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Parallel panel sessions on the sub-themes of the Forum

Background paper on the sub-theme: “Promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls”

Introduction

1. African economies have grown steadily over the last decades and now rank among the fastest growing economies of the world. This growth, which has taken place in defiance of the uneven global recovery from the 2008 economic and financial downturn, has been celebrated by analysts, who have declared the last decade as a period of triumph for Africa. This achievement is somewhat diminished, however, by the reality that economic growth in Africa has not equally benefited all segments of its population. Inequality has grown in tandem with the continent’s growth. With a Gini coefficient estimated at 44 per cent, the second highest after Latin America,¹ and a gender inequality index of 0.572, the highest among all regions,² income inequality and gender inequality have proved to be the most critical by-products of Africa’s growth.

2. Development debates have become increasingly dominated by an investigation of the relationships between growth, inclusiveness, equality, poverty reduction and sustainable development. Research in this area demonstrates that growth in Africa is by no means sufficient to ensure poverty reduction and inclusive and sustainable development. While “the powerful association between economic growth and poverty reduction is one of the central stylized facts of development economics”,³ the evidence on the ground has led to the emergence of a counter-narrative, suggesting that growth can be associated with increased or worsened poverty and vulnerability. The key questions therefore are: first, what are the causal factors behind this trade-off? Second, why have growth and inequality both risen simultaneously, eroding the continent’s poverty reduction and sustainable development efforts?

3. The responses, also drawn from evidence on the ground (ECA, 2014, 2015; World Bank, 2011, 2014; UNDP, 2011, 2012; UNFPA, 2016, and other sources) are clear. In the first place, processes generating economic growth but which do not include all segments of the population, women and men, girls and boys, and the

* E/ECA/ARFSD/3/1

¹ Economic Commission for Africa, African Union Commission, African Development Bank, *Africa Regional Report on the Sustainable Development Goals*, 2016.

² United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2016: Human Development for Everyone*, UNDP, 2016. The report shows that the score on the gender inequality index for Africa is the highest of all regions, followed by the Arab States (0.535) and South Asia (0.520).

³ World Bank, *World Development Report 2006: Equity and Development*, World Bank, Washington D.C.

outcomes of which do not benefit them equally, failing to take due account of their specific constraints, options, incentives and needs, cannot be either equitable or sustainable. Added to this, unsustainable growth impedes equality and shared prosperity.

4. The present paper, a contribution to the African Regional Forum on Sustainable Development, assesses progress in the implementation of Goal 5 of the Sustainable Development Goals, together with that of Goal 17 and aspiration 6 of Agenda 2063. The paper outlines the challenges and opportunities, then spells out key policy messages and policy recommendations designed to ensure that both agendas do not end up as missed opportunities for the continent.

I. Assessment of progress in the implementation of Sustainable Development Goal 5 and Goal 17 of Agenda 2063

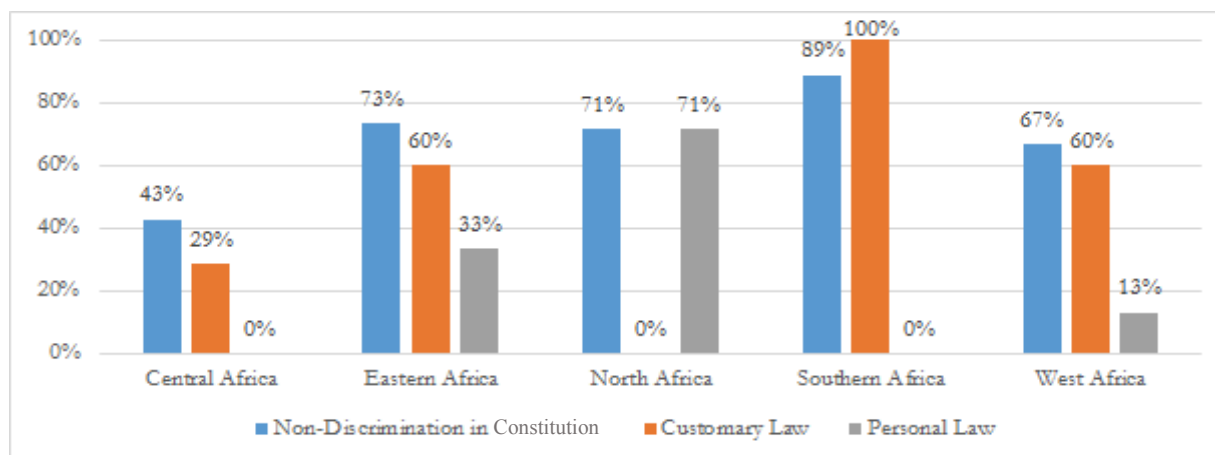
A. Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

5. Goal 5 includes 7 targets and 14 indicators that relate to the main forms of discrimination against women and girls on the continent. Assessment of these seven targets will furnish governments with information for the implementation of the Goals and future assessment of progress. It should be noted, however, that it is not possible at the current stage properly to assess attainment of the targets, since in some countries the systems to collect the necessary data for the specific indicators are yet to be developed.

