Empowerment and access to opportunities in South Africa: can gender equality be achieved?

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the unequal and inadequate access to opportunities by both men and women in South Africa, as well as the progress made in achieving gender equality and promoting women’s empowerment, which are embedded in the Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals, respectively. The paper is virtually theoretical and relies upon literature to present its arguments, soliciting information from published journals, reports, and previous studies. Access is primarily a gendered phenomenon worldwide, pertaining to the subsets of, inter alia, access to information, rights, land, money, education, skills, political participation, and opinion. Gender equity and equality are high on the developmental agenda of women in almost every country. South Africa, being part of international treaties and conventions on gender equity, is obliged to advance the empowerment of women and eliminate all forms of gender discrimination. The development of women, their access to essential resources, and their participation in important positions of decision-making are still challenges in most countries. It is commonly known that everywhere in the world, women face constraints that limit their capacity to contribute to production, well-being, decision-making, growth, and most importantly, empowerment, which in turn promotes independence. Women face discrimination in access to productive resources such as land; they face wage inequality in rural labor markets; and they are also more likely to work part-time, seasonal, and/or low-paying jobs when engaged in wage employment. Despite the Domestic Violence Act 116 of 1998 and the inauguration of the Annual 16 Days of Activism for No Violence Against Women and Children by the South African government, which are aimed at fighting the perpetual inequalities and abuse of women and children, gender inequality, women’s disempowerment, and unequal access to opportunities are still predominant in the country.

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Introduction

South Africa’s definition of and goals towards achieving gender equality are guided by a vision of human rights which incorporates acceptance of equal and inalienable rights of all women and men. This ideal is a fundamental tenet under the Bill of Rights of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (Act 108 of 1996). It emerged from a long period of struggle for a democratic society that respects and promotes the rights of all its citizens irrespective of race, gender, class, age, disability, etc. (Bill of Rights, Sections 9.1 to 9.4). The conception of such an ideal emerged from people whose history is steeped in institutional racism where rights, life chances, and the distribution of goods and services were predicated along racial lines (Zhang, 2021). More importantly, respect for the dignity of individuals was determined by the colour of their skin and, further within the various racial groupings, by their gender designation. The socio-cultural dictates of all groups defined women to be inferior to men and as such assigned to them the position of minors in both the public and private spheres of life. For instance in the private sphere, women were less likely to lead in decision-making. In most interpersonal relationships men had more power (Makalela, Masenya, Mokoele, 2021). This historical legacy of patriarchy influenced essential informal and formal human relationships with a marked impact at the workplace.
Despite considerable progress made regarding the legal status of women, and despite gender equality being entrenched in the Bill of Rights of the Constitution of South Africa of 1996, South African women and men do not enjoy equal rights in practice. Patriarchy is still entrenched amongst all ethnic groups (Makalela et al., 2021). Underrepresentation of women in decision-making structures and violence against women, inter-alia, show that structural gender inequalities remain firmly imbedded in South African society. Unequal gender relations within the ambit of race, class, disability, religion and geographic location further complicate these disadvantages.

**Etymology and Theoretical of Concepts**

**Empowerment**

The empowerment of women is an essential precondition for the elimination of world poverty and the upholding of human rights (Department for International Development, 2000; Tallontire, & Said-Allsopp, 2014), in particular at the individual level, it helps building a base for social change. Women constitute about half of the total population of which 80 percent live in rural areas (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics) (BBS, 2001). But their status has been ranked the lowest in the world on the basis of twenty indicators related to health, marriage, children, education, employment and social equality National Contaminant Bio-monitoring Program (NCBP, 2000; Matli & Ngoepe, 2021).

Empowerment is the enhancement of assets and capabilities of diverse individuals and groups to engage, influence and hold accountable the institutions which affect them (Bennett 2002; Batiwala, 2007; Roy, 2014; Sado, Spaho, & Hotchkiss, 2014). Batiwala (1994) stated that empowerment is “how much influence people have over external actions that matter to their welfare”. Kabeer (2001) defines it as “the expansion in people’s ability to make strategic life choices in a context where this ability was previously denied to them”. Sen (1993) defined empowerment as “altering relations of power which constrain women’s options and autonomy and adversely affect health and well-being”. For women’s empowerment, the 1990s were an important time. The world conferences of the 1990s human rights, population, and social development all provided opportunities to mobilize and build a consensus among many actors around women’s empowerment. This was also crystallized in the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action (BPA) which remains the most comprehensive document of the world’s commitment to women’s rights. The 1990s brought international attention to issues of sexual and reproductive rights, violence against women, and gender inequality. Although, the concept of empowerment is very old and is known from historical struggles for social justice, only in the late twentieth century the term empowerment became popular when it was used by liberation theology, black power and feminist movements which were striving for participation, democracy and development.

