

# **EU Strategy for Africa: A Feminist Assessment of its Implications on the Empowerment of African Women in the Context of International Agreements**

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## **Introduction and Background**

I would like to thank WIDE-Austria for inviting me to speak at this meeting on my favourite subject, women's rights in Africa. This gives me an opportunity to share my own experience as an African woman and also those of my organisation, ActionAid International (AAI) where I work with African women and their organisations. The new strategy of AAI for the period 2005-2010-*Rights to End Poverty*-prioritises women's rights informed by the experience from our work that women's rights in of themselves must be promoted and protected in order for Africa to eradicate poverty and realise sustainable development.

For decades, we have evidence indicating that the best way for Africa, and any other nation, to thrive is to ensure that its women have the freedom, power and knowledge to make decisions affecting their own lives and those of their families and communities. Myriad of studies have proved that there is no effective development strategy in which women do not play a central role. When women are fully involved, the benefits can be seen immediately: families are healthier; they are better fed; their income, savings and investment go up. And what is true of families is true of communities and, eventually, of whole countries.

We also know that national governments and political leadership, in partnership with the international community, play a critical role in development. The conditions established by governments' economic and social policies are crucial to the long-term sustainability of development measures. Governments determine the economic policy framework, redistribute resources, provide critical social investments for the poor, and frame the legislation that establishes property rights and the legal basis for eliminating violations of women's rights.

Both African and EU governments are party to international conventions and declarations defining frameworks for promoting and protecting women's rights including United Nations' (UN) international conferences on the advancement and rights of women from the first world conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975, through the second in Copenhagen (1980) and third in Nairobi (1985), to the fourth in Beijing in 1995 and their respective reviews. As well as the 1990s conferences on population and development, human rights, social development and human settlements: financing for development, trade, poverty reduction strategies and the millennium development goals.

However, member states of the EU and Africa are yet to overcome the biggest obstacles to the realisations of women's rights in Africa. Implementation of these policies has been hampered by lack of political will, resources and violation of women's rights in Africa.

In 2005, the EU adopted the *EU Strategy for Africa: Towards a Euro-African Pact to Accelerate Africa's Development*, hereinafter referred to as the Strategy, geared to the whole of Africa to replace the various strategies and policies of the EU and member States within a single framework for the coming decade to ensure implementation of the MDGs in Africa, effective, more and better development aid, to increase the speed of implementation.

The EU is the biggest aid donor in the world, accounting for 55% of development assistance, 20% of which is managed by the European Commission (EC) and it has developed twenty-six policies/positions, so far, on wide range of policy issues. It is also Africa's biggest trade partner.

However, there is need to interrogate the impact of EU's policies and practice in its engagement with Africa on the rights of women in Africa. Has the EU supported or harmed women in Africa? In trying to answer that question, in this paper, I will focus on the situation of women in Africa and relate it to the Strategy. I will conclude by identifying ways in which the EU could incorporate women's rights in its engagement with Africa towards realising Africa's development.

## **EU Policies: Influence on Women's Lives in Africa**

### **What is the Situation of Women in Africa?**

Notwithstanding the firm commitment to the indivisibility and interrelatedness of all human rights they are ignored by state parties and international financial and multilateral institutions namely; the EU, the World Bank, International Monetary Fund (IMF), and World Trade Organisation (WTO). Consequently, African women face violations of economic and social rights in various ways through poverty and social marginalization as discussed below.

Selective application of African culture, tradition and religion as witnessed daily in the resilient survival of oppressive and harmful traditional practices. Beliefs and practices deny property, sexual, reproductive and inheritance rights to women, subject them to genital mutilation and other forms of physical and psychological violence, make them disproportionately vulnerable to HIV/AIDS infection and often compels them to transact their bodies—through sex - for livelihoods in villages, in conflicts, in refugee camps. In spite of these multiple challenges, the Strategy has narrowed Africa women's issues to illiteracy, sexual and reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, participation in conflict and maternal and child mortality in only 7 lines under gender equality<sup>1</sup>.