1. Target 5.1: End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere

6. A review of African legal frameworks against the indicator for this target, namely: whether or not legal frameworks are in place to promote, enforce and monitor equality and non-discrimination on the basis of sex, shows that, while important progress has been made, a number of countries still have laws that discriminate against women in the private and public spheres. A number of African countries have constitutions which still do not fully protect women's social, economic and political rights. As figure 1 below shows, the proportion of countries in each of the five subregions that enshrine the principle of non-discrimination in their constitutions varies from 89 per cent in Southern Africa, 73 per cent and 71 per cent in Eastern Africa and North Africa to as low as 43 per cent in Central Africa. This means that there are still a number of countries whose basic laws – in other words their constitutions – discriminate against women. This discrimination takes different forms, including discrimination in the work place: this consists in sectoral and occupational forms of segregation that confine women in low-paid, vulnerable jobs and in the informal sector, where the majority (70 per cent) of African women work.

Figure 1
Proportion of countries in each of the subregions of Africa which enshrine the principle of non-discrimination in their constitutions



Source: ECA calculations based on the Women, Business and the Law Database (2016).

2. Target 5.2: Eliminate all forms of violence against all women and girls

7. Performance in attaining this target is measured against the indicator: the proportion of ever-partnered women and girls aged 15 years and older subjected to physical, sexual or psychological violence by a current or former intimate partner in the previous 12 months, by form of violence and by age.

8. Violence against women and girls constitutes the most pervasive form of violation of women's and girls' basic human rights. It is both the result and an expression of the discrimination rooted in the unequal power relationships between women and men, and between girls and boys that are socially constructed and enshrined in social norms, laws and values. In a 2003 study, the World Health Organization (WHO) estimated that 35 per cent women are victims of such violence during their lifetime. The prevalence of violence against women is estimated at 36.6 per cent in Africa, with significant variations across the region. According to the 2016 gender scorecard of the African Union Commission, of the 23 countries for which data are available from the Country Reports of the Demographic and Health Surveys (DHS), 14 have very high prevalence rates of violence against women, ranging between 30 and 54 per cent. It is worth noting that, although the official prevalence rates of violence against women are high, they are still not a true reflection of the magnitude of the phenomenon because of underreporting, a consequence of the social stigma suffered by the victims of such violence.

9. A critical barrier to the elimination of violence against women and girls is the lack of laws on such violence or, where they exist, failure to enforce them effectively. According to data from Women, Business and the Law (WBL) database (2016), the situation is worse in Central and North Africa, where the estimated proportion of countries with legislation on violence against women is as low as 25 per cent and, even of those, few impose criminal penalties for domestic violence, a major form of violence against women.

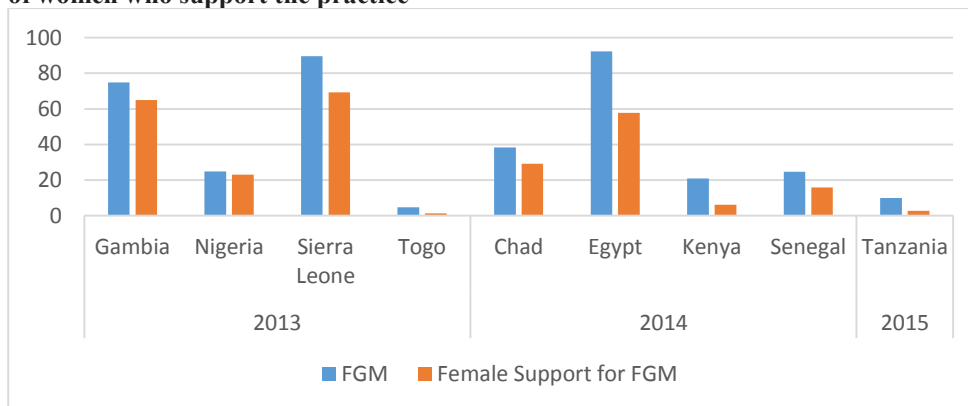
10. Many countries lack laws penalizing sexual harassment, another form of such violence. According to WBL database (2016), 85 per cent of countries in Eastern and North Africa and 80 per cent of Southern African countries punish sexual harassment by law. This proportion is as low as 25 per cent in Central Africa. Similar subregional trends are observed in respect of the criminalization of sexual harassment: overall, some 67 per cent of African countries have criminal penalties against sexual harassment.

