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Towards institutionalizing gender equality in Africa: How effective are the global gender summits and convention? A critique

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In the neo liberal order, gender equality discourse has had a renewed impetus following the post global gender summits and conventions inspired by options to enlarge the participation of women in governance and decision making processes such as the Beijing 35% affirmative action. However, decades on, institutionalizing gender equality in the periphery societies such as Africa has been elusive. This paper explores some prevailing dimensions of inequality and efforts at women emancipation and transformation to understand the verity of the summits and their resolutions. It deploys historical approach based on secondary data sources to provide brief genealogical mapping of some global gender conventions and summits namely; the first World Conference on Women held in Mexico City, 1975, the 1979 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), Second World Conference on Women held in Copenhagen 1980, World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women 1985, the Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, Goal three (3) of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) 2000 etc. Results from the findings suggest that women are still marginalised, evidences were provided within health, educational, cultural, political and socio-economic dimensions. The paper calls for mainstreaming gender in top political offices across Africa to redefine women's status and force a concomitant transformation.

Key words: Gender inequality, sustainable development, global gender summits/ conventions, Africa.

INTRODUCTION

In the neo liberal order, the study of global women summits becomes necessary as gender inequality is undermining the standard unit of liberalism namely – equality. Discourses and scholarly evidence on gender studies show that gender equality has recorded minimal success in Africa, parts of Latin America and South Asia

at the post- cold war era (AfDB, 2012; UNDP, 2012; OECD, 2013).

In Africa gender inequality has a long historical antecedence; first was the colonial trajectory extending to the symbolic colonial struggles in places like Ghana, Kenya, Senegal, Nigeria etc. In Eastern Nigeria, the Aba women riots of 1929 involved enterprising women of strong matriarchal culture. The core issue was the imposition of taxation on women and organization of a colonial political transition and power structure whose terms were contested by the persistent marginalization of women as the colonial state was male dominated.

For instance, in the context of colonial agricultural practices, the introduction of cash crop relegated women to the background. In Kenya as in most African countries, it was observed that women grow food for home consumption .Occasionally, they sell surplus food, or brew grains into beer to earn cash incomes. When colonial authorities attempted to "modernize" agricultural economies, they introduced cash crops like coffee and tea to men, by passing women....Colonial agricultural ministries established agricultural extension systems in colonial headquarters, focused on men delivering advice, training, and credit to men farmers....Kenya is an example, where large numbers of men migrate away from agricultural households, where women remain to grow food and feed their families. Studies of agricultural policy implementation showed that few extension officers, up to 40 percent, managed farms on their own. And women rarely receive credit in many societies because they limited opportunity to own the land and so have no collateral to offer. In Kenya women's voices have been virtually silenced in the man–made political machinery" (Nzomo and Staudt, 1994 quoted in Staudt 2008:153).

Yet women continued to operate self-help groups, rotating savings among themselves, even small numbers of women are elected and appointed to political office (Staudt, 2008).

Similarly, in Ghana, Amadiume (2001) observed that; "Like most West African women, Ashanti women have always been farmers, traders, and politically active citizens, controlling a network of market systems, including one of the largest markets in Africa, Kumasi market. It has a daily trading population that ranges between 15,000 and 70,000".

In Western Nigeria, the colonial marketing board relegated women who were the bulk of peasant farmers in cash crop production such as cocoa to the background as men held administrative positions.

By the twentieth century, state policies and laws institutionalized male privilege and transplanted the tools, ideology, and machinery of privilege from one nation to another, and throughout colonial empires in nearly global breath (Staudt, 2008:149).

Between the post 1948, UN universal declaration on human rights and the 1960s following the political independence of most African countries, the emergent African elite (male dominated) towed the existing patriarchy in Africa which is a system and institution of male rule with women subordination.

From political independence until approximately 1970s, patrimonial autocracy with male domination remained a dominant mode of rule almost across Africa as the colonial state was equally unable to change the rules of the game. Three years after the Stockholm conference of 1972 was the first World Conference on women in Mexico in 1975 in which gender inequality found concrete expressions and the UN's declaration of 1975 as International Women's Year.

In the 1980s, a generalized sense of women constellation took form and deepened during the decade. This gave impetus to women social movements accompanied by the second Women Summit in Copenhagen in 1980 and Nairobi in 1985.

In 1987, the Brundtland Commission Report; "Our Common Future" emphasized sustainable development with prioritization of gender issues within its main pillars which was both reassuring and congenial as it opened a novel vista for women's political relevance.

The late 80s saw the rise of some form of civil activism such as the civil riots of 1988 in Morocco that preceded the end of cold war and one party dictatorship in some African states in 1990. Women constellation re-emerged as a veritable platform for gender transformation, a number of gender based NGOs sprang which in recent times become popular and common ground for women from all walks of life; religion, creed and belief to form alliances and networks to assert relevance in governance. Examples are Tanzania Media Women Association (TAMWA), National Council For Women Society (NCWS), the Collaborative Centre for Gender and Development, Kenya, Gender Development Institute, Nigeria, Rural Nigerian Women Network (RNWN), Ghana National Council of Women and Development etc. Also significant in the 1990s, was the role played by women such as Winnie Mandela and the women wing of the African National Congress (ANC) during the apartheid South Africa and subsequent release of Nelson Mandela. The return to multi- party elections at the rise of neo liberal ideologies resulted in a more formidable rise of civil society organizations (CSOs) including NGOs and women cooperatives, gender equality awareness and platforms for increased participation of women in governance heightened and culminated into the Beijing Conference of 1995 and clamour for 35% affirmative action for women participation in governance and decision making processes. Gender equality discourse became a global concern as more African states undertook some sort of democracy reforms.

In 2000, the Beijing + 5 aimed to assess progress on the 1995 summit. Similarly, world leaders gathered in one of the largest ever UN meetings and adopted the

Millennium development Project aimed to half poverty globally by 2015. Goal three of the Millennium declaration focused on gender equality while goal five focussed on maternal child care. Some scholars like Moss and Stevens (2004), Easterly (2008) have been sceptical about the effectiveness of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in Africa.

