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## Indicators for Women's Economic Empowerment in Sub-Saharan Africa: The Role of Social Norms

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### ***Abstract***

*Women Economic Empowerment (WEE) speaks directly to at least four of the 2030 SDGs: gender equality; no poverty; decent work and economic growth; and reduced inequalities (United Nations Statistics Division). Few studies have exclusively studied the role of social norms in connection with WEE, despite the tacit acknowledgement among scholars of its potency in delivering or hindering WEE. This Paper highlights the pivotal role those social norms play in the fight for the economic empowerment of women and proposes that transformation of social and gender norms is foundational to achieving WEE. It specifically addresses the way social norms represent subtle power dynamics within the communities, which may either facilitate or undermine efforts to attaining WEE. The Paper provides an elaboration of this theme, using three broad indicators: access to gainful employment opportunities; property ownership rights; and economic leadership and strength of collaborative action. Literature reviewed found that Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) is lagging significantly in these three areas, with the most potent hindrance being traditional social norms. Leaning on statistics provided by relevant bodies, particularly the United Nations Women, the International Labour Organization (ILO), and the World Bank, with a contextualization to SSA, it argues that program and policy interventions must be designed with the lens of gender and social norms squarely in place in order to ensure that effective, sustainable strategic actions are taken. The role of different players, including the community, government, and international institutions in advancing WEE in these three areas is also brought into view.*

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**Key words:** power, social norms, sub-Saharan Africa, women economic empowerment

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## 1.0 Introduction

Women Economic Empowerment (WEE) is a global movement that is aimed at bringing women on a par with men in matters concerning economic liberties and capabilities. The fourth world conference on women held in Beijing in 1995 was pivotal for this agenda on gender and equity. Though it was the third world conference on women, it was significant in that it became the basis upon which progress in this endeavour was measured. The meeting adopted the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action which set out 12 key strategies to further the purposes of women advancement including: women and poverty; education and training of women; women in power and decision-making; and women and the economy. Two decades later, the United Nations adopted the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals which set out 17 goals. Linking these goals to the women empowerment agenda, the United Nations Women notes that:

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*Achieving gender equality and women's empowerment is integral to each of the 17 goals. Only by ensuring the rights of women and girls across all the goals will we get to justice and inclusion, economies that work for all, and sustaining our shared environment now and for future generations. (United Nations Women, 2022-b, par. 4)*

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According to Perezniето and Taylor (2014), WEE offers economic advancement as well as a transformation in power and agency for women. Batliwala (1994, as cited in VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002) asserts that empowerment addresses the *contextual* systemic forces of marginalisation against women. Therefore, WEE aims to transform unfair power dynamics and provide women with resources and opportunities to succeed economically. The benefits of empowering women are well documented, and they range from reducing poverty, building healthy and safe economies, to reducing poverty and improving gross domestic product of countries (Pluess, 2016).

Most of the literature reviewed defines WEE as a process, implying that it is ongoing, progressive, and multistage. It is imperative that progress in this process is monitored, and the marking of indicators is a useful way of tracking the said progress. WEE is multi-dimensional and so are its indicators; they

provide a measure of outputs, outcomes, and short-term, and long-term impacts at individual, community, country, regional, and global levels (Golla, Malhotra, Nanda, & Mehra, 2011). They can be viewed along objective lines (economic achievement) and subjective lines (economic empowerment) (Buvinic, O'Donell, Knowles, & Bourgalt, 2020). The objective indicators visualise WEE as a product of economic achievement which can be measured empirically in terms of resources controlled by women. Subjective indicators, on the other hand, relate to the degree of economic empowerment and agency exercised by women in the different contexts within which they operate, starting from the household to the community, nationally, and even internationally.

Relatedly, Golla et al, (2011) categorize these indicators into three: reach and process (United Nations Women, 2022) indicators which assesses aspects such as participation of women in different activities and their challenges, success and outcomes; power and agency indicators which look at aspects like control over assets, gender norms, autonomy, and self-efficacy; and economic advancement indicators which consider, among others, productivity and skills, income, work environments, and prosperity. This Paper highlights the role played by social norms in the fight for WEE. It specifically addresses the way social norms represent subtle power dynamics within the communities which may either facilitate or undermine efforts to achieve WEE. It discusses three broad indicators: access to gainful employment opportunities and property ownership rights on an objective level, and economic leadership and strength of collaborative action on a subjective level.

