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WOMEN'S ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT POLICY BRIEF

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01

Briefing Paper Women's Economic Empowerment

1. ECONOMIES, EMPOWERMENT AND WOMEN

“A woman is economically empowered when she has both the ability to succeed and advance economically and the power to make and act on economic decisions.”

Economic empowerment has always been central to the struggles for women's rights. The exclusion of women from economic activities and access to resources is key in the reproduction of gender inequality; hence programmes meant to address women's poverty are centred on providing them with the means to earn livelihoods¹. Although growing numbers of women have joined the economy as workers, traders, professionals, or civil servants over the past few decades, there is still a long way to go before the economic gender gap is bridged². Persistent economic inequality—particularly for rural and low-income women—indicates the need to revisit and rethink the women's economic empowerment agenda.

1 United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women, 1995. Beijing Declaration and Platform of Action for Women, United Nations.

2 UN Women (undated) Facts and Figures Economic Empowerment <http://www.unwomen.org/en/what-we-do/economic-empowerment/facts-and-figures> (accessed 25 March 2015)

This paper intends to contribute to that agenda, particularly within the African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) network by conceptualising economic empowerment in three ways: empowerment as participation, empowerment as transformation and empowerment as self-determination. These distinctions reflect the different kinds of power that women have over their own being, economic status as well as the economic systems to which they belong. The categories, of course, are not mutually exclusive, but each contains particular elements that differentiate one from the other.

The paper draws heavily from the work of feminist analyses of economics and economic policy as well as from a large body of work around women's participation, empowerment and transformation³. These ideas are rich and complex and could never be fully explored in such a short paper. The main purpose in the paper is to create more clarity on what we mean by women's economic empowerment, and question the extent to which current programmes will achieve long term, self-sustaining impacts on economic equality.

1.1 DEFINING EMPOWERMENT

Power can be defined as the degree of control over material, human, intellectual and financial resources exercised by different sections of society. The control of these resources becomes a source of individual and social power... The extent of power of an individual or group is correlated to how many different kinds of resources they can access and control. Different degrees of

3 For a comprehensive overview of current feminist debates on empowerment and transformation, visit the website <http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org>. Specifically Manuh T. (2006) Conceptualising Women's Empowerment in West Africa (Draft) – Ghana Scoping Workshop, Accra 2006) Pathways of Womens' Empowerment RPC http://www.pathwaysofempowerment.org/archive_resources/conceptualising-women-s-empowerment-in-west-africa

power are sustained and perpetuated through social divisions such as gender, age, caste, class, ethnicity, race, north-south; and through institutions such as the family, religion, education, media, the law, etc...⁴

While power is obviously central to the definition of empowerment, there are other elements that contribute to the process of empowerment. Empowerment is “the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them, meaning they have agency, choice and resources.⁵”

Economic empowerment happens when women have “both the ability to succeed and advance economically and the power to make and act on economic decisions.

- For women to succeed and advance economically, women need the skills and resources to compete in markets, as well as fair and equal access to economic institutions.
- For women to have the power and agency to benefit from economic activities, women need to have the ability to make and act on decisions and control resources and profits.

It is also important to note that women’s economic empowerment can not happen without addressing both the “money economy” as it were, as well as the “care economy.” Recognition of women’s

4 Just Associates (2006) Making Change Happen 3: Power. Just Associates

5 Kabeer, N., 2001, ‘Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women’s Empowerment’, in *Discussing Women’s Empowerment - Theory and Practice*, ed. A. Sisask, Sida Studies No. 3, Swedish International Development Agency, Stockholm, pp. 17-59 <http://www.gsdr.org/go/display&type=Document&id=4085>

unpaid work to sustain households and communities is an integral part of women's economic empowerment.⁶

From the above, it is apparent that empowerment processes for women should result in them attaining power, agency, choice, resources, skills, access and control in relation to the economy. Thus, economic empowerment is as much about improving women's material circumstances as it is about expanding opportunities and influencing decision making for their individual and collective benefit.