3. Target 5.3: Elimination of all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation

11. Female genital mutilation or cutting and child marriage are among the most persistent harmful practices occurring on the continent. Despite commendable efforts, with a number of African countries adopting measures to curb these practices, the prevalence of female genital mutilation is very high in Africa, with a number of countries scoring more than 70 per cent: Burkina Faso, Djibouti, Egypt, Gambia, Guinea, Mali, Sierra Leone, Somalia and Sudan. The prevalence of female genital mutilation is low in such countries as Ghana, Togo and Uganda, where it is estimated at below 5 per cent.

Figure 2

Prevalence of female genital mutilation in selected African countries and proportion of women who support the practice



Source: ECA calculations based on data from the DHS Program (www.statcompiler.com).

12. Over the course of many years, the conduct of strong and persistent global and regional advocacy has led to a decline in the prevalence of female genital mutilation, albeit at a slow pace. In 2012, by its resolution 67/146, the United Nations General Assembly called on the international community to intensify efforts to end the practice. While a number of African countries have taken action in response to this call, much more still needs to be done to tackle and eradicate female genital mutilation.

13. Early marriage, sometimes also referred to as child marriage, is widespread in Africa. The United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)⁴ defines child marriage prevalence as the percentage of women of 20-24 years old who were married before the age of 18. The Global Partnership to End Child Marriage estimates the proportion of girls who marry at the age of 15 at 12 per cent and at the age of 18 at 39 per cent. Countries with high child marriage prevalence (before 18) include: Niger (76 per cent), Central African Republic and Chad (68 per cent), Mali (55 per cent), Burkina Faso and Guinea (52 per cent), Sierra Leone (44 per cent) and Nigeria (43 per cent). High prevalence rates occur in West and Central Africa (42 per cent). In Chad, the Niger and the Central African Republic, the proportion of girls marrying at under 15 is as high as 29 per cent. Overall, as many as 20 of the countries with the highest rates of child marriage in the world are in Africa.⁵

⁴ United Nations Children's Fund, *The State of the World's Children 2016: A Fair Chance for Every Child*, UNICEF 2016.

⁵ Global Partnership to End Child Marriage, "Ending child marriage in Africa. A brief by Girls Not Brides", 2015.

14. Early marriage contributes to an intergenerational transfer and perpetuation of gender inequality and discrimination against women and girls. Child brides face huge challenges as a result of being married as children, including deprivation of fundamental rights to health, education and safety, resulting in their disempowerment.

4. Target 5.4: Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies, and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate

15. Performance in attaining this target is measured against the indicator of the percentage of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work, by sex, age group and location.

16. Across African societies, the burden of caring for and nurturing children and the elderly falls disproportionately on women and girls. They spend a large portion of their productive time, equivalent in aggregate to the gross domestic product (GDP) of France, collecting firewood and water, cooking and taking care of children and the elderly. Those activities are not remunerated or recognized as productive economic activities.

17. This inequitable system is underpinned by the socially established unequal division of labour and reinforced by the lack of labour-saving infrastructure and social services. As a result, all too often, women simply have no time left to pursue income-earning opportunities. The policy challenges faced in this regard are threefold. First, there is a lack of updated time-use data in the majority of African countries. Second, there is a persistent failure to recognize the potential value of women's employment and its contribution to the economies of Africa. Third, there is limited investment in social infrastructure and services such as water, sanitation, energy. This is borne out by the assessment of the Millennium Development Goals, which underscores that Africa has not met the target for access to safe drinking water.⁶

5. Target 5.5 Ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life

18. Countries' performance in attaining this target is measured against two indicators, the first showing the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments and local government.

19. A wide range of source materials⁷ highlight the progress registered by African countries in women's political participation and representation in national parliaments. The benchmark of 30 per cent women representation has been surpassed by 16 countries, among which Rwanda has scored a particularly creditable performance, with Rwandese women holding 64 per cent of the seats in the national parliament. Here Rwanda has decisively outperformed such countries as Mozambique, Namibia, Senegal, Seychelles and South Africa. These quantitative achievements should now be reinforced by efforts to ensure the commensurate quality of women's participation, with the aim of influence decision-making in favour of women's rights and empowerment.

