

Walking the talk.....we need a new politics of social and economic equity!!!

Ten years ago, African Heads of State came together to establish the African Union (AU), a body to promote solidarity and coordinate efforts for development among its 54 member nations. Encouraging social, political and economic integration across the continent, the AU pledged to eradicate poverty through, amongst other initiatives, focusing on the economic empowerment of African nations.

It is fitting, then, that this year's AU theme, 'Boosting Intra-Regional Trade' cannot be overemphasized. Implicit in the theme is economic growth and development through an increased reliance on inter-regional, rather than inter-continental trade. This year's theme hints at the emergence of a new Africa, one with a rapidly increasing consumer market, growing middle-income countries and a decline in poverty through economic empowerment. In celebrating this year's AU day, let us reflect on the role we can play in strengthening the African economy, especially in improving the lives of women, in whose bellies lie the future of Africa.

The AU has clearly recognized the importance of gender equality and women's empowerment to economic advancement through the ratification of several global and regional commitments. In 2010, the AU announced the African Women's Decade (AWD), a bold political initiative running until 2020 that puts women at the centre of economic advancement. The objectives include women's empowerment, agriculture, education, science, health, peace and security. It highlights that each of these themes are interconnected and an integral component of economic advancement. In Ghana, the Government of Ghana has ratified a number of international and regional instruments to enhance women's empowerment. These include the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW), Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, AU protocol on the Rights of Women, the Solemn Declaration on Gender Equality in Africa (SDGEA), Millennium Development Goals, and the African Women's Decade (AWP) among others. All these commitments provide a comprehensive package for addressing women and child health problems- maternal mortality, child mortality, HIV/Aids, TB and malaria.

Despite all these commitments, women still continue to face widespread discrimination, violence and challenges with regards to maternal deaths, sexual and reproductive healthcare, gender based violence, poor political representation and limited access to credit facilities. Issues of social justice as well as gender equality and equity have become increasingly urgent in Ghana as Ghana strives to achieve MDG goals 1 and 5. The current rate of maternal mortality reduction (3.3% per annum) in Ghana does not depict a reducing trend towards the target of 5.5% annual decline needed to meet the MDG goal 5 of reducing by three quarters the MMR by 2015.

The high maternal mortality rate put women in vulnerable situations such as unwanted pregnancy, maternal mortality, HIV infection or sexual violence. These negatively impact on poverty levels of women and further limit their access to quality health care services including family planning and reduced social and economic abilities of women.

Ghanaian women are generally underrepresented in all sectors of the economy (formal and informal sector). Women's participation in decision making is limited in numbers as compared to men. Out of the total number of 230 parliamentarians only 19 constitute women. Gender based violence is still at an increasing rate in Ghana contributing to increasing health care cost. Although women are seen to be dominating in the agricultural sector and contribute about 55 to 60 percent of production, they are still the poorest (GSS, 2000). This is to a large extent due to their inaccessibility to land and credit facilities and lack of women's empowerment.

So, as another AU day passes, it is important to reflect on the position of women in the Ghanaian society, Vis-a Vis their ability to access basic human rights services like access to quality healthcare and economic equity. In our joint efforts to make the African continent a safer place to live by eradicating poverty, let us take a look at our micro finance system, especially in the rural communities as a catalyst for empowering rural women financially. We must also ensure efforts are made to realize that the many protocols, charters and commitments made by the AU, the Government of Ghana, NGOs, businesses and partners are moving from promises to results. Gender equality must serve the development of intra- African trade by promoting the health status and future challenges of the vulnerable populations.