1.2 ECONOMICS, ECONOMIC POWER AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS

An economy is the result of social power structures, including gender power structures, which determine, for instance, the division of labour and resources, as well as who can influence decision making on economic development pathways and choices. From a feminist perspective, it is ironic that the English word economy is derived from the Greek οἰκονόμος, which meant "to manage the household" – and yet the invisibility of the gendered division of labour, and the lack of value for women's productive and reproductive work in households, is a persistent feature of economic measurement.⁷

Economics is the study of the economy "which involves money, work, technology, international trade, taxes and other things ●

6 Chopra ,D. (2015) Balancing Paid Work and Unpaid Work to Achieve Women's Economic Empowerment. IDS Policy Briefing 83. Brighton: IDS <http://www.ids.ac.uk/publication/balancing-paid-work-and-unpaid-care-work-to-achieve-women-s-economic-empowerment>

7 Batliwala, S. (2012), What Does Transforming Economic Power Mean? Paper- AWID 12th International Forum. AWID. Published online 18th April 2012 <http://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/srilatha-batliwala/what-does-transforming-economic-power-mean>

that have to do with the ways in which we produce goods and services, distribute the incomes generated in the process and consume the things thus produced”.⁸ Economists purport to offer solutions on how to deliver greater prosperity and well being for all, and have increasingly become influential in shaping all aspects of public policy—including social policy. There are many different fields of economics but most (other than feminist economics) are dominated by male theorists and, for this reason, are unsympathetic and unresponsive to women’s economic concerns.

Economic power is essentially about who owns or controls the factors of production—land, labour and capital—the basic inputs required to produce goods and services.⁹ Therefore, the economically powerful are able to influence what is produced, bought, sold and the means by which this is done. They are able to direct the allocation of land, labour and capital (public and private finance and investment) towards particular economic sectors. Critically also, those with economic power can define and set the nature and rules of economic relations between economic actors within and between countries.

This kind of economic power, needless to say, is beyond the reach of most women, who have little formal control over land (and other natural resources), labour (sometimes including their own), capital and other productive resources. Even men in low-income groups have a measure of economic power within their own households, and can dictate how available resources will be used. As a result of patriarchy, gender, in addition to race, class and caste, is a key determinant the economic status and power wielded by individuals and groups.

8 Chang H.J. (2014) *Economics: The User’s Guide*. A Pelican Introduction. Penguin Publishers.

9 <http://www.businessdictionary.com/definition/economic-power.html>

1.3 FEMINIST ECONOMICS

In the jargon of economic statisticians, the yearly output of a country (its gross national product) is measured primarily in terms of expenditure - of the 'output that is sold'. As many women researchers have pointed out over the last 15 years, these definitions leave out all of the work that women do, unpaid, in family farms and businesses, and as mothers, wives, and daughters with obligations and responsibilities to look after others. The work that is particularly 'women's work' is defined as 'non-economic', though without it, no economy could function.¹⁰

Feminist economics was born out of critiques of how male bias in the practice of economics is complicit in replicating women's marginalisation and exclusion from the economy¹¹. Firstly, feminist economists have pointed out that measures such as "gross domestic product" (all the goods and services that are produced in an economy) are meaningless as they overlook unpaid goods and services produced by women within the "care economy," i.e. the totality of goods and services women produce within the home for the welfare of household, family or community members.

Also, feminist theorists critique the way mainstream economics seems to suggest that women and men operate on a level playing field and that people from the same household have similar economic interests. As a result, economics ignores the barriers to women's economic participation. Indeed, many economic development policies--even progressive ones like land redistribution--can have positive impacts for men of a particular

¹⁰ Elson, D. (1993) Gender Relations and Economic Issues. Focus on Gender Vol 1 No 3. Taylor & Francis on behalf of Oxfam GB

¹¹ Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) (2013). Feminist Economics Toolbox, online document <http://www.forum.awid.org/forum12/2013/02/feminist-economics-101>

group (eg. farmers) while being detrimental for women in the same group.¹²

In Africa, economic policies and frameworks were inherited from assorted colonial regimes whose major economic activities on the continent involved the extraction of natural resources. There was, it goes without saying, little interest in developing and growing traditional agrarian economies in which African women were active participants. In countries like South Africa, colonialism and apartheid actively sought to destroy the agrarian economy.¹³ This century-old bias for extractive industries persists in the post-colony, resulting in the continued marginalisation of women who, by and large, operate in traditional rural agrarian economies, urban informal markets, or micro to small scale enterprises providing a large variety of goods and services for local consumption.

