

# Disrupting Orthodoxies in Economic Development – An African Feminist Perspective

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In recent years, women's economic empowerment (WEE) has been the focus of perhaps the most intensive spotlight to date within the international development global arena. The creation of the UN High Level Panel on WEE in September 2015, in the wings of the UN General Assembly that ushered in the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), has led to a plethora of policy dialogue and programming unprecedented since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.<sup>1</sup> Parallel to this, Africa's overall economic growth over the last decade has created an interest in the continent from both international public and private sector players who now also see the promise of large untapped markets alongside the continent's ubiquitous natural resources and fertile agricultural land (Bashir and Amine, 2016). However, with a growing wealth gap and deepening inequality across the continent (despite a growing middle class), equitable and inclusive growth remains elusive (Zwane, 2015), while structural inequalities and patriarchal norms persist.

I write from the perspective of an African feminist working in the areas of economic empowerment and justice, education and health for the last sixteen years. My work has involved conducting research and providing women's rights technical assistance on policy and programming to civil society organisations, governments, and a variety of international organisations. As a feminist, I view women's economic empowerment and justice as central to the struggle for gender equality and equity. Economic empowerment approaches uphold women's power and agency to make and act on their own economic decisions (either as individuals or as a collective), while economic justice strives to ensure that institutions provide fair and equal opportunities and processes (e.g. decent work conditions, fair pay) without prejudice. Critically, women's economic empowerment alone will not deliver on the feminist goal of gender justice as – taken by itself – its focus on the individual (or even group) is not enough to dismantle systemic gender inequalities and inequities. The inclusion of an economic justice

framework is needed to hold accountable and dismantle the institutions perpetuating the deep-rooted structural inequalities impacting women within patriarchal economic spheres.<sup>2</sup>

In programmatic, research, and policy terms, the arena of women's economic empowerment and justice has presented the greatest challenges by far.<sup>3</sup> And while several decades of advocacy on women's economic empowerment have offered activists influential entry points for engagement in economic development spaces, such advocacy remains fraught with tension when trying to advance economic justice while maintaining a feminist agenda. For Africa, in particular, the current conjuncture is marked by a growing emphasis on big-business and private-sector-led engagement, big-budget economic development programming with high number targets, growing inequality gaps in GDP growth, and a covetous focus on women's productive capacity. Wider global interest in the continent's productive capacity during the SDG era should alert us to the significance of setting and pursuing our own agenda for economic justice for African women. The current international interest in women's economic empowerment has reached that critical point where African feminists either become more vocal on the issues across all areas of engagement, or risk the appropriation of women's economic empowerment by wider global agendas.

## Challenging Economic Orthodoxies

Feminist positions on women's economic empowerment and justice traditionally contest the free-market neoliberal orthodoxy that dominates economic development assistance. Redressing women's unpaid care; recognising tax as a feminist issue, due to the acute importance of services like healthcare, education, water, and energy, given the gendered realities of women and girls; and a push for decent jobs over private-sector competition and profit: all challenge that orthodoxy.<sup>4</sup> Scholars and activists of economic justice have for decades been critically exploring the exploitative realities women found themselves in during the establishment of Export Processing Zones (EPZs), where the ideal of economic competitiveness was predicated on low wages for women, minimal to no benefits, and abusive working conditions. Moreover, women were often left out when shifts to higher skilled technological innovations took place as EPZs matured (Edgren, 1984; ILO, 1998; Milberg and Amengual, 2008).

At a purely practical level of engagement in this work, I have found that taking feminist economic convictions into spaces with sectoral influencers such as trade and export policymakers has often been met with scepticism, if not outright resistance. While these tensions have been partly driven by economic ideology, the latent misogyny in what are often male-dominated and masculinised sectors also plays a part. Clear indicators of this are the challenges I have faced when attempting to introduce an interrogation of power and gendered social norms into discussions on gender and economic development. At best, these continue to be largely viewed by economic development practitioners as “not our remit”, instead placing all responsibility for addressing gender issues on national women’s machineries and civil society.<sup>5</sup> At worst, the issues are ignored on the grounds that economic development is considered a gender-neutral endeavour. In trade policy, trade facilitation, and export promotion, for example, others (Atthill et al., 2007; Jobes, 2010) have pointed out the gender blindness that remains in trade diagnostics and prescriptions, while Viilup (2015) underscores the slow progress towards gender-sensitive response in this area.

Barriers to challenging social norms and gendered power relations play out in other ways, too. Whilst most African women are concentrated in the smallholder-driven cash economy of the rural agricultural sector, 74% of non-agricultural informal employment is also held by women (WIEGO, 2014). Despite this, there remains a lack of commitment to funding the depth of research needed to adequately inform women’s economic empowerment and justice initiatives effectively, particularly with the consent and direction of women themselves. For example, where women are economically active in large numbers as smallholder farmers and home-based processors and retailers, many economic development programmes still need convincing that socio-cultural norms must be fully understood if economic barriers are to be addressed. These include norms around divisions of labour, intra-household relationships, and gendered relationships with the market – from negotiating power with middlemen who may have better access to male-dominated market linkages, to lack of land ownership and other assets needed to become growth entrepreneurs. In a national sub-region like northern Nigeria for example, the prevailing narratives focus on Boko Haram and religious fundamentalism. Women from this part of the country are objects of speculation and stereotypical assumption whilst also being among the

least properly researched in global programming (Kelleher, 2014). Despite this, northern Nigeria is currently hosting multimillion-dollar economic programmes targeting hundreds of thousands of women. These programmes are operating from a contextually blind position because adequate budgets have not been committed to fully understanding the gendered realities of women's economic agency.

## **Defending the Critical Importance of Collective Action Led by African Women**

The broad feminist consensus that women from the global south should lead the gender and development discourse is not new. My engagement with agricultural incomes and rural markets programmes over the years has been defined by recognition of the importance of collective action driven by African women. This is essential to the goal of transforming women's economic realities more sustainably. Some international NGOs, like ActionAid and Oxfam, have pioneered work along these lines successfully through direct programming on women's economic empowerment in the form of discrete projects aimed specifically at women in value chains. However, bringing similar collective action into the larger economic and rural development programmes that are currently proliferating has been highly problematic. Market systems programmes (sometimes known as Making Markets Work for the Poor or M4P), that are designed to introduce market linkages for affordable goods and services – and thereby theoretically stimulating a less aid-dependent development process – are the most obvious example of this. Many such programmes have large numbers of women targeted within them, giving them the potential to do both the most good, but also the most damage.

It is not new for women to organise around their economic needs.<sup>6</sup> Within the era of international development, and particularly in the last two decades, microfinancing schemes that offer poor women opportunities to access credit by leveraging group lending guarantees and structures have been utilised extensively with mixed success and much-needed cautionary and critical reviews (Geleta, 2013; van Rooyen et al., 2012) where they have proven problematic.<sup>7</sup> For example, the disbursement of sums of money to groups of women is meaningless if the women are not organised collectively around their economic activities and if, at the same time, their access to markets is not improved. Otherwise, the money simply intensifies competition among

poor women within what are often already crowded economic spaces. What continues to be misunderstood, however, is the difference between organising women around economic assets and production, and collective action driven by women towards a more just economic system.

A recent visit I undertook with rural smallholder women farmers and processors in northern Nigeria illustrates this point concretely. The women's productive organising – bulk farming through collective land leasing, shared processing responsibilities – had certainly improved the quantity and quality of their produce. However, previous development engagement had failed to note that, when the women went to market, they reverted to their individual, atomised units as retailers. This meant that the male buyers who dominated the market space found it easy to control pricing and pit the women against one another by exploiting the differences in their economic resilience: the poorest women would sell at lower prices.

Along with a team of women's rights colleagues, we have managed over the last two years to introduce some hard-won activities that have strengthened women's leadership skills, financial knowledge and their collective action towards maximising their group agency. This led to stronger collective negotiation and positioning at the marketing end of their value chain, with better power relationships and women's economic empowerment outcomes for all. However, rolling out such activities in economic development is challenging. The short-term nature of many programmes, often looking for “quick wins” of increased incomes with big numbers that can be easily quantified before project-end, means that the time and investment needed for this type of transformational change is considered not enough “value for money”. Additionally, many orthodox economic programmers still view the idea of collective action within markets as a left-inspired challenge to the individual aspirational and competitive system needed to create the orthodox vision of a dynamic economy.