A discussion of WEE indicators in the form of statistics provided by relevant bodies, particularly the UN Women, the ILO, and the World Bank is offered, with a contextualization to SSA. The power dynamics at play within the community, government, and international institutions that hinder or advance WEE in these three areas is brought into view. The Paper examines the role of social norms as revealed by these indicators and finds that inasmuch as there is little empirical evidence connecting social norms to WEE, the impact of social norms in the quest for WEE is indisputable.

## **2.0 Theoretical Grounding**

The push for WEE arose from the extant gender inequalities that plague the majority of the nations of the world. Gender inequality is fuelled by imbalanced power relations within the communities, which make up the political, social, and economic systems. In turn, social divisions such as age, caste, race, ethnicity, and

gender sustain and perpetuate these power imbalances, thereby creating a vicious cycle (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002). Power can be understood as the degree of control over material, human, intellectual, and financial resources exercised by different sections of society (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002). An understanding of power dynamics within communities, therefore, provides a firm foundation for conceptualising the WEE indicators.

Scholars generally agree on four basic forms of power: power over, power to, power with, and power within (Pansardi & Bindi, 2021; Perezniето & Taylor, 2014; VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002), though Galiè and Farnworth (2019) as cited in Pansardi & Bindi (2021) present another form of power, power through. The forms of power were first popularized by Mary Parker Follet (1868-1933), while studying power processes within organizations (Mele & Rosanas, 2003). Follet claimed that the most dominant form of power in organisations, as in general society, was *power over*, a concept closely associated with control, and which commonly engendered resistance and negativity. She advocated for the exercise of *power with*, which she considered a higher form of power since it was coactive rather than coercive, stating:

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*Genuine power can only be grown, it will slip from every arbitrary hand that grasps it; for genuine power is not coercive control, but coactive control. Coercive power is the curse of the universe; coactive power, the enrichment and advancement of every human soul. (Mele & Rosanas, 2003, p. 39)*

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We now turn to a basic definition of the forms of power as explicated in literature. According to Perezniето and Taylor (2014), women exercise *power over* when they can access and control financial, physical, and knowledge-based assets, in addition to employment and income generating activities. This begs the question: by what means is such access and control engendered to begin with? While policies and political activism may provide access to resources, control over them and sustainability of action will hang on what is allowed or disallowed by extant power dynamics in the community. *Power over* has been associated with repression, force, coercion, discrimination, corruption and abuse (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002). When the prevalent form of power in the community is *power over*, VeneKlasen and Miller assert that inequality, injustice, and poverty are likely to be perpetuated. In fact, Pansardi and Bindi (2021) go so far as to claim that *power over* represents the actual patriarchal and illegitimate

distribution of power in the society. Such power, evident in male-dominated society, stifles efforts towards WEE.

*Power with*, *power to*, and *power within* have been fronted as alternatives to *power over* in the quest for a more equitable society. *Power to* has been defined as “*the unique potential of every person to shape his or her life and world*” (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002, p. 39). With reference to WEE, *power to* manifests as the economic decision-making power of a woman within her household, community, and local economy in areas traditionally considered as women’s realm as well as in those traditionally considered as men’s realm (Pereznieto & Taylor, 2014). Therefore, *power to* relates to both the desire to act and the ability to do so. Such desire and capacity can only be facilitated within an enabling community, hence the need for social and cultural norms that support WEE.

Collectivism and collaboration have been identified as powerful forces for change and development. Hence, *power with* has been propounded as a potent driver of WEE. VeneKlasen and Miller (2002) conceptualised *power with* as the collective strength drawn from a unification of interests, talents, and knowledge of different people. Follet referred to *power with* as “coactive” power in which compromise and integration, rather than domination, were the primary tools of solving conflicts within a community (Mele & Rosanas, 2003). While this may seem rather utopian, it is worth considering that domination struggles within society along gender lines can be greatly reduced by promoting *power within* in this sense. The principle of *power with* promotes collaboration and equity and promises to reduce oppression.

The fourth form of power, *power within*, is somewhat subjective and personal but is the well-spring from which *power with*, *power over*, and *power to* emerge. Pansardi and Bindi (2021) conceptualise *power from within* as an individual’s awareness of her own capacities which motivate the action. Similarly, VeneKlasen and Miller (2002) postulate that *power within* relates to a person’s sense of self-worth and self-knowledge. It may, therefore, be argued that, unless an individual has a robust sense of self-worth and esteem, their ability to take advantage of the many opportunities afforded by policies and programs promoting WEE is severely curtailed. This is commonly seen in households with strong religious and cultural beliefs that place women lower and subordinate to men. The hardest part is often to inculcate a *power within* in the women before any other kind of power may be groomed. It is important to inculcate a *power within* in the women and allow it to provide a foundation for the other forms of power.