The foregoing shows how the quest for the economic empowerment of women is beset with multiple barriers. These range from lack of access to the means of production because of gender discrimination, the male centric nature of mainstream economics, to the negative legacy of colonialism. The next section discusses how these challenges are dealt with in the framing of women's economic empowerment.

¹² Meer, S. (date unknown) Possibilities for Redistribution: Rural Women in South Africa Today. International Sociological Associations Regional Volumes Southern Africa Vol 10.9 <http://www.isa-sociology.org/colmemb/national-associations/en/meetings/reports/Southern%20Africa/Chapter%209.pdf>

¹³ Meer, S. idem

Empowerment: participation, transformation or self- determination?

2.1 EMPOWERMENT AS PARTICIPATION

“Empowerment as participation” is about removing the gender, race, class and other barriers that women face in their quest to participate in economic life on equal terms. While gender discrimination is the main constraint to women’s economic participation, consequent factors such as lack of skills, mobility or access to finance also come into play. The majority of economic empowerment projects meant for women have been about addressing these barriers; initiatives enlisted for this cause include women’s income generating projects, co-operatives, savings and loans clubs, micro-finance schemes and women in business programmes.

A key indicator of women’s economic participation is their participation in labour markets as employed or self-employed workers. In the past five decades, women have established a foothold in just about every sphere of the economy, showing that

women's economic participation is expanding. Furthermore, in sectors where women's work was previously unrecognised—in particular agriculture and family enterprises—efforts to channel more productive resources directly to women are slowly being made. Women continue to be dominant players in the traditionally feminised social sectors such as teaching, nursing and social work, but now a force to be reckoned with in other services, Africa's highest growth sector¹⁴.

There remains, however, much to be done to improve women's workforce participation, both quantitatively and qualitatively. Firstly, in many places there are still prohibited from working outside the home. Secondly, even as increased numbers of women join the labour force, they still experience discrimination in the types of jobs they can get as well as the remuneration and conditions of work.

“The women who choose to enter the labour market are generally highly educated but still face a difficult time in finding work. For those who do attain work, they are generally segregated in poorly-paid, insecure, home-based or informal employment, partly as a result of lingering discrimination among employers and partly in response to the female need to combine family responsibilities with paid employment.”¹⁵

Whilst formal waged employment has been seen as one of the most secure and beneficial ways for women to earn a livelihood. However, current job trends (in particular labour market deregulation) indicate that formal sector jobs have become more insecure, more poorly remunerated and even fail to lift people out

¹⁴ UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2010) *The World of Women: Trends and Statistics*. United Nations, New York 2010

¹⁵ International Labour Organisation (2010) *Women in Labour Markets: measuring progress and identifying challenges* / International Labour Office. ILO Geneva 2010

of poverty¹⁶. For women the downward spiral in the provision of social services by the state has increased their care burdens at home, further limiting women's work opportunities.

Economic, livelihood and other crises, such as the HIV&AIDS pandemic have been major drivers of increased women's entry into markets in search of paid work¹⁷. Unfortunately a feature of Africa's economies has been one of "jobless growth" resulting in the majority of economically active women earning a living in the informal sector ie. in micro-enterprises, petty trading, domestic work etc.¹⁸ At the same time, policy makers now recognise that the informal economy is increasingly becoming the "real" economy when it comes to providing jobs and incomes for Africa's populations. According to the African Development Bank (AfDB), "nine in 10 rural and urban workers have informal jobs in Africa and most employees are women and youth."¹⁹

Economic policy failures to provide secure decent jobs at domestically have also resulted in an increase in more women migrating across borders to earn incomes. Women are now estimated to contribute half of all global migrant remittance flows²⁰. In Africa, according to the World Bank in 2011 the remittances from the continent's 30 million strong migrant strewn across the globe amounted to \$21 billion each year.

16 Netshitenzhe, J. (2014) Notes: Role of a Capable Developmental State in Addressing the Injustice of Inequality. Presentation to Oxfam Inequality Symposium <http://www.mistra.org.za/Library/ConferencePaper/Documents/Netshitenzhe%20Inequality%20Oxfam.pdf>

17 Bryceson D. F. and Fonseca. J. An Enduring or Dying Peasantry? Interactive Impact of Famine and HIV/AIDS in Malawi. AIDS, Poverty and Hunger: Challenges and Responses. Gillespie S. (Ed.), Chapter 5. IFPRI 2006

18 African Development Bank (2013), Recognising Africa's Informal Sector. Published online. AfDB <http://www.afdb.org/en/blogs/afdb-championing-inclusive-growth-across-africa/post/recognizing-africas-informal-sector-11645/>

19 AfDB idem

20 International Office of Migration (Undated), Gender, Migration and remittances Infosheet. IOM, Geneva

This figure accounted for between one third of [gross domestic product] at the higher end countries and 3 to 10 per cent at the lower end.²¹ Estimates in 2015 are now at US\$60 billion for remittances within and outside Africa²².