Empowerment is not only restricted to women in development cooperation. The concept also aims at changing the climate of power; inequality and oppression that marginalized people live in rural areas (Khumalo, Mckay, & Freimund, 2015). Nevertheless, it is mostly used in terms of women in development and gender equality. Today empowerment is a popular tool in development cooperation and international organisations like the World Bank, and Gender Mainstreaming (Speer, 2012). Knowing that the empowerment of women generates many positive effects for society as a whole makes the task of determining the underlying factors of women’s empowerment essential. The most common indicators measure capabilities, education and health in particular, and control over economic and political resources and decision-making. Patel (2022), stated that “empowerment must include six dimensions: economic, socio-cultural, interpersonal, legal, political, and psychological. Each of these dimensions is complex with various sub dimensions”. For instance, the economic dimension would include labour force participation, wage differential, and sex segregation among others.

**Gender Equality**

National Gender Policy Framework (2000) and Andersson (2020), states “gender equity is ‘the fair and just distribution of all means of opportunities and resources between women and men”. Gender equality is a situation where women and men have equal conditions for realizing their full human rights and potential; are able to contribute equally to national, political, economic, social and cultural development; and benefit equally from the results (Nyarko, 2022). Equality is understood to include both formal equality and substantive equality; not merely equality to men.

The traditional notion of equality based on a system of formal rules in national legal systems, and views equality as consistent or equal treatment regardless of circumstances or difference. For instance, the first principle of equality in Section 9 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996) provides that ‘everyone is equal before the law and has the right to equal protection and benefit of the law’. The second principle provides that ‘equality includes the full and equal enjoyment of all rights and freedoms’, and more importantly the equality clause prohibits discrimination on various grounds among which is gender and sex.

**Contemporary Status Quo**

**Women’s Unpaid Care Work**

Women often undertake duties of households. Women are considered as housekeepers as they take care of the house, children, cooking and washing (Morrison & Jutting, 2005; Ali, 2014; Wang, 2014). Women are the ones who are responsible for fetching water and fire-wood. Men only take care of the livestock and other hard labour and do less to help within households. The
Responsibilities and duties that are undertaken within household are much gendered (Debusscher, 2011; Kim & Oh, 2021). The workload of women increases when there is a new-born in the house and yet again men do little to help. Debusscher (2011) found out that there is a “division of labour between women and men”. Women are disproportionally bearing large burdens and men have small burdens of social necessity. This shows how over-worked women are in the households.

The Participation of Men and Women in Decision Making

The involvement of both women and men in the development initiatives is a good way of mainstreaming gender into development (Kim & Oh, 2021). One of the reasons why many poverty alleviation projects fail is because women do not take part in the planning and in all phases of the project and that development is imposed on them (Tudora et al., 2015). The participation of both men and women is of paramount importance if gender equality is to be achieved. Men are the ones that hinder women from living their lives with freedom that is assured to them in the Constitution of Republic of South Africa (Mjoli, 1991; Ayala, 2008; Walton, 2013; Modiba, 2017). So, men and women together should form an integral part of policy making and planning.

Tradition and Unfavourable Economic Structures

Tradition is the key problem in African countries because the inadequacy of women’s access to and control management of services is constrained by various customary and patriarchal social relations (Wallace, 2005; Ashley, 2012; Thobejane & Thobejane, 2017). In KwaZulu-Natal, women’s access to water is extremely insecure, although, women provide labour for farming under severely exploitative relations in terms of both production and reproduction (Manase, 2003; Ashley, 2012; Modiba, 2017). The major source of the unequal water distribution problem is undoubtedly the on-going dominance of patriarchy, including customary land tenure systems that privilege men’s access to land and local authority structures (Wallace, 2005; Ali, 2014). Such perverse social relations, also characteristic in different forms within pre-colonial African society, were contrived during colonial and post-colonial times by male-dominated central and local states in Africa which led to women not being empowered.