20. Overall, impressive and sustained progress has been registered in Africa in this regard, with women's representation in national parliaments rising by 14 percentage points over the last 25 years, from 8 per cent in 1990 to 22 per cent in 2015.⁸

⁶ Economic Commission for Africa, African Union, African Development Bank Group, United Nations Development Programme, *MDGs to Agenda 2063/SDGs Transition Report 2016, Towards an Integrated and Coherent Approach to Sustainable Development in Africa*, Addis Ababa, 2016.

⁷ African Union Commission, *African Gender Scorecard 2015, African Gender Scorecard 2016*; International Parliamentary Union, statistical archives from 2014 and 2015 on women in national parliaments; reports of the African Gender and Development Index.

⁸ See footnote 6 above.

21. Strides have also been made in women's representation in local government. Of the countries for which data are available, 20 have implemented an affirmative strategy – namely, a quota system of 15-50 per cent for women's representation at local level. Cabo Verde, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Senegal and South Africa have adopted a target of gender parity (50 per cent) for local governance.

22. The second indicator shows the proportion of women in managerial positions. Where it comes to the occupancy rates by women of such positions in the judiciary of African countries, the picture gives cause for concern.

23. The proportion of women judges in constitutional courts⁹ is estimated at only 20 per cent in Central and Eastern Africa and slightly higher in Southern Africa, at 23 per cent, and West Africa, at 22 per cent. In North Africa the proportion is lowest of all, at 5 per cent.

24. The level of gender inequality is even worse when it comes to the position of Chief Justice in African countries, with Southern African and West Africa registering the highest level among the subregions, at a mere 22 per cent of women. The inhibiting factors behind this discriminatory situation include social and cultural norms and their impact on education, which are conducive to sectoral and occupational segregation and the concentration of women in so-called "female profession" such as nursing and teaching, in particular at low educational levels.

6. Target 5.6: Ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights

25. This target is aligned with the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, held in Cairo from 5 to 13 September 1994, and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, adopted at the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing from 4 to 15 September 1995, and the outcome documents of their respective review conferences.

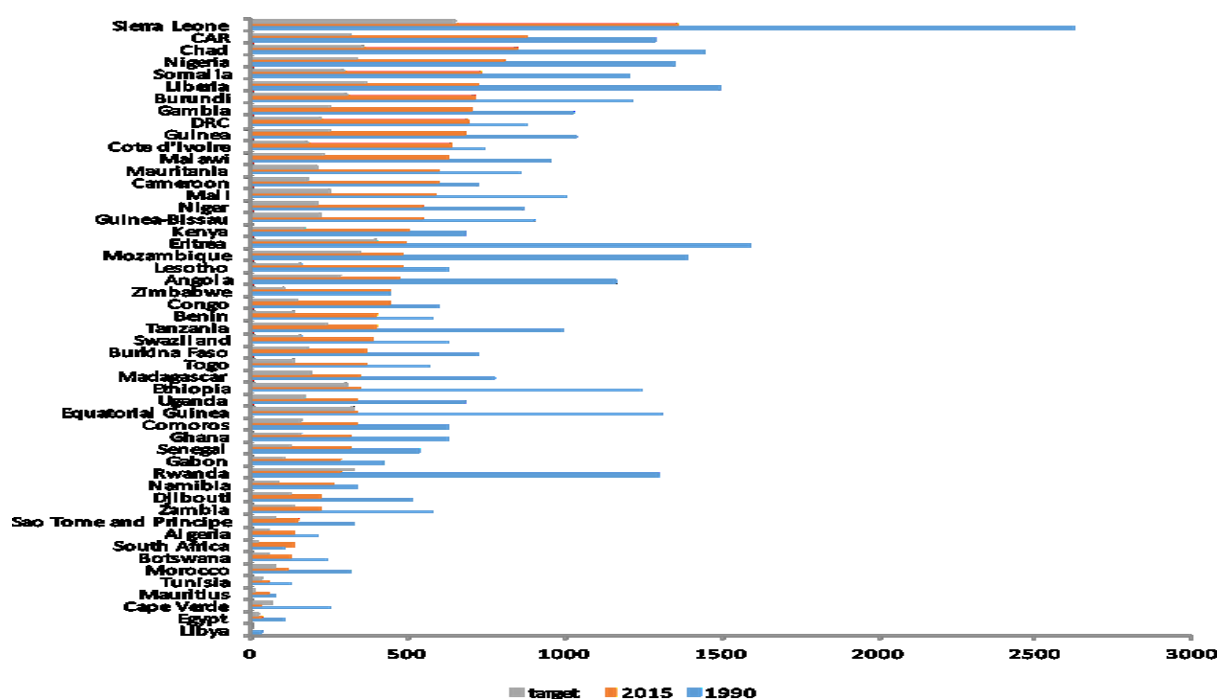
26. Access to reproductive health and reproductive rights is a basic human right and a reflection of women's and girls' freedom and empowerment. The main indicator for this target is the maternal mortality ratio, which is defined by the World Health Organization (WHO) as the number of maternal deaths per 100,000 live births. As reflected in figure 3 below, progress in Africa against this indicator has varied widely. Three African countries have met the Millennium Development Goals target of reducing by three quarter the maternal mortality ratio; this was more than halved in 15 countries, while 24 others reduced the ratio by less than half.

