The Tale Of The Empty Seat: Young Women And Decision Making In Africa

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African countries are often lauded for the progress they have made in gender equality and women's political representation and participation on the continent (Ighobor, 2015). In most African countries, legal frameworks are in place to give men and women political equality through an equal opportunity to vote, become a member of parliament or political party, and to be elected as a president. In addition, the continent has seven of the top 20 countries with the highest number of women represented in Parliament (UN Women, 2017).

Rwanda, for example, holds the record for the highest number of women parliamentarians (61 percent) in the world (ibid).

In Africa, young men and women under the age of 35 account for approximately 65 percent of the total population. Of this, young people between the ages of 15 and 35years account for over 35 percent (African Union Youth Division (AUYD), 2017). Given their sheer strength in numbers and the other advantages associated with their age, youth present a huge potential resource economically, socially and politically. On the other hand, if not fully invested in their societies, they can also pose considerable risk to stability. Examples of this in Africa can be seen in the recruitment of young women into

terrorist networks such as ISIS (Ondieki, Otsialo, Okwany & Achuka, 2016). African youth also have little interest in voting and instead increasingly become involved in disruptive and sometimes violent public protest as a form of political expression (Tracey, 2016).

Because the future prosperity of Africa is dependent on the investments made in the youth, it is important to nurture the aspirations of the emerging generations. Consequently, over the last three years, the African Union (AU) has strategically focused its mandate on youth empowerment, with a particular focus on young women, so as to include their views and concerns in all its activities (AU Commission (AUC), 2013). While this strategic focus on women's rights and youths in Africa is commendable, it is clear that there is still much more to be done if the benefits of fully empowered and engaged young women are to be realised in Africa.

The hope provided by African policy frameworks.

At the AU's fourth High-Level Dialogue on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance in 2015 with the theme of 'Women's Equal Participation and Leadership in Political Parties in Africa', the AU Commission was urged by member states to set up a continental programme aimed at assisting political parties to enhance women's political participation (Kwibuka, 2015). This could be achieved, explained the Commission, by ensuring women increasingly hold positions of power, encouraging more countries to adopt quotas for women in leadership positions, and implementing skills programmes to equip women to participate fully in decision making (Kwibuka, 2015). As part of the AU Agenda 2063, a blueprint for the long-term development of Africa, member states have As part of the AU Agenda 2063, a blueprint for the long-term development of Africa, member states have been urged to build 'An Africa whose development is

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been urged to build 'An Africa whose development is people-driven, relying on the potential of African people, especially its women and youth, and caring for children' (AUC, 2015, p. 8). Member states are thus also expected to ensure that there is 'full gender parity, with women occupying at least 50 per cent of elected public offices at all levels and half of managerial positions in public and private sectors' (p. 9). In the last two decades, recognition of the need to empower girls, adolescents and young women has also become a key feature of African development models (Hickel, 2014). With a little over a year left until the end of the AU African Youth Decade Plan of Action 2009-2018, it is an opportune time to assess the progress made in empowering not only the youth generally, but young women in particular, towards enhancing their participation in democratic governance.

The 2016 Ibrahim Index of African Governance revealed that overall governance in Africa has improved in 37 of the 54 African countries (Mo Ibrahim Foundation, 2016). This finding suggests that as much as 70 percent of all African citizens live in a country that has seen improvements in key governance areas such as human development, participation, human rights, and sustainable economic opportunities (ibid).

Africa boasts an extensive and progressive body of legal frameworks aimed at promoting gender equality, enhancing youth participation and empowering women (AU, 2016). There are a number of instruments aimed directly at women and youth including the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa (Maputo Protocol), AU legal framework on gender and women's rights, and African Youth Charter – a

continental framework aimed at promoting the rights, freedoms and responsibilities of the youth. In addition to these, the overarching African Charter on Democracy, Elections and Governance (ACDEG) commits AU member states to promote and nurture democratic and participatory governance.

The Maputo Protocol is considered one of the most progressive women's rights instruments globally. However, of the 55 AU member states, only 38 have ratified the Protocol, limiting its full potential (Aling'o & Abdulmelik, 2017). Furthermore, domestication through the implementation of national laws and policies by those who have ratified it has been slow, particularly in the area of discriminatory sociocultural practices, such as the lack of rights to land and inheritance, and continued harmful practices, such as early marriage and female genital mutilation, which contribute to maternal mortality (Kombo, Sow & Mohamed, 2013).Such practices underpinned by patriarchal attitudes subordinate young women's roles in social, economic and political development.

