

Women's Rights in Africa: Land Reform, Gender Equality and Social Equity

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International Women's Day on March 8 is an annual commemoration extending back for over a century. In Africa women have been in the forefront of the movements toward national liberation, social and environmental justice as well as gender equality.

A host of events have taken place in March across the African continent and in the Diaspora both recognizing the contributions and advancements of women in society but also examining the ongoing challenges. With African Union (AU) member-states having gone on record calling for full equality for women within governmental and economic affairs, raises serious questions about the pace of change and the commitment of the various states in implementing these goals.

In Liberia a third regional workshop on gender, the environment and land tenure was held. Some 50 women participated in the event from 16 different countries.

After the conclusion of the gathering 150 women from various areas of Liberia held a rally and march to present their findings to President Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia, one of only three women heads-of-state on the African continent. Johnson-Sirleaf has promised to institute land reform which benefits the social interests of women who do much of the agricultural work inside the country and throughout the continent.

An article published by The New Dawn newspaper based in the capital of Monrovia, its states that "In Liberia, as in most Central and West African countries, indigenous peoples and local communities do not own the land and forests on which they have lived and cultivated for generations. Instead, government claims ownership instead." (March 4)

This same article continues noting

"As Liberia moves towards adopting a new policy on land ownership, many customary traditions do not yet respect the rights and abilities of women in land governance and, as currently written, Liberia's proposed land reform policy has no safeguards for women. Last year, the publication said, Liberian President Johnson-Sirleaf made an unprecedented promise to Liberian women, stating: 'Women will have the full right to own their land like anyone else.'"

In its concluding declaration the workshop, which was sponsored by the African Women's Network for Community Management of Forests (REFACOF), the president of the organization Cecile Ndjebet, posed a challenge to President Johnson-Sirleaf to honor previous pledges to include strong protections for women in the pending land reform

legislation in Liberia.

Ndjebet said

“For real political and social change to take place, there are three issues that need to be addressed, we need legislation that protects equal rights for women, mechanisms that provide for political and social equity, and a change in social and cultural perceptions of women.” (FrontPageAfrica, March 12)

SADC Region Calls for Gender Parity and Equality

In the Republic of South Africa which has the strongest economy on the continent with the largest industrial and rural working class, the National Assembly passed a new bill mandating gender equality on March 5. The Women Empowerment and Gender Equity Bill represented the continuation of other similar pieces of legislation enacted over the last two decades since the African National Congress (ANC) came to power.

Minister for Women Affairs Lulu Xingwana welcomed the passage of the legislation saying “The women of South Africa have said to us that they cannot wait any longer to share in the fruits of our democracy. It is a precondition for meeting the challenge of reducing poverty, promoting sustainable development and building good governance.”(SAPA, March 5)

A spokeswoman for the Department of Women, Children and People With Disabilities, Motalalale Modiba, pointed out that the bill “calls for the progressive realization of at least 50% representation of women in decision-making structures.” According to the SAPA

“It also aims at improving access to education, training and skills development. The Bill seeks to promote and protect women’s reproductive health, and eliminate discrimination and harmful practices, including gender-based violence.” (March 5)

The Bill adds to the Commission on Gender Equality Act (1996), the Skills Development Act (1998), the Employment Equity Act (1998) and the Promotion of Equality and Prevention of Unfair Discrimination Act (2000).

In the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region despite the adoption of a protocol which mandates that 50% of all decision making positions should be occupied by women only one-third of the member countries are anywhere near approaching these goals. Of the five states which have the most representation by women within the legislative and administrative structures of government only Seychelles and South Africa have achieved levels above 40%.

These states within SADC which have the highest number of women within governing structures are Seychelles (43.8%), South Africa (42.3%), Mozambique (39.2%), the United Republic of Tanzania (36%) and Angola (34.1%). Zimbabwe, which introduced a quota system under the 2013 Constitution, now has 31.5% representation in the legislative National Assembly. (Zimbabwe Herald, March 12)

SADC Executive Secretary Dr. Tax Stergomina in a statement issued honoring International Women’s Day applauded the advancement made by women in Southern Africa but also

stressed that

“Many of our communities, especially women and girls in rural areas continue to face challenges that include harmful traditional /religious practices, and violence against women and children among other concerns. Lack of access to and ownership of resources such as land continues to be a challenge for basic livelihood necessary for poverty eradication, food security and sustainable development among others.” (March 8)

In the Republic of Zimbabwe, Women’s Affairs, Gender and Community Development Minister Oppah Muchinguri issued a statement on International Women’s Day noting that

“We are happy that the new constitution provides for the establishment of Gender Commission which will work as a watchdog in ensuring that all State institutions abide with gender equality provisions. I would like to urge Zimbabwean women to use the new Constitution as a lobbying tool to penetrate key economic sectors such as mining, tourism, and agriculture. (Zimbabwe Herald, March 10)

Muchinguri applauded the provisions in the new constitution which places much stiffer penalties on those convicted of domestic violence and said that more work should be done to further criminalize sexual assault. “We should continue lobbying for deterrent sentences for rape and stiffer penalties for other forms of gender based violence. Specifically Section 25(b) of the Constitution obliges the State to adopt measures for the prevention of domestic violence,” she said.

The Debate Over Race and Gender Politics in the Diaspora

Outside of Africa among women of African and Asian descent in Britain a debate is still ongoing on the role of race in the struggle for gender equality. Many Black women feel that the specific aspects of racism and national oppression are not clearly understood by many white feminists.

In an article published by the Guardian which takes up this issue, writer and activist Armit Wilson noted that

“For many of us – Black, Muslim, trans, lesbian, queer and disabled – police harassment is commonplace and specialist refuges and services for women facing violence built over decades by Black feminists are being closed down. Can anyone honestly say that these things do not represent or shape experiences of gender for a vast number of women? And yet the mainstream feminist movement says little (and does less) about these issues. This status quo needs challenging – good luck to the voices who do so.” (March 7)

Another contributor to the Guardian article was Egyptian writer and activist Nawal El Saadawi summed up the intersectional relationships between race, gender and class. She said

“There have always been conflicts and disagreements between women belonging to the upper-middle classes in the global west or north and the majority of women in the south or east who belong to working classes. For

example, working-class women in the US supported African women when others called us “women of the third world” and we were not happy with that term. Even within countries there have always been different feminisms, and it is really a matter of understanding the links between oppression by gender, by race, class and religion.”

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