The power dynamic that is prevalent within any given community is strengthened by the ideologies held and perpetuated therein. According to VeneKlasen and Miller (2002), ideology is a complex structure of beliefs, values, attitudes, and ways of perceiving and analysing social reality which are disseminated and enforced through the family, education system, religion, and the media, among other social, economic, political and religious institutions. For instance, when the male or father figure within the home is considered the head and the sole provider, women and girls are conditioned as domesticate rather than being able to venture out to engage in economic activities. Such ideologies present a significant threat to WEE and must be addressed accordingly. However, as VeneKlasen and Miller (2002) note, progressively, there is growing resistance and challenge to such ideologies by the marginalised sections of the society, especially by women, which has seen a gradual change in the prevailing structures of power.

There is much work to be done in tackling negative manifestations of power, such as *power over*, and promoting more productive forms such as *power with*, *power to*, and *power within* in the quest for a more equitable society. When leaders at all levels fail to acknowledge and tackle the complexities of power inherent within the community, it may result in poor strategic choices in terms of policy and resource allocation, and missed opportunities to consolidate WEE (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002). Since negative power dynamics are deeply nested in social norms and cultural beliefs, it is imperative that proponents of WEE tackle them, as well as the ideologies that perpetuate them. As such, therefore, the degree of positive transformation of social norms could well be the foundational indicator of progress towards WEE.

### **3.0 Conceptual Framework**

The framework in Figure 1 shows the relationship between the indicators of WEE and their facilitating factors, which in and of themselves may act as indicators of reach and process, and power and agency. It postulates that, through transformation of negative social norms and traditional restrictive mindsets, social and legal protections can be strengthened to achieve the intended impact. Thereby, girls and women will have greater access to quality education and financial resourcing, thereby bringing sub-Saharan women and girls closer to the goal of economic empowerment as measured by the three indicators.

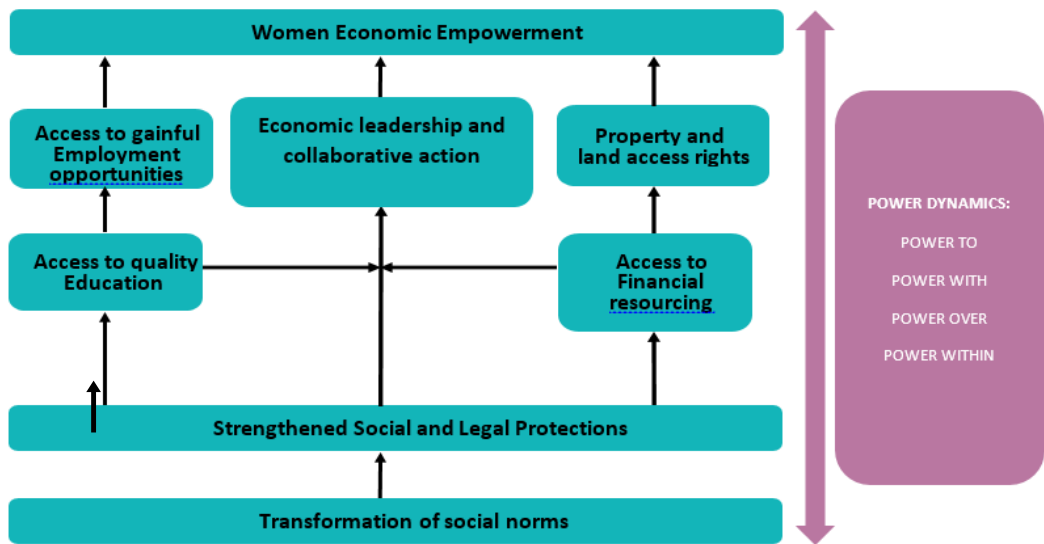


Figure 1: A conceptual framework illustrating the interconnectedness of the indicators of WEE

It also shows that economic leadership is more effective with quality education, and that collaborative action is buffered by access to financial resources. Gendered power dynamics weave all through the scheme, thereby facilitating, or hindering WEE. Ultimately, therefore, WEE will be achieved based on how communities and societies address social norms and the gendered power dynamics that sustain them.

