A Review of the Role of Women Leadership in Facilitating Regional Integration in Africa: The Way Forward

By:

Yankho Mwandidya

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“If wealth was the inevitable result of hard work and enterprise, every woman in Africa would be a millionaire.”

George Monbiot

1. Introduction

Allow me to begin this article by making an assertion that anticipates the conclusion of this article, **“An efficient and effective regional integration in Africa is impossible without the inclusion of women.”** Since time immemorial, African women have engaged in trade and are agents of development in formal and informal sectors. Women constitute half of the world’s population, with more than 70 percent of cross-border trade being

conducted by women. These women are not a homogenous group and have different experiences. Therefore, it is essential that women, as the subject of policy, spearhead regional integration in Africa. This paper asserts that one of the reasons for the stagnated pace of regional integration in Africa is due to the failure to include women in the regional integration process. Specifically, this paper reviews the status of women in regional integration in Africa and concludes by providing recommendations for the inclusion of women in the decision-making processes to facilitate regional integration in Africa.

2. Status of Regional Integration

Regional integration aims to allow the free movement of goods, services, people and capital between national markets[1]. It has been described as being the gateway to development worldwide[2]. In the African context, regional integration is anticipated as the potential initiative for driving more robust and equitable economic growth as well as promoting poverty and unemployment reduction in Africa[3]. As such, the United Nations Economic Commission of Africa (UNECA) has championed the need for the introduction of regional integration in Africa to reap the numerous benefits that it presents for the development of the continent[4]. The African Union (AU)[5] answered this call by introducing strategies for regional integration[6]. These strategies are implemented using various means, including preferential trade agreements[7], free trade treaties[8], customs unions and common markets with freedom of movement for labour and capital.

Globally, various regional integration strategies have been adopted in line with the prevailing issues existing in that jurisdiction[9]. For example, in Europe, there is the European Union (EU)[10], whereas in North America, there is the United States-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA)[11]. In Africa, there is a common market known as the Common Market for Eastern and Southern Africa (COMESA). From these options, it appears that regional integration in Africa has focused on the free-trading communities and common markets, as evidenced in the following: the East African Community (EAC); the Economic Community of Central African States (ECCAS); the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS); the Southern African Development Community (SADC); and most recently the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (AfCFTA)[12]. The AfCFTA has been described as the largest trade pact to be enacted since the

World Trade Organization (WTO) that would provide a progressive approach to promoting trade in Africa[13].

Ordinarily, one would think that the presence of these multiple free-trading communities and common markets would have facilitated a smooth regional integration in Africa due to continental industrialization and the liberalization of trade in goods[14]. However, that is not the case. Despite the broad consensus on the benefits of regional integration in Africa, the process of regional integration in Africa has been extremely slow and has even stagnated in certain regions[15]. This has been attributed to multiple causes, including a lack of mechanisms to deal with governance challenges[16], the proliferation of non-tariff barriers[17], the prevalence of multiple commitments and overlapping obligations due to overlapping membership of various regional communities[18], fragmented distribution of economic activities[19], a discrepancy between international obligations and domestic laws concerning cross-border interactions[20], and a lack of inclusivity of the youth and women[21]. Regional integration processes in Africa have been criticized as following political impulses as opposed to economic imperatives, thereby creating a complex set of overlapping regional configurations and resulting in a so-called spaghetti bowl of integration[22].

3. A Lack of Inclusion of Women in Regional Integration in Africa

Presently, the inclusion of women in Africa’s regional integration is not impressive[23]. So, the question remains: what approach should the AU take to facilitate the inclusion of women and the youth in the design of regional integration strategies in Africa? There are multiple solutions that can resolve the prevailing challenges in facilitating regional integration. This article will focus on improving the inclusivity of women in the leadership of regional integration.

In many countries in Africa, women play essential and dynamic roles in facilitating the development of trade[24]. However, African women have been sidelined and alienated from the discussion of regional integration as well as its implementation[25]. Research on the free-trading communities in Africa reveals that only ECOWAS has had a female leader since its establishment in 1975, and this was Madame Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf[26]. Similarly, since the inception of the

OAU, which was replaced by the AU, there has only been one woman elected as a chairperson, and this was Dr. Nkosazana Clarice Dlamini-Zuma[27]. Currently, none of the regional communities in Africa has women leaders. Evidently, women have been marginalized in the leadership that is responsible for facilitating regional integration. As such, regional integration in Africa has not been responsive to existing realities and alienates the youth as well as women from the process[28].

From this perspective, this article asserts that one of the key factors influencing the stagnated pace of regional integration in Africa is the failure to involve women in trade decision-making at the multilateral level meaningfully[29]. Indeed, this trade-gender linkage has long been recognized as a significant driver of sustainable and inclusive societies across Africa[30]. This recognition has resulted in an increase in gender mainstreaming in free trade agreements by incorporating gender-related provisions[31]. For instance, the AfCFTA provides for the inclusion of women and youth[32]. This presents an unparalleled opportunity, which, if realized, would have significant benefits for the state parties of the AfCFTA, such as an increase in employment, gender equality and poverty reduction[33]. The AfCFTA has even been described as gearing towards better integrated markets and resolving the spaghetti bowl phenomenon[34]. However, since the AfCFTA entered into force on 30 May 2019, only 37 member states have ratified it, with those that have ratified yet to introduce domestic legislation to facilitate the same[35]. Further, out of these 37 states, only Ethiopia and Tanzania have female presidents. Visibly, there is a need for inclusion to fulfil the provisions.

4. Conclusion and way forward

From the foregoing, it is evident that there are gaps in the current approaches to regional integration, which have hindered their smooth adoption in the African context. There is a need for an African approach that fills these gaps by considering the local circumstances and including those directly affected by the regional integration in the decision making. It must be noted that in that there are many challenges experienced in regional integration, it is impossible to have one approach that encompasses all these challenges. Nevertheless, the inclusion of women in the leadership facilitating regional integration will be instrumental in promoting integrated markets in Africa and include the voices

of 70 percent of the traders on the continent.

In line with UNECA's sentiments that gender mainstreaming will not occur automatically[36], this inclusion must also incorporate a bottom-up approach and start from the grassroots. This review highlights three recommendations that will facilitate the inclusion of women in regional integration in Africa. To begin with, governments must ensure that there is an increase in women's participation at all levels, which will create a snowball effect in society[37]. The WTO has described the snowball effect as improving living standards, thereby reducing poverty[38]. Such an effect will further enable the drafters of regional integration strategies to understand the barriers that women face in cross-border trade in both the formal and informal sectors[39]. In turn, this will enable governments to remove barriers to women's integration in international trading systems[40].

In addition, state parties should support women's associations and cooperatives to enhance women's access to market information and opportunities[41]. This should be coupled with advocacy campaigns that encourage removing gender norms and stereotypes[42]. Finally, the AU and the UNECA must introduce measures or tools for gender equality in specific sectors to ensure compliance by state parties to facilitate trade liberalization[43]. For instance, introducing financial initiatives such as micro loans, provision of financial literacy training and improving access to markets will bridge the existing gap[44].In turn, these will enable African women to become empowered in their societies whilst engaging in their businesses in both the formal and informal sectors. Overall, the inclusion of women will provide a stepping stone in expanding trade in Africa.

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