The picture for female migrant workers is far from rosy, with risks to their personal safety and a lack of civic, social and worker rights.²³ Again, these “new” trends in women’s economic participation are barely factored into policymaking; government efforts to collect data on these issues have only recently started seriously because of the growing size of these parallel markets, and the realisation of their economic significance.

Women’s Informal Cross Border Trade

- ❖ In Sub-Saharan Africa, informal cross border trade features prominently among women’s individual strategies for self-employment, poverty reduction and wealth creation.
- ❖ A 2004 ILO [International Labour Office] study showed that trade is the most important source of employment among self-employed women of sub-Saharan Africa providing 60% of non-agricultural self-employment.
- ❖ Official sources report an average value of informal cross border trade in the SADC [Southern African

21 World Bank (2011) Migration and Remittances Factbook, Washington DC, World Bank

22 International Fund for Agriculture and Development--IFAD (2014) Africa: First African Conference On Remittances and Postal Networks Addresses Cost of Sending Money, Press Release. Rome, IFAD 02/03/2015 <http://allafrica.com/stories/201503030503.html>

23 Afrika J-G & Ajumbo G (2012) Informal Cross Border Trade in Africa: Implications and Policy Recommendations. Africa Economic Brief, Volume 3.10, November 2012 Africa Development Bank

Development Community] region of US\$17.6 billion per year. Informal cross border trade contributes 30-40% to intra SADC trade. Seventy per cent of informal cross border traders are women.

- ❖ In West and Central Africa, women informal cross border traders “employ 1.2 people in their home businesses; support on average 3.2 children as well as 3.1 dependants who are not children or spouses.”²⁴

There is no doubt that women are active participants in Africa’s economy; concerns are about the nature and conditions under which this participation is happening—on the margins of the formal economy, driven by crisis and survivalist imperatives and in the absence of supportive policies and legal protection, and with abiding discrimination in recognition and remuneration. Participation is not always transformative or just.

2.2 EMPOWERMENT AS TRANSFORMATION

“In the context of social justice, transformation can be defined as a profound and radical change in the relations of power that determine the status, privileges, opportunities, entitlements, and access to resources of an individual or group. Transformation of economic power for women’s rights and justice means that women who are currently marginalized in multiple ways, as a result of intersecting oppressions and exclusions, gain equal

²⁴ UN Women (Undated) Unleashing the Potential of Women Informal Cross Border Traders to Transform Intra-African Trade, New York, United Nations

*power to determine the distribution, access to and control of material, human and technological resources, and goods and services that are the basis for social, physical and psychological wellbeing.*²⁵²⁷

There have been many noteworthy transformative changes to women's economic status—and indeed power—in a relatively short space of time in the post-independence era. Due to investments in education, women have become a large income-earning group in their own right; in turn, this has enabled them to organise themselves and campaign to force decision makers to address their needs, interests and challenges. Markets and businesses, too, have had to become more responsive to women as the latter gain greater consumer power. Women's increased presence in the workplace has put issues such as sexual harassment and discrimination, childcare or maternity leave on the table²⁶.

Politically, women have become an important electoral bloc, forcing governments to address them specifically in their programmes—including establishing quotas for women in decision-making positions. The entry of more women in politics and economics in turn means they are better placed to demand the enactment of policies that guarantee their economic and social rights. This picture is of course mixed, but there is little doubt that women have been agents of change at both grassroots and elite levels in different ways.