### 3.1 The Pivotal Role of Social Norms in Securing WEE

The thread of social norms weaves through actions and efforts by community agencies, governments, and non-governmental organisations, enabling or disabling WEE. Moreover, policies and programs do not suffice in bringing about WEE. The role of social norms must be acknowledged for its pivotal capacity. WEE may be facilitated by several factors, including growth or decline of economies, increased access to education, greater access to information and communications technology (Marcus & Harper, 2014 as cited in Marcus, 2021, p. 148) and supportive policies and programs. Regardless, the effect of all these is often undermined by extant social norms that hold societies captive.

Social norms may be understood as “*collective definitions of socially approved conduct, stating rules or ideals*” (Pearse & Connell, 2016 as cited in Marcus, 2021, p. 147). They are perpetuated by empirical expectations, that is, beliefs concerning the actions of others, and normative expectations: the beliefs

about what actions are deemed by others as appropriate; and enforced by social sanctions, including ostracization, and in some cases, violence (Marcus, 2021; Singh et al., 2018). Social norms are not just limited to communities but are also widely held in institutions such as companies and economic sectors. Institutionalised social norms determine how men and women are treated. Evidence from literature suggests that institutionalised social norms have contributed to gendered workplace and market inequalities, leading to categorisations such as 'jobs for women' and 'jobs for men' (Singh et al., 2018).

The role of social norms in WEE has not been widely explored in literature, despite the tacit acknowledgement among scholars of its potency in delivering or hindering WEE (Singh et al., 2018). Much of scholarly work has focused on the role of policies, and programs, as well as economic development on promoting WEE. For instance, Duflo (2012), argues that in addition to economic development, there is a need to continuously take policy actions that favour women at the expense of men. A good example of such a policy is the affirmative action in Uganda which is targeted at increasing girl child enrolment at higher levels of education by giving them an advantage. This policy has, indeed, delivered its target (Ntale, 2019), however, there is little evidence to show that there is a concurrent equitable representation of women in the higher echelons of economic spaces; women remain highly represented in underpaid or informal work. This, therefore, begs the question: how effective/sustainable is policy in the absence of political will, especially when actors have not bought into the rationale or are inhibited by cultural norms and beliefs?

Economic empowerment for women must be supported and sustained by strategies to tackle inhibiting social norms. Economic development must go hand in hand with social development if WEE is to be realised on a sustainable level (Ntale, 2019). Social development encompasses the non-economic processes and outcomes of development including, reduced vulnerability, inclusion, wellbeing, accountability, people-centred approaches, and freedom from violence (Browne & Millington, 2015). Additionally, they assert that social drivers of development, including gender equality, power relations, and human rights must be addressed lest gains made in human development be undermined. Browne and Millington (p. 3) outline four key reasons why barriers to achieving social development arise, including:

- 1) the difficulty in increasing gender equity and shifting power relations in society,



- 2) ii) the rigidity of cultural norms which are thus difficult to change, coupled with the reluctance of donors to engage an overtly political approach to address them,
- 3) lack of expertise in specific areas such as gender, and
- 4) the apparent subjection of would-be change agents to the very socio-cultural norms and prejudices. Such barriers are significant because they perpetuate circumstances that undermine WEE efforts.

The pivotal role of social norms in determining the success of WEE efforts was well demonstrated by Ambler et al. (2020). Ambler and colleagues conducted a study of the uptake of an intervention designed to increase WEE among sugarcane farmers in Uganda. In the study, households in rural Uganda were offered an empowerment initiative which aimed to increase the participation of women in the marketing and sale aspects of sugarcane farming. To begin with, a workshop was organised along the themes of gender equity, household balance in responsibilities, and access to resources. Couples were randomly assigned to attend the workshop and thereafter encouraged to register a sugarcane block in the name of the wife. This meant, in essence, that an asset was being transferred from the husband to the wife.

The study found that 30% of households that were invited to take up the intervention refused the offer. Only 3% of those were attributed to a lack of interest on the part of the wife (Ambler et al., 2020, p. 10). This was a clear demonstration of the power over dynamic in which the husband maintained controlling interests over financial and intellectual resources in the household, exercising domination despite the potential benefits of the intervention. However, it was found that the rates of refusal were reduced by 7% as a result of attendance to the workshop (p. 10). This indicates that economic interventions aimed at women can be greatly aided by such workshops.

The study also found that the likelihood of refusal of the intervention was predicted by factors related to division of labour in the household, gender norms, and lower socioeconomic status. The workshop was found to be most effective in addressing inequities arising from division of labour in the household and gender norms. In terms of power dynamics, the workshop opened the women in these households up to their *power within*, helped husbands to open up to the idea of *power with*, and allowed women some *power over* household assets and finances.

