

Why EAC needs a gender barometer

By James Karuhanga

ACTIVISTS are working tirelessly for an East African Community (EAC) gender barometer, a lobby and advocacy tool measuring implementation of gender equality commitments by partner states, to be set up.

According to Elizabeth Ampairwe, the coordinator for women and girls' empowerment at the Eastern African Sub-Regional Support Initiative for the Advancement of Women (EASSI), they are "in the final stages" and working towards having it published by end of February before a regional meeting is held to launch it in April.

"We started with country reports, and then moved on to consolidate the reports for a comparative analysis. Key advocacy issues will be picked and policy briefs produced once the process is finalised," Ampairwe told Sunday Times from Kampala, Uganda.

"The purpose is to generate evidence for holding leaders accountable on gender equality."

The inspiration of the EAC gender barometer comes from the work done by the Southern African Development Community (SADC), a 15-member grouping of southern African states. Gender Links, a Southern African NGO committed to gender equality reportedly helped champion the SADC project.

"They successfully advocated for a SADC gender protocol and they do annual assessments through a SADC gender barometer. They came to Uganda and trained us to spearhead the EAC process which is a replica," she said.

Ampairwe said donors are interested in taking the same agenda to West Africa, and that the AU is already looking for a continental gender barometer.

"This process has a big future and the sustainability is almost assured," she said.

In 2008, EASSI received support from the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (SIDA) to spearhead a campaign for an East African Declaration on Gender Equality (EADGE). It was renewed in 2010.

The EADGE later changed to a Gender Bill, which was tabled in the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) as a Private Members Bill.

As the East African Legislative Assembly (EALA) sits in Kampala, Uganda, next week, the EAC Gender Equality and Development Bill, 2016, which makes provision for gender



Girls at school. There is still an imbalance when it came to school completion due to high dropout rates of girls due to different reasons. File

equality, protection and development in the Community, will be top on agenda.

"That's a great sign," said Ampairwe who has pushed for the legislation for nearly seven years.

"There is a lot of commitment by EALA".

In 2012, EASSI conducted a gender analysis of the EAC road map as a way of highlighting the implementation deficit on gender commitments of the EAC Treaty.

The organisation intends to produce an annual EAC gender barometer report similar to the SADC model. It will provide a blended measure of gender equality that is both easy to understand and to communicate, as well as support decision-makers in assessing how far individual Partner States are reaching gender equality.

Besides giving more visibility to gender equality by making it possible to measure its progress over time, the use of the new tool, it is said, will permit meaningful comparisons to be made between different policy areas across partner states.

Case for improvements

Among others, the World Economic Forum Global Gender Gap Report 2016 ranked Rwanda fifth globally for closing the gender gap in various spheres. The country came after Nordic countries of Iceland, Finland, Norway and Sweden while it continues to be Africa's top performer, as well as the only sub-Saharan country ranked in the global top 10.

Among others, Rwanda maintains its place in the global top 10 as country with the highest share of female parliamentarians in the world at 64 percent.

Explaining how the EAC gender barometer will hold governments accountable to their gender commitments, Chantal Umuhiza, the Women in Cross-Border Trade (WICBT) project coordinator at local NGO Pro-Femmes/Twese Hamwe, said the EAC gender barometer will contain up to date factual data reflecting trends and progress by countries to achieve the goals set in line with different commitments to gender equality.

"The barometer report compiles citizens' views and experiences through a scorecard. For example, if Rwanda has done all required to ensure women's participation in governance, citizens score how they rate the government on that achievement," Umuhiza said.

"The combination of quantitative and qualitative aspects give a general aspect of how countries are doing. It also gives power to the citizens to express how they feel or experience different gender issues

and thus indirectly communicates to their governments."

Umuhiza said the first baseline barometer report was highly appreciated by government institutions as a tool to help track progress and to "show where gaps still exist in achieving gender equality and equity."

She added: "Rwanda has made tremendous progress in gender equality across all sectors but we are not yet there. The report highlights where the gaps are and it's crucial that these are taken into consideration moving forward."

For example, women's participation is the governance is the highly celebrated achievement but it's mostly at central governance level. At local governance level, there remain gaps and challenges. Women's participation in other sectors is still low as well."

The EAC Gender Equality and Development Bill's barometer baseline study in Rwanda puts the percentage of women in economic decision-making (mining sector) at 33.3 percent and men at 66.7 percent. The same report has 143 females in the media sector while males

are 446. Further still, the extractive industries employed 14 percent females and 86 percent males.

Umuhiza further said education parity was achieved, but there was still an imbalance when it came to school completion due to high dropout rates of girls due to different reasons.

Enrollment in higher education institutions is also still unequal and the type of courses taken on by girls is still highly influenced by traditional women's roles in society, she said.

"There's still a mindset issue influenced by gender inequalities. There's still more to be done, in policies, laws and in implementation of the existing good laws and policies."

According to the barometer baseline study, the current status of women in the region speaks to the need to address gaps.

Asked about the particular critical issues the new tool will highlight more than ever before, in Kenya, Joan Ireri, the project coordinator Women's Rights Awareness Programme (WRAP) in Nairobi, Kenya, told Sunday Times that at present there are no consolidated records of gender-based violence (GBV) cases reported, prosecuted, convicted or withdrawn in the justice system.

"The barometer has identified it as a gap that needs to be addressed; hopefully proper documentation structures will be put in place," Ireri said.

"Gender inequality in Kenya remains glaring despite having laws and regulations including the constitution speaking into the same."

One of the causes of limited implementation of gender policies by EAC partner states, it is noted, is weak institutional frameworks and systems for holding governments accountable.

Article 121 of the EAC Treaty particularly emphasizes the role of women in socio-economic development.

Partner states are required – through appropriate legislative and other measure – to, among others, promote the empowerment and effective integration and participation of women at all levels of socioeconomic development especially in decision-making; abolish legislation and discourage customs that are discriminatory against women; and take other measures that eliminate prejudices against women and promote the equality of the female gender with that of the male gender in every respect.

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