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GENDER EMPOWERMENT IN AFRICA: AN ANALYSIS OF WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN ERITREAN ECONOMY

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Abstract

The role of women in African economies is more emphasised in recent years by ensuring gender equality and women empowerment. But the fact remains as women have less access to resources, education and health facilities in most of the developing countries. Greater participation of women in economic activities is the major concern of most of the countries in Africa. The picture is same in Eritrea, which became independence recently, with low levels of women education and their participation in the economy. An attempt is made in this paper to analyse women participation in economic activities in Africa in general and Eritrea in particular. The paper also provides some policy measures seeking higher participation of women in Eritrean economy.

Key Words: Women participation, gender gap, women empowerment, formal sector, informal sector, compensation to workers

INTRODUCTION

Fruits of development should reach all sections of the society particularly to women. Social scientists believe that real development lies in the empowerment of women. Employment for women is an important issue in empowering women. It is believed that unemployment for women implies not only deterioration in their living standards but also an increase in their dependence on men and loss of autonomy as well as security (Sen, 1989). Moreover, the fact is that earnings of women unlike men are spent entirely on welfare of the family members particularly on children. The levels of health and education of mothers are closely related to children's survival and quality of life (World Bank, 1993).

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In spite of women empowerment measures, women have less access to resources as men. In many societies women are not fully economically dependent. Women came to be regarded as primarily dependent on men, making it unnecessary to plan and provide for their needs. They have to work in the fields and home to produce food and other crops to support their men who are employed or engaged in different productive activities. Among the majority of rural and low-income urban dwellers, women perform all domestic tasks, while many also farm and trade. They are responsible for the care of children, the sick and the elderly, in addition to performing essential social functions within their communities.

The main objective of this paper is to understand the status of women in Africa and to analyse the level of participation of women workers in the national economy of Eritrea. The issue of women empowerment is viewed as important in the present set up as women, by and large, has lower levels of education and health. Education and employment are the two issues which have been analysed here in the context of women of Eritrea. The emergence of women as a work force in the traditional patriarchal society is a new dimension after the Independence of Eritrea (Government of Eretria, NSO, 2003a).

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT IN AFRICA

African women's fundamental contributions in their households, food production systems and national economies are increasingly acknowledged, within Africa and by the international community (World Bank, 2005). But women in Africa continue to face enormous obstacles. The growing recognition of their contributions has not translated into significantly improved access to resources or increased decision-making powers.

Women shared initially in the promises of independence and saw gains in their access to education, formal sector employment, health care and nutritional profiles. Their life expectancy at birth rose from 37 to 50 years by the end of the 1960s. But development plans in African countries continued to be formulated and implemented without an adequate understanding of women's contributions to African economies.

Women provide the backbone of the rural economy in much of sub-Saharan Africa. About 80 per cent of the economically active female labour force is employed in agriculture and women comprise about 47 per cent of the total agricultural labour force (UNDP, 2005). Food production is the major activity of rural women and their responsibilities and labour inputs often exceed those of men in most areas in Africa. Women also provide much of the labour for men's cultivation of export crops, from which women derive little direct

benefit. Women's contribution to the production of food crops ranges from 30 per cent in Sudan to 80 per cent in the Republic of Congo, with estimates for other countries tending toward the higher end of the scale. Women are responsible for 70 per cent of food production, 50 per cent of domestic food storage, 100 per cent of food processing, 50 per cent of animal husbandry and 60 per cent of agricultural marketing (FAO, 2004). The fact remains that to develop a more productive, sustainable, and equitable agricultural sector in Africa, it cannot afford to neglect women and constraints that women face must be addressed if agriculture is to be the engine of economic growth.

Constraints to Women Empowerment

The following are some of the constraints for empowerment of women in Africa. They are mostly in terms of access to resources and labour market imperfections and limited jobs outside household activities.

Access to land: The first of these constraints is access to land. Across Africa, agricultural intensification, population growth and economic change have led to substantive shifts from common property systems of tenure towards more centralized resource control. In the process, women and poorer people generally have lost out. Women rarely own land and even when they own, their holdings tend to be smaller and less fertile than those of men (FAO, 2004).

Where land reform schemes have been introduced in many countries, they often have displaced complex systems of land use and tenure in which women had certain rights in common law and local practice, if not in legislation. New land titles usually have been registered in the name of a male household head regardless of women's economic contribution to the household and their customary rights or the increasing number of female-headed households.