Thus, addressing social and gender norms makes a significant difference to the uptake of WEE interventions.

The social protections program in Tanzania provides further evidence that social and gender norms are critical to the success of WEE initiatives. Myamba (2020) acknowledges that despite numerous efforts by the government towards WEE and gender equality, prevailing cultural and social norms continue to present significant barriers. The Productive Social Safety Net (PSSN) programme exemplifies an effective remedy to this challenge and has been found to be historically significant in addressing gender equality and WEE. Since its inception in 2012, Myamba notes, PSSN has worked through conditional cash transfers, supporting a public works programme, and initiatives that have enhanced the livelihood of at least 1.1 million households.

The program's intentions were initially thwarted by negative power dynamics, including instances where male recipients of cash funds were reported to have spent it inappropriately. This situation was rectified by disbursing funds to the women instead. However, this was insufficient to empower women as it was noted the household gendered power dynamics determined who spent the income and how (Bastagli et al, as cited in Myamba, 2020). Consequently, gender and social norms must inform the design of social protection programs if they are to be sustainable (Newton, 2016). Among the key action points for the PSSN program are:

- 1) gender training for all PSSN personnel,
- 2) the enhancement of women's rights, increased control over household resources, and active decision-making in the household and in the community, and
- 3) developing a grievance system which responds to the needs of women (Myamba, 2020).

Therefore, lessons from the PSSN programme reinforce the argument that WEE can be made most effective and sustainable by starting at the foundation with the transformation of social norms.

In Kenya, Kariuki and Birner, (2021) conducted a study that evaluated the role of gender dynamics in an ecological restoration scheme at the Mara North Conservancy, Kenya, known as the Payment for Ecosystem Services (PES). Their findings indicated that the outcomes of the PES scheme were significantly affected by gendered power imbalances which reinforced historical inequities in land tenure. Moreover, regarding the women's role in the scheme, they found that

governance structures often excluded women from decision-making and from the direct benefits of PES. The authors encouraged a critical reflection on the complex social dimensions that on the one hand contribute to land degradation and, on the other, may affect ecological restoration efforts.

Another study by Githukia et al., (2020) analysed the gender roles and constraints at play in the aquaculture value chain in Western Kenya by surveying 384 farmers. They found that while both men and women were involved in the value chain, women representation was lower than that of men (32% against 68% respectively). Discriminatory gender norms were found to be key among the factors that limited the ability of women to participate in and prosper in this economic arena. Other constraints women faced included: limited access to factors of production, limited control over their income, and mobility. The authors recommended that limiting gender norms should be abolished, along with addressing the accompanying constraints in order to promote the participation of women, thereby assuring their economic wellbeing, along with that of their households and communities.

These studies highlight key indicators that reveal the state of WEE in SSA and the role those social norms play in supporting or undermining it. The following sections discuss three key WEE indicators, viewing them through the lens of power dynamics and highlighting the impact of social norms and beliefs on each.

### **3.2 Property and Land Ownership Rights**

In Sub-Saharan Africa rights to land and property ownership are traditionally the exclusive reserve of the male fraternity in the community. Property and land are passed down to the male descendants of the family through inheritance and marriage. For the intent of this Paper, property ownership shall include ownership rights to economic enterprises such as businesses, and agricultural farms.

According to UN Women (2022) and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) (2020), property ownership rights encompass the rights of women to land tenure and the ability of women to make decisions concerning land and property as well as own, use, access, control, transfer, and inherit it. Access to property ownership rights for women is essential for their economic independence and autonomy, however, this has been long challenged by gender inequality and discriminatory practices in society (UN Women & OHCHR, 2020). Some of the benefits that accrue from securing land rights for women include: an increased assurance of food security for their

households, and access to capital for investments and wealth creation through leveraging the land as an asset (African Development Bank, 2016).

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) reports that equal access to productive resources by women in developing countries has the potential to increase farm yields by 20 to 30%, leading to an increase in agricultural output, thereby reducing hunger by 16 to 17% (Pluess, 2016, p. 17). On a more subjective level, access to property control and ownership for women goes a long way to increase their self-esteem, and respect from other family members (Hunt & Samman, 2016). Potentially, this could increase the agency of women in the area of economic empowerment by promoting their *power within* and securing their *power over* capacity.

Universal land and property ownership for women is still an elusive proposition for the most part. Indeed, a United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Report on women's land rights declares that 40% of the economies in the world limit the property rights of women (USAID, 2021). Hindrances to the acquisition of land and property by women in SSA range from traditional views on inheritance, which exclude women from family lineages, high costs of purchasing land on the open market, expensive land leasing, and restrictive land titling formalization programs (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2019). Figure 2 illustrates that the highest level of insecurity of access to land for women across different regions in the world is found in SSA. This is a testament to the conservative beliefs held across SSA about land and property ownership as regards women. Unfortunately, there is scarce literature that documents actual gender gaps when it comes to property and land ownership, nonetheless, it is acknowledged as a fact that substantial gaps exist within and across most countries, with women on the disadvantaged side (International Centre for Research on Women (ICRW), 2005).

## Level of Insecurity of Women's Access to Land Assets, 2019



**Figure 2:** A comparison of levels of insecurity of women's access to land assets across Global Regions (UN Women & OHCHR, 2020, p. 10)

### Looking Forward

While strides have been made in a few sub-Saharan countries to remedy this situation, much still needs to be done. Interventions have come in several forms including: government policy reforms, gender integration in land documentation, change in gender and social norms, and private sector engagement (USAID, 2021).

Government policy reform is arguably one of the most powerful interventions to secure women property and land ownership rights in SSA. In parts of SSA, this has seen statutory and customary laws amended and customized, as in the national land policy reform in Rwanda that resulted in land tenure regularization that allowed 81% percent of land to be jointly owned by men and women (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2019). This has also been exemplified by the Matrimonial Property Law in Kenya that has given women the right to exercise ownership over property in marriage (Africa Development Bank, 2016).

International actions have gone a long way in supporting sub-Saharan countries to implement land reform policies that give women a more equitable

place. One such effort, specifically geared towards securing the rights of women to property and inheritance, is the joint advocacy effort by the Huairou Commission, the UN-HABITAT, the Centre on Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE), and the Food and Agricultural Organization (ICRW, 2005). The Maputo Protocol of 2005, which the majority of sub-Saharan countries have signed and ratified, is an important measure to keep governments accountable in issues pertaining to women's property rights (African Union, 2003). This issue is specifically addressed by articles: 7 (d), 15 (a), 19 (c), and 21 (African Union, 2019). The African Union member states do well to adhere to the promises made in this Protocol to enhance women's property rights.

### **3.3 Women Economic Leadership and Strength of Collaborative Action**

Women's economic leadership and collaborative action is a powerful testament to economic empowerment. These aspects embody the tenets of WEE power and agency, by which women make economic decisions and exercise control over resources and profits. The indicators of women power and agency at community and institutional level include: their participation in community groups, networks and associations, inclusion in decision-making processes, and exercise of leadership in community (Golla, Malhotra, Nanda, & Mehra, 2011). When women take on leadership roles on economic platforms, they communicate their unequivocal ability to participate in and substantially contribute to economic development. It also opens doors for more women to enter the workforce and ascend to leadership positions by, if nothing else, discounting stereotypical tendencies.

*The Little Data Book* of the World Bank reports that in SSA firms with female participation in ownership stand at only 31% while firms with a top female manager stand at only 16% (World Bank Group, 2019, p. 9). This portends a significant lag in the economic leadership of women as opposed to men. In addition, statistics reported by Gallup indicate that in SSA, only 12% of women possess a bank account compared to 17% of men (Hunt & Samman, 2016). It also means that fewer women than men have access to economic growth opportunities. This narrative can change with collaborative action, especially in the form of women savings and credit cooperatives, which also provide women with meaningful leadership platforms.

The UN Secretary-General's high-level panel on WEE has identified seven key drivers of WEE, among which was strengthening visibility, collective voice, and representation (UN Women, 2022). It is notable that the panel identified the

need to tackle adverse norms as key to delivering on WEE. Women economic leadership and collaborative action can only find room for impact in a community or institution when negative gender norms are transformed. Hunt and Samman (2016) assert that collective action has a strong correlation with positive effects on women's empowerment, including improved productivity, income, and working conditions.

### ***Looking Forward***

Collaborative action and economic leadership are clear demonstrations of a power with dynamic, which has great promise for efforts towards WEE. Illustrative of this is the exposition by Kiamba (2019) of women's savings groups, which she asserts, are actually powerful tools for economic empowerment. Kiamba identifies three intervention types through which their impact can be diversified. These include:

- 1) savings group only interventions, which focus solely on enabling members to access financial services from financial institutions, and expand their social and support networks,
- 2) savings group in combination with other development activities such as financial education, vocational training, and other specific income generating activities which foster economic independence, self-worth, and improved decision-making, and
- 3) savings groups within other integrated programming aimed at tackling harmful social norms and inequalities- these provide capacity building for members, as well as whole community gender dialogue sessions. With this kind of collaborative action, real gains can be witnessed and consolidated in WEE.

