Development Programme will not have been realized unless we see visible and practical terms that the condition of the women in our country has radically changed for the better. And that they have been empowered to intervene in all spheres of life as equals with any other member of society". (President Nelson Mandela, Inaugural Speech April 1994)*

According to the policy document, the definition of the SDGs towards achieving gender equality is guided by a vision of human rights that incorporates acceptance of equal and inalienable rights of all women and men. This ideal is a fundamental tenet under the Bill of Rights of The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996). It emerged from a long period of struggle for a democratic society that respects and promotes the rights of all its citizens irrespective of race, gender, class, age, disability, etc. (Bill of Rights, Sections 9.1 to 9.4). The commencement of such a model should begin from people whose history is immersed in the institutional racialism in which rights, life probabilities, and the sharing of goods and services stayed established around racial lines. More prominently, the respect for one's dignity was resolute by "the color of their skin and, further within the various racial groupings, by their gender designation" (National Gender Policy Framework document, n.d: i).

*the socio-cultural prescriptions of all groups in South Africa defined women to be inferior to men and as such assigned to them the position of minors in both the public and private spheres of life, and in the private sphere, women were less likely to lead in decision-making" (Kornegay, 2000: i).*

In many interpersonal interactions men had more power than women, as cultural demands, women are expected to submit and respect men by all virtues. This historical heritage of patriarchy has also influenced

the critical “informal and formal human relationships” with a noticeable bearing virtually in all aspects of life and at the workplace as well. This, therefore, called for the need to formulate a policy such as the “Gender Policy Framework”, whose status is to “establish the procedures and guidelines for Africa as a progressive nation to take action that will remedy this systemic discrimination. The National Gender Policy Framework is therefore established to remedy the historical legacy by defining new terms of reference for interacting with each other in both the private and public spheres, and by proposing and recommending an institutional framework that facilitates equal access to goods and services for both women and men” (Kornegay, 2000).

## 8. African gender policy framework and strategy for women’s empowerment

The Strategy for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment is an Africa where human development is driven by the potential offered by people, particularly women and youth, and child care, and the principles laid down in Article 4(I) of the AU Constitutive Act: “promoting gender equality” as well as key continental and global commitments (African Union, 2018). “Gender equality is achieved when women and men enjoy equal rights and opportunities in all fields of society, including economic participation and decision-making, and when different attitudes, ambitions of women and men are equally respected and preferred.” This approach is revolutionary in that its results strive to reduce, if not remove, the main obstacles that hinder gender equality. The African Union (AU) institutions and bodies and partners will implement this strategy (Favaro et al., 2016).

To maximize opportunities, women’s outcomes and dividends must be economically empowered and contribute to sustainable development, they must have equal access to quality education and control over productive resources. The African Union’s commitment to gender equality is rooted in the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights (AFDB, 2017). However, it has failed to meet the set objective by implementing the policy on women’s participation in the decision-making and involvement in political leadership. Some of the main decisions that highlight the leadership of the AU in gender equality and women empowerment include the Declaration on the promotion of gender equality as a key objective of the AU – Article 4(L) of the Constitutive Act explicitly provides that the African Union’s task will be to promote gender equality, “making the promotion of gender equality one of the priorities of the AU. To ensure conformity with the principle of promoting gender equality and to promote gender mainstreaming within the Commission itself and the AU as a whole (Favaro et al., 2016).

Article 12(3) of the Statutes of the AU Commission specifically provides that, because “gender issues are cross-cutting through all the portfolios of the Commission, (African Union, 2018). The principle of gender equality as laid down in Article 4(L) of the Constitutive Act of the African Union, as well as other current obligations, values, goals and acts set out in the various regional, continental and international frameworks. The above instruments have allowed the RECs and the Member States to advance their own legislative, administrative and institutional structures to make progress on women’s rights and gender equality. In many respects, the AU’s approach to the advancement of women’s rights and gender equality has been informed by the UN framework and the specific needs of the African continent. In an internationalized context in which cultural, geographical, economic and social boundaries are dissolved, respect for human rights and their indivisibility is a fundamental principle for all humanity (African Union, 2016).

Besides, innovative ideas and growth approaches have materialized to achieve greater equality between men and women. The recognition of the leadership role of women in all areas of development, including their involvement in decision-making at the international, regional and national level remains low; this is reflected in the establishment of forums for gender-related action. Although the AU developed a gender policy that focuses on closing the gender gap between men and women in general and, in particular, addressing gender inequalities, which have led to women's disempowerment and feminization of poverty, to gain a better understanding of the contribution of women to development. The policy failed to provide a framework that will accelerate the implementation of gender equality, equality between men and women, non-discrimination and fundamental rights in Africa. The desired effect and impact of the policy is to provide opportunities for empowerment of women, to ensure their protection against violence and abuse, and to ensure their participation in public and economic life.

