CHAPTER 8

How to Unleash the Economic Potential of Women in Africa – Challenges and Opportunities in the Context of the Post-2015 Agenda

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A Introduction

African women make a major contribution to trade in most African countries and will be essential to the continent’s success in exploiting its trade potential. However, Africa still fails to empower 50 per cent of its population to participate properly in the economic process.

Even though, since the adoption of the UN Millennium Development Goals in 2001, substantial progress has been made in the areas of primary school enrolment and the representation of women in decision making, significant economic, social, and cultural barriers continue to hinder the economic empowerment of women in Africa: manifold legal and de facto discrimination refuses women access to credit and resources, and denies them the right to own property, to inherit, to have parental authority over their children in case of a divorce, and to seek legal protection from violence. Furthermore, harmful traditional practices such as female genital mutilation and child marriage permanently impair the health status of women and girls and undermine their chances to get an education or to obtain a status within the family, which would allow them to actively participate in family planning.

The expenses caused by gender inequality and the discrimination of women are extremely high and include not only direct costs such as medical care but also indirect costs as a consequence of unemployment, reduced productivity and occupational segregation. Hence, overcoming the gender gap within the African economy is not only a question of social justice: advancing gender equality contributes sustainably to economic productivity, growth and the creation of jobs and, thus, constitutes a pivotal element in the efforts to reduce

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poverty. There is ample evidence that when women are able to develop their full labour market potential, there can be macroeconomic gains up to 27 per cent of the GDP per capita in certain regions.¹ The African Union and the African Regional Economic Communities (RECs) can play a pivotal role in the struggle for gender equality.

This paper analyses the gender-specific MDG process in Africa and intends to draw conclusions for the role of the African Union and the RECs in consolidating the economic status of women on the continent. In order to do so, the paper gives an introduction to the current situation of women in the African economy and the obstacles that hamper their full economic participation (B). Subsequently, it aims to take stock of the gender-specific achievements and failures in the MDG process in Africa and looks at the post-2015 agenda (C). Then it will analyse the existing legal and policy frameworks of the African Union and RECs on gender equality and the status of women and put them into perspective with the post-2015 agenda (D). As a conclusion, the author will propose a three-fold approach which does not only seek to address specific gender gaps, but rather intends to transform the structural factors that cause the widespread persistence of gender inequalities (E).

B Why Gender Equality is Essential for Sustainable Development in Africa

B.1 Terminology

First, in order to define gender equality, a closer look has to be taken at the concept of gender. The term “gender” is being used increasingly in academic and public discussions, although it is still often understood falsely as a synonym for “women”. In brief, gender is a social construct. The concept of gender refers to “the social, behavioural, and cultural attributes, expectations, and norms associated with being a woman or a man”.² In other words, the determination of one’s gender depends on the perception of one’s behaviour, activities, abilities, power and status as “feminine” or “masculine”.³ Hence, gender has to be distinguished clearly from the biological sex of a person, which determines whether someone is a woman or a man (or an intersexual). It rather describes the appropriate norms and behaviours that are taught to a person by individuals and

¹ Cuberes/Teignier-Baqué, Gender Inequality and Economic Growth, 2011.
³ Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity, 1990, p. 9 ff.