The labour bottleneck: Labour is also a bottleneck for female farmers in Africa, as men have left rural economies in search of more viable livelihoods and women have lost access to male help on farms or the money they may have previously provided. In countries like Lesotho, Botswana and Burkina Faso, the out-migration of adult males is very high, influencing the sexual division of labour for those left behind (World Bank, 2005). The only means for most women to increase their yields is through hard work, using more labour-intensive methods to maintain soil regeneration and fertility. Where technical innovations such as irrigation techniques have made more than one cropping season possible, increased women's labour has been crucial in meeting the intensified work demands.

Women's employment: Analysis of women's employment in Africa indicates that the ongoing economic crises and the gulf between job creation and the growth in the numbers of job seekers have worsened the employment situation for women. Women also face greater vulnerabilities in the labour market because of their relative lack of education and training. In addition, the tendency to channel women into certain occupations, continuous heavy burdens of unpaid domestic work and child-bearing and child-care which restrict women their time and energy available for income-earning activities.

The formal sector: Women are two-thirds less likely than men to get waged employment, while only 3 out of 10 women in the labour force in sub-Saharan Africa are paid employees. In 2000, about 5 per cent of the female labour force worked in industry, 20 per cent in services, 23 per cent in sales, and only 6 per cent in professional, technical, administrative or managerial positions (UNDP, 2004).

Employees in both the public and private sectors earn steady but low incomes. The self-employed are more insecure who often must make substantial investments in time and energy. Despite International Labour Organization (ILO) conventions, to which many African countries are signatories, there are significant income disparities, with women earning half or less of the incomes of men in some countries. Many women also do not benefit in practice from formal laws and policies guaranteeing maternity protection or equal pay for equal work.

Data from the ILO (2004) and other sources suggest that women's formal sector participation rates dropped from 57 per cent in 1970 to 33 per cent in 2000, with 3.5 million women losing their jobs between 1985 and 2000. In Benin, to cite just one example, women accounted for 26 per cent of retrenched workers, although they were only 6 per cent of formal sector workers. Women had predominated in the lower echelons of the social services sector, which faced the heaviest budget cuts. Many of such retrenched women have relocated to the informal sector.

The informal sector: The non-agricultural informal sector employs about 25 per cent of the female labour force, mainly in petty trading and home-based processing and manufacturing, where they have little access to official sources of credit or information. Congestion and lack of water and sanitation create a hazardous environment for both the women and the children they must take with them to work (because no other childcare is available). These women workers also do not benefit from minimum wage and social security provisions and have to

provide for their own health and retirement needs. Many are subject to harassment and exploitation from municipal authorities.

With the contraction of formal sector jobs, the informal sector has become a safe haven for both men and women because of its low capital requirements and ease of entry. For the majority of women, participation in the informal sector is a survival strategy as they take over aspects of household maintenance that men can no longer afford, although they tend to face stiff competition from new entrants, including men who have lost or cannot obtain formal sector employment. Many girls have been withdrawn from school to assist their mothers or guardians in informal sector activities.

The informal sector has shown some dynamism in creating new jobs. In Zimbabwe, for example, it is estimated that job creation in the informal sector may average 25,000 to 35,000 a year (ILO, 2004). The sector also provides needed linkages among small-scale manufacturers, promotes labour-intensive production processes and integrates local and regional markets. Informal sector workers have built associations to protect their interests and mobilized traditional savings and credit schemes to offer sources of capital for women. In places like Nairobi, Kisangani and Accra, rich women traders have used their profits to build houses to rent out; a few have crossed over into the formal sector, in importing, manufacturing and commerce (ILO, 2004).

In general, however, women's lack of access to affordable credit, information, technical advice and services prevents them from expanding their enterprises. The sector is characterized by low productivity and disguised unemployment.

Providing credit, information, services and infrastructure to the informal sector would enhance its productivity, thus supporting women's efforts to maintain their families and provide services to farmers, artisans and other producers.

Education and training: Lack of access to formal education and training has been identified as a key barrier to women's employment and advancement in society. In Africa, female illiteracy rates were over 55 per cent in 2000, compared to 41 per cent for men. Certain countries have extremely high rates: Burkina Faso at 91.1 per cent, Sierra Leone at 88.7 per cent, Chad at 82.1 per cent and Guinea at 86.6 per cent (World Bank, 2004). Literacy classes for women appear to have limited impact, while programmes linked to income generating activities have been most successful.