Nevertheless, the objective is yet to be achieved, as many women still experience discrimination and abuses in many sectors. A paradigm change is inevitable to achieve the empowerment of women, ensure their protection against violence and abuse, and their participation in public life. The policy underpins the need to recognize ways and means of implementing gender-based initiatives, such as the creation of the African Women's Trust Fund and the reorientation of gender-based initiatives to pay better attention to gender equality. According to the African Union Commission (2016), this policy document is divided into four parts:

- *Part I sets out the historical background to gender issues in Africa;*
- *Part II sets out policy objectives, objectives, principles, values and objectives;*
- *Part III sets out gender policy commitments; and*
- *Part IV sets out the institutional framework for the implementation of the policy.*

An important Annex to this Policy is the Gender Policy Action Plan for the implementation of policy commitments. As stated by the African Commission (2017), the mandate of the Gender Policy remain unwavering in ensuring that this gender equality and women empowerment Policy derives from three main factors:

- a. *The strong AU commitment to gender equality as established in the various AU basic documents, namely: the AU Constitutive Act (Article 4L); the Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa; the SDGEA; the NEPAD Framework, etc. Collectively, these instruments form a normative framework that confers several commitments and corresponding responsibilities for the promotion of gender equality in Africa.*
- b. *The aspirations and achievements of the African women's movement have influenced the acceleration of promoting gender equality and women empowerment.*
- c. *The empirical necessity to consolidate the positive experience that took place in Africa following the adoption of the principle of gender equality, as well as ensuring progress in terms of developing gender equality policies and creating mechanisms for promoting the empowerment of all peoples of Africa (African Commission, 2017).*

The Gender Policy aims to set out a clear vision and to make commitments to direct the process of gender mainstreaming and empowerment of women to influence policies, processes and practices that will accelerate the achievement of gender equality, gender equity, non-discrimination and basic human rights in Africa. Similarly, the South African Gender Policy Framework proposes a process that moves away from treating gender issues as something done at the end-of-the-day business, this often, while discussing

development issues, it is presumed that gender issues can be addressed after the hard-core issues have been dealt with" (Statistics Canada, 1999). The formulated National Gender Policy Framework, attempt to guarantee the method to achieve gender equality at the very center of "the transformation process in the country within all the structures, institutions, policies, procedures, practices and programs of the government, its agencies and parastatals, civil society and the private sector."

It is necessary to ascertain the rudimentary expectations that underpinned the formulation of the Gender Policy Framework. The fundamental expectations and assumptions that underpinned the policy framework are: "though South Africa is considered by some international indicators to be among the upper-middle-income countries of the world, the majority of Africans live either in abject poverty or in fear of becoming poor" (National Gender Policy Framework, n.d). As most of these individuals are women who live in the "peri-urban and rural areas", the Gender Policy Framework has taken a "basic needs" approach and has prioritized to meet the basic needs which by definition; is "basic needs" approach is holistic. The approach is to conform to the principles and values that are embraced in this process, "the strategy for program implementation has to be inter-sectoral" (National Gender Policy Framework, n.d). To deliver programs, those involved will have to mobilize across many sectors to address the multiple needs assumed within this model;

*"The women's empowerment approach tends to focus more on practical needs which in themselves are complementary to the 'basic needs' approach reflected in the situational analysis" (South African National Gender Policy Framework, p. 3)*

Given the high levels of inequalities which pertain to the African context, the focus on women's empowerment in the policy document affirmed the gratification of 'basic needs' as a necessary requirement toward the identification and the accomplishment of 'strategic needs.

## 9. Conclusion

This study looked at bridging the inequality gap in Africa for sustainable development through the lens of promoting women's participation in all spheres of life; it concludes that the promotion of gender equality should remain a central continental and global commitment. Bridging the gap in gender inequality in Africa for sustainable development is achievable when women and men enjoy equal rights and opportunities across all facets of society, including economic participation and decision-making, and when different attitudes, desires of women and men are equally respected and favored. This strategy is revolutionary in that its effects are aimed at alleviating, if not removing, the main constraints that obstruct gender equality and women 's empowerment, and at jumping on the AU to capture the current global momentum for this agenda.

It was noted that there are some significant reasons why gender inequality is still prevalent in the area of socio-economic development in Africa. Any form of discrimination against women causes social injustice. Subsequently, African governments through the African Union should not just have policies in place to address this social issue but ensure that there are services put in place to implement them. This study also shows that the reason why there is a high rate of gender inequality, especially against women, is because of culturally biased views that have dominated the African socio-economic system and the entire Sub-Saharan region.

Conventionally, African countries are patriarchal, and women are often believed to stay home and play the wife and mother roles without pursuing any career. Equally, women that were once in the workforce are often compelled to take up part-time work or most times give up their job to concentrate on the family.

It is recommended that to be able to break ground against such levels of gender inequality towards women and increasing economic opportunity for women, customs, and practices that are entrenched in primitive laws and policies should be reviewed and addressed to scale up with international laws and treaties that protect women from any form of gender inequality.

There also needs to be more grassroots level awareness, women-led initiative programs, and the national sectors should start by role modelling their policies by encouraging and appointing women in government institutions and organizations. They need to be the same for women to have a voice represented in all decision-making areas, at all stages, and being able to engage with an effect through removing formal and informal obstacles.

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