27. Notwithstanding this performance, the maternal mortality ratio remains a critical area of concern for at least two reasons. First, as of 2013, 86 per cent of maternal deaths are registered in sub-Saharan Africa and Southern Asia. While the maternal mortality ratio decreased by 49 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa, the average is still very high at 510 maternal deaths per 100,000 live births, while the average in North Africa stands at 69.¹⁰ The second reason is, despite important progress made in many African countries, leading to on the proportion of deliveries attended by skilled health personnel, leading to an improvement from 32 (47) per cent in 1990 to 52 (90) per cent in 2014 in sub-Saharan Africa (northern Africa), this proportion in rural and remote areas is expected to be unacceptably low and it is difficult to obtain updated data on coverage.

⁹ ECA calculations based on data from WBL (2016).

¹⁰ United Nations, MDG Report (2015).

Figure 3
Maternal mortality ratio



Source: ECA and others, MDGs to Agenda 2063/SDGs Transition Report 2016.

28. The adoption and implementation of the Continental Campaign on Accelerated Reduction of Maternal Mortality in Africa (CARMMA) has contributed to raising awareness by countries of the alarming prevalence of maternal mortality in Africa. Maternal mortality is not acceptable from the standpoint of human rights and development. The main causes of maternal mortality are well known and include: high blood pressure (pre-eclampsia and eclampsia); unsafe abortion; and malnutrition, caused in some societies by customs prohibiting pregnant women from eating certain types of food. All these driving factors are entirely preventable and appropriate actions are required to drastically reduce and end maternal mortality in Africa.

29. Achieving universal access to reproductive health will significantly contribute to reducing maternal mortality and helping African countries to reap the demographic dividend. Across the world in 2015, some 12 per cent of women aged between 15 and 49, married or in a union, had an unmet need for contraception. In Africa, less than half of women who are married or in a union and who need contraception have their family planning demands satisfied. The situation is worse among girls, both married and unmarried. In 2012, the adolescent birth rate was still as high as 75 live births or more per 1,000 girls in sub-Saharan Africa, the highest such rate in the world. Although data suggest significant differences among countries and across regions, West and Central Africa have the highest level of unmet need for contraception at 24 per cent.¹¹

B. Goal 17 of Agenda 2063

30. Goal 17 of the African Union's Agenda 23: "Full gender equality in all spheres of life" is closely associated with Sustainable Development Goal 5. Performance in attaining this goal, under priority area 6.11, "End all forms of violence and discrimination (social, economic and political) against women and girls and ensure full enjoyment of all their human rights", is measured against target 3 for that priority area: "Eliminate all barriers to quality education, health and social services for women and girls by 2020".

¹¹ United Nations Population Fund, *Universal Access to Reproductive Health: Progress and Challenges*, UNFPA, New York, January 2016.

31. Africa registered important progress, in particular in terms of gender parity in primary level education, which improved by 10 percentage points, from 86 per cent in 1990 to 96 per cent in 2013. At the subregional level, West Africa registered the best performance, with an 18 percentage point increase, whereas Central Africa lacked behind with an increase of only 4 percentage points. A somewhat similar trend was observed in secondary education, where the performance by Africa improved from 71 per cent in 1990 to 90 per cent in 2013.¹²

32. This progress notwithstanding, Africa as a whole failed to meet target 3A of the Millennium Development Goals, namely, to “eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015”. In addition, achieving gender equality in tertiary education remains a challenge. The underlying causes of the gender gaps in education are now clearly identified. Social and cultural norms that value boys’ and men’s education more highly than that of girls and women, early marriage, poverty, and the lack of appropriate sanitation services for girls are among the many challenges that impede girls’ and women’s education, with multiple negative effects on their employment and economic opportunities, thereby contributing to the generational transfer of gender inequality.