In many African countries, parents still prefer to send boys to school, seeing little need for education for girls. In addition, factors such as adolescent

pregnancy, early marriage and girls' greater burden of household labour act as obstacles to their schooling. While most girls do not go beyond primary education, school curricula have not been guided by this reality and their content is not geared to helping girls acquire basic life skills. The curriculum also is suffused with gender biases and leads girls into stereotypical feminine jobs in teaching, nursing and clerical work. Few women are found in scientific or technical education where they could develop better skills to secure better paying jobs.

There have been improvements in the net enrolment of girls at primary levels, but disparities persist in comparison with the enrolment of boys. Female enrolment numbers decrease as girls move up the education ladder. Exceptionally, in Southern Africa, the out-migration of men has led to a very different pattern of gender representation in the education system. Botswana and Lesotho provides the most striking case, with females accounting for more than fifty percent of students, even in higher education.

Prospects for increasing the access of women and girls to education have been undermined by economic crisis, budgetary cuts, and debt servicing burdens. Cuts in state spending on education have led to a slower rate of increase in gross enrolment rates, while drop-out rates for girls have risen as they have been withdrawn from school in response to new fees and cost recovery and other economic factors.

The teaching profession shows a similar level of female participation. In 2000, women accounted for 30 per cent or less of primary teaching staff in 13 African countries, while their proportions in secondary schools remained at 33 per cent in sub-Saharan Africa between 1985 and 2000 (UNDP, 2002). Women are largely absent in technical fields, with the exception of home economics and secretarial courses, depriving girls of needed role models.

It is evident that a woman's education beyond primary school is a reliable route to economic empowerment and long-term change in the status quo, as well as a determinant of a family's health and nutrition. Education beyond ten or more years of school is also a reliable predictor of lower fertility, improved infant survival, reduced maternal mortality and enhanced levels of infant and child development and educational attainment. However, the current economic and policy situation, combined with socio-cultural factors, threaten any real advances in the education of women and girls. Training programmes are needed to help women develop their technical competence, to enable them to be better informed, better infiltrate the political and economic structures and help them gain the maximum competence and means.

An important issue raised in the Beijing Platform for Action is equality of responsibility between men and women for gender equality to become a reality (Government of Eritrea, 2004a). In order for more women to reach the same high positions as men in various fields, more focused education and socialization are needed for better burden-sharing and a fairer division of labour between the sexes in the home and society. Not only should governments' macroeconomic policies incorporate gender perspectives in their design, they also need to take into account intra-household differences in resource use and control, recognizing that improvements in women's incomes promote equity as well as child welfare.

Most economic programmes in Africa tend to overlook the unpaid economy, where women predominate. They also assume that males and females respond to incentives in the same way, thereby ignoring gender and power relations within households and communities. But gender biases and rigidities may strongly affect women's access to productive resources and markets, ultimately frustrating economic reform policies.

WOMEN IN ERETRAIAN ECONOMY

Women play an important role in the war-ravaged Eritrean economy. Many enterprises are owned and run by women, and women make up 30 percent of the workforce in manufacturing, services, and trade. It is to be noted that a legal framework for gender equality and equity is in place. Eritrea's 1997 Constitution prohibits the violation of the human rights of women and mandates the Legislature to enact laws designed to eliminate inequalities in the Eritrean society because of gender discrimination. Laws forbid the kidnapping of women and the exchange of dowries upon marriage, and women now can initiate divorce. Women gain the right to access land for housing and farming at the age of 18 (UNO, 2001). Women ex-combatants have found it difficult to return to their home communities and therefore stayed in towns where they tried to make a living without the traditional support provided by their families. Some of these women acquired skills during the war that could be helpful in running a microenterprise in peacetime, such as metal welding and machine operation. It is to be noted that, after independence the women fighters (from rural areas) settled in towns after demobilization rather than returning to their home villages because of their employment and other responsibility. Besides, better facilities motivated them to settle in towns than in villages (Ruth, 1995 & Rena, 2006).

An examination of Eritrean society reveals a more traditional picture, however. Nearly 70 percent of Eritreans live below the poverty line; this

pattern is particularly acute among the major percent of households that are headed by women. Women are concentrated in low-skill, low-paying jobs and earn only 50-80 percent of what their male colleagues earn (UNO, 2001). In addition, women's enterprises are concentrated in areas with limited growth, such as simple food processing and small tailor workshops (Rena, 2006).

Thus, political and economic gender equality is still weak in Eritrea despite the enactment of mechanisms to empower women and to inform them of their rights. One reason is the lack of organizations to mobilize and support women. Only one women's organization i.e. National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) is involved in advocacy and education on key women's issues, including health, education, microfinance, and human rights (Amrit, 1989 & UNO, 2001).

The gender gap is prevalent in the area of basic education. Household responsibilities, early marriage, and economic and cultural factors hamper girls' access to education. At the primary school level, girls have lower enrollment rates and higher grade repetition rates than do boys, and only 13 percent of eligible girls attend secondary school. The low education level among girls and women inevitably has a negative influence on their income-earning capabilities and on their access to economic opportunities (Rena, 2005).

Although the end of the Eritrean/Ethiopian war is welcome and likely have a negative effect on the economic participation of women because male workers tend to be the first to be employed in post-war jobs and enterprises. Improvement in the availability and efficiency of the economic activities of women, and in turn their well-being, therefore is critical (Amrit, 1991 & Connell, 1997). Since many men were mobilized for the war, a large number of women are now de facto heads of households and of their husbands' businesses. For example, many women also occupy jobs that were previously held by men in construction sector.

Following the war, many Eritreans returned to their native country from abroad, where they had acquired skills and business experience. About 100,000 Eritreans were expelled from Ethiopia alone, many of whom have experience in managing restaurants, hotels, taxis, and other services. The newly created enterprises of this group have been witnessing many problems because of hostile economic situation in the country (Connell, 1997).

Eritrea is a country located at extreme North East of Africa. It is a young nation as it has got its independence in the year 1991, 24 May. Total land area of Eritrea is about 125000 Square Kilometers (Ministry of Tourism,

2003). Eritrea lies in between 12° and 18° North latitude and 36° and 44 ° East longitudes. The country is having more than 1000 Kilometers of coastal line along the Red Sea with about 350 off shore islands. Besides Red Sea which is located east and north-east side of Eritrea, it shares boundaries with Sudan in the north and west and Ethiopia and Djibouti in the south. The population is estimated to be 4.5 million, including about a half a million refugees in Sudan. With about 70 per cent of its population dependent on agriculture, it is producing only 16 per cent of GDP in 2005-06 (Rena, 2005). The Table 1 gives the picture of Eritrea in terms of socio-economic conditions of the people of Eritrea.

Table 1: Socio-Economic Indicators of Eritrea

Item	Particulars
1. Population (millions)	
a. 1975	2.1
b. 2002	4.0
c. 2015 (estimate)	5.9
2. Annual growth rate of Population (%)	
a. 1975 - 2002	2.4
b. 2002 – 2015 (estimate)	3.0
3. Urban Population (% of total)	
a. 1975	12.7
b. 2002	19.5
c. 2015 (estimate)	26.5
4. Illiteracy (% of people 15 years & above)	
a. Male	42 (1990) 33 (2000)
b. Female	72 (1990) 61 (2000)
5. Population with sustainable access to improved sanitation (%)	13
a. 2000 year	
6. Population with sustainable access to an Improved water resource	46
a. 2000 year	
7. GDP (US billions \$)	
a. 2002 year	0.6
b. 2003 year	0.9
8. GDP per Capita (US \$)	
a. 2002	150
b. 2003	190
9. GDP (% growth 2002-03)	3.0
10. GDP (per Capita % growth 2002-03)	0.8

Source: Compiled from (i) UNDP: Human Development Report 2004
(ii) World Bank: World Development Indicators, 2005

WOMEN EDUCATION IN ERITREA

It is generally accepted that economic and social factors are the major causes of girls' low participation, retention, and achievement rates in education. The Educational statistics published by the Eritrean Ministry of Education (Eritrea 2003b) reveals that enrollment of female students has increased by 2.32 times from 1991-92 to 2002-03 against 2.67 times increase in male students. The details are presented in the Table-2.

Although enrollment levels of female students have increased, but the rate of increase has not been significant. In the home arena, factors affecting girls' education include attitudes toward women's limited roles due to early marriage and heavy domestic responsibilities.