Key historic moment was the election of a female President in Liberia Ellen Sirleaf Jonhson as the first African female President in 2005, which seems to enliven the hopes of women in top government positions.

Significantly, contradictory images of gender equality jostle for scholarly attention as divergent perspectives and arguments are held in mainstream media, international community and policy makers on how best to equitably integrate women into governance and decision making which has remained undervalued in global policy discourse. It becomes appropriate to interrogate the plausibility of Africa's nascent democracy project in the context of gender equality.

One central argument painted in glowing colours at the wake of neo liberal order has been the contention that liberal democracy will enhance political emancipation and transformation of women for popular and participatory roles in governance. Results in this direction have been minimal as inequality pervades.

In this paper gender inequality entails unequal access, participation and under representation of women in issues that affect them.

In this essay, we explore dimensions of gender inequality and argue that failure to institutionalize gender equality will continue to derail the global liberal democracy project. Thus, issues of gender, and political emancipation of women are central to Africa at the dawn of the 21st century. Yet few voices clamour for such equality as women are relegated from top political offices. We posit that gender equality which inevitably should have served as a dominant mode of political emancipation, human rights and social justice during much of the neo liberal order is a missing global policy agenda. The paper presents a critical analysis that makes some cogent policy observations that the failure to effectively mainstream gender equality into key development issues will repeatedly breed inequality in Africa.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Dynamics and overview of gender summits and conventions

Global gender summits have been given scant attention in the literature. Although there have been some important contributions from various perspectives discussing aspects of gender inequality in the neo liberal order (Hermings, 2005; Hartsock, 1998; Davis, 2008; Pearce, 2004).

Much effort has been made to relate democratization to women empowerment, which seems not to have recorded the much expected success (Dolphyne, 2000).

Inequality which is a substantial part of political practice remains prevalent across Asia, Latin America, part of East Europe, and Africa with evidence of poor participation of women as core stake holders in the business of governance. Neo Marxists are piqued at this unequal social status as capitalism an element of liberal democracy is riddled with inequality (Muller, 2013).

This historical challenge remains a fundamental development concern acknowledging the enormous problems that confronts women.

The 2012 UNDP Gender Inequality Index (GII) sheds new light on the position of women in over 150 countries; it yields insights in gender gaps in major areas of human development. The component indicators highlight areas in need of critical policy intervention and it stimulates proactive thinking and public policy to overcome systematic disadvantages of women. A critical instigation of improvement on the prevailing dynamics and possible alternatives seem inevitable in debates among feminist theorists (Butler, 2004; Robyn, 2000; Lynne, 2004, Braidotti, 1991; Pearce, 2004).

Viewing gender equality thinking as ongoing questioning and probing alternative options with the aim of effecting rapid changes is expedient. The literature on gender summits is best explored through a brief genealogical mapping of major trends in gender thinking, building up to an inventory of current and future directions in ongoing gender equality debate in Africa as well as possible distortions in striking a gender balance.

Is gender equality a matter of politics or of development reality? Writers have different views on the degree of autonomy of gender theory. Some treat gender theory primarily as part of social science and thus emphasize the influence of social realities (Barak 2010) as justification for men's superiority over women. Others implicitly view gender theory mainly as ideology (Kroska, 2007) perhaps with less policy utility.

Some cynicism in relation to gender equality is evident as some traces of poor gender transformation in Africa lie on women themselves whose vulnerability seems to constrict their assertiveness. Recent evidence such as Nigeria's 2011 general elections, Africa's largest democracy with a population of about 160 million, the only female presidential candidate Mrs. Sarah Jubril got only one vote. How often is gender equality in effect a transformative gesture? What is the politics of gender equality? Whom does this discourse serve? In between these views is a middle position that recognizes the intellectual as well as the political elements in gender equality theory. It does not make sense to isolate gender theory from political processes and treat it as a distinct intellectual exercise; but neither can we simply reduce it

to theory or propaganda. Gender inequality is every-day reality and should form a key global policy formulation and implementation discourse.

While a number of perspectives argue for more participatory approaches as they consider political leanings, civil emancipation in a broad sense, as more important in shaping gender equality than theoretical considerations (Chambers, 2010; Dolphyne,2000). The advantage of the later view which is in line with this paper is that, it draws attention to the participatory role of gender equality through civil emancipation and colla-borative efforts, such as the rise of CSOs and women networks in setting agendas, framing priorities, building coalitions, alliances and justifying policies. Its limitation is that it treats gender emancipation as a by-product of political processes and not as a reformative and reconstructionist endeavour. Gender transformation in the modern sense implies intentional social change in accordance with societal objectives; it is collective and participatory. What is appropriate transformation obviously varies according to class, culture, historical context and relations of power. Gender equality is the negotiation of these issues. The strength and the weakness of gender thinking is its policy oriented character and less commitment to practice. This is part of its vitality and inventiveness; it is problem driven rather than problem solving. In part for the same reasons, gender thinking ranks fairly low in global equality policies. How has global gender summits fared towards institutionalizing gender equality in Africa in the neo liberal order?

Historical evidence shows that the origin of democracy in the Greek city state of Athens as a system of government had a limited franchise with only adult males of Athenian descent eligible to vote. This limited or restricted franchise marked the incipient political discrimination against women.

