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Why are we still talking about women's rights in 2023?

Some people might think that gender equity is no longer an issue in today's world and that legal gains have been made and that we live in a fair world where everyone has an equal voice. This is not the case.

By claiming to have achieved real equity through legal equity, we limit women's reality to a series of laws and charters, as if they magically change behaviors and persistent systemic injustices. Even today, we close our eyes and refuse to see that women are paid less than men for the same skills. Most women still carry a double burden of work and household/caring duties. Statistics show that women are still very under-represented in society's decision-making institutions. In fact, the higher up the rank of decision-making in different institutions (public or private), the less likely one is to encounter women. Even in the education and health sectors, where women are more likely to be present in large numbers, there is no exception. The majority of decision-making positions are held by men, especially in Africa.

Beyond the purely recreational aspect that is usually attached to it, International Women's Rights Day is an excellent opportunity to put the spotlight on the glaring injustices and inequalities that continue to snake through the lives of women globally but especially across Africa. For decades now and even up to today, African women continue to suffer daily harassment (sexual, moral, etc.), sexism, misogyny, sexual assault, gender-based violence (GBV), discrimination, etc.. In the name of sometimes phallocratic beliefs, little girls are prevented from going to school and obtaining an education. Those who denounce sexual violence and those who want to improve access to reproductive health are gagged. In many countries, women are forbidden to dress as they wish, to hold the positions they desire and to challenge the norms that are unfairly imposed on them. Those who dare to speak out or stand up against their oppression are criticized and sometimes discriminated by their communities. In short, GBV and discrimination remain the daily lot of many women in Africa.

Gender and violence

For example, UNAIDS has identified GBV as a major factor in risk of HIV/AIDS infection among women in Africa. [According to UNAIDS](#) statistics, this impact is most pronounced in Sub-Saharan Africa, where adolescent girls and young women (aged 15-24) accounted for 25% of new HIV infections, even though they make up only 10% of the population. [Women in general accounted for 63% of new HIV infections in the region in 2021](#). For international organizations, eliminating violence against women is essential in the fight against the spread of epidemics, and this is an area in which such organizations are increasingly active.

This is why HIV prevention strategies must address the unequal power between men and women and the norms and practices that put women at higher risk of HIV. Women who have experienced GBV are up to three times more likely to be infected with HIV than those who have not. In Africa, younger women are more likely to experience physical or sexual violence than older women, usually from a close partner or family member. Women report that they fear discrimination, physical violence and rejection by their families if they disclose their HIV status.

Gender-based violence was described by the UN as “the most widespread but least visible human rights violation in the world” and this overwhelmingly affects African women. A World Health Organization (WHO) report revealed that 65% of women in Central Africa and 40% in West Africa have experienced violence. These figures fall far short of the reality, according to women’s rights organizations. Indeed, the fear of stigmatization too often discourages victims from reporting their attacker. For instance, in Niger, 99% of rape victims do not go to court, and when they do, the prison sentences are not commensurate with the gravity of the acts committed against women, according to a [study](#) by the German Friedrich-Ebert Foundation.

Female genital mutilation is still rife

According to WHO, in the world today there are more than 200 million girls and women who have been subjected to female genital mutilation (FGM) in 30 countries in Africa, the Middle East and Asia [where FGM is practiced](#). For instance, in [Guinea](#) 97% of girls and women have been mutilated; and 90% in the central-eastern regions of Burkina Faso. In Senegal, a quarter of women over 15 have undergone FGM. In [Mali](#), along with Liberia and Sierra Leone, the proportion rises to 73% among girls under 14 and 89% among those aged 15-49.

If this happened to men, these issues would’ve been addressed long ago

What women are fundamentally requesting and are entitled to expect is an end to these kinds of violence and discrimination: or, to put it more positively, effective equal rights. It is not one day once a year that will put an end to violence and discrimination that women are facing or give rise to an occasional expression of sympathy that will improve the condition of women, but a firm commitment to implementing an effective response to barriers to women’s rights. It is high time that natural differences cease to be a source of systemic inequality.

For this to happen, it will require the removal of patriarchal, misogynistic, historical, religious, cultural and socio-economic barriers that prevent African women from enjoying their rights on an equal basis with men. In fact, ending all forms of discrimination against women and girls is not only a requirement of justice. It is also a way to chart a sustainable future for the African continent. Many economists insist that women’s empowerment is a factor in economic growth and development.

In light of the above, it is easy to see that the challenges are enormous. However, while it is true that the

road to equality/equity is still long with many difficulties, Africa has the potential to become a world leader in gender equality. With a little political will, it can correct these long-standing injustices. And even if such an ambition were feminist in inspiration, it would not disqualify the demand for justice that it embodies for African women.

I hope that this 8 March 2023 will not be just another opportunity to drink, eat, dance and celebrate, or attend bland, low impact debates/conferences, but be a real window of opportunity and a decisive commitment against gender inequalities that put Africa and especially African women at a disadvantage so that they cannot perform at their full potential.

Happy International Women's Day! [#EmbraceEquity](#)

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