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The role of empowering women and achieving gender equality in the sustainable development of Ethiopia

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to uncover the role of empowering women and achieving gender equality in the sustainable development of Ethiopia. To achieve this purpose, the researcher employed qualitative methodology, with secondary sources as instruments of data collection. Based on the data analysed, findings of the study show that the role of women across different dimensions of sustainable development is less reflected in the country. The use of a women's labour force in the economic development of the country is minimal. The political sphere of the country is, by and large, reserved for men alone. The place of women in society is also relegated to contributing minimally to the social development of the country. In addition, women's rights are not properly being protected in order for women to participate in various the issues of their country but are subjected to abysmal violations. Moreover, women are highly affected by environmental problems, and less emphasis is given to their participation in protecting the environment. The researcher concluded that unless women are empowered and gender equality is achieved so that women can play their role in economic, social, political, and environmental areas, the country will not achieve sustainable development with the recognition of only men's participation in all these areas. The fact that women constitute half the entire population of the country makes empowering them to be an active part of all development initiatives in the country a compelling circumstance. Hence, this paper calls for the strong commitment of the government to empower women and utilize all the potentials of the country to bring about sustainable development.

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1. Introduction

The issue of women's empowerment and gender equality is at the top of agendas across the world, as gender inequality is widespread in all cultures. In developing countries, gender disparity is highly rampant compared to the developed countries (Ahmed et al., 2001). Most importantly, in Ethiopia, gender-based discrimination and inequalities are very much apparent, although the government is working aggressively towards alleviating such problems. As a result, low empowerment of women and high gender gap still impede the development process of the country (Environmental Protection Authority, 2012). Even though the country is on the path of development in various respects, the likelihood of its sustainability is in question, given such a large gender disparity. Hence,

this study reveals the need to empower women and achieve gender equality for the sustainable development of the country.

As far as the organization of the study is concerned, this paper attempts first to conceptualize some terms. Accordingly, the definitions of women's empowerment, gender equality, and sustainable development will be addressed based on the literature, and such definitions will, *mutatis mutandis*, be applied to the paper throughout the discussion. Later, the paper will address the crucial importance of empowering women and achieving gender equality for the sustainable development of Ethiopia.

2. Conceptualization of terms

2.1. What is women's empowerment?

Empowerment can be defined as a “multi-dimensional social process that helps people gain control over their own lives. It is a process that fosters power in people, for use in their own lives, their

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communities, and in their society, by acting on issues that they define as important" (Page and Czuba, 1999). In the same way, women's empowerment refers to "women's ability to make strategic life choices where that ability had been previously denied them" (Malhotra et al., 2009). Accordingly, empowerment is central to the processes of maintaining the benefits of women at individual, household, community and broader levels (Malhotra et al., 2009). It involves the action of boosting the status of women through literacy, education, training and raising awareness (Alvarez and Lopez, 2013). Hence, women's empowerment is all about allowing and equipping women to make life-determining choices across different issues in the country.

Another, almost-related and equally important concept in this paper is gender equality. Gender equality is understood to mean that the "rights, responsibilities and opportunities of individuals will not depend on whether they are born male or female" (Warth and Koparanova, 2012). It is also defined as a situation where "... all human beings are free to develop their personal abilities and make choices without the limitations set by strict gender roles; that the different aspirations and needs of women and men are considered, valued and favoured equally" (Holzner et al., 2010). The ultimate goal of gender equality is the non-existence of discrimination on the basis of one's gender (Alvarez and Lopez, 2013). To this end, empowerment of women has an indispensable role (Alvarez and Lopez, 2013), which is why the researcher preferred to use both terms together throughout the discussion. In this study, both terms are used frequently to have, *mutatis mutandis*, such meanings explained above.