Early gender emancipation movements dates back to 1840s in the United States of America. "The seed for the first Woman's Rights Convention was planted in 1840, when Elizabeth Cady Stanton met Lucretia Mott at the World Anti-Slavery Convention in London, the conference that refused to seat Mott and other women delegates from America because of their sex. Stanton, the young bride of an antislavery agent, and Mott, a Quaker preacher and veteran of reform, talked then of calling a convention to address the condition of women. Eight years later, it came about as a spontaneous event".[1] The Seneca falls convention which held in the United States in July 18 and 19 ,1848 was described this way; "A crowd of about three hundred people, including forty men, came from five miles round. No woman felt capable of presiding; the task was undertaken by Lucretia's husband, James Mott. All of the resolutions were passed unanimously except for woman suffrage, a strange idea and scarcely a concept designed to appeal to the predominantly Quaker audience, whose male contingent commonly declined to

vote"[2]

About a hundred years later, the UN support for the rights of women began with the Organization's founding Charter. Among the purposes of the UN declared in Article 1 of its Charter is; "To achieve international co-operation … in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion."[3]

In Africa, the Aba women riot of 1929 in Eastern Nigeria as mentioned was among the early efforts at women emancipation in Africa. Such emancipation remains topical in recent literature. Dolphyne (2000) chronicled the nexus of African women and socio-cultural alienation through beliefs and practices which keep women subjugated, including bride-wealth, child marriage, polygamy, such as purdah, widowhood, inheritance of property, fertility, female circumcision. She suggested modalities for emancipation involving NGOs and government.

Global conventions as used in this paper refer to relevant gender conferences and related world develop-ment summits. We do not seek to map out a genealogical analysis of women emancipation summits in Africa rather to lucidly examine and interrogate salient and recent gender summits and their outcomes to be able to provide a broader elucidation of the subject matter in gender inequality discourse. For our purposes we examine; the 1948 UN declaration on human rights, the first World Conference on Women, held in Mexico City 1975, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Second World Conference on Women held in Copenhagen 1980, World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women 1985, The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995.

Within the UN's first year, the Economic and Social Council established its Commission on the Status of Women, as the principal global policy-making body dedicated exclusively to gender equality and advance-ment of women. Among its earliest accomplishments was ensuring gender neutral language in the draft Universal Declaration of Human Rights.[4]

The landmark Declaration, adopted by the General Assembly on 10th December 1948, reaffirms that "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" and that "everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, color, sex, language, religion, …birth or other status."[5]

The first world conference on women held in Mexico in 1975 as the international feminist movement began to gain momentum during the 1970s and the General Assembly declaration of 1975 as the International Women's Year. At the aftermath of the Conference, the years 1976-1985 were declared the UN Decade for Women, and established a Voluntary Fund for Decade[6].

Subsequent summits and conventions followed.

For instance in 1979, the General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which is often described as an International Bill of Rights for Women. In its 30 articles, the Convention explicitly defines discrimination against women and sets up an agenda for national action to end such discrimination. The Convention targeted "culture and tradition as influential forces shaping gender roles and family relations, and it is the first human rights treaty to affirm the reproductive rights of women". [7] The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) stipulates the urgency of eliminating stereotypes, customs, and norms that give rise to the many legal, political and economic constraints on women. Article I of CEDAW defines discrimination as "any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, human rights, and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field." Discriminations contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequalities

Five years after the Mexico City conference, a Second World Conference on Women was held in Copenhagen in 1980. The resulting Programme of Action called for stronger national measures to ensure women's ownership and control of property, as well as improvements in women's rights with respect to inheritance, child custody and loss of nationality.

In 1985, the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, held in Nairobi. It was convened at a time when the movement for gender equality had finally gained true global recognition, and 15,000 representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) participated in a parallel NGO Forum, the event, which many described as "the birth of global feminism". Realizing that the goals of the Mexico City Conference had not been adequately met, the 157 participating governments adopted the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies to the year 2000. It broke ground in declaring all issues to be women's issues. [8]

An early result of the Nairobi Conference was the transformation of the Voluntary Fund for the UN Decade for Women into the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM, now part of UN Women).

By 1995 almost all sub –Saharan African countires introduced some measure of political liberalization,and a majority permitted competitive elections. This has been belied with poor commitment to women political emancipation. Major neo- liberal gender equality thinking was the fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, which went a step farther than the Nairobi Conference. The Beijing Platform for Action asserted women's rights as human rights and committed to specific actions to ensure respect for those rights[9]; the core need for gender equality was brought to bear. Gender equality thinking was broadened to encompass "women rights "as human rights, combined with political emancipation, that is, enlarging the choices and opportunities of women for top political positions, and economic emancipation such as employment, improved livelihood fostering entrepreneurship and 'achievement orientation' proclivities. These were supposedly informed with the clamor for 35% affirmative action.

Women's political vulnerability remains on the increase as their options are narrowed in virtually all facets of sococial and political endeavours.

At the aftermath of the Millennium Declaration of the September 2000 Millennium Summit, gender issues were integrated in many of the subsequent Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) — and explicitly in Goal No. 3 ("Promote gender equality and empower women") and Goal No. 5 ("Reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio"). The UN system is mobilized to meet these goals.[10]

On 2 July 2010, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously voted to create a single UN body tasked with accelerating progress in achieving gender equality and women's empowerment. Thus four UN agencies and offices were merged into one namely, UN Women. The bodies are the UN Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), the Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW), the Office of the Special Adviser on Gender Issues, and the UN International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (UN-INSTRAW).[11]

In the lead-up to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) Summit in September 2010, the Secretary-General launched a global effort convening 40 key leaders to define a collective strategy for accelerating progress on women's and children's health (Table 1).[12] On 14 September 2010, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced the appointment of Michelle Bachelet, former President of Chile, as Under-Secretary-General for UN Women. UN Women became operational on 1 January 2011.[13]

On 13 April 2012 a UN System-wide Action Plan (UN-SWAP) on gender equality and women's empowerment was adopted at a meeting of the United Nations Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) to be applied throughout the UN system.[14]

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The focus on global gender summits is important, which are major efforts at bringing global attention to gender equality. However, we draw a meta -analysis of Africa as a microcosm of this global clamour and more importantly as the poorest region of the world

Table 1. Selected global gender summits/conventions and resolutions.