25 Batiwala S, What does transforming economic power mean? 18 April 2012 <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/srilatha-batliwala/what-does-transforming-economic-power-mean>

26 Association for Women's Rights in Development (AWID) 2008 Feminists talk about achievements and challenges for women's rights since Vienna (Online video Interviews) <http://www.awid.org/News-Analysis/Special-Focus-Vienna-20/V20-Frontpages/Feminists-talk-about-achievements-and-challenges-for-women-s-rights-since-Vienna>

The biggest obstacle the transformative economic empowerment agenda, particularly for the average woman, is the pervasive discrimination between men and women in access to economic resources, particularly land and property. Asset poverty is at the root of women's relegation to an economic underclass. Heads of households, traditional chiefs, directors of firms, managers of organisations, and other elites within a community or society derive their authority from their "resource power." Even in common property regimes where access to productive resources may be more equitable, gendered hierarchies of rights exist; those with access to family and community assets use these to defend their interests, and command other economic resources (labour, capital, technology etc). As long as women are excluded from these resources, their influence over decisions within the household, community and nation as a whole remains constrained.

Women's unequal access to resources has mainly been through unjust inheritance and property regimes. It is impossible to understate the impact that reforms to legal systems and constitutions have had in securing women equal rights to property/economic resources. Through persistent litigation, women's rights advocates have forced reforms to legal systems to recognise women's economic and social rights as human rights, subject to constitutional provisions on equality. By way of example, the two recent landmark judgements from Botswana and Ghana on the right of women to equal inheritance and marital property rights demonstrate the transformative power of such legal changes.

Affirming women's human rights through equal property rights: Recent Cases from Ghana and Botswana.

Mensah vs Mensah – Supreme Court, Ghana 23/7/2009

The Court argues that common sense and principles of general fundamental human rights requires that a person who is married to another, and performs various household chores for the other partner like keeping the home, washing and keeping the laundry generally clean, cooking and taking care of the partner's catering needs as well as those of visitors, raising up of the children in a congenial atmosphere and generally supervising the home such that the other partner, has a free hand to engage in economic activities must not be discriminated against in the distribution of properties acquired during the marriage when the marriage is dissolved.²⁷

Ramantele v Mmusi and Others, Botswana Court of Appeal 3/09/2013

Justice Isaac Lesetedi [...] took note of the changes in society over the past 30 years in his opinion. He wrote that the "Constitutional values of equality before the law, and the increased levelling of the power structures with more and more women heading households and participating with men as equals in the public sphere and increasingly in the private sphere, demonstrate that there is no rational and justifiable basis for

²⁷ Mensah vs. Mensah, Gold Gavel Award, Women's Link Worldwide <http://www.womenslinkworldwide.org/wlw/sitio/caso-interna.php?idcaso=24&idi=en>

sticking to the narrow norms of days gone by when such norms go against current value systems.²⁸

A transformative economic empowerment agenda is one where women's economic participation is characterised by greater agency, resources and opportunity in the economic activities of their choice. As mentioned earlier in this paper, women's ability to make the best of available economic opportunities is limited by the disproportionate responsibility placed on their shoulders for the household reproductive burden. The resulting "time poverty" must be addressed as a public policy issue by "reducing, rewarding and redistributing" care work.

*"The time women and girls spend on routine tasks could be reduced dramatically if the appropriate infrastructure were put in place, whereby efficient sources of energy (especially new forms of fuel for cooking and heating), transport systems, and water and sanitation systems were more readily accessible to women. Investments in such infrastructure to relieve women's time burdens are therefore essential to maximize the impact of poverty reduction strategies, gender equality strategies, and achievement of the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals)."*²⁹

The foregoing discussion attempts to draw a distinction between "empowerment as participation" and "empowerment as transformation." One reason for emphasising this distinction is the concern expressed by feminists that many development institutions' claims to support "empowerment" is limited improving the wellbeing of women and girls without tackling the

28 Anderson L. "Botswana women win landmark right to inherit under customary law" Thomson Reuters Foundation - Wed, 4 Sep 2013, <http://www.trust.org/item/20130904043025-bt15h/>

29 UNDP (2013) Assessing Progress in Africa Towards the MDGs: Report 2013. AfDB, AU ECA, UNDP

fundamental problem of redistributing power to marginalised women gender, race, class and caste lines. The argument that “women are a good investment” dilutes and depoliticises transformative empowerment agendas, appealing to patriarchy to be more benign towards women, rather than attempting to do away with patriarchy altogether.