Culture and tradition have created an environment where men and women have different roles and responsibilities within households and it is still manifesting even in the 21st century (Manase, 2003; Morrison & Jutting, 2005; Ali, 2014). This is not different even in United Kingdom (UK), women continue to combine dual work duties and are still marginalised (Greed, 2005). The female gender is the one that is over worked within the households. Men are doing little to help women within the households and this makes the unequal division of labour within households to be visible (Walton, 2013). The manifestation of gender inequality is conditioned by the unequal allocation of responsibilities undertaken by women and men within households.

Exclusion of Women from Employment Opportunities

Lack of women in high posts (CEO, Directors and Manager) does not increase the voice of women in the household (Wendy, 2010). The underrepresentation of women in managerial posts compromise the ideas of women that could be used to alleviate poverty, gender inequality, gender violence and all forms of discrimination in rural areas (Brewster, 2013; Modiba, 2017). Due to lack of women in senior posts or managerial posts, women do not gain the role in decision making process as they enter the labour market because of the lack of confidence, lack of self-esteem and lack of support from men (Keera, 2007). Many women still have the stereotypical mentality that they cannot lead, but they have to be led and thus exhibiting the subordinate role of women.

Legislative Framework on Women Empowerment

The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996

The Constitution is the cornerstone of democracy in South Africa. In terms of equality, the Bill of Rights articulates that the state may not unfairly discriminate directly or indirectly against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth. In terms of the Constitution of 1996, Chapter 2: Section 9 further emphasizes equality of mankind. It prohibits unfair discrimination against anyone on the basis of race, gender, sex etc. Gender equality is, therefore, enshrined in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996 as a fundamental principle. The Constitution provides specifically for gender equality, affirmative action, freedom and security of the person and socio-economic rights. In this Section 9 of the Bill of Rights, emphasis is placed on the corrective measures to be taken to promote the achievement of equality.

National Policy Framework on Women’s Empowerment and Gender Equality

The National Policy Framework on Women’s Empowerment and Gender Equality was formulated by the National Office on the Status of Women. This policy framework was adopted by Parliament in 2000, and provides guidelines to spheres of government with regards to the formulation of gender policies. Gender Policy Framework was established to provide a clear vision and framework to guide the process of developing laws, policies, procedures and practices which will serve to ensure equal rights and opportunities for women and men in all spheres and structures of government as well as in the workplace, the community and the family (OECD, 2017). The Policy Framework recommends gender mainstreaming as an approach towards achieving gender equality, and also stresses the importance of women’s empowerment as a further requirement for achieving gender equality.

The first overarching policy to be legislated in South Africa to promote equality in the Public Service was the White Paper on Affirmative Action of 1998. Affirmative action can be defined as laws, programmes or activities designed to redress past imbalances and to amend the conditions of individuals and groups who have been disadvantaged on the grounds of race, gender or disability. The goal of this policy was to speed up the creation of a representative and equitable Public Service and to build an environment that supports and enables those who have been historically disadvantaged by unfair discrimination to fulfil their maximum potential within it so that the Public Service may derive the maximum benefit of their diverse skills and talents to improve service delivery. The White Paper refers to women as one of the designated groups race and disability being the other and recognizes that these groups are poorly represented at decision-making levels and in other technical occupational classes.

The Determinants of Women Empowerment

While there is discrepancy on defining empowerment, most measures have only quantified the dimensions of control over resources and outcomes. Women’s agency and process remain difficult to measure. There have been several challenges to measuring the dimensions and levels women empowerment; however, many researchers have identified decision-making, mobility, freedom from domestic abuse, education, access to resources, ownership of assets, participation in household and community decision-making and property rights as the most important in measuring the level of women empowerment (Haupt & Fester, 2012; Munir & Kanwal, 2020).

Decision-Making Power

Household decision-making power refers to the extent of women’s ability to participate in formulating and executing decisions regarding domestic, financial, child-welfare, reproductive health, farming and socio-political matters in coordination with other family members (Akinboade, 2008; Kabeer, 2012). Decision-making power in the household shows the amount of say the woman has in household decisions, and was estimated as an average of several sub-variables (Speer, 2012; Munir & Kanwal, 2020). It is based on if she has a say in the household income, if she has the possibility to buy goods without needing permission and if she decides over her own work, her children’s schooling etc. Decision-making power can also be viewed through ability to raise a voice (Funke, 2007). Voice is a variable showing the woman’s freedom of expression, if she is able to express her views in the presence of her husband, family members, knowledge of laws against domestic violence, respondent’s educational attainment, frequency of reading newspapers and watching television.