Yr	Summit/Convention	Resolution
1948	Universal Declaration on Human Rights	"All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights" "everyone is entitled to all the rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration, without distinction of any kind, such as race, colour, sex, language, religion, … birth or other status."
1975	Declared as International Women's Year and the first World Conference on Women, held in Mexico City.	The years 1976-1985 was declared the UN Decade for Women, and a Voluntary Fund for Decade was established
1979	The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW),was adopted . which is often described as an International Bill of Rights for Women	Set up 30 articles and sets up an agenda for national action to end discrimination. The Convention targets culture and tradition as influential forces shaping gender roles and family relations, and it is the first human rights treaty to affirm the reproductive rights of women.
1980	Second World Conference on Women was held in Copenhagen.	The resulting Programme of Action called for stronger national measures to ensure women's ownership and control of property, as well as improvements in women's rights with respect to inheritance, child custody and loss of nationality.
1985	World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace, was convened in Nairobi.	The 157 participating governments adopted the Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies to the Year 2000. It broke ground in declaring all issues to be women's issues
1995	The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, went a step farther than the Nairobi Conference.	Adopted the Beijing Platform for Action, asserted women's rights as human rights and committed to specific actions to ensure respect for those rights. (affirmative action)
2000	In the aftermath of the Millennium Declaration of the September 2000 Millennium Summit, gender issues were integrated in many of the subsequent Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) Goal No. 3 and Goal No. 5	"Promote gender equality and empower women" "Reduce by three quarters the maternal mortality ratio"
2010	UN women formed, through the merger of four UN agencies and offices.	Mandate to guide the system's coordination on gender.
2010	On 14 September 2010, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced the appointment of Michelle Bachelet, former President of Chile, as Under-Secretary-General for UN Women.	
2011	UN Women became operational	
2012	On 13 April 2012 a UN System-wide Action Plan (UN-SWAP) on gender equality and women's empowerment was adopted at a meeting of the United Nations Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB).	To apply its principles throughout the UN system.

Source: The Authors.

(Collier, 2007).

Recent shift to historical methods has been influential approaches to exploratory analysis of gender inequality. Feminist theorists such as Clare Hemmings, capture the essence of these shifts in contemporary gender debates. She observes that these shifts are broadly conceived of as corresponding to the decades of the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s respectively, and to a move from liberal, socialist and radical feminist thought to postmodern gender theory. A shift from the naïve, essentialist seventies, through the black feminist critiques and 'sex wars' of the eighties, and into the 'difference' nineties and beyond, charts the story as one of *progress* beyond falsely boundaried categories and identities. A shift from the politicized, unified early second wave, through an entry into the academy in the eighties, and thence a fragmentation into multiple feminisms and individual careers, charts the story as one of *loss* of commitment to social and political change (Hemmings, 2005:116).

This treatment opens with general historiographical analysis on the character of gender perception in era of nascent liberal democracy in Africa. As Hemmings (2005) recounts, historiography is in its broadest sense the name for historical accounts, or theories of history. Combined with the practice of genealogy, it has proven particularly amenable to feminist and queer work seeking to emphasize that all history takes place in the present, as we make and remake stories about the past to enable a particular present to gain legitimacy (p.118).

The argument then turns to relevant gender conventions/summits namely; the first World Conference on Women, held in Mexico City 1975, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of

Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), Second World Conference on Women held in Copenhagen 1980, World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women 1985, The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995.

Beyond theoretical debates, the paper builds on seminal secondary data sources which include World Bank reports, African Development Bank and UNDP reports, OECD (2012) Social Institutions and Gender Index (SIGI), AU reports (2004) and related existing literature.

This paper makes some novel contributions to the field of gender studies and development policy as it demonstrates why gender equality policies in the neo liberal order should share top priority as over-arching directives of international development discourse.

DISCUSSION

Dimensions of prevailing inequality at post gender summits

On close inspection the classic aim of liberal democracy seems internally challenged at the time of revaluing women participation in governance and decision making processes. UN Women (2000) reports that women's representation at the highest levels of national and international decision-making has not changed in the five years since the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Recent World Bank and African Development Bank report on *World Development 2012 Gender Equality and Developme*nt shows that disparities persist in many areas. Four such areas are described as priorities: Health sector, as female mortality exceeds male mortality; Persistent inequalities in education; Unequal pay and productivity of women and men; Unequal status of men and women within the household and in society (AfDB, 2012).

During the Beijing Conference, only 21 of the 189 countries that made commitments to improve the status of women gave the highest priority to the issue of increasing women's participation at all levels of decision-making. Since Beijing, extensive discussions have continued on this at governmental and non-governmental levels.

Similarly, UNDP (2012) report shows that gender inequality remains a major barrier to human development. Girls and women have made major strides since 1990, but they have not yet gained gender equity. The dis-advantages facing women and girls are a major source of inequality. All too often, women and girls are discriminated against in health, education, political representation, labor market, etc - with negative repercussions for development of their capabilities and their freedom of choice.

Gender Inequality Index (GII) reports that women are marginalized in virtually all sectors of human endeavour (UNDP, 2012). Women continue to be in the minority in national parliaments, with an average of 13 per cent

worldwide in 1999, despite the fact that women comprise the majority of the electorate in almost all countries (UN Women, 2000).

Arguably, gender summits and their ambitious resolutions are underestimated in global policy discourse. The notion that women emancipation counts for less because "we are in a man's world" continues to under-write the status of women. As major political positions are held by the men, this reflects a deep-seated inequality and dichotomy along gender lines. In this scenario, women in the poor societies such as Africa are most vulnerable as cultural practices apply in key social decisions which negatively affect gender equality. During the Beijing Conference, only 21 of the 189 countries that made commitments to improve the status of women gave the highest priority to the issue of increasing women's participation at all levels of decision-making. Since Beijing, extensive discussions have continued on this at governmental and non-governmental levels (UN Women, 2000) (Table 2).

Gender inequality is further due to changing forms of the international system including development failures and local crisis across Africa.

Despite a number of global gender summits and their robust resolutions, several dimensions of gender inequality still exist in Africa.