“(W)omen’s economic participation may not lead to their empowerment because “policy makers often continue to see the benefits of educating girls and women in terms of improving family health and welfare, rather than preparing women for a more equal place in the economy and in society.”³⁰

2.3 EMPOWERMENT AS SELF DETERMINATION (OR SOVEREIGNTY)

The current notion of empowerment has become less and less convincing in the face of accelerated neo-liberal capitalist hegemony in all spheres of human existence. With the intensification of war and conflict industries; pollution and related accumulation practices; displacement of large populations from homelands and productive land, the list of exigencies causing ‘incapability’ among increasing numbers of people, women and men of various ages and social classes, is intensifying³¹.

It is to address these concerns that this paper proposes an additional category of “economic empowerment as self determination.” The idea is to link transformative economic empowerment to women to a social justice and transformation agenda about equity in the distribution of economic resources. The right to self determination recognises the right of all to “freely

30 Kabeer N. (2005) Gender equality and women’s empowerment: A critical analysis of the third millennium development goal 1, *Gender & Development*, 13:1, 13-24, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13552070512331332273>

31 McFadden P. (2010) Challenging Empowerment. *Development*, 53(2), (161–201) Society for International Development 1011-6370/10 www.sidint.org/development/

determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development”.

These rights are reaffirmed in the UN Declaration on the Right to Development: “The right to development is an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized. [...] The human right to development also implies the full realization of the right of peoples to self-determination, which includes [...] the exercise of their inalienable right to full sovereignty over all their natural wealth and resources.”³²

Self determination and sovereignty are powerful notions that should be included in economic empowerment processes. Empowerment as self-determination for all women means being part of the decision making processes that shape economic systems and policies. The rights to development and self determination also requires policies to be tailored to take account of the diversity that exists among the group called “women.”

Effective intervention to ensure that all economic issues are treated as gendered issues, with potentially different implications for women and men, requires both grassroots organisation and a capacity to intervene in debate among economists.

These questions are particularly significant in the current age when inequality has taken a front seat in economic debates worldwide. While African countries have posted some of the highest economic growth rates globally, the benefits of this

³² United Nations General Assembly, Declaration on the Right to Development, 1986, <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/41/a41r128.htm>

growth have gone to a small group of business and political elite and transnational corporations. “Global capitalism, in its unabashed neo-liberal form, continues to appropriate and consolidate wealth for a few, and poverty for the rest.”³³ Africa’s richest country, South Africa, is one of the most unequal in the world, but is only an extreme case of a trend everywhere else on the continent.

“Despite the emergence of a solid black middle class, a rising superfluous population is becoming a permanent fixture of the South African social landscape with little possibility of ever being exploited by capital. So the point yesterday was that we were exploited by capital, today the point is not even to be able to be exploited. And that seems to be a fundamental shift in the logic of production of the human as waste.”³⁴

According to the AfDB/World Bank, in 2010, three times as many people (60.8%) lived on less than \$2 per day than the number that lived on \$2-\$4 per day (20.6). Between them, those that live on less than \$2 a day and those that live on \$2-\$4 per day constitute 81.4% of the population. The “rich,” classified as those living on more than \$20 per day make up only 4.8% of the population and 18.8% of total income.³⁵

Empowerment as self-determination forces a debate on how the total resources in the economy are shared between different groups, and why such a large percentage of Africa’s populations lives on the margins of the economy where wealth is created and accumulated. Unequal wealth distribution is a result of

33 Adejumobi, S. The pain of inequality in Africa. Opinion. New African Magazine, 7 August 2014 <http://newafricanmagazine.com/pain-inequality-africa/>

34 Mbembe A. (2011) Worldliness, Citiness, Postcolonial Life and Thinking from the South. Oxford Africa Lecture. Online podcast, 26 May 2011. African Studies Centre, University of Oxford.

35 African Development Bank – AfDB (2012) Income Inequality in Africa. Briefing Notes for AfDB’s Long Term Strategy Briefing Note No. 5 March 2014) AFDB

inequitable power relations in a society, which in turn are determined by race, class, gender and caste. It is for this reason that feminists of colour frame the prevailing political economy as “imperialist, white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.”³⁶ Without directly challenging these interlocking systems, the collusion between racism, patriarchy and capitalism will either keep women locked out of the economy in situations of eternal economic dependence, or will integrate them on unequal and exploitative terms. Most certainly, this system will not give up the vast profits it is able to make by excluding women’s unpaid work in economic calculations of who gives and who benefits.