### **Battling the Instrumentalist Wave**

Instrumentalist approaches to gender equality – approaches that posit women's equality as instrumental for achieving wider development goals, more specifically economic development and growth – have gained a certain orthodoxy in their own right. In 2007, the World Bank coined the phrase “gender equality as smart economics”. Providing evidence of the “business

case” has now become the marker of rigour, pragmatism and “value for money” considerations within professional work on gender equality. Chant and Sweetman (2012) highlight the danger of this approach to potentially undermine the feminist goal of removing the more deep-rooted structural discrimination that women face. Instrumentalist moves, such as the turn to “smart economics”, are often utilised as a much-needed aid in support of rights-based positions, particularly when working in the more challenging spaces of trade, enterprise, finance and the like. In this context, cautioning against instrumentalism potentially hijacking the women’s rights agenda can lead to relegating oneself to the margins of accepted discourse on women’s economic empowerment. As a consequence, fissures are created amongst women’s rights professionals themselves, which poses a challenge for feminist engagement.

While instrumentalism can be found across all development sectors,<sup>8</sup> in programming on women’s economic empowerment the linkage between women’s productivity and economic growth/private-sector development is by far the most explicit. My concern is not with highlighting the integral nature of women’s contributions to economic development *per se*. However, the reliance on an instrumental premise to win the support of women’s rights detractors – in the context of our patriarchal realities and within the private sector in particular – may only continue to dilute and depoliticise an arguably already compromised women’s rights agenda. There are erasures and silences within the approach itself; for example, where growth has been accompanied by deepening inequalities or the business case for private-sector engagement is reliant on and exploits women’s existing socio-economic marginalisation. This situation is rarely interrogated effectively in the practical world of programming. Highlighting such erasures remains either the preserve of gender and development academics or that of activists who continue to agitate from the margins.

### **Debunking Those “Silver Bullets”**

Gender myths instrumentalising women, exposed over a decade ago by authors such as Bhatliwala and Dhanraj (2007), still circulate today and continue to be treated as a “silver bullet”, or panacea, to the problem of gender inequality. One such myth is that giving poor women access to economic resources, such as credit, will necessarily lead to their overall empowerment. In addition, the

myth that women's economic empowerment *automatically* leads to increased voice, decision-making power and overall agency still prevails. Yet financially independent and educated metropolitan women in Africa may be bound as strictly by patriarchal norms as any woman from the rural areas.<sup>9</sup> Myths are more likely to prevail when analysis of the power relations impinging on women's economic empowerment is fundamentally avoided. Intersectional oppressions are typically not addressed, despite the oft-repeated allusion to "taking a holistic approach". Almost invariably, the projected "face" of poverty in the development sector is an impoverished, rural African woman. Women who don't fit that narrow focus are marginalised, as articulated by Everjoice Win in her 2007 article, "Not very poor, powerless or pregnant: The African woman forgotten by development".

The narrowness of focus in women's economic empowerment also unfortunately tends to fit quite well with the largely quantitatively driven monitoring and analysis frameworks of most development programmes. In what can arguably be called the "tyranny of the log-frame", with its big-number goals and mainly number-crunching methodologies, the ease of capturing income increase over a finite period of (often) a few short years as an indicator of women's empowerment is convenient. The need to capture women's individual and collective experiences of changing power and agency through more qualitative indicators and evaluations remains a secondary area within economic development programming.<sup>10</sup>

## Future Forward: Understanding and Organising Around the Frontlines

Today, Africa is touted as the future "breadbasket" of a world facing both food and water shortage projections in the 21st century (Thurow, 2010). This "final frontier" of agricultural expansion is a far cry from the "basket case" imagery of two decades ago, but with it comes the march of neo-colonial interests. With African women smallholder farmers and processors now the face of international agricultural programmes and policy roll-outs, there is a disconnect with the reality of large land acquisitions, commercial and industrialised farming and an ever-increasing focus on cash-cropping. The debate on women in agriculture (see *Feminist Africa*, 2009) is integral to programming on women's economic empowerment and justice. As global interest from private and public players increases, African women across all

areas of production are going to be at the coalface of these tensions: as both the recipients of some of development's opportunities and also the burden-bearers of most of its mistakes. This makes women's economic empowerment a critical frontline for African feminists in the coming years.

Feminist positions that can uncompromisingly challenge the status quo and provide alternative solutions – such as eco-feminist activism that offers ground-level truths on climate-smart agriculture and the environment – are rarely engaged with. And, although the key roles of women as custodians of agricultural biodiversity and in community level interactions with ecology and nature (African Bio Diversity Network and the Gaia Foundation, 2015) are now being recognised due to Internet activism, such recognition remains peripheral within development.

Organising African feminist responses to the current international spotlight on women's economic empowerment is needed now more than ever. Such responses *should be tied intrinsically* to economic development's engagement with agricultural expansion on the continent. African feminists working across the formal programmatic spaces of the economic and agricultural development sectors need to be part of this, allying cohesively with both academics and the grassroots activists already engaged in contesting the orthodoxies. We also need more African feminists entering positions of influence within those spaces. Being a “disrupter” in such spaces is not easy, but nonetheless those orthodoxies need to be disrupted more uncompromisingly. It is better to defend African feminist positions and avoid being part of anything that enables a perpetuation of economic injustice or that holds back genuine transformations. This is more reason why *coordinated and globally amplified* African feminist voices on women's economic empowerment and justice can give individuals the collective strength needed to pursue feminist goals.

## Endnotes

- 1 The 1995 Beijing Platform for Action provided an agenda for women's empowerment, including a set of comprehensive strategic objectives on women and the economy. This built on the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which had articulated clear measures expected of states and stakeholders regarding women and employment.
- 2 Although women's economic empowerment is grounded in a rights-based approach, the flaw in taking empowerment alone as the answer to women's economic marginalisations and oppressions lies in its potential to be manipulated

around an individualistic aspirational agenda. Without an economic justice lens, this can undermine the wider structural struggle for all women facing their intersectional challenges.

- 3 Within these technical areas, engagement with direct project programming has been the most challenging overall. Policy work requires less of a focus on “beneficiary numbers” and expectations of making tangible changes to people’s lives within a short period of time.
- 4 For more on tax as a feminist issue, see Adams (2016).
- 5 This is a phrase that has been repeated often by team leaders, economic advisors and many others – largely men but also many women – over the last ten to fifteen years or so.
- 6 Women’s organising around economic needs and agency predates development programming globally. Collective systems of savings and loans – like the *osusu* (money banks) schemes women use in northern Nigeria – are culturally embedded and centuries old.
- 7 The enduring lesson from the many evaluations we now have on microfinance (of which Geleta (2013) and van Rooyen et al. (2012) are only a small sample) is that regional and cultural specificities play a critical role in the success or failure of microfinancing schemes. An example is the differential power dynamics between men and women in different communities and how this impacts on a woman’s financial sovereignty and control when it comes to spending and paying back a loan. A further critical lesson is the importance of ensuring that financial literacy training is a standard part of microcredit disbursement – something that many microfinance institutions continue to fall short on.
- 8 The education sector, for example, has long emphasised the importance of girls’ education from an instrumentalist angle, citing all the benefits of girls’ education to families and the wider society (improved child and family health, skilled workforce, engaged citizenship). Often this is done before simply stating that education in itself is an inalienable human right, regardless of what it does or does not do for society.
- 9 One of the most powerful cultural outputs demonstrating this in recent years is a 2013 film by Nigerian director Chika Anadu, “‘B’ for Boy”, which detailed the traumatic and extraordinary lengths that an economically empowered and successful Lagosian businesswoman went to when her marriage and status were threatened because she was approaching middle age and had yet to give birth to a boy.
- 10 The increasing pressure on donor countries from taxpayers criticising the idea of foreign aid, following austerity cuts in their home nations, has arguably led to a focus on delivering easily quantifiable outcomes based on large numbers that justify the expenditure. This is sometimes without a mind to the quality of these outcomes from a sustainable and genuinely transformative standpoint.

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