



# **THE AFRICAN WOMEN'S DECADE**

**AFRICAN WOMEN'S DECADE 2010 –  
2020**

POLICY BRIEF ON AFRICAN WOMEN AND  
ENVIRONMENT



# Policy Brief on African Women and Environment

## 1. OBJECTIVE

The objective of this Brief is to sensitize policy makers, particularly Ministers responsible for women and gender affairs in Africa, on the importance of gender sensitive environmental management and planning.

## 2. BACKGROUND

When the environment becomes unsustainable it is women's lives that are most affected and disrupted, particularly in Africa. This is because women in Africa play a fundamental role in providing the basic necessities such as food and water. Due to this direct dependence on land-based resources, the loss or degradation of natural resources largely contribute to environmental loss and degradation due to ignorance in the use, management and sustainability of these basic life supporting environmental resources. Consequently women are the hardest hit by negative environmental phenomena namely loss of biodiversity, deforestation and desertification, to mention but a few. Women are therefore inextricably linked to both the destruction and conservation of the environment and should therefore be recognized as powerful agents in the preservation of life supporting environment resources. Cognizant of this phenomenon the African Union adopted several important legal instruments.

In October 2003, in Maputo, Mozambique, the AU Heads of State adopted the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa which makes provision that "women shall have the right to live in a healthy and sustainable environment". The Protocol further commits member States to ensure inter-alia greater participation of women in the planning, management and preservation of the environment and the sustainable use of natural resources at all levels. Up to date only 28 Member States have ratified the Protocol. The AU also adopted in 2009 in Addis-Ababa, the AU Gender Policy whose main purpose is among others to guide the process of gender mainstreaming in all sectors, including in the sector of environment and women empowerment to influence policies, procedures and practices.



### **3. WOMEN AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES**

#### **Women and Biodiversity**

As earlier mentioned, Africa women are responsible for provision of food, water, fuel and in many communities are the backbone of the rural economies. In their quest to sustain livelihoods through the provision of food, water, fuel or even medicine, women highly depend on their surrounding natural resources. For example, in the Niger delta, characterized by mangrove and fresh water swamp, forests that provide habitation for different species of plants, amphibians, reptiles and mammals, have also become dependable sources of fuel for domestic and small-scale food processing activities for income generation for the women. (A.O.I. Gabriel). In other areas such as the western coast of Africa, women derive their income from oysters harvested from mangrove swamps while freshwater swamp ecosystems support their fishing activities. In sub Saharan Africa where elderly women are often traditional midwives, forests are the source of medicinal herbs for newborn babies and their mothers. It is therefore evident that the loss of biodiversity negatively impacts on the multiple responsibilities and roles that women play in various African communities and consequently their dependants.

#### **Women and Climate Change**

Climate change is presently widely recognized as a global phenomenon with wide impacts. Considering the fact that women make up the a large portion of the agricultural labour force in Africa as well as the continent's poor, it is seemingly evident that they are most exposed and susceptible to the effects of climate change due to, for example, demeaning socially constructed roles and responsibilities and less access to resources. More so, it is the girls who are likely to drop out of school to help their families during disasters. Unfortunately, despite the lingering evidence, women remain inactive and disengaged in the discussions and deliberations on the mitigation of this phenomenon, despite the pivotal role they could play in providing invaluable knowledge, information and solutions on ways of adapting to the erratic environmental changes. When involved in disaster preparedness training, the survival rates of women will improve

(Oxfam America 2008/2009). Climate change also impacts on population movement and displacement. When climate disasters occur, there is tendency for people to migrate to places where there is hope for better living conditions. However, women are put at a disadvantage in preparing for climate change, and are less likely to migrate.

### **Women and desertification**

Desertification mainly occurs as a result of climate variation and human activities which greatly impact and diminish natural resources and the productivity of the land. Women can be considered the custodians of environmental resources in Africa as they daily interact with the environment in search for basic resources such as fuel, food and water. As such, women endure the effects of desertification as they are relegated to spending more time in search of firewood for fuel and walk even further distances in search for water, consequently devoting less time to other valuable activities, particularly income generating activities.



