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ABOUT WACSI

The West Africa Civil Society Institute (WACSI) was created by the Open Society Initiative for West Africa (OSIWA) to reinforce the institutional and operational capacities of civil society in the region. WACSI also serves as a resource centre for training, research and documentation, experience sharing and political dialogue for CSOs in West Africa.

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- To raise awareness on key issues in West Africa;
- To generate debates and discussions on these issues;
- To proffer recommendations on civil society involvement in advocacy;
- To provide recommendations to policy makers.
Championing an Inclusive Women’s Empowerment Agenda in West Africa

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS AND ACRONYMS

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<tr>
<td>AWDF</td>
<td>African Women Development Fund</td>
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<td>Female Genital Mutilation</td>
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Introduction

The indispensable role of women in West African societies, especially their participation in economic and socio-political activities, has been a subject of interest among varying groups including governments, civil society organisations (CSOs) and individuals worldwide (Abdul-Fatawu, 2014). Over the years, discrete stakeholders have dedicated effort, shown great compassion, and commitment through the development of feminist policies, and the ratification of varied international protocols to promulgate and protect the right of women and girls. Fundamentally, ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls is not only a basic human right, it is crucial for inclusive empowerment and fostering a sustainable future.

Emanating from the Beijing declaration of 1995, establishing a sustainable, just and developed society depends on the advancement of equality between women and men at all levels. As envisioned in the Beijing Platform for Action, one critical piece for advancing the women’s empowerment agenda is engaging men and boys. Beyond just the nominal or symbolic involvement of men, the Beijing framework envisions male engagement as a necessary means to challenge the structures, beliefs, practices, and institutions that sustain men’s aggregate privileges, as well as to address inequalities between women and men.

Within time and space, an appreciable percentage of women in the world, Africa and West African sub region in particular have taken key leadership positions and are leading in policy development and their implementation. For example, in 2006, Ellen Johnson became Liberia’s first female president and the first in Africa. Today, more women have become conscious of their role in community development. Increasingly, many opportunities are being created daily for women and girls in government, and other sectors in society. Additionally, many women are being educationally, economically, and politically supported and encouraged to be self-reliant. Through some socio-economic activities championed by civil society organisations and political and economic agendas powered by governments, women in West Africa are given the opportunity to realise their full potential. However, these efforts need to be significantly scaled up to meet the growing empowerment needs of the larger segment of the West African population.

Observed from a liberal perspective, according to Sharma (2000), the women’s empowerment approach suffers from exclusionary bias, adversarial orientation and subversive logic. From an exclusionary standpoint, it excludes men from the feminist discourse, organisation and movement. According to Caplan (1985), it is no secret that the movement for women’s empowerment has been hijacked by women of higher strata, particularly upper class/middle class and power elites thereby ignoring the social differences existing amongst women, in terms of social background, needs and interest. This internal differentiation amongst women is as telling as between men and women. From a structural viewpoint, regarding women as a homogeneous category, and an undifferentiated mass only serve as an additional hindrance to inclusive women’s empowerment.

Men can benefit from greater gender equality. However, the dominant female leadership of the women’s empowerment agenda by women can be regarded as a factor that has exacerbated and increased the gender equality gap, for example, and often excludes men from the process. This has contributed to scare some African women who feel that women’s empowerment considers and projects men as an adversary of women, which could be a threat to domestic peace and may drive a wedge between man and woman, fanned by culture and African traditional patriarchy structure.
Despite the progress made by leading women’s organisations, many African women and young girls continue to experience a myriad of challenges ranging from misrepresentation in decision making on issues relevant to women, access to and control of resources, to sexual and domestic violence. Evidently, women and girls in West Africa continue to suffer from a good number of vices, like domestic violence, forced and early marriages, and female genital mutilation (FGM). According to Fomunjong (2018), some of these unjust acts are perpetrated by men; some of whom sit at the decision-making tables in their countries.

Many continue to question the benefit and impact of the approaches used by women’s organisation, which sometimes excludes men and boys in their quest to protect, promote and create better opportunities for young girls and women. Realistically, one could argue that women’s organisations and leading activists have ignored the assertion that men and boys also have social problems that greatly contributes to fuel violence against women and girls. To understand the critical necessity for women, men, boys and girls to be given equal considerations in efforts to promote a transformative women’s empowerment agenda in West Africa, this article raises some critical questions.

Firstly, if women’s empowerment is geared to deconstruct the predominant African patriarchy system that limit women’s efforts to attain better livelihood, how do we make sure that our efforts do not result to the establishment of a matriarchy system? Furthermore, what would be an ultimate impact of persistent isolation of men by women in fostering women’s empowerment agendas in West Africa?

It goes further to proffer feasible ways by which key stakeholders can reposition themselves to realise an inclusive women’s empowerment engagement as a means to an end.

This research argues that women led organisations and women’s movements in West Africa can attain their objectives by empowering the male gender in the process, even when priorities geared towards the empowerment of women and the girl child remain at the epicentre of their mission and actions.

Below are five recommendations that CSOs, women activists and governments can leverage on to champion an equitable and inclusive women’s empowerment agenda in West Africa without marginalising, discriminating, and excluding the male counterparts who can strategically play indispensable roles to support a balanced and holistic women’s empowerment agenda.

1. Civil Society Organisations (CSOs)

1.1 Establish gender-open platforms

CSOs need to create a comprehensive and resilient platform that enables women and men to co-create better systems that support, engage and ensure the active and non-biased participation of men in the process. It is necessary for men and boys to be allowed to sufficiently benefit from the bank of women’s empowerment programmes championed by women’s organisations. Somehow, organisations as well as individuals have defined visions, mission and policies for themselves that may be intentionally or unintentionally exacerbating discrimination against a particular group of people simply because of their sex or gender. In some cases, men and boys are the victims. Creating and sustaining an enabling platform for women and men to co-create strategically thoughtful policies that would advance a relatively equitable society will be providing remarkable space for men to be part of this just discourse. This would also be amplified by recognising the efforts of men in West Africa who are steadfast, passionate, and determined in promoting a non-biased empowerment agenda, where capacities of both young women and men are improved evenly.

For more than seven (7) decades, humanity has worked to foster the political, economic, social and natural rights of every human since the enactment of the 1948 universal declaration of human rights without distinction. As highlighted in article II of this historic document, everyone
is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national or social origin, property, birth or other status. To realise the aforementioned, CSOs can reconsider their visions, mandates and approaches by engaging in a thorough introspection based on the following thought-provoking questions.

- How would including men and boys into the big picture enhance the mandate of CSOs striving to achieve a holistic women’s empowerment agenda? What are some practical measures CSOs can put in place to create opportunities for both male and female children?
- Is women’s empowerment just a question of rearrangement of power (between men and women), both economic and political or a matter of change of values?
- Who takes care of shaping the views of the boy child to be more ‘gender-aware’?
- What must we do differently to make women’s empowerment a collective responsibility and not solely the affair of women and majorly that of women led organisations in West Africa?

These are fundamental questions that any women’s empowerment organisation should ask when developing empowerment programmes in favour of an inclusive women empowerment agenda and creating a society with better opportunities for the girl child.

1.2 Women’s empowerment should be about values: CSOs should develop alternative measures, facilitate initiatives that influence a change in perspectives and redirect women’s empowerment to be more centered on values.

CSOs should lay emphasis on approaching women’s empowerment from a complementary framework rather than a conflictual framework. It is not solely a woman’s issue. There are a handful of men-led organisations, academic institutions and communities advocating, protecting, promoting and empowering women in all sphere of life. Leading women’s organisations and other structures predominantly reserved and dominated by women should leverage on this to get more men involved. Creating more space for men means broadening the scope and sensitisation of more men, and possibly levelling the playing field for more women to be supported by their male counterparts to attain self-sufficiency. More importantly, women grant making organisations like the African Women Development Fund (AWDF), through its unique niche and laudable initiatives should provide technical and financial resources to these organisations headed by men to build their capacity and give them the space to support their female counterparts to play influential roles in promoting an inclusive women’s empowerment agenda. Women’s empowerment should stand for fostering a balance in gender relations as opposed to a one-sided women’s empowerment approach that in one way or the other may tend to marginalise males. It is not just a question of reorganisation of economic, social and political status of women; it is also a matter of change of values. Men need gender sensitisation, as much as women do. In fact, men need it even more, because they are in a perceived position of domination on account of the perpetuation of patriarchy. There is a clear need for a greater integration of men and boys in women’s empowerment efforts across the region. The involvement of supportive men and boys could significantly contribute to lasting socio-cultural changes in favour of women’s empowerment. Supporting the trend is an accumulation of research and evidence-based interventions, as well as the growth of gender justice organisations that focus on men and boys. The current trend offers an opportunity for CSOs promoting women’s empowerment agendas to rethink and strategically integrate issues of male involvement and responsibility, where relevant, into the women’s empowerment agenda. Working with girls and women to challenge and reduce gender inequality is fundamental, hence, boys and men must also confront and minimise unequal power relations and work as allies towards women and girls’ rights.
2. **Women’s Activist**

2.1 Advocate for an increased adoption of competency-based standards: Women’s activists should advocate for the establishment of more support systems to build and increase women and girls’ autonomy and self-efficacy. They should also advocate for equal opportunities to be provided for women and men to compete based on competencies. Fundamentally, a society built on the principle of competence is more advanced, inclusive and prosperous, compared to one built on an unequal social stratum that gives more power to the more privileged groups in society. How can women work to build a society where women and men compete based on competence rather than one based on gender stereotypes?

Historically, West African women and men have fundamentally cooperated to battle against servitude, discrimination, exploitation, domination and colonisation. It is deplorable that a handful of men continue to use coercion and violence against women in private and public spheres. At the micro level, in some families, some men make unilateral decisions regarding the use of household resources, and at a macro level, they occupy vast majority of leadership positions in government and the private sector and make decisions that shape women’s access to opportunities and the full definition of women’s wellbeing.

While it is vital to work towards a more competitive society, we cannot lose sight of the fact that women and girls bear the brunt of gender inequalities. Therefore, focus should be on building capacity, supporting, educating, nurturing, coaching women, men, girls, and boys. This approach directly or indirectly contributes to inform, shape and reform any biased stereotypic perspectives towards women at all levels.

Even though women’s empowerment is fueled by the unquenchable necessity to dismantle a patriarchal system, absolute care and informed strategies must be employed by women activists to avoid the possible inception of a matriarchal system in the long run. Though gender equality is most often associated with the advancement and empowerment of women, it is a much broader enterprise that seeks to advance societies as a whole by ensuring that, “all human beings can develop and make choices without the limitations set by stereotypes, rigid gender roles, and prejudices.” (Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights, 2013).

“Even though women’s empowerment is fueled by the unquenchable necessity to dismantle a patriarchal system, absolute care and informed strategies must be employed by women activists to avoid the inception of a matriarchal system.”

Making women’s empowerment a primordial mandate and more gender inclusive in nature will go a long way to possibly influence and recruit more men not only as advocates but also leading voices/champions of women’s empowerment agenda. Within this premise, stakeholders championing a women’s
empowerment agenda must understand that effective and efficient results would hardly be achieved if men and boys are constantly ignored or sidelined by perpetuators of this worthy agenda. Inclusive empowerment would bring forth an ideal group of men who will join the chariot of active advocates and strategists to educate, inform and inspire more men to create space(s) for women to contribute their quota, without bias or discrimination, to societal development.

2.2 Build a common consensus among grassroots and urban women: Scaling woman to woman grassroots mobilisation campaign, bridging feasible social difference and building common consensus. Women’s knowledge on women’s empowerment, grassroots representation, and collective action is a powerful resource that if well exploited can enhance the ecosystem of collective and inclusive empowerment by all and for all. Despite global efforts to advance women’s empowerment and increase space for women in all social spheres, many women at the grassroots level continue to be socio-economically exploited by other women. So many women who work at restaurants, as domestic workers for other privileged women are highly exploited by their employers despite persistent efforts and available legal and administrative instruments to minimise such. That is why an all-inclusive empowerment must not ignore the social differences existing amongst women, in terms of social background, needs and interest which are as telling as discrepancies between men and women.

A strategic advocacy to limit the exploitation and marginalisation of women by women would be a significant step to enhance women’s empowerment and rights. As asserted during the 2009 International Women’s Day, Ban Ki-Moon, former United Nations Secretary General, said, “We must unite. Violence against women cannot be tolerated, in any form, in any context, in any circumstance, by any political leader or by any government”. This was an appeal to both men and women to unite against such a vice.

This cause should be championed by all women regardless of their societal background and interest. Domestic violence and economic exploitation of women by women is a threat to women’s empowerment which if not properly and promptly tackled will remain a source of continuous marginalisation of women of a particular socio-economic class.
3. Role of the Governments

3.1 Build visionary partnerships: Governments should partner with leading women’s organisations to develop, implement, and monitor policies to engage men in gender equality and build capacity for holistic, heuristic and effective implementation.

Governments need to push forward policies that standardise the basis of gender inclusion in driving women’s empowerment in West Africa. Governments should lead in the development of women’s empowerment and specific gender-related policies. The need to strengthen national institutions to fully mainstream gender in their operations and actions is indispensable. To achieve this, government should partner with CSOs to develop gender sensitive policies and empower relevant ministries and institutions to enforce their implementation in an effort to address the structural gender inequality challenges. This would lay a solid base on which the inclusion of men in promoting this moral and ethical call will not only be the choice of few women to decide who is, and who is not part of the movement, but a collective decision of multi-stakeholders passionate about inclusive women’s empowerment.

More pragmatically, mutual partnerships between multi-stakeholders should make consideration to build capacities, provide financial and technical assistance to diverse institutions to implement, monitor and evaluate the agreed policies as well as increase ongoing public awareness campaigns to transform men’s perceptions of gender roles in society.

These policies, if well thought through, will contribute to dilute the highly patriarchal beliefs, systems, structure and other socio-cultural factors that interplay to influence the interactions between the genders. Relationship between social groups which have resulted in some cases, to the exclusion of women, girls, and other vulnerable groups from actively participating in certain sectors will also be reconsidered and restructured; there by creating an inclusive space at all levels of development process for women and men in West Africa.
Recommendations

1. Platforms
CSOs need to create a comprehensive and resilient platform that enables women and men to co-create better systems that support, engage and ensure the active and non-biased participation of men in the process.

2. Values
CSOs should develop alternative measures, facilitate initiatives that influence a change in perspectives and redirect women’s empowerment to be more centered on values.

3. Competency
Women’s activists should advocate for the establishment of more support systems to build and increase women and girls’ autonomy and self-efficacy.

4. Common Consensus
Scaling woman to woman grassroots mobilisation campaign, bridging feasible social difference and building common consensus.

5. Partnerships
Governments should partner with leading women’s organisations to develop, implement, and monitor policies to engage men in gender equality and build capacity for holistic, heuristic and effective implementation.
Conclusion

Women’s organisations, women activists and the government must understand that the quest to achieve gender equality by 2030 depends on the collective, inclusive, meaningful and decisive actions taken by both women and men. Investing in women’s leadership and promoting inter-gender transfers of skills and knowledge would create mutually beneficial and sustainable spaces where women and men would work together in addressing violence, discrimination, political and economic marginalisation of women and men.

Boys and young men have the ability to shift the dominant norms and ideas about gender and masculinity, and challenge the patriarchal beliefs, practices, institutions and structures that drive inequality between men and women. Hence, stakeholders championing this cause must see them as an asset and actively involve them in efforts to promote women’s empowerment in West Africa. Stakeholders must make commitments to create equal opportunities, fair, enabling, and inclusive spaces for women, men, boys and girls to compete based on competencies, which is a fundamental basis of a prosperous society. This strategy would promote the education of men and boys to understand that women and girls are competent enough to drive change and should be seen, respected, and engaged as equal and indispensable partners for the growth and development of West Africa.

Ultimately, finding sustainable solutions to the plight of women cannot be achieved without changing men’s perception and actions towards women and this can only be accelerated if they (men) are brought in to the transformative matrix. However, not meaningfully involving men in efforts to promote a transformational women’s empowerment agenda could end up being like finding a solution to a problem without addressing a root cause. Deliberately making men part of the solution will consciously or unconsciously recruit more men and boys to champion the quest for women’s empowerment in all its dimensions as a fundamental right of a woman.
SOURCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY


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