Food security. In Africa, one of the most serious obstacles to increasing the agricultural productivity and income of rural women is their lack of access to, ownership and control over land. Agriculture is the major source of exports in Africa, and many governments, with EU's support, promote export of cash crops—often with serious consequences for domestic food security.

Debt is a significant obstacle to the eradication of poverty and the creation of any meaningful development.

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<sup>1</sup> *EU Strategy for Africa: Towards a Euro-African Pact to Accelerate Africa's Development. Page 25-Promote gender Equality*

Due to heavy debt burdens, African governments are obliged to prioritise debt repayments over spending on health, education, sanitation, clean water and other social needs. In some cases ODA is used to service debts instead of playing a key role in ensuring that the benefits of economic growth benefits people living in poverty, particularly women. The Strategy has completely ignores issues of debt and prioritised trade over aid.

Trade/Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) has replaced Official Development Assistance (ODA) as the largest provider of financing for most African countries due to decreases in ODA. Caught as they are at the divide between the productive spheres of life, African women have borne the full impact of debt and dropping aid levels. In their multitudes roles of worker, caregiver, home manager, wife and mother, women's time and energies are stretched to breaking point as they strive to enable the family to survive economic crises.

Women's rights are not integrated in all aid planning, design, implementation and evaluation. Bilateral aid from the EU and its member states is characterised by asymmetrical power relations between them and recipient African countries. In many cases, the EU and its members states control the flows and use them to enforce policies-privatisation and liberalisation-on governments that diverge from their strategic social and economic interests critical to women's and the continent's development.

Trade. As transnational corporations secures cheap and flexible labour through immigration and offshore production, sexism, racism and class prejudices become personified through the African women who are entering the labour market as suppliers of cheap and unorganised labour. Anti-immigration policies are now common in many EU countries leading to trafficking in women from Africa. These factors are becoming more pronounced at a time when African women are being incorporated on a massive scale into the multinational labour force. Yet the Strategy is calling for promotion of private investments under the guise of integrating Africa into the world economy at a time when it is over integrated<sup>2</sup>.

In Ghana, the government has supported an export drive based on cocoa that is a crop totally controlled by men. However, women are generally expected to provide unpaid family labour that leaves them with less time to devote to production of food for family consumption and for sale. Women's own crops are not seen as important and are not supported or protected from imports. Thus, in Ghana, and in several other countries in West Africa, imported cheap rice is bringing the price down for produce of domestic (women) farmers with all that this implies for incomes and domestic food security.

FDI has had negative consequences on women's health and rights. For instance, in export processing zones (EPZs) owned by multinational corporations from the EU, operating outside the mandate of national labour laws. While globalisation offers women opportunities for employment and income in EPZs, the unregulated and competitive nature of their operations mean that women's labour is often unprotected

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<sup>2</sup> *EU Strategy for Africa: Towards a Euro-African Pact to Accelerate Africa's Development. Page 25-Promote gender Equality. Page 4-Creating an economic environment for achieving MDGs*

and dispensable. Few African governments have, or are willing to enforce legislation that ensures women workers in such employment fair living wages, benefits, occupational safety and opportunities for upgrading skills to promote investments and to implement EU's and Africa's economic partnership agreements (EPAs) and WTO.

Violence against women has been a major obstacle to girls' access to education rising out of displacement of communities. Violence against girls in school carries the risk of HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. It has been noted that where girls drop out of school because of violence they are deprived of "the best chance they have of empowerment—sexual, economic, intellectual and otherwise—and, sadly, what may be the best chance they have to protect themselves from HIV/AIDS"<sup>3</sup>.

In Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania, women who used to earn an income from smoking and selling fish have lost their source of livelihoods following the establishment of fish processing factories which have been set up to export fish from Lake Victoria to Europe as a result of investment liberalization policies. In such situations, own-account workers move into less remunerative sectors of the informal such as petty trading or resort to piecework in garment factories or factory farms where working conditions and earnings are much less attractive.