Mobility

Mobility is a variable showing a woman’s freedom of movement (Anokye & Gupta, 2012). It is based on if she is able to visit different places without the permission of a family member and if she can go to these places alone. These places include the local market, health care centre, fields outside the village, a temple, relatives and friends as well as nearby villages. Women’s mobility includes the variables showing if the women need permission and those showing if the woman can go to these places alone (Anokye & Gupta, 2012). Women’s identity as housewives and mothers has provided a basis for collective action, the vast majority of grassroots women’s organizations mobilizing around collective consumption issues such as the provision of day care, health services, housing and food.

Freedom from Domestic Abuse

Freedom of domestic abuse includes if she fears her husband and if her husband beats her (Ganle, Afriyie & Alexander, 2015). A woman may fear her husband although he does not beat her, due to underlying gender relations in the family where the husband abuses her in a nonviolent way (Anokye & Gupta, 2012; Munir & Kanwal, 2020). Freedom from domestic abuse includes women not being raped, sexually assaulted, battered and sexually harassed and sexually abused even at childhood.

Education

Education is crucial for the empowerment of both men and women. It expands opportunities, enhances people’s capacity to develop their full potential, contributes to gender equality and enables recipients to benefit from development interventions (African Development Bank Group) (Blagowalia, Menon, Quisumbing & Soundararajan, 2012; Roy, 2015). Education furthermore enables the use of voice to be more effective in decision-making within the households, community and the workplace (World Bank, 2004). When it comes to women, basic literacy is important in improving their standards of living (Roy, 2015). Formal education and exposure to media can help to empower women in all the dimensions. By equipping women with information and new ideas, schooling can lead to an increase in women’s role in household decision making and freedom of mobility, and has the potential of enhancing self-esteem as well by promoting reflection and analysis and by demonstrating alternative ways of thinking and doing (Roy, 2015). Moreover, investing in women’s education provides multiple benefits for overall development goals which contribute extensively to the reduction of poverty (Parveen, 2022). Even before the capabilities approach, education had been regarded as a key to women’s empowerment for its ability to raise awareness and open possibilities as well as its instrumental link to economic growth and children’s health (OECD, 2017). Hence, universal primary education has been a goal in many developing countries for many years. With the articulation of the MDGs there has been increased focus on meeting this challenge.
Access to Resources

Access to resources refers to the right, scope, power or permission to use and/or get benefits from ten selected resources that were divided into mainly two types (UN, 2009). These are: household resources, equal consumption of nutritious food, handling and spending money, selling of minor agricultural products, interpersonal communication, hiring of helping hands and utilisation of credit money if they receive; and social resources which are education/training, credit, rural cooperative and bank (Roy, 2015). Rights to natural resources are extremely important for rural women. Women’s livelihoods in rural areas crucially depend upon them, especially in developing countries (Khumalo et al, 2015). The nature and extent of these rights affect women's bargaining power within the household as well as within the community and society at large (World Bank, 2003). Yet women’s rights to natural resources are often curtailed. Beyond the family and succession law norms examined in the previous section, this may be caused by norms specifically concerning natural resources (Haupt & Fester, 2012). While in most cases these are gender-neutral in formulation, their practical implementation or their interaction with other social norms and practices particularly customary law may lead to inequitable outcomes. As a result, in many parts of the world women have few independent rights to natural resources. Some interesting developments of the 1990s have attempted to address this issue.

Ownership of Assets

Ownership of assets refers to the ability of a woman to control her own current assets and enjoy benefits accruing from them (OECD, 2017). They include: land, cattle, goat, poultry and cash savings, jewellery, television, radio and small vehicle. Women’s ownership of physical and financial assets constitutes one of the main means of generating income and hence expenditures and consumption (OECD, 2017). This is evident in the case of land and agricultural production, but equally relevant in the case of the urban informal sector where ownership of consumer durables (such as a sewing machine, stove, or refrigerator) may also constitute business assets and make possible a series of income-generating activities (Parveen, 2022). In addition to being means of production, some assets also generate rent (housing and land), interest (savings), and profit (land and business assets), or components of income. They also have current use value or provide services, such as housing.