On 1 March, 2011, the Commission on the Status of Women convened an interactive expert panel to examine the emerging issue "Gender equality and sustainable development" to serve as an input to the preparatory process for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, which held in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012. The Conference focused on two main themes: (a) a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication; and (b) the institutional frame-work for sustainable development.[15]

However, it was noted that human civilization has never been closer to gender inequality. In a period of sustainable development and globalization, a third of humanity live in poverty, and another 2 billion people are projected to join the human race over the next 40 years, employment in every sector is male dominated, politics and policy remains largely an exclusive preserve of the men[17].The United States which claims to advocate gender equality has never considered the need for a female President. It was only in 1992 that Carol Mosely – Braun became the first African American woman to be elected to the US Senate (Patterson, 2010). As of August 1999, there were only 10 women serving as heads of state and government, namely; Bangladesh, Guyana, Ireland, Latvia, New Zealand, Panama, San Marino, Sri Lanka (President and Prime Minister) and Switzerland. Women's representation in government decision-making positions at the cabinet (ministerial) and sub-ministerial levels (deputy minister, permanent secretary and head of department) shows very slow progress. (UN, Women,

Table 2. Women executives in terms of geography.

Geographical area	Cases of Women Prime Ministers or Presidents	Further breakdown
* Africa	6	All Sub-Saharan
Asia	9	South Asia: 6; Southeast: 32 cases each from Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Sri Lanka
Caribbean	5	2 cases from Haiti and Netherlands Antilles
Europe	14	Western Europe 10: (3 of which are Nordic); 4: Eastern. 2 cases from Ireland. Latin America 5
Middle East	1	Israel
North America	3	Two cases from Bermuda
Oceania	2	Both cases are from New Zealand

Source: Jalalzai F (2004). Women Political Leaders: Past and Present Women & Politics, Vol. 26(3/4). The Haworth Press, Inc.*Africa's data is authors's update.

Table 3. African women in top political offices (Prime Minister/President).

Country	Name	Year	Position
Rwanda	Agathe Uwiliingiyimana	1993	Prime Minister
Sao Tome and Principe	Maria das Neves Ceita Batista de Sousa	2002-	Prime Minister
Senegal	Madoir Boye	2001-2002	Prime Minister
Burundi	Sylvie Kinigi	1993-94	Prime Minister
Central African Republic	Elisabeth Domitien	1975-1976	Prime Minister
Liberia	Ellen Johnson Sirleaf	2006-	President

Source: Author.

2000) (Table 3),

In 1996, women made up 6.8 per cent of cabinet ministers worldwide, 7 per cent in 1997 and 7.4 per cent in 1998.

In 1999, there were only 677 female members of the upper house or senate, compared to 5,639 male members.

The majority of women ministers are still concentrated in social sectors such as education, health, and women and family affairs (UN Women, 2000)

In Germany, one of Europe's largest democracy was only in 2005 that parliamentarians selected Angela Merkel as the first female Chancellor of Germany.

Several prevailing dimensions of gender inequality are discernible. The following could be examined;

Political dimension: Women all over Africa are politically de-aligned; this has resulted in massive political apathy. "In the early twenty first century, only a handful women were added; the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh are the only countries to have elected two different women as Chief Executives….In 2006, voters elected two women presidents and set important precedents. In war torn Liberia, Ellen Johnson Sirleaf became the new president, the first ever female chief executive in an African country. In Chile, voters selected first ever female president, socialist, and feminist Michelle Bachelet" (Staudt, 2008:157).

Socio-Cultural Dimension: Despite the several global summits, not much has changed. Old habits of thought die hard. Africans are strongly attached to their traditional belief system. Traditional patriarchal practices are still in existence even when they erode the fundamental human rights of women. Gender issues have not been prioritized in many African countries; in several rural African countries issues like female genital mutilation, child marriage etc are still in practice. For instance, in South Africa in 2006, high -level political leader Jacob Zuma raped a young woman, used Zulu masculine culture as the justification and was judged not guilty at the trial in

2006. The case roused people to reflect on misogyny (Staudt, 2008:150).

According to the World Health Organization, approximately 98% of women in Somalia undergo Female Genital Mutilation (FGM),[16] and it is mostly performed on girls between the ages four to 11 years in its most severe form; infibulation is reported.

Female Rights Abuses: On the subject of the rights of women in Africa, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights states in Article 17 that; "Women shall have the right to live in a positive cultural context and to participate at all levels in the determination of cultural policies."

In a recent study on gender issues in Kenya, Ciarunji Chesaina observed that; "Kenyan women are known for their contribution to the welfare, not only of their individual families, but also of the nation at large. Kenya's food security, for example, depends largely on the efforts of the Kenyan woman. 88 per cent of Kenya's women live in the rural areas where the bulk of the food for the nation is grown. 60 to 80 per cent of the tasks involved in agricultural food production are performed by women. In the urban areas over 60 per cent of food processing and food marketing is done by women". The study further noted that; " The women on the other hand, having been brought up to take a secondary position *vis a vis* men, often do not know their rights as human beings in marital relationships and will therefore not seek legal help when their security is threatened by husbands"[17]

Within the North African axis, Muslim practices inhibit the rights of women. In places like Egypt are growing concerns on gender inequality. In 2009, Egypt was ranked 82 out of 102 in the 2009 Social Institutions and Gender Index. The country is ranked 65 out of 86 in the 2012 Social Institutions and Gender Index (OECD Development Centres (2012).

Egypt is ranked at 113 (out of a total of 187 countries) in the 2011 Human Development Index, with a score of 0.644. The Gender Inequality Index score is not provided for 2011. Egypt is ranked 123rd in the 2011 Global Gender Gap Index, with a score of 0.5933 (OECD Development Centres, 2012).

The works of Qasim Amin, one of Egypt's most important writers on feminist issues, prove that the subordination of females is a result of misinterpretations of Islam, and that the Egyptian feminist movement wants to apply the teachings of the religion, and not to copy the West. Amin demonstrated that the respect for female rights and equality was an obligation in correct Islamic practices. [18]

Amin was supported by the leading Islamic Egyptian scholar, Sheikh Mohamed Abduh, who argued for feminism from a religious point of view. The argument they offered was that the Qu'ran established female rights and freed them from the inequality they suffered from during the pre-Islamic age, but misinterpretations of the Qu'ran transformed women into second-class citizens once again[19]

Sudan (excluding South Sudan) is ranked 85 out of 86 in the 2012 Social Institutions and Gender Index. The country was ranked 102 out of 102 in the 2009 Social Institutions and Gender Index (OECD Development Centres, 2012).