### **3.4 Access to Equitable Gainful Employment Opportunities**

In recent years there has been a remarkable surge in participation of women in labour markets in SSA. Kabeer (2009) chalks this up to factors such as increasing access to education for girls and women, declining fertility and hence smaller family sizes, a shift in aspirations by women for themselves and their families, declining agricultural production, and economic recession, leading to an increased cost of living. Most notably, in sub-Saharan countries, the gender gap in labour market participation is generally below 20% (ILO, 2018).

This is good news. However, it raises a few questions such as: what are the types of paid work that women engage in? How much income does it engender?

Do men and women who do the same type of job experience equity in pay? Are there available opportunities for advancement? The ILO elaborates that decent work:

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*Involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organise and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men. (Hunt & Samman, 2016, p. 13)*

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Literature reveals two major descriptions of labour force participation: formal and informal employment. Formal employment is that which offers various covering in terms of legal contracts, social protections, benefits, access to financial institutions, and a predictable, stable source of income, while informal employment offers little or no protections in terms of legal contracts, is not subject to labour market regulations, and offers few or no benefits (Kabeer, 2012, as cited in Hunt & Samman, 2016, p. 13). Economic independence is more likely to be realized by women who engage in salaried or wage work, and less by those who are own-account workers or contributing family workers (ILO, 2010). This is because informal employment is unregulated, and more often than not, tied to exploitative practices, including physical abuse, and poor, irregular pay, not to mention limited agency. Bonnet, Vanek, and Chen (2019) assert that there is a significant overlap between poverty and informal employment. Unfortunately, statistics reveal that up till 2016, in sub-Saharan Africa, more women than men were engaged in the different forms of informal employment. This is illustrated in Table 1, highlighting statistics for the SSA region.



Table 1: *Percentage of informal employment in total and non-agricultural employment by sex and geographical region, excluding developed countries (Bonnet et al, 2019, p. 10)*

	Total employment			Non-Agricultural employment		
	Total	Men	Women	Total	Men	Women
Asia and the Pacific	71	74	67	63	65	58
Southern Asia	88	87	91	78	78	77
East and South-Eastern Asia (including China)	61	63	59	56	58	54
East and South-Eastern Asia (including China)	77	77	77	66	67	65
Sub-Saharan Africa	89	86	92	77	72	83
Southern Africa	40	38	42	36	34	38
Rest of sub-Saharan Africa	92	89	95	82	76	88
Latin America and the Caribbean	54	53	55	50	47	52
Middle East and North Africa	68	69	62	59	62	44
Eastern Europe and Central Asia	37	38	36	30	32	27

Factors that contribute to this disparity in employment opportunities between men and women include levels and quality of education and skills attained by girls and women, restrictive social norms, and limiting care-giving responsibilities. Hunt and Samman (2016) further expound on hindrances, mentioning limits on mobility due to poor infrastructure and unsafe transportation options, unpaid care work, including domestic work, and legal restrictions preventing women from taking on certain jobs or economic activities.

The importance of quality education for economic empowerment cannot be understated. Through quality education, a girl child is afforded a competing chance for gainful workplace participation, especially full-time formal employment opportunities. Fox and Romero (2017) note that studies show a strong correlation between secondary school education for women and formal

wage employment, greater decision-making power within the household, a drop in cases of gender-based violence, and improvement in economic outcomes.

Indeed, with education, skills training and life-long learning, women are more likely to sport greater self-confidence and take more advantage of opportunities for employment (Grantham, Dowie, & de Haan, 2021). This is exemplified by the fact that women with higher education are more likely to formalize their businesses by registering them (Grantham, Dowie, & de Haan, 2021). Therefore, the vicious cycles in societal norms that hinder women from accessing quality education need to be broken by fighting against teenage pregnancy, ending girl child labour in domestic care, and doing away with discriminatory practices at the family level.

### *Looking Forward*

The ILO enumerates three major interventions in achieving women economic empowerment through access to equitable employment: achieving equal pay, tackling occupational segregation, and eliminating discrimination (ILO, 2018). These factors are key to levelling the ground in the world of work in a bid to promote women economic empowerment. Statistics from UN Women indicate that the gender wage gap globally is estimated at 23%, with developing countries exhibiting even wider gaps (UN Women, 2018). This is in spite of SDG 8 which advocates productive employment and decent work for men and women alike. In Uganda, for instance the pay gap stands at 36%, while in Rwanda, it stands at 32% (ILO, 2019).