2.2. What is sustainable development?

The concept of sustainable development arises due to the change of human perception as to what development is. Development perspectives shifted gradually, leading to what we perceive today as sustainable development. In the 1950s and 1960s, the focus was on the economic growth and productive capacity of a country (ECA, 2015; Gunduz, 2004; Drexhage and Murphy, 2010). However, in the 1970s, the focus shifted to equity matters, i.e., social development and income distribution, as awareness grew of the prevailing gap between rich and poor (ECA, 2015; Gunduz, 2004; Drexhage and Murphy, 2010). In the same period, environmental protection came into the picture as one component of development: knowing the impact of economic growth on the environment (ECA, 2015; Gunduz, 2004; Drexhage and Murphy, 2010). Hence, sustainable development is perceived broadly nowadays. Accordingly, the most frequently cited definition of sustainable development is "development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987). It calls for attention to be paid to the interest of future generations while attempting to satisfy our present needs.

Following the aforesaid changes in development perspectives, sustainable development is also understood to have three interrelated pillars: economic development, social development and environmental protection (Warth and Koparanova, 2012; UN, 2007; UN Women, 2014). It is further noted that "the goal, and indeed the ultimate test, of sustainable development is the convergence among the three trajectories of economic growth, social development and environmental protection" (Warth and Koparanova, 2012). This shows that sustainable development can be achieved if and only if those three elements are satisfied cumulatively. These dimensions have equal and interrelated importance; the absence of one will impede others (Stevens, 2010). It is well articulated that

Stressing the environmental and social dimensions of sustainable development in the absence of economics neglects the financial

capital needed to pay for progress. Building up the economic and social pillars of sustainability while neglecting the environment degrades the natural capital needed for growth. Focusing on economics and the environment without attention to social factors can lead to green growth for a few. Given gender gaps worldwide, these few tend to be mostly men (Stevens, 2010).

Therefore, sustainable development denotes achieving a balance among the three pillars sustainably (Drexhage and Murphy, 2010; Murphy, 2012). The Ethiopian government is also convinced that sustainable development will be achieved in the country only when balanced development of those three areas is pursued and all citizens benefit from it (Birhanu, 2015). In a nutshell, sustainable development requires an all-rounded, comprehensive and integrated development.

3. Why should we empower women and achieve gender equality?

A number of studies have shown that sustainable development is impossible without women's empowerment and gender equality. Consequently, it is asserted that gender equality is both a human rights issue and a precondition for, and indicator of, sustainable development (Alvarez and Lopez, 2013). It is also affirmed that gender disparity is prevalent across the cultures of the world and that without serious steps to tackle it, sustainable development cannot be achieved (Stevens, 2010). Furthermore, UN Women (2014) rightly outlined that to create a just and sustainable world and to enhance women's roles in sustaining their families and communities, achieving gender equality is paramount. On the other hand, if gender equality is not maintained, it will retard the country's development. In line with this idea, Stevens (2010) interestingly underlines that "an increasing number of studies indicate that gender inequalities are extracting high economic costs and leading to social inequities and environmental degradation around the world."

Therefore, one can understand from such explanations that without the equal inclusion of women in all areas of development initiatives, all the above-mentioned components of sustainable development cannot be achieved. However, gender inequalities across economic, social and environmental dimensions remain widespread and persistent (UN Women, 2014); Ethiopia's case is also very much apparent. Being cognizant of the negative effects of the prevailing gender disparity, the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development (2008) affirmed that "any development initiative has to engage and ensure that both men and women contribute and benefit equally from it." The researcher, being firmly convinced by this assumption, further argues that women should be empowered and equally allowed to contribute to and benefit from all dimensions of development so as to bring about sustainability.

Therefore, in this paper, women's empowerment and gender equality are discussed as a means to bring about sustainable development in the country. In his analysis, the researcher goes beyond those three pillars of sustainable development mentioned above, due to the conviction that more issues can be considered for the attainment of sustainable development. The argument of Bossel (1999) corroborates the assertion that "sustainable development of human society has environmental, material, ecological, social, economic, legal, cultural, political and psychological dimensions that require attention". Hence, for greater emphasis and detail, the paper also discusses political development/good governance and human rights protection separately, even if these are, in one way or another, included among the three pillars of sustainable development. The reason stems from the fact that they play equally

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