The 2011 Human Development Index (HDI) score for Sudan is 0.408, ranking the country in 169th place out of 187 countries with data. The 2011 Gender Inequality Index of 0.611 places Sudan 128 out of 187 countries. Sudan was not ranked in the 2011 Global Gender Gap report (The OECD Development Centres, 2012).

In Rwanda, women have assumed new roles and key responsibilities in public offices at the post genocide era, perhaps occupying the position the men have left vacant. Rwanda is currently ranked higher among most African countries on gender empowerment and equality.

According to Rwandan radio and print freelance journalist, Didier Bikorimana; "The country made history in 2008, when 45 women were elected out of 80 members of parliament. At 56%, this is by far the highest percentage of women MPs in any government in the world. The constitution of Rwanda, adopted in 2003, states that at least 30% of posts in "decision-making organs" must go to women across the country". In elections for district and sector council officials last year, women won 43.2% of district and Kigali City advisory posts. Women lead a third of Rwanda's ministries, including foreign affairs, agriculture and health, and every police office in Rwanda has a "gender desk" to take reports of violence against women, as does the national Army" (Bikorimana, 2012).

Usta Kaitesi, a teacher of gender and law and Vice-Dean of post-graduate research in Rwanda University's Faculty of Law, says political will was lacking in the years up to the genocide even though the country had already signed the 1978 UN Convention prohibiting all discrimination against women. "Generally, there was an environment of tolerating discrimination" she says, regarding ethnicity, religion and gender (Bikorimana, 2012).

Nowadays, she says, "There is political will to avoid discrimination in Rwanda, and that will give a legal direction" (Bikorimana, 2012).

"Most countries do have good laws, laws that don't have any form of injustice but the application of such laws is another issue altogether," she adds. "So in Rwanda there is a political will to empower women and women are quite aware of their role to play in society."[20] She painted the post genocide Rwandan women in this light; "The genocide also played a role in the women empowerment. "Many women were left as widows because of the genocide. Others had to work hard in the place of their jailed husbands for allegedly taking part in

Table 4. Wage and self-employment in non-agricultural informal employment,by sex 1994-2000.

Region/country	Self-employment as % of non-agricultural informal employment			Wage employment as % of non-agricultural informal employment		
	Total	Women	Men	Total	omen	Men
North Africa	62	72	60	38	28	40
Algeria	67	81	64	33	19	36
Morocco	81	89	78	19	11	22
Tunisia	52	51	52	48	49	48
Egypt	50	67	47	50	33	53
Sub-Saharan Africa	70	72	70	30	29	30
Benin	95	98	91	5	2	9
Chad	93	99	86	7	1	14
Guinea	95	98	94	52	6	26
Kenya	42	33	56	58	67	44
South Africa	22	27	23	72	73	77

Source: UNIFEM 2003, Progress of the World's Women. Quoted in AU (2004).

the genocide. So even young girls got that mentality to perform genuinely to access good jobs, and good jobs means going to school first" .[21]

"President Kagame credits women's empowerment for some of the strides Rwanda has made in terms of development. In the last five years, one million Rwandans have emerged from poverty, with poverty rates falling from 56.7% in 2005/6 to 44.9% in 2009/10" (Bikorimana, 2012).

The scenario in Ethiopia is not different, according to OECD report (2010); "In Ethiopia, women have limited control over resources and access to ownership rights, placing them in a vulnerable position and compromising their ability to care for the health and welfare of their children. It is estimated that over one-third of Ethiopian children under the age of five are malnourished. Although 75% of all economically active women work in agriculture and they account for nearly 45% of the total agricultural labour force, they still have less access to land, credit and other property than men. This means that they have little control over household wealth and little say in how resources are allocated. Even though women are often the main producers of food, they rarely have rights to or control the land on which it is produced". (p3)

Wage Inequality: While the international Labour Organization (ILO) produced conventions that established principles (such as "Equal pay for equal work")-agreed in tripartite negotiations among government, business, and labour-national governments enforced these principles only to the extent that internal political forces and laws supported such measures. For women who laboured for income in the informal economy, laws and regulations had no impact on earnings (Staudt, 2008:151) (Table 4).

In the economic context, women do not have a pride of place even where they are more competent than the men. In employment, several organizations are headed by men. In every developing region men outnumber women in paid employment. Women are largely relegated to more vulnerable forms of employment. Women are over-represented in informal employment, with its lack of benefits and security. Top-level jobs still go to men — to an overwhelming degree. Njogu and Orchardson-Mazrui (2013) observed that; "Violence against women caused by, among other things, economic inequality between the genders, the acceptance of physical violence to resolve conflicts, low female autonomy and control of decision making in household affairs and legal restrictions against divorce for women has been on the increase. They argued that whenever women are in abusive relationships, they find it difficult to move out due to attitudes associated with divorce. However, that was not always the case. In Northern Namibia / Southern Angola, women in the Ovambo communities used to be fairly independent. Matrimonial relations could be easily separated un-ilaterally by the woman, without negative consequences. This changed with the coming of Christianity which stigmatized divorce and made it difficult for women to opt out" (Njogu and Orchardson-Mazrui, 2013).

In Nigeria, the credible performance of the late Professor Dora Akunyili as former Director General-National Agency for Foods, Drugs, Administration and Control (NAFDAC) , where several men in a similar circumstance acquiesced to corruption in drug peddling, stands a taste of time.

Health Dimensions: HIV/AIDS have been critical indicators of gender inequality. According to the (2008) WHO and UNAIDS, global estimates, women comprise 50% of people living with HIV. In sub-Saharan Africa,

Table 5. Gender poverty ratio in selected countries, 1980s and 90s.