Many African countries have been embroiled in civil strife and armed conflict. Conflict has made women vulnerable to poverty, violence and HIV/AIDS. Particular forms of harm suffered by women in conflict situations and their role in maintaining social order during conflict and in post-conflict reconstruction have not been adequately addressed in legal, reconciliation and political processes leading to further disempowerment of women. In conflict situations, gender-based abuses are not an accident of war, they constitute a deliberate strategy designed to intimidate or undermine

and inflict deep and lasting damage on entire communities.

This is despite the existence of clear standards for responding to sexual and gender-based violence, including in the context of conflict, Human Rights Watch's research to date suggests that humanitarian agencies are not implementing these guidelines on a systematic basis in Darfur in Sudan and Chad.

The Strategy's analysis of conflict and trafficking interventions is blind to the women's violations in conflict situations and violence as it is limited to strengthening the African Union's Peace Facility. No mention is made of the role of some of its member states and private companies in the conflicts through arms trade, resource exploitation and policies that create poverty and discriminatory immigration policies. It is vital that EU and humanitarian agencies give much greater emphasis—and more resources—to preventing sexual and gender-based violence and to responding to its medical, psychological, social and economic consequences.

Closely linked to violence and conflict is HIV/AIDS. 77 per cent of all HIV positive women live in sub-saharan Africa. Violation of human rights of women; inheritance rights, sexual rights in marriage, access and control over land for food production, sexual and other forms of violence, contribute to women's vulnerability to the epidemic. HIV AIDS is increasingly being used as a weapon of war with women being raped with the intention of deliberately infecting them.

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<sup>3</sup> Human Rights Watch, 2003

Due to HIV/AIDS, farming skills are being lost, agricultural development efforts are declining, rural livelihoods are disintegrating, productive capacity to work the land is dropping and household earnings are shrinking. At the same time, HIV infection and AIDS are spreading dramatically and disproportionately among women. Therefore, the low prominence of HIV/AIDS in the Strategy and lack of strategies to address it as a major development challenge for Africa is glaring.

Interventions being implemented with support from EU member states are not

In Tanzania, a study found that HIV positive women were over two and a half times more likely to have experienced violence by their partners than HIV negative women.<sup>1</sup> Rape has been widespread in recent conflicts in such diverse places as Liberia, Somalia, Rwanda and Sierra Leone, and continues today in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and the Sudan, amongst other places. This atrocity is perpetrated by civilians, border guards, soldiers, peace keepers and other security forces.

confronting patriarchy and power issues, which are the root of the problem by addressing women rights issues relating to HIV/AIDS. The ABC (Abstain, Be Faithful and Condomise) approach disregards the reality of a large majority of African women who have little or no control over how, when and with whom they will have sex<sup>4</sup>, are sexually assaulted and abused, have little choice but to accept their partners' adultery and are felt powerless to insist on protected sex.

Due to inadequate representation and participation of African women in decision-making at local and national levels, the situation at sub-regional, regional and international level is very low. As a result, women's concerns are largely voiced by civil society organisations. However, the voice of African communities through civil society organisations in EU policy debates surrounding these issues is extremely muted. Although the EU makes decisions that impact heavily on African women, no mechanisms exist for their participation. The EU needs to walk its talk on good governance.

The Strategy does not mention this crucial aspect of empowering poor women to participate in emerging opportunities to realise sustained development. For example, its Strategy was developed in consultation with regional economic communities and the African Union. Thus, representation is mainly by male leaders without input by African women who constitute more than half of the continent's population.

As a result, African women's concerns are not reflected in the Strategy. Thus, they will continue to bear the consequences of policies enforced by the EU without regard for women's rights. Women participation in decision-making can contribute to redefining policies, placing new items on the agenda which address women's gender specific concerns, values, experiences, and provide new perspectives on mainstream issues such as poverty eradication. Without parliaments', civil society-especially women's active participation-at all levels of decision-making in the EU and Africa; the goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved.