Property Rights

Property rights shows if the woman owns land or any other property or valuables (Roy, 2015). According to Kim & Oh (2021), property rights “measure access to and control over economic resources, this variable only includes the indicators showing the woman’s full access to and control over property or valuables”. Women’s say in economic decision-making is included in the decision-making in the household-variable. Norms concerning the internal organization of the family and the conduct of family affairs may affect the ability of women to acquire and control property, including land. Succession law affects women's access to land rights, particularly in countries where land sales are rare and inheritance is the primary form of land acquisition (Makalela et al, 2021). Problems can arise where testamentary freedom is very broad, as testators may leave land to male relatives, following socio-cultural practices. Some legal systems recognize a nearly absolute testamentary freedom, providing only for the maintenance of the surviving spouse.

Steps to Achieve Gender Equality

Women’s economic empowerment is essential for the full, effective and accelerated implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Without it, the global economy will not yield inclusive growth that generates decent work for all, eliminates poverty, promotes equality foremost, gender equality and improves wellbeing and livelihoods. Achieving women’s economic empowerment and realising women’s human and labour rights constitute a sustainable development solution for people, planet and prosperity that equally benefits paid and unpaid, formal and informal workers (Moon, 2017).

Talk to women and girls

A fundamental reason of not achieving gender equality in every realm is that women’s and girls’ voices are too often excluded from global and national decision-making. When programmes and policies are designed without women’s needs central to their foundation that is a big step towards to failure. If grassroots women have been adequately consulted in designing the Millennium Development Goals, decision-makers would have been able to anticipate that girls would still be held responsible for many home chores, caring for younger siblings and fetching water, and have known that a major obstacle for girls’ education is that girls are at risk of physical and sexual assaults when they have to walk long distances to school.

Stop Child Marriage and Sexual Harassment

Child marriage is a major impediment to girls’ education. In order for girls to be able to complete education, child marriage have to be ended. Sexual harassment of girls must be addressed categorically without hesitation. Insecurity is one of the reasons parents give for marrying their daughters. It is also a major barrier to girls’ full participation in education. This is normally practiced in Asian countries such as India and Bangladesh.
Make Education Gender Sensitive

There has been much progress in increasing access to education, but progress has been slow in improving the gender sensitivity of the education system, including ensuring textbooks promote positive stereotypes. This is critically important for girls to come out of schools as citizens who can shape a more equal society.

Raise Aspirations of Girls and Their Parents

One of the key strategies must be to change how girls, families and society imagine what girls can be and can do. Girls must have images and role models that expand their dreams. There is a need to build girls’ and women’s confidence that they could be engineers or entrepreneurs. Furthermore, there is also a need for parents to see that there really are opportunities for their daughters, which their only security is not just to be good wives and mothers.

Empower Mothers

When mothers are educated and empowered to make choices in their lives, they enable their daughters to go to school. Empowering women on the community level will also enhance girls’ education.

Conclusions

Women’s employment is generally a first ‘adjustment variable’ for businesses. Women are more frequently employed with short-term (temporary) or part-time contracts. Additionally, gender norms lead to the perception of men as the more legitimate jobholders when work is scarce. Women’s loans may still be controlled by their male relatives, and the poorest women may continue to face difficulties in building an asset base. These constraints suggest strongly that unless women are actively supported in improving their productivity with better access to markets, gender relations and the perception of the value of their work may not change simply through better access to credit. The gender roles associated with the prevailing division of labor are clearly problematic to challenge without reconsidering the broader issues associated with employment patterns and interrogating the gravities presently imposed on both men and women. A key cause of the persistence of existing gender roles is that many men in the formal sector work long hours, providing at least a partial explanation of why they are not assuming a greater share of family responsibilities.

One major justification the government and its people should work so hard towards women's empowerment and gender equality is economics. Economic development, as one component of sustainable development, is unthinkable without the involvement of women. South Africa is one of the fastest economically growing countries in the world. However, like many developing countries, the women's labour force has not been properly utilized. Despite certain improvements following efforts from the government, the economic opportunities for and participation of women are still low. This is due to male oriented development projects and the exclusion of women from the formal employment sector, confining women to unpaid, tiresome household work. Moreover, women still suffer from lack of adequate access to training, extension and credit services, financial support and modern technology.

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