The Ministry of Education has tried to address these factors through the enforcement of marriage law and projects to help reduce domestic chores (such as water and fuel wood collection) and by the establishment of schools closer to local communities and resources. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) also addresses the problem of physical distance from schools by building hostels and dormitories for girls at the secondary level (Gruber, 1998; Stefanos, 1997).

Table-2: Enrolment of Female students from Elementary level up to Technical & Vocational level (1991/92- 2002/03)

Year	Female	Total
1991/92	96,131	208,162
1992/93	110,899	247,567
1993/94	120,626	274,723
1994/95	130,786	298,741
1995/96	141,900	321,256
1996/97	145,663	329,696
1997/98	152,657	347,150
1998/99	165,644	377,896
1999/00	188,698	431,508
2000/01	193,532	442,033
2001/02	206,501	484,357
2002/03	223,119	522,099

Source: Ministry of Education (2003) Essential Education Indicators-2002-03, Asmara, Eritrea.

On the other hand, with respect to female teachers, the statistics show that at different levels of education, number of teachers has increased overwhelmingly over a period of 11 years (Table-3).

Table-3: Number of Female teachers- 1991/92 – 2002/03

Academic Year	Level of Education					
	1-5 Grade		6-7 Grade		8-11 Grade	
	Total	Female Teachers	Total	Female Teachers	Total	Female Teachers
1991/92	3,647	1,411	783	139	758	67
1992/93	4,978	1,849	855	143	905	93
1993/94	5,272	1,865	978	140	1,015	104
1994/95	5,583	1,974	948	139	1,081	108
1995/96	5,828	2,025	992	156	1,039	103
1996/97	5,476	1,977	1,017	170	942	106
1997/98	5,799	1,893	1,162	170	959	113
1998/99	5,576	1,951	1,208	149	982	112
1999/00	6,229	2,330	1,312	167	1,047	109
2000/01	6,668	2,710	1,377	160	1,188	115
2001/02	7,498	2,873	1,529	177	1,419	145
2002/03	7,692	2,754	1,614	178	1,277	140

Source: Ministry of Education, Essential Education Indicators 2002/03, Asmara, Eritrea

WOMEN PARTICIPATION IN ERITREAN ECONOMY

Participation of women in all spheres of life enhances their role in economic development process. It is to be noted that the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in the year 1995 declared to develop the fullest potential of girls and women of all ages, ensure their full and equal participation in building a better world for all and enhance their role in the development process. Beijing declaration further stressed to promote women's economic independence and empowerment by enhancing opportunities of employment to women and eradicating persistent and increasing burden of poverty on women. Besides this, the declaration stated for equal access and equal treatment of women and men in education (UNO, 1995).

After independence of Eritrea in 1991, Government of Eritrea took all-round measures for its development. Education is the initial step for development because without human resource development no development can take place.

Women also make up a major part of the large-manufacturing workforce especially in the garments, leather, and tobacco industries. This participation probably increased during the war with Ethiopia as a result of the military mobilization of a large proportion of the male workforce. Women make up 50 percent of the workforce in the public sector, compared with 22 percent in the private sector. About 80 percent of the workforce in women-owned enterprises is female (Gerde, 2001). The average age of women factory workers is 35 years. About 12 percent of the women workers, mainly those in public factories, are older than 50 years of age. Many of the women workers started working in these factories when they were very young (NUEW, 2004).

According to the survey carried out by the Ministry of Trade and Industry, total number of Medium and Large Scale Manufacturing Establishments (MLSMEs) were 276 in 2004. The number of MLSMEs has increased substantially for last several years as indicated in the Table-4.

Women are engaged primarily as unskilled labor in the production process. Skilled women represent a very small percentage (7.4 percent) of employment in large enterprises. In both public and private sector offices, women do predominantly secretarial work, with little participation in management (Gerde, 2001).

Table-4 Major Economic Indicators of MLSMEs (2002-2004)

Indicators	2002	2003	2004
Number of establishments	250	252	276
Number of persons engaged	13,431	13,842	14,818
Number of employees	13,084	13,528	14,485
Compensation of employees ('000 Nakfa)	132,485	154,230	187,896
Gross Output ('000 Nakfa)	1,755,108	2,194,459	2,766,612
Gross Input ('000 Nakfa)	1,133,345	1,393,476	1,824,479

Source: Ministry of Trade & Industry (2004) Report on Census of Manufacturing Establishments, Asmara: Eritrea.

Composition of the employees in manufacturing sector as shown in the Table 5 indicates that there is a high rate of women participation in the manufacturing sector. According to 2004 census, women employees comprise about 46.5 per cent of the total number of persons engaged in medium and large establishments. This rate varies widely between manufacturing groups.

The high rate of women participation is due to large number of women enrolled in textile industry. In 2004, the number of women employees engaged in textile industry was 2,342 which constitute 34 per cent of the total employees. The next higher participation of female employees is in the food industry accounting for 21.6 per cent of the total number of women employees (Government of Eritrea, 2004b).

In the same year, (2004) foreign employees engaged in the MLSMEs were only 15 per cent of the total number of persons engaged. Most of them were engaged in manufacturing of finished textiles and non-refractory clay and ceramic products.

Table 5 Composition of Paid and Unpaid Workers in Eretria

Employees	2003			2004		
	Total No. of Unpaid Workers	Total no. of Paid Workers	Total Workers (Paid& Unpaid)	Total No. of Unpaid Workers	Total No. of Paid Workers	Total Workers (Paid& Unpaid)
Eritrean Male	216	6960	7176	254	7478	7732
Eritrean Female	85	6401	6486	73	6784	6857
Total	301	13361	13662	327	14262	14589
Non-Eritrean Male	8	140	148	3	193	196
Non-Eritrean Female	5	27	32	3	30	33
Total	13	167	180	6	223	229
Total Male	224	7100	7324	257	7671	7928
Total Female	90	6428	6518	76	6814	6890
Grand Total	314	13528	13842	333	14485	14818

Source: Ministry of Trade & Industry (2004) Report on Census of Manufacturing Establishment, Asmara: Eritrea.

Compensation paid to Employees

As shown in the Table 6, compensation paid to employees consists of two types – wage/salary and benefits. Total compensation paid to employees in 2004 was about Nakfa 188 million, of which about Nakfa 171 million was paid as wages and salaries, and remaining Nakfa 17 million was paid for different types of benefits. This includes commission, bonus, professional hardship allowances, pension, life and causality insurance scheme, etc.

The annual compensation of employees varies from one industrial group to another. Data relating to the compensation paid per employee shows variation in payments among the industrial groups.

Table 6 Compensation per Employee by Industry Type (In '000 Nakfa)

Type of Industry	2003			2004		
	Total No. of Workers	Compensation	Compensation per Worker	Total No. of Workers	Compensation	Compensation per Worker
Food	2,472	24,180	9.782	2,627	28,860	10.986
Beverages & Alcoholic Drinks	1,083	17,147	15.833	1,321	25,645	19.413
Tobacco	49	2,065	42.143	44	2,065	46.932
Textile	2,924	28,130	9.620	2,991	26,596	8.892
Leather & Shoe	974	10,104	10.374	934	10,087	10.800
Paper and Printing	517	6,326	12.236	556	8,897	16.002
Chemical Products	542	7,315	13.496	585	9,284	15.870
Rubber& Plastic Products	578	4,414	7.637	582	5,689	9.775
Non-Metallic Mineral Products	1,952	21,011	10.764	2,233	27,202	12.182
Metal Products	1,083	12,788	11.808	1,088	15,754	14.480
Furniture	1,354	20,749	15.324	1,524	27,817	18.253
TOTAL	13,528	154,230	11.401	14,485	187,896	12.972

Source: Ministry of Trade & Industry (2004) Report on Census of Manufacturing Establishment, Asmara: Eritrea.

It is evident from the table 6 that the annual compensation of employees in 2004 ranges from the lowest ratio of Nakfa 8.892 per employee in Textile Industry to the highest ratio of Nakfa 46.932 per worker in Tobacco Industry. In general the compensation per worker in 2004 has increased in all industrial groups (except in Textile Industry) as compared to 2003. The payment in tobacco industry is higher than the other Industrial groups due to higher salary scales for administration and technical employees. The compensation paid per worker in the manufacturing of Beverage and Alcoholic drinks and

Furniture stands second and third respectively. Compensation of employees in general is low in Textile, Rubber and Plastic products (Shaebia, 2006).

Participation of Women in Transport Sector

In recent years, women participation in transport sector has increased in Eritrea, especially driving of commercial vehicles. Those who are trained by the National Union of Eritrean Women (NUEW) and the defense forces and other organizations now working as professional drivers constitute a substantial number. It is now common to see women driving government or commercial vehicles such as buses as well as heavy vehicles used in the construction industry of Eritrea.