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<sup>4</sup> See for example, the Human Rights Watch, 2003, *Just Die Quietly: Domestic Violence and Women's Vulnerability to HIV in Uganda*

## **Walking the Talk on Women Rights in Africa in EU's Engagement with Africa to Ensure that African Women to Live a "Good Life"**

Supporting African women's initiatives. Despite the challenges above African women from the most remote village or in the harshest informal urban settlements to the national, sub-regional and regional in many ways are working together and discuss issues important to them, their communities and their survival. They are working and raising their voices against poverty, inequality and insecurity.

They are engaging their governments and institutions such as regional economic communities (RECs), the African Union, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) and its Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), the African Social Forum (ASF) and the World Social Forum (WSF). African women's advocacy efforts have been centred on the UN particularly around the Beijing and CEDAW monitoring and reporting processes.

They are leading in gender-budget initiatives, campaigns against violence against women, vying for leadership positions (setting new standards at national level–Rwanda–and at the regional level–African Union and currently has a female head of state in Liberia), they are tackling the challenges and shouldering the burden of

The EU Strategy suggests the MDGs, NEPAD and PRSPs as the frameworks for its engagement with Africa. African women have pointed out that the frameworks adopt a narrow approach to women's human rights marginalising the advances made in women's human rights in international agreements on human rights and development. Yet, the EU adopts these Frameworks without supporting integration of women's rights in them. This is a betrayal of African women's cause. There is need to align the Strategy to international human rights and development agreements under the UN.

HIV/AIDS, struggling to ensuring household food security, and they are joining movements to demanding for reforms of governance structures around aid, trade, debt, financing and investment. However, their efforts and gains are being eroded by the neo-liberal policies of the multilateral institutions and developed nations, such as the EU, that are imposed on their governments.

Gendered causes of poverty, such as women's triple work burden (productive, community, and reproductive in national production), lack of access and control over land and other resources, HIV/AIDS, poor health and violence against women and low educational levels and gender-specific barriers to resources need to be addressed by changing African countries and EU's laws, policies and institutions that maintain these inequalities at all levels.

Despite the fact that the EU and African governments have participated in and input global commitments and agreements and reviews on women's rights and analysis on the status of African women abounds in many academic institutions, the UN and civil society, the Strategy entirely overlooks the obligations of all member states on women's rights. It goes against its stated principles of coherence of policies and equity. Its does not acknowledge the prevalence, or even the existence, of the many obstacles in structural and institutionalised violation of women's human rights and gender discrimination.

The EU Strategy will not be successful without recognising and addressing women's rights issues which are intrinsic within all the problems which need to be addressed in African development. In order to reduce poverty, the achievement of women's rights and gender equality should be a central goal of all EU policies and development programmes.

EU's and multilateral policies and rules on debt, trade, aid, financing, investment and governance should be based on the rights based approach to respond to the needs of citizens first before those of individuals or private companies. The EU should comply and ensure the compliance of its member states, African governments and international financial institutions to existing human rights norms under the United Nations and the African Union.

African governments and their citizens should be allowed to exercise their rights to determine their priorities and design their development plans. Instead of the EU proposing strategies for Africa, it should get behind Africa's own home-grown strategies under the African Union, Regional Economic Communities and national development plans developed in consultation with citizens, particularly women, to ensure democracy, good governance and human rights including strategic and selective trade policies that will help attain the social development goals. The current move by the EU, World Bank and IMF discouraging government to invest in social services through privatisation should stop.

The epidemic of HIV/AIDS and violence against women poses an exceptional threat to Africa's development, social cohesion, political stability, food security, life expectancy and imposes a devastating economic burden especially on poor women. The EU should support policies and interventions on HIV/AIDS informed by gender analysis to challenge power and entitlement over women, contest control over women's sexual and reproductive rights and addressing vulnerable, infected and affected women.

Its Strategy should integrate international commitments that address gender based discrimination and violence and women's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases. The EU should adopt an international guarantee to access to essential medicine that is not restricted by the WTO intellectual property rights agreement, especially for HIV/AIDS and support governments to eliminate violence against women.

The EU should change existing policies that damage and disadvantage Africa on trade (agricultural subsidies, dumping, tariff escalation, restrictive sanitary and rules of origin and intellectual property rights), aid, debt, financing and investment imposed on African countries through bilateral negotiations, EPAs and multilateral institutions such as the WTO, World Bank and IMF.

EU trade agreements on agriculture should take into consideration the particular situation of women farmers in Africa, who do not participate in commercial ventures but engage in farming for food self-sufficiency, as a family activity passed down from generation to generation.

Trade rules governing intellectual property should be in conformity with *UN Convention on Biological Diversity* and the *Food and Agriculture Organisation's (FAO) Undertaking on Plant Genetic Resources*. There is need to establish gender-sensitive policies to regulate the employment practices of global corporations and provide appropriate mechanisms and institutions to monitor corporate practices and their adherence to human rights.

And review, where necessary, immigration policies which are inconsistent with international human rights instruments, with a view to eliminating all discriminatory policies and practices against migrant workers, particularly African women.

Relevant case study material on gender and trade in trade policy capacity building programs and participation of women's organizations as participants in trade policy capacity building programs is critical.

Bilateral agreements with sub-regions in Africa should not be based on reciprocity but on development and human rights benchmarks and objectives of individual countries. They should not be used to divide Africa by undermining the African Union's future role in trade negotiations. The Strategy adopts a divide and rule stance in its approach to partnership with Africa contradicting its principle of engaging Africa as one entity. The EU in the Strategy states that it seeks to ensure coherence in policies on Africa. However, it has no link to the G8 Action Plan for Africa or the Commission for Africa Report; both were developed by member states of the EU and are yet to be implemented. This poses a challenge not only in implementation by African governments but also in monitoring for African women undermining accountability.

This is demonstrated by the multiplicity of agreements that the EU has entered to with different regions of the continent under Cotonou Agreement on EPAs, with South Africa (Trade, Development and Cooperation Agreement) and with North Africa

In Kenya, gender insensitive health care system exacerbated by inaccessible and high costs of health services has led to loss of life, which otherwise would have been saved especially in the rural areas. Even for those who can afford health insurance, they are still not covered in respect of the second largest cost for females-gynaecological illnesses.<sup>1</sup>

under the Europe Neighbourhood Policy and European Mediterranean Partnership. It has also bestowed the continents leadership on and emphasis on partnerships with countries like South Africa and Nigeria as leading countries in the Africa which against the letter and spirit of the African Union.

In the Cotonou Agreement and the negotiation of EPAs, the EU has maintained global rules of free trade embodied in the WTO. If the focus of the EU's relationship with Africa was truly developmental it could seek to alter the very rules of the multilateral trading system that harm Africa's women that it claims limit its options.

Economic reform measures imposed on African countries by the IMF, World Bank and WTO. They include fiscal austerity, trade liberalisation, privatisation, reduced government support for social services, and retrenchment of workers. In the process the development state in Africa has been dismantled, leaving a weak government apparatus.

Real sustainable development through poverty reduction and women's rights require a strong developmental state capable of managing resources at all levels.

The EU should ensure that member states' and EU foreign policies and development programmes complement and reinforce each other to achieve coherence at bilateral and multilateral level negotiations on trade, financing and investment towards greater voice for women and governments from Africa.

In its Strategy, the EU should halt trade in arms with African governments fuelling violent conflicts beyond strengthening the capacity of the African Union's Peace and Security Council. The EU should ensure that funding for its peace keeping is in line with UN human rights agreements to ensure special attention is directed to the long-term health needs of women affected by armed conflict. These include the psychological needs arising from trauma from violence and the effects of violations of their reproductive rights and HIV/AIDS infection and support initiatives to hold both state and non-state actors accountable for violations of international human rights and humanitarian law, including violations specific to women, and ensure their full participation, according to the *UN Resolution 1325 (2000) on Women and Conflict*.

The EU should reign in on private companies from its member states engaging in corrupt practices in Africa, to address the root causes of conflict. Security policies should not compromise human rights and democracy and should embrace the concept of human security in order to ensure the eradication of poverty, equitable distribution and utilisation of natural resources and elimination of violence against women during conflict and in peace time.