33. Gender inequality in education will ultimately hamper the economic growth and development of the entire continent.¹³ The main barriers to women’s and girls’ education are inherent in certain social and cultural norms with adverse consequences for women, such as early marriage, the unequal division of labour that leaves girls and women with very limited or no time to pursue their education, the tendency to favour the education of boys, widespread poverty and other such factors.

II. Main challenges and opportunities

34. In the light of the above assessment of the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and aspirations of Agenda 2016, the following structural and emerging challenges may be identified:

Challenges

- Very slow pace of implementation of the multiple global, regional and national gender equality and women’s empowerment commitments entered into by member States. This constraint has been confirmed by a number of assessment reports, including the Africa regional review under the 20-year review of the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action
- Low investment in women’s social and economic rights, in particular that of women’s reproductive health, and in women’s economic skills and opportunities
- Pervasive violence against women and girls
- Persistent and strong social and cultural standards and beliefs that underpin discrimination against women and girls across Africa
- Weak gender responsive statistics that impede an effective assessment of all gender related goals and the formulation and implementation of appropriate policy responses.

¹² United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, “Youth population trends and sustainable development”, Population Facts No. 2015/1, May 2015, New York.

¹³ International Monetary Fund, “Inequality, gender gaps and economic growth: comparative evidence for sub-Saharan Africa”, IMF Working Paper WP/16/111, June 2016, Washington, D.C.

Opportunities

- The prominence accorded to gender equality and women's empowerment in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Agenda 2063 and the current development of integrated national plans for the implementation of both agendas open up opportunities to integrate gender dimensions in these plans and to address the above challenges in a more systematic manner
- The development and strengthening of strategic partnership among a wide range of stakeholders would enable greater and coordinated responses to persistent challenges
- The Africa Data Revolution initiative would facilitate a systematic integration of gender dimensions in national statistics systems.

III. Policy messages and recommendations

35. Proceeding from the above analysis of the sub-theme, the following policy messages and recommendations on efforts to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls in fulfilment of the Sustainable Development Goals and the aspirations of Agenda 2063 are put forward for consideration by the Forum:

Policy messages

- Growth that overlooks or worsens gender inequality cannot be inclusive or sustainable. Yet growth that is based on the over-exploitation of Africa's resources (in other words, that is unsustainable) and discriminates against women and girls, the majority of the population (in other words, that is exclusive) cannot be inclusive nor equitable
- Failure to achieve the gender equality goal will result in further delays to progress by the continent towards its much needed structural transformation and sustainable development
- A number of African countries have formulated policies and enacted laws to secure and protect the rights of women and girls. Their implementation is weak, however, and needs to be accompanied by appropriate resources and strengthened monitoring and evaluation mechanisms
- African countries' commitment to gender equality and women's empowerment should go along with the harnessing of domestic resources – both financial and human – to implement fully and urgently the gender goals, in order to steer the development discourse in the right direction and to maximize the potential and outcomes of women's social, economic and political empowerment.

Policy recommendations

- Appropriate measures and stronger action must be taken to reflect gender and women's issues, including those of girls and young women, in the national integrated plans that countries are developing to incorporate the 2030 Agenda and Agenda 2063 into their domestic legal frameworks and also in regional strategies and plans to harness the demographic dividend
- The ministry responsible for developing national integrated plan for the implementation of both agendas should ensure the full and effective participation of the ministry in charge of gender equality and women's

empowerment, of women's movements and of gender experts to ensure that gender issues are analysed and taken on board

- Sufficient financial and human resources should be allocated for the implementation of the gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment goals
- Greater investment in women's sexual and reproductive health is also a priority, given the alarming rates of maternal mortality and unmet need for voluntary family planning, in particular among younger women. In order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals and Agenda 2063, it is critical for the international community to reaffirm the promise of universal access to reproductive health and family planning, and to increase investment in this area, in particular for young girls, given the size of this population group
- Special attention should be given to women's economic empowerment by harnessing their entrepreneurial talent and opportunities. In this context, women should be fully involved in and benefit from the continuing engagement by Africa in strategies and initiatives to transform the continent's economies.