Country	Women per 100 men in the poorest quintile1
Botswana (1993)	192
Cote d'Ivoire (1986-88)	123
Ethiopia (1989-90)	127
Ghana (Urban 1987-1988)	141
Ghana (rural 1987-1988)	140
Madagascar (1992)	109
Niger (1989)	113
Rwanda (1985-1986)	132

Source: UNIFEM, Progress of the World's Women, 2000:96 Quoted in AU (2004).

women constitute 60% of people living with HIV. In other regions, men having sex with men (MSM), injecting drug users (IDU), sex workers and their clients are among those most-at-risk for HIV, but the proportion of women living with HIV has been increasing in the last 10 years. This includes married or regular partners of clients of commercial sex, IDU and MSM, as well as female sex workers and injecting drug users. Gender inequalities are a key driver of the epidemic in several ways[22]

Sexual exploitation: Beyond political inequality are "sexual assault and domestic violence which primarily burdens women" (Staudt, 2008:151). Violence against women (physical, sexual and emotional), which is experienced by 10 to 60% of women (ages 15-49 years) worldwide increases their vulnerability to HIV. Forced sex can contribute to HIV transmission due to tears and lacerations resulting from the use of force. Women, who fear or experience violence, lack the power to ask their partners to use condoms or refuse unprotected sex. Fear of violence can prevent women from learning and/or sharing their HIV status and accessing treatment.[23]

Gender-Related Barriers: There is a common notion in African that; "she is a woman" ,this vitiates the status of women and relegates them to the backdrop even where they are more competent than men. This includes limiting women to hold certain positions because of their sex; also, access to services which prevent women from accessing HIV prevention, treatment and care. Women may face barriers due to their lack of access to and control over resources, child-care responsibilities, restricted mobility and limited decision-making power. Many women, especially those living with HIV, lose their homes, inheritance, possessions, livelihoods and even their children when their partners die. This forces many women to adopt survival strategies that increase their chances of contracting and spreading HIV. Educating girls makes them more equipped to make safer sexual decisions.[24]

Poverty: According to the African Union 2004 policy document; *The Road to Gender Equality in Africa;* "African women bear a disproportionate burden of poverty compared to men, a phenomenon that has been described as the 'feminization of poverty" (AU, 2004). The document further observed that in Sub-Saharan Africa both the incidence and depth of poverty are high compared to other regions of the world, although the incidence varies across and within countries. Sub Saharan Africa also lags behind other regions in terms of the non-income measures of poverty. A comprehensive understanding of be reached by examining the multidimensional nature of poverty. In addition to low levels of income, the poor are those who have poor access to government services. Moreover, the poor also face varying degrees of vulnerability, isolation, dependence and a sense of powerlessness. Poverty may also result from beliefs, norms and values of a society" (p4) (Table 5).

Educational Inequality: African women are discriminated educationally compared to their men. Preference is usually given to boy child to the girl child.

In Somalia, talking about gender issues in relation to education, UNICEF's Mike Pflanz reports on challenges of teenage female drop out in Burtinle District of Somalia; "it is all the more striking here in Somalia, where both culture and curriculum have traditionally shied away from talking to children about the changes they face as they grow up" (UNICEF, 2008). "A son's education is seen as important in Somalia. The thinking is if a boy receives a good education, he will find salaried work and be able to look after his parents into their old age. A daughter, by contrast, is seen first as domestic help, then as dowry" (UNICEF, 2008).

According to the Director Galkayo Education Centre for Peace and Development (GECPD), Hawa Aden Mohamed; "Even before she is married, she is needed around her parents' home, cleaning the compound, the dishes, looking after younger siblings," (UNICEF, 2008).

The UNDP Somalia Gender Briefing (2013) observed that; "The Gender Inequality Index for Somalia is 0.776 (with a maximum of 1 denoting complete inequality), placing Somalia at the fourth highest position globally. Somalia has extremely high maternal mortality, rape, female genital mutilation and child marriage rates, and violence against women and girls is common, though statistics are difficult to find. The participation and role of women in politics and decision-making sphere is extremely limited, perpetuating narrow gender based roles and inequalities (p2).

In South Sudan, Gender disparities are evident in key poverty indicators, including a female illiteracy rate as high as 84-86%. Lack of education and access to health services, and early marriages (from 12 years) combine to result in extremely high rates of infant mortality (102 per 1,000 live births) and one of the highest maternal mortality rates in the world (2,054 per 100,000 live births). Sexual and gender based violence is rampant and perpetrators unfortunately enjoy high degrees of impunity. [25]

South Sudanese women´s time burden is said to have increased by 300% impairing their ability to break the circle of poverty, within which many families are trapped. The costs to South Sudan's prosperity and growth of such violations and gender disparities cannot be underestimated.[26]

"Net enrolment in primary education is, on average, lower in countries with high levels of early marriage. In the countries where more than half of girls aged 15-19 years are married (Democratic Republic of Congo, Niger, Afghanistan, Congo, Mali), on average fewer than half primary school aged children are in school. From this evidence, it therefore appears that women's lack of decision making power in the family and household is associated with lower enrolment in schools" (OECD, 2010).

Conclusion

The status of women in contemporary development thinking reflects a wide gap between development and social realities that ought to have been driving a more equitable and socially stable polity. Thus, a recurring inequality exists in gender discourse. It is appropriate to consider issues of gender inequality as part of the wider historical relations between men and women in tandem with changing social relations, and dialectics. Gender equality and gender has carried very different meanings.

Despite the rhetoric, liberal democracy's real achievement in the promotion of gender transformation in Africa has been relatively meagre. According to Joseph (1997), Huntington also believed that "the ability of the US to affect the development of democracy elsewhere is limited" and echoed Dahl's contention that the process of

transformation is too complex and too poorly understood to justify "such initiatives".

Gender transformation in Africa should contribute significantly to the understanding of the need for equality in "practice", it should form an integral component of liberal democracy. Liberal democracy seems to treat gender equality as a non -component of its tenets of freedom and equality. In the United States gender inequality is still an issue of concern (Patterson, 2010).