The AU's African Youth Decade Plan of Action is aimed at achieving the goals and objectives outlined in the African Youth Charter, particularly with regards to employment, education and governance (AUYD, 2017). As with the Maputo Protocol, however, only 38 of the 55 AU member stateshave ratified the Charter (Aling'o & Abdulmelik, 2017). According to Article 11 of the Charter, 'every young person shall have the right to participate in all spheres of society', and state parties need to 'ensure access to young men and young women to participate in decision making and in fulfilling civic duties' (AU Youth Charter, 2017,
p.6).One of the key objectives of the African Youth Decade Plan is to raise youth's representation and participation in inter-governmental and decision-making processes (Lekalake &

Gyimah-Boadi, 2016, p. 2). However, observers, such as Lekalake and Gyimah-Boadi (2016) andTracey (2016), note that there are still wide gaps between the reality and the aspirations of the African Youth Charter and the AU's African Youth Decade Plan of Action, particularly in the political South African youth have little interest in voting, more so young women who are faced with the challenges of joblessness, child-marriage and adolescent pregnancy.

participation and civic engagement of youth. This highlights that even though the legislative frameworks are there, the reality faced by youth, and specifically young women, is still one full of hurdles and, in many cases, exclusion. Hence, there is a need to ensure that the legislative frameworks are effectively implemented through systematic monitoring in all of their areas, including employment, education and governance, to include youth and especially young women. Equally important is the need to ensure that no young woman is left out of these efforts as the participation of illiterate, rural young women must be guaranteed as well as that of educated, urban young woman.

At the 61stsession of the UN Commission on the Status ofWomen (CSW 61), a key focus of the discussions was the need to place greater investment in young women for trans-formative and sustainable economic development (GIMAC, 2017, p. 2). Yet, it seems that while the empowerment of young women is increasingly and internationally acknowledged as necessary for economic, social and political development, the reality presents a different picture. Women continue to suffer a disproportionate disadvantage to that of their male counterparts, as commonly seen, for example, in areas such asthe labour market. At a continental level, there isa need to increase strategies and approaches that specifically focus on this potential demographic dividend.

From the above discussion, it can be seen that undeniable progress has been made at the continental level in the provision of legal frameworks on gender equality, enhancing youth participation and empowering women, but there is a lack of effective mechanisms for the implementation of these frameworks due to inadequate institutional reforms that keep pace with new developments, and a lack of financial where with alto carry through needed reforms. Added to this is the lack of comprehensive legislation that recognises and caters for the multiple roles of youth and especially young women to enable them to participate fully in social, economic and political development.

The reality of young women's lived experiences

It has been well recognised that young women and girls can contribute significantly to economic development and poverty reduction on the African continent (Hickel, 2014). The discussion above, however, emphasises that while young women make up at least half of the youth demographic, there is often little attention paid to them in policies, legal provisions and pro-grammes. Arguably, interventions aimed at empowering women often focus on adult women in general rather than young women (Aling'o & Abdulmelik, 2017). Young women, however, are typically disproportionately affected by challenges facing youth, such as high unemployment, inadequate access to quality education and health care, ongoing poverty, violence and conflict (AUC, 2013). In societies where adult men are the prime beneficiaries, they typically face double discrimination. This notably limits the possibilities for young women to participate in politics and government or private sector decision making.

Education plays an important role in supporting social change and is also a crucial link for

the attainment of other development goals (Elder & Kring, 2016). Increasing the number of educated women provides tangible benefits in economic growth, social development and political participation. Indeed, there are notable improvements made in some African countries around access to education for young people, such as in Uganda, one of the first countries in sub-Saharan Africa to have a free universal secondary education policy, and in Ghana, through capacitation grants which take the burden of education costs off parents by providing free access to quality education (Costin, Montoya & Mundy, 2015). However, in many African countries, there are still key factors that structurally disadvantage young women in education, and these require specific interventions.

It is clear from the reality on the ground, however, that young women will require increased opportunities and targeted initiatives to ensure that their involvement is constructive. Initiatives could include programmes that will enable their empowerment politically, economically and socially.

For example, the African continent contains the largest number of countries with the highest rates of child marriages and adolescent pregnancies globally, with 'between 30 and 51 per cent of girls giving birth before they are 18' (Human RightsWatch, 2017). However, while the highest number of pregnancies is among young women, African governments often fail to address the harmful and discriminatory practices and policies that contribute to this avoidable situation.

