

Policy Brief

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Advancing Sustainable Women's Economic Empowerment

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THOUGHT AND CONVERSATION



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1 Introduction

Advancing sustainable women's economic empowerment is essential for fostering inclusive growth and social equity. Empowering women economically involves equal access to education, employment opportunities, and financial resources. It requires dismantling structural barriers such as discriminatory laws, cultural norms, and gender biases that inhibit women's full participation in the economy. Promoting entrepreneurship and supporting women-led businesses can drive innovation and economic diversification. Additionally, ensuring workplace equity through fair wages, safe working conditions, and policies that support work-life balance is crucial. Investments in women's education and vocational training are foundational for equipping them with the skills needed in a rapidly changing job market. By creating an enabling environment that supports women's economic activities, societies can enhance overall economic productivity, reduce poverty, and achieve more sustainable and resilient communities.

In addition, sustainable women's economic empowerment lies at the intersection of social progress and economic development, encompassing not only equal access to economic resources and opportunities but also women's autonomy and full involvement in decision-making processes. Achieving long-term economic empowerment for women is a moral and strategic imperative for promoting inclusive and sustainable development goals. Despite international agreements such as the Beijing Platform for Action, significant disparities in economic participation between men and women persist globally, particularly in developing countries.

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The convergence of women from across the globe at the Women's Impact: Innovation and Sustainability in Africa Conference (WIISA) 2023 conference underscores their collective power and determination to address issues impacting them and to devise long-term solutions that will empower women universally. A coordinated effort involving women from academia, policymaking, government, civil society organisations, the private sector, and international development partners is essential for advancing sustainable economic development for women. Debates on barriers to women's economic growth are critical for informing policymakers and providing women-centric solutions.

The University of Johannesburg has proactively promoted women's economic development worldwide by facilitating and encouraging such gatherings to discuss issues aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2063. The Pan African Women Studies Unit at the Institute of Pan African Thought and Conversation (IPATC) champions gender equality. It invests in women's economic empowerment, recognising that this unlocks societal potential, fosters economic growth, reduces poverty and advances sustainable development goals.

This second Women's International conference by the IPATC, the Research Chair: Welfare and Social Development, Centre for Social Development in Africa, the Faculty of Humanities at UJ, and other partners was successfully hosted in 2023. It marks a significant milestone in advocating for gender equity, innovation,

and sustainable development across Africa with a theme on "Advancing Sustainable Women's Economic Empowerment in Line with the SDGs and Agenda 2063."

The two-day conference highlighted, six keynote sessions, six plenary sessions, and twenty high-level panels. The discussions at the conference were framed around the themes of 'Innovation and Technology', 'Climate Change and the Green Economy', 'Science, Education and Workforce', 'Financial Inclusion and Entrepreneurship', 'Gender Based Violence', 'Governance and Leadership' amongst many. The conference provided a platform for dialogue, collaboration, and action to realise the full potential of women as catalysts for inclusive and sustainable development. The conference brought together diverse participants, including governments, financiers, policy practitioners, academia, civil society, the private sector, and continental and global networks across Africa and beyond, to promote long-term women's economic empowerment.



PANELISTS WHO CONTRIBUTED ON DAY TWO OF THE WOMEN'S IMPACT: INNOVATION AND SUSTAINABILITY IN AFRICA CONFERENCE.

Source: IPATC

The hybrid conference was attended by a total of 187 delegates in person and 80 delegates online. The attendees hailed from various regions, including Africa, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. The two-day conference, organised by Dr Tinuade Adekunbi Ojo, Prof Tanusha Raniga and the Pan African Women Studies Unit Team, provided a platform for delegates to discuss various issues impacting women and to formulate concrete solutions. The conference featured dignitaries such as Ambassador Stella Hauya Ndau, the High Commissioner of Malawi to South Africa; Nana Wanjau, Vice President of Commonwealth Business Women Africa; Engineer Lightness Salema, Country Head of Tanzania Commonwealth Women-Africa Commonwealth Women Network; Dr. Sophia Price, Head of Politics and International Relations at Leeds Beckett University, United Kingdom; and Professor Olocha Nwabara, Assistant Professor of English at the State University of New York at Geneseo, United States of America and UJ Leadership including Prof Victoria Graham, SIA Senior Director; Dr Vukuza Nolitha, Senior Executive Director, University Relations, Students Affairs and Sport and Prof Kammila Naidoo, Dean, Faculty of Humanities, Prof Siphamandla Zondi, Director, IPATC and Co-director of Institute for Global African Affairs, and other prominent dignitaries.

The conference deliberations aimed to empower women as change agents in the transition to a green economy, promote inclusive and equitable sustainable development, and accelerate the integration of gender issues into climate change policies and programs.