Women living in dry lands tend to rank among the poorest of the poor, with little power to bring about real change. The deterioration of natural resources drives people, especially women, away from income-generating activities resulting in increased level of poverty. On the other hand, women can exacerbate the effects of desertification due to lack of awareness as they are usually excluded from participation in land conservation and development projects, from agricultural extension work, and from the overall policy-making processes.

### **Women and pollution**

Environmental pollution may have a disproportionate impact on women's health because of women's different susceptibilities to the hazardous effects of various pollutants. In Africa, women play an important role in horticulture and agriculture and may be in direct contact with agro chemicals including pesticides. Toxic chemicals, including pesticides, are responsible for a variety of women's health risks with the risk higher among pregnant and lactating women.

Some toxic chemicals, such as persistent organic pollutants, can enter body tissues and breast milk, through which they are passed on to infants, causing reproductive and immunological disorders. Persistent organic pollutants (POPs) levels in human milk from Africa shows varying concentrations from one country to another, attributed to differences in socio-economic, industrial and agricultural activities taking place in that country. As high as 1199 $\mu$ g of the POP called dichlorodiphenyltrichloroethane or DDT per kg of human breast milk has been detected in some highly industrialised countries in Africa (UNEP-GEF Global Monitoring Plan for POPs-

Africa Region Report 2008). Mercury is also considered to be highly toxic metal; it is rampant practice in African women to use skin bleachers containing this chemical.



Women by virtue of their roles as household managers are also responsible for waste management at household level. Improper and inadequate waste disposal at household level (burning, land filling) contribute to water and air pollution leading to the spread of water and air borne diseases. Activities such as dyeing, which in most parts of Africa are relegated to women, can be a major source of water contamination. In terms of economic losses, ill health renders women less productive and therefore less income is generated by them.

### 3. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The principles of development must integrate women in all economic, social, and environmental sectors. In this regard, the following recommendations are meant to guide policy makers in their establishment of adequate policies on environmental issues in their respective countries or regions.

#### **Policies, Plans, Laws**

- Gender considerations must be taken in the development of sustainable and ecologically sound development plans and programmes;
- Women should more actively participate in decision-making and planning; the participation of women in decision making using gender responsive environmental planning and management is a contributing factor to resolving environmental disasters;
- Environmental laws and poverty reduction strategies should be gender friendly to empower women to make decisions on environmental issues and the laws should provide for women to access and own land;
- Programmes should be established that respond to the different impacts climate change has on men and women;
- Women should be encouraged, supported and promoted to be more organised in their communities so that they would complement the activities of government;
- Strategic action should be taken in overcoming gender inequalities in the management of natural resources and in safeguarding of the environment
- AU Member states should endeavour to ratify and implement the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa

### **Capacity Building**

- Women should be educated in natural resources and environmental management and control in the interest of human health and natural resources sustainability
- Health educators should develop and implement more programmes geared towards sensitising women on toxic chemicals used in homes and cosmetics
- Women groups should be capacitated so that they could be of service in the events of major disasters and pollutions in their communities,
- Farmer schools should endeavour to sensitise women farmers on the dangers of improper use of agro chemicals
- Women should be made aware of the different laws signed or put in place by the government on the environment and their importance to women
- RECs and AU Member States should endeavour to implement the **AU** Gender Policy which is a guidance document to gender mainstreaming

### **Economic Empowerment**

- Economic empowerment of women is a critical factor in the eradication of poverty; programmes should be put in place providing labour saving and income generating devices for women; and markets to sell their produce derived from natural resources;
- Funding (credit and support services) should be provided for women environmental groups to implement environmental friendly projects;
- In providing financial and technical assistance to communities to adapt to climate change and build up their resilience, the gender aspect should be taken into consideration.



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