In many African countries, pregnant students continue to be expelled from school. As a 19-year-old female from northern Tanzania explains, 'Teachers found out I was pregnant, I found out that no student is allowed to stay in school if they are pregnant… I didn't have

the information [sexual education] about pregnancies and what would happen' (Human RightsWatch, 2017). She was expelled from school at age 17. Another 18-year-old female from South Sudan explains how her uncle stopped her from going to school in order to have her marry an older man she did not know: 'I would wish to return to school even ifI have children. People think that I am happy but I am not because I don't have an education. I don't have something of my own and I am only cleaning offices. If I had gone to secondary school, I would get a good job' (Human RightsWatch, 2017).

Hickel (2014, p. 1356) illustrates how policies that are meant to 'strengthen women's empowerment by expanding access to the labour market and access to credit, often end up placing these women in new forms of inferior positions as workers, consumers and debtors.' According to the International Labour Organization (ILO, 2016), youth unemployment in the developing world is expected to increase by half a million between 2015 and 2017. In South Africa, for example, over half of the youth actively looking for employment remained unemployed in 2016, making it the country with the highest youth unemployment rate (ILO,2016,p.5).Hence,it is important that new policies and programmes are developed so they do not negatively impact on young women.

While there has been a downward trend in the last few years in the number ofyouth that are either underemployed or unemployed from 53.3 percent (2000) to 45.8 percent (2016), wide disparities exist between young men and young women globally (ILO, 2016). For example, among young people aged between 15 and 24 years old, labour participation by young men is notably higher at 53.9 percent, compared with young women at 37.3 percent (p. 19). In some African countries, a large proportion of young women are locked out of the labour market.

In North Africa, for example, there is a 20.3 percentage point difference between male and female participation in the labour market (p. 20).

In many countries, the challenges young people continue to face, such as unemployment, often negatively affect the like lihoodof their participation in formal democratic processes including elections (Tracey, 2016). For some young women, experiences with unemployment are particularly frustrating. A 21-year-old female student from South Africa explains, 'People go to study but when we look for a job, people want experience. How do we get experience if we do not get a chance to train to get the job we want?' (Tracey, 2016, p. 12). In addition to various other socioeconomic challenges they face, young unemployed people often become desperate for the promise ofa better life and opportunities that could help foster this. Hence, they are more easily recruited for criminal activities, as this 18-year-old female South African student explains: I think the most important problem facing South Africa is the unemployment rate, which results in crime – people just find stealing as a mode of survival. People do not work; people do not have anything for their families to put on the table to eat. In order for them to survive, they need to steal, which is a wake-up call to government. But they are doing nothing (Tracey, 2016, p. 12).

Vulnerable youth and, more recently, young women, have increasingly become involved in radical extremist groups by playing a role as violent actors and victims or, alternatively, they are playing a role in prevention and peacebuilding(Cachalia,Salifu&Ndung'u, 2016;Ondieki et al., 2016). Young women's involvement in extremism is often as a result of feelings of exclusion and subordination, or they are driven by social and political agency

(Cachalia et al., 2016, p. 21).

In their civic and political engagement, young women's feelings of exclusion are often further exacerbated by the persistent gender gaps they face in democratic processes such as elections. In a recent study conducted by Afro barometer on the political engagement of African youth between the ages of 18 and 35 years in 36 African countries (Lekalake & Gyimah-Boadi, 2016). Lekalake and Gyimah-Boadi (2016) highlight that there is little difference in the voting behaviour of young women andyoung men, with 64 percent and 66 percent respectively voting during an election. Young women, however, are still far less likely to be representatives in parliament. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, only 23 percent of parliamentary representatives are young women. This figure, however, is much lower in Arab states at a mere 18 percent (Lekalake & Gyimah-Boadi, 2016, p. 2).

Despite the various AU policies targeted at gender equality, young women continue to present lower levels of political activism than their male counterparts (Lekalake & Gyimah-Boadi, 2016, p. 2). The Afrobarometer study highlights significantly lower levels of political interest among young women (48 percent), than young men (60 percent) (p. 3). In addition, these young women (49 percent) are also less likely than young men (58 percent) to take part in community meetings and other platforms that allow them to raise issues of concern (p. 19). Part of the reason for this is that women are often more harshly judged than their male counterparts and face various sociocultural barriers to participation (Chirwa-Ndanga, 2017).

Young women are increasingly expressing their interest and need to play a role in their communities. This can be seen at the decision-making level through their participation in formal democratic processes, such as taking

part in elections or holding leadership positions in political parties, and through informal interventions, such as involvement in protest action and radical groups. It is clear from the reality on the ground, however, that young women will require increased opportunities and targeted initiatives to ensure that their involvement is constructive. Initiatives could include programmes that will enable their empowerment politically, economically and socially. It i seven more important that the AU, member states and policy makers harness this demographic dividend by acknowledging the different needs and concerns of young women compared to young men in the design of their policies and programmes aimed at empowering these young women.

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