For the majority of African women and households in Africa, wealth = natural resources, owned individually or traditionally under customary systems. Their ownership of this wealth is threatened by the “new scramble for Africa” where huge tracts of land and natural resources are taken away from communities for mining, infrastructure or agricultural projects. This is done in collusion with governments or traditional authorities under the guise of modernising agriculture. On a continent with such high levels of income poverty, where women’s subsistence farming has ensured food security, there is a real threat to communities’ livelihood rights. The accelerated pace of the extraction natural resources continues to destroy other vital ecological resources that are the building blocks for ordinary citizens to create wealth.

Under current trends of dispossession on the one hand and concentration of economic resources on the other means that whatever economic empowerment may be happening is over smaller shares of a shrinking cake. It also suggests a paradigm where “places (or their resources) are useful, but the people are

36 hooks, b. (2004) Understanding Patriarchy Online article www.imagenoborders.org/pdf/zines/UnderstandingPatriarchy.pdf

not.”³⁷ With youth unemployment ranging between 60-80% on the continent, there is a clear crisis of surplus human capital “dramatized by the dilemmas of unemployment and disposability, survival and subsistence, and the expansion in almost every arena of everyday life of spaces of vulnerability”³⁸. Without reasserting the rights to life and dignity, self-determination and development, which call for equality between all people and a democratized way of governing resources, there is little hope for transformative economic empowerment for the majority of African women any time in the near future.

A feminist agenda for empowerment as self determination means demanding a fundamental change in the way African economies are organised—mainly to create profits, regardless of human, social and environmental costs—towards systems which promote equality, diversity, dignity and self determination. For women, this means organising production and consumption of economic resources in ways that straddle both home and market, rural and urban, market and agrarian, individual and collective, production and reproduction, self reliance and interdependence.

37 Murray Li, T. (2009) *To Make Live or Let Die: Rural Dispossession and the Protection of Surplus Populations*. Antipode Journal Vol 41 No 51. Wiley 2009

38 Mbembe A. *op cit*

Main Recommendations

1. ***New visions of both the economy and women’s economic empowerment*** are needed beyond simply improving women’s wellbeing. While women are now present across the spectrum of economic power—from disempowered to more empowered—systemic sexism prevents all women from being fully empowered economic actors. Women’s economic empowerment requires that women insert themselves within economic decision making structures armed with new proposal on how economic resources and benefits are allocated, used and shared.
2. ***Empowerment—including economic empowerment—is a political process*** not a technical one. It goes beyond simply addressing women’s material conditions and abusive economic practices, which is where currently the majority of empowerment efforts lie. As with other changes in women’s rights, this can only happen through collective action and solidarity amongst all women—regardless of their economic status—to resist and change current patterns of economic domination of one group over another and propose alternatives that address women’s economic needs and interests.
3. It is critical to ***challenge mainstream development narratives “women’s economic empowerment as “a good investment,”***

“smart economics” or “good for growth.” Such narratives only serve to put women to the services of capitalism and capitalism’s failures, while disregarding their agency, autonomy and rights. The narrative on economic empowerment must be located back to the realm of rights and social justice whose attainment is an end to itself.

4. The majority of *Africa’s women live within agrarian systems where wealth is accumulated on the basis of natural resources*. Economic empowerment for women is meaningless if it does not address issues of inequitable access to, control over and ownership of land and natural resources. It is even more meaningless if these resources are continuously being destroyed in the name of development.

5. *Economic policy and transformation in Africa must be reformed to address both production and reproduction*—human social and ecological. Without this women will always be integrated into economic life on unfair terms, subsidising the market through unpaid and unrewarded biological, social and ecological reproductive work.

Conclusions

This paper argues that advocates of women's economic empowerment need to go beyond improving the terms in which women participate in the economy to addressing the way economic power relations are structured along gendered, race, class and caste lines. We observe that even with the progress that has been made to date, while of huge significance for women's empowerment, has not been enough to address trends of inequality, poverty, dispossession, employment and marginality amongst a large section of Africa's population. While women's rights is now mainstreamed in development and policy rhetoric, the trend has been to reduce women's rights to "good economics" rather than to change economic systems and the underlying power relations. We suggest that empowerment as participation and transformation could be well served by resurrecting fundamental notions of rights to life, dignity, self-determination and development in their language.