The EU should lead the way in repatriating money stolen from Africa and deposited

The central cause of the war in the DRC is the fundamental power struggle for the remaining wealth in the country. The DRC has been caught in a war since 1998. Member states of the EU such as Belgium, Germany, Netherlands and Switzerland, have played a role in the war economy in the DRC and the Great Lakes region. A panel of United Nations Experts concluded that "extracting the maximum commercial and material benefits" has become "the primary motive" of the countries and armies involved in this war. The Panel went on to state that "the role of the private sector in the exploitation of natural resources and the continuation of the war has been vital". The DRC accounts for 80% of the world's reserves of coltan. It is therefore no accident that companies like Alcatel, Compaq, Dell, Ericsson, HP, IBM, Nokia, Siemens and Motorola benefit.....through international traders such as Cogecom, Sogem, Masigiro and others based in European capitals these multinational corporations have set up lucrative deals.

in its banks or laundered through its financial institutions. The EU should implement the *Kyoto Protocol* as its accounts for high levels of greenhouse gas emissions leading to climate change which has a disproportionate impact on African harming women who depend on climate for their livelihood.

Aid/ Overseas Development Assistance (ODA) still serves as one of the most important financial instruments for fighting poverty, reducing gender inequality and

promoting sustainable development. Debt relief and improved trade conditions including foreign direct investment should be treated as substitutes for development assistance directed towards the meeting of these fundamental social goals.

The EU's fulfilment of its commitment to increase aid flows to at least 0.7 per cent of GNP towards meeting the objectives of poverty reduction, gender equality and sustainable development is long overdue. The new targets set out in the Strategy need to reflect this urgency given that this commitment dates back to the 1970s. Commitments that offer commitments that are less and new time frames in the Strategy are unacceptable.

As UNCTAD estimates, for every USD1.00 of net capital inflow to Sub-Saharan Africa from the rest of the world, USD1.06 has flowed out-30 cents through leakage into reserve build-up and capital outflows; 51 cents through terms of trade losses; 25 cents through debt servicing and profit remittances.

Aid should be allocated to basic services to address women specific access to services such as health, education, water and shelter. The EU should further ensure that what it gives in one hand is not taken away by conditionality to liberalise African economies and privatise public basic services as it only serves to increase women's burden.

The high rate of debt servicing in Africa channels savings out of the continent during a time of devastating public crisis due to poverty, HIV/AIDS and violence against women that should have led to a significant infusion of resources from the EU. The hardships and distress brought about by the heavy debt servicing and loan conditionalities are unequally distributed, displaying bias against the most vulnerable sectors of the population-namely poor women. Debt reduction and debt write-offs for Africa are a minimum necessary step for promoting sustainable human development. Resources whether borrowed or released from debt relief initiatives should be used to address the critical social and human needs of the vulnerable segments of the population namely the poor and women.

There is need for genuine, transformative measures that allow for more active participation by African countries' citizens-women and men-in governance structures and institutions at all levels. Civil society, including women's organisations, should be involved in more depth both in establishing ownership in international governing bodies' decisions as well as the economic and social reforms that have global repercussions-whether they involve trade agreements, environmental protection agreements, development assistance, debt negotiations and debt relief, or capital markets and foreign investments.

The EU should put an end to privileged access to its meetings by private sector lobbyists from the EU denying civil society a space to input into its policy making processes on a permanent and formal manner. The EU needs to establish mechanisms for engagement with civil society, including women's organisations, from the Africa and its member states to entrench a system of mutual accountability and raise the political costs failing to implement promises to Africa and to African peoples' by their governments.

## **Conclusion**

Can the EU afford to ignore the needs of African women who constitute more than 50 percent of the population in Africa if it seeks to foster people's participation?

Harnessing African women's potential and eliminating inequalities on the basis of gender are prerequisites for achieving peace, security and sustainable development for all. For Africa this can be achieved if its governments, citizens and partners such as the EU embrace a human rights approach to development. If we want to save Africa from catastrophes-poverty, conflict, violence against women and HIV/AIDS, we would do well to focus on saving Africa's women first.

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