The processes of economic and political liberalization in Africa are not just concurrent events in the late twentieth century:they are part of a broader dynamic of global transformation.While substantive changes have occurred ,many of these "transitions"also exhibit an illusory quality (Joseph,1997).

As the 1990s ushered in some political changes, its verity has not been palpable as state institutions simply down play the relevance of gender equality. Significantly, the post- cold war discursive analysis of gender equality is fraught with disillusion and covert levity.

In spite of the global summits and conventions, Africa has not evolved the much anticipated gender equality as has been substantially demonstrated in this paper. The point this paper has tried to make is that the prevailing neo liberal order has beamed a searchlight of optimism in bridging the age long inequality; however, pockets of resistance have been germane despite the end of one party system, military dictatorships and return to multiparty system in Africa, divergent relics of inequality pervades.

Critique of global summits and conventions reveals that despite the 1948 Universal Declaration on Human Rights- "universalization of human rights", in the context of gender equality has been faced with numerous obstacles both in Africa and most developing countries.

Cultural rights still prevail over civil rights. African norms and values are paramount irrespective of constitutional provisions. Human rights abuses and gender inequality have been on the increase. The recent human rights report ranked gender inequality and sexual abuse high in Africa. Equally, human rights issues have been elitist, the rights of the poor and oppressed are hardly guaranteed with women in majority.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) which was adopted in 1979 has been weak to forge a collective internationally acceptable instrument to fully guard against "all forms of discrimination against women". Ironically in most developing countries cultural practices such as female genital mutilation still exist. While in developed countries white racism and sexual discrimination pervade. This undermines the objectives of CEDAW.

In Africa, women have not been able to effectively coordinate themselves to "remove cultural barriers" which limit their emancipation.

The 1980 Copenhagen convention which was more pro women with focus on stronger national measures to ensure women's ownership and control of property, as well as improvements in women's rights with respect to inheritance, child custody and loss of nationality, has a variety of shortcomings. Critiques have argued on its emphasis on economic rather than political rights of women as political rights are prelude to economic rights. Thus if political rights of women are fully guaranteed and women assert a strong place in governance, their rights to ownership and control of property could be better actualized. As Nkrumah in the nationalist struggle once told Ghanaians "seek ye first the kingdom of political power all other things shall be added unto you".

The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in 1995, Primarily sought for 35% affirmative action on women participation in governance and decision making processes among other things. As a robust and influential initiative it has not been effective within country specific challenges rather have largely been superficial in influencing policy discourse. Since its clamor, all over the world, female leaders have not increased either through elections or through political appointments both in Africa and any other part of the world. The recent appointment of Michelle Bachelet to head UN women could effect a change considering her feminist pedigree.

Several empirical studies have shown that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and its targets are not realizable. Easterly (2008) demonstrates, "How the Millennium Development Goals are Unfair to Africa". Equally, Clemens and Moss (2005) in their seminal study; "What is Wrong with Millennium Development Goals?", argued in a similar direction provided empirical evidence on how the goals would not be realizable.

While the relevance of gender equality and women's empowerment for sustainable development has long been established in intergovernmental commitments, such as the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, Agenda 21,and the various global summits/conventions mentioned above, it has become increasingly evident that women's contributions to sustainable development are both undervalued and underutilized.

In 1992, governments and world leaders at the Rio Earth Summit made a historic commitment to sustainable development—an economic system that promotes the health of both people and ecosystems. Twenty years later, the Rio +20 summit emphasized that "sustainable development must be inclusive and people centred, benefiting and involving all people, including youth and children. We recognize that gender equality and women's empowerment are important for sustainable development and our common future. We reaffirm our commitments to ensure women's equal rights, access and opportunities for participation and leadership in the economy, society and political decision-making". Despite this "commitment"

gender inequality in Africa has been on the increase.

According to the Beijing Declaration document, "Review of the national reports show that profound changes in the status and role of women have occurred in the years since the start of the United Nations Decade for Women in 1976, some more markedly since the FWCW. Women have entered the labour force in unprecedented numbers, increasing the potential for their ability to participate in economic decision making at various levels, starting with the household. Women, individually and collectively, have been major actors in the rise of civil society throughout the world, stimulating pressure for increased awareness of the gender equality dimensions of all issues, and demanding a role in national and global decision making processes. Thus, the role of non-governmental organizations, especially women's organizations, in putting the concerns of women and gender equality on the national and international agenda was acknowledged by many Governments". [27]

"Despite much progress, responses from Member States indicate that much more work needs to be done with regard to implementation of the Platform for Action. Two major areas - violence and poverty - continue to be major obstacles to gender equality worldwide. Globalization has added new dimensions to both areas, creating new challenges for the implementation of the Platform, such as trafficking in women and girls, changing nature of armed conflict, growing gap between nations and genders, the detachment of macroeconomic policy from social protection concerns."[28]

"Overall, the analysis of the national reports on the implementation of the Platform for Action revealed that there had been no major breakthrough with regard to equal sharing of decision making in political structures at national and international levels. In most countries of the world, representation of women remains low. Even in countries where a "critical mass" in decision-making positions within the public sector has been achieved, there are few women on boards of directors of major business corporations. There is need for more careful monitoring of progress in ensuring women's equal participation in these positions of economic power."[29]

According to OECD research findings; *Gender Inequality and the MDGs: What are the missing dimensions?* 21 countries reflected in 2010 issue in which gender inequality is most entrenched, are the same countries which are making the slowest progress towards achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. [30]

Getting women out of Inequality will involve full Implementation of Affirmative Action across Africa, Constitutional reform to enlarge the chances of women, novel re-orientation on discriminatory cultural practices, re-invention of governance with novel participatory roles for women etc.

Our focus therefore has been policy driven, historical, exploratory and discursive. In search of alternative

dynamics of women emancipation, we suggest a possible global re-alignment of key policies purported to provide a critical break in mainstreaming gender equality.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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