Gender pay gaps represent institutional social norms that are skewed along gender lines. They can be narrowed with intentional, well targeted, and consistently taken measures. ILO (2019) recommends, among other things: offering equitable salaries to men and women for the same kind of work, basing the salary on the job rather than the previous pay of the employee, encouraging greater flexibility in jobs to allow women to access higher paying jobs despite their responsibilities at home, tackling gender bias in the workplace and conducting frequent gender pay reviews.

## **4.0 Conclusions**

Significant strides in women economic empowerment have been made the world over and specifically in Sub-Saharan Africa. This has been assured through a combination of factors, including ratification of international gender and trade policies such as the Maputo Protocol, changing global economic landscapes that have compelled shifts in the way women participate in the economy, and shifts in

socio-cultural norms that are allowing women greater freedoms. However, there is still a long way to go as so strongly indicated by the numerous gaps in gender equity dynamics in research and literature.

While there are numerous indicators that can be used to measure and analyse women economic empowerment, this Paper analysed three broad indicators, at country and region level: access to equitable, gainful employment opportunities, property and land ownership rights, and economic leadership and collaborative action. These indicators were analysed in light of the impact of social norms on attempts at progress in these areas.

The Paper noted that there has been a surge in labour market participation by women in SSA in recent years, which is both positive and negative. It is negative in the sense that a disproportionate number of women are engaged in informal employment, which is not regulated by the Government and is subject to exploitative practices. This does not further the cause of women economic empowerment. The Paper also noted that more girls have been able to access quality education at higher levels. In some countries, this has led to greater opportunities for gainful employment in the formal sector. However, the gender pay gap across SSA is still a matter of concern that needs to be addressed.

Access to land and property, as well as the accompanying rights, is an important indicator of WEE as it has been shown to assure economic independence and autonomy, promote food security in the community, and allow women access to capital investments and wealth creation opportunities through leveraging property. It has also been shown to increase self-esteem and social standing, factors which support agency in economic matters. Unfortunately, rights and access to land and property by women in SSA has been severely hampered by traditional perceptions, restrictive legislation and land titling procedures, and high costs of purchasing land off the market. In fact, literature has shown that SSA has the highest levels of insecurity of access to land assets in the world. Several African countries have taken steps to remedy this situation, for instance, by ratifying the Maputo Protocol, and introducing policies that support women to acquire or inherit land.

Economic leadership and collaborative action are powerful indicators of women economic empowerment as identified by the UN secretary-general's high-level panel on the key drivers of economic empowerment for WEE. Through collaborative action, women have voice, opportunities to ascend to leadership, access to financial information and credit services. It offers platforms for community-wide discussions to transform limiting social and cultural norms.

Data reviewed revealed that women are still lagging behind men in economic leadership. Literature also elucidated on the diversity of roles that savings groups can serve besides offering financial services. For instance, they foster WEE by offering education and training opportunities, and partnering with institutions and communities to tackle harmful social norms.

## **5.0 Recommendations**

The common thread running through this discussion of the indicators of women economic empowerment is social norms surrounding gender. These social norms more often than not prevail despite excellent legislation, policies, and resources expended to promote women economic empowerment. They represent the various power dynamics extant in communities as well as institutions. Unfortunately, there is scarce empirical evidence of the impact of social and gender norms, whether positive or negative, on WEE per se. There is, therefore, a great need to conduct further research on the impact of gendered social norms on WEE in specific sub-Saharan contexts.

Program and policy interventions must also be designed with the lens of gender and social norms squarely in place in order to ensure that effective, sustainable strategic actions are taken. At a very practical level, community and institution members should be encouraged to evaluate and adjust their personal ideologies and beliefs concerning WEE as these eventually shape the direction that social and gender norms take. As aptly stated by the Asia South Pacific Bureau of Adult Education (ASPBAE) in Veneklasen and Miller (2002, p. 41),

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*Neither power, ideology, nor the state are static or monolithic. There is a continuous process of resistance and challenge. When challenges become strong and extensive enough, they can result in the total transformation of a power structure.*

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Transformation of social norms, and the power dynamics they represent, to facilitate WEE is within the realms of possibility. However, it must be duly attended to through research, rigorous dialogue on the same and consistent action to work against harmful social norms.

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