It is after 2000 that the number of women drivers started to show a rapid increase. Out of 1,772 drivers' license issued in 2000, 638 were given to females, only 2.8% of which were third grade licenses authorising the holders to drive commercial vehicles. In the following year the number of women obtained licenses was lower but the percentage of third grade license holders was 4.3%. During the period 2000-2005 29,926 licenses were issued, 3,490 or 12% were issued to females (Shaebia, 2006).

The government garages, which operate 200 vehicles serving different government departments, employ the largest number of women drivers. The garage has 160 drivers 60 of which are women. Most of these women work in cities. Each woman drives an average of 80kms per day. It is believed that the women acquire necessary skills and turn out to be better drivers than men. They tend to show appropriate respect for traffic rules and are generally more disciplined drivers. In general, they have a better driving record and the accidents they cause are generally minor and thus cost less.

It is reported that during the last 10 years (1996-2006) no major accident resulting in serious damage has been caused by women drivers. Accidents involving women drivers are usually minor such as those causing slight damage to fenders. Women tend to be careful drivers, this attests to the superiority of women drivers. Women drivers have implications on saving life and protecting property and it therefore something which goes beyond the principle of women's equality. Various studies show that women are more careful drivers than men. Women drivers do not display 'macho' characteristics while men do and this leads to avoidable accidents. The participation of Eritrean women in all spheres of activity has been demonstrated in practical terms (Shaebia, 2006).

POLICY MEASURES

Appropriate measures have to be taken to protect women workers in order to ensure their participation in the economic development of Eritrea. It is important to develop confidence in women and raise their level of consciousness so as to safeguard their rights in the political and legal systems. What is essential is equal access to education and employment opportunities, equal pay for equal work and equal rights to skills development to promotion, eradication of harmful traditional practices that endanger women's health and well-being and reduction of poverty for Eritrean women and their families.

Access to resources

Government of Eritrea and local authorities must demonstrate commitment to removing legal impediments and socio-cultural obstacles against women, especially in the rural areas where the majority of women live and are economically active. The constraints on women's access to land, credit, extension services, inputs and new technologies must be removed, and opportunities should be created for their enterprise. Measures to improve women's access through institutional reforms must be pursued and monitored for effectiveness.

Reducing labour time

Appropriate technologies for household chores, food processing, preservation and storage are needed. Farm tools that are appropriate for women, including small transportation equipment that will free women from head loading must be provided. The increased provision of potable water and cheap and reliable energy sources are also needed to reduce the long hours that women work and to remove the drudgery from their lives.

Improving education and health

Gender biases in the educational system, training and employment must be consistently eliminated to give women new opportunities for achievement, while school curricula must incorporate concepts of gender equality and peace at all levels, so that students will incorporate them throughout their lives. Young women need role models to motivate them and must be given a usable education and skills to play meaningful roles in society and to safeguard them from harmful practices which mortgage their health and lives.

It is critically important for policy-makers to listen to and work with women to improve their positions and thereby accelerate economic development. A

comprehensive approach must be taken up by the government of Eritrea in conjunction with development agencies and women themselves to remove the social, economic and legal constraints on women.

CONCLUSION

Women play an important role in African economies in general and the war-ravaged Eritrean economy in particular. The participation of Eritrean women in all spheres of activity has been demonstrated in practical terms. Government and the private sector throughout Eritrea have to commit to achieving gender equity. The translation of this commitment into reality is, however, limited by factors such as differences in terms of educational and economic status in the towns and cities on one hand and rural areas on the other and a lack of experience with the implementation of gender policies. In addition, women can play a crucial role in Eritrea's socio-economic development if they are recognized as vital resource and given opportunities to participate. This includes women completing their national service and engaging actively in the formal economy.

Since women participation in the employment is found to be low in Eritrean economy, the government should make efforts by bringing necessary changes in the system by taking measures in providing equal access higher education and health needs, food security, enterprise development etc. In each of these areas, attention to gender-based opportunities could lead to stronger and more positive support to achieve gender equity goals of the Eritrean people. Every organization should recruit the women and give importance to the women workers to develop the organization and thus develop its economy. As it is well known, anything that is anti-woman represents socio-economic backwardness. It therefore makes economic sense to take into account gender biases and tailor planned interventions to improve women's ability to take advantage of incentives, thus enhancing overall economic efficiency.

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