2 Promoting Impact for Change

Promoting impact for change in women's empowerment involves implementing and supporting initiatives that address the unique challenges faced by women and amplify their voices in all spheres of life. This requires a multi-faceted approach that includes education, economic opportunities, legal rights, and social support systems. Education empowers women with knowledge and skills, enabling them to pursue higher education and professional careers. Economic opportunities, such as access to capital and entrepreneurship programs, allow women to achieve financial independence and leadership roles. Legal reforms ensure that women have equal rights and protection against discrimination and violence. Social support systems, including mentorship programs and community networks, provide the necessary encouragement and resources for women to overcome barriers and thrive. By focusing on these areas, stakeholders can create a ripple effect that transforms individual lives and fosters broader societal change, leading to a more equitable and just world.

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The discussions at the conference underscored the importance of creating opportunities for women to achieve excellence. It emphasized the necessity of examining women's challenges and opportunities in Africa, focusing on innovation and sustainability. Furthermore, the realization of gender equality and empowerment was highlighted as being contingent upon universal access to education, skill development, quality healthcare, and the eradication of Gender-Based Violence (GBV). In addition, the innovative solutions devised by African women in response to significant challenges, are crucial in highlighting the technology-driven entrepreneurship and environmentally conscious practices.

The discussion further narrates the need for the conference to provide an impactful and sustainable resolution relevant to women's sustainable development. Participants were urged to be mindful of how they present information and ideas, ensuring that the language and tone are inclusive and valuable for all women.



AMBASSADOR STELLA HAUYA NDAU, HIGH COMMISSIONER OF MALAWI TO SOUTH AFRICA.

Source: IPATC



HIGHLIGHTS FROM THE WOMEN'S IMPACT INNOVATION AND SUSTAINABILITY IN AFRICA CONFERENCE.

Source: IPATC

3 Promoting Transformative Changes

Promoting transformative changes for women's empowerment involves creating a holistic approach that addresses the structural and cultural barriers hindering gender equality. This includes implementing policies that ensure equal access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities for women while also challenging and changing societal norms that perpetuate discrimination and gender stereotypes. Empowerment initiatives should focus on fostering leadership and entrepreneurial skills among women, ensuring their representation in decision-making processes at all levels, and protecting their rights through robust legal frameworks. Additionally, community-based programs that engage both men and women in dialogue about gender equality can help shift mindsets and build a supportive environment for sustainable change. By prioritising these strategies, we can create a society where women are equal participants and drivers of economic, social, and political progress.

The discussion also highlighted the relevance of the conference's theme in promoting critical thinking about transformative changes benefiting women. Women's impact requires active involvement in political decision-making at all levels for gender equality. Women must strive to make continual efforts to relevant data showing the progress made in the past decades towards gender equality and the recognition of its importance for an inclusive, prosperous, and sustainable world.

4 Gendered Impacts of Climate Change on Women Entrepreneurs

Climate change is not a gender-neutral phenomenon; it disproportionately impacts women and exacerbates existing gender inequalities. The multi-dimensional effects of climate change encompass adverse impacts on the environment and human health and disruptions in the economy and society. Natural disasters induced by climate change increasingly drive women into poverty due to the resultant economic decline in communities. Female entrepreneurs encounter greater obstacles compared to their male counterparts when dealing with climate change. This is because women are heavily involved in specific sectors such as agriculture, tourism, forestry, and healthcare industries, which are highly susceptible to climate change and exhibit lower resilience.

Women's capacity to adapt to climate change is often constrained by gender norms dictating interactions within and outside the household. For instance, in Africa, women's ability to transition to more climate-resilient businesses or accumulate savings to respond to climate and income shocks is significantly hampered by laws and norms restricting their ownership or inheritance of land and access to financial resources.

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Advancing Sustainable Women's Economic Empowerment.

Conference discussions highlighted that women in various sectors and households have limited power to make financial decisions due to persistent gender norms in society. Many women reported difficulties accessing finances from banking institutions without their husbands' approval. Additionally, the lack of collateral further hinders their ability to obtain loans and insurance necessary for transitioning to more resilient sectors.

There is a pressing need for advocacy to facilitate women's access to financial assistance from banking institutions. In Africa, land ownership is predominantly restricted to men. However, since many women's businesses are based on agriculture and forestry, women must be permitted to own land and hold title deeds. This necessitates an institutional shift in policies that impede women's land ownership.



DAY TWO OF THE WOMEN'S IMPACT: INNOVATION AND SUSTAINABILITY IN AFRICA CONFERENCE.

Source: IPATC

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Empowering Women Entrepreneurs as part of the Green Economy

Throughout the conference deliberations, the role of the green economy in empowering women was a significant focus. Mitigating the impacts of climate change through a green economy enhances women's livelihoods globally and economically empowers them, particularly as custodians of natural resources. Current global policy discourses increasingly emphasise the green economy to address the social and environmental impacts on economic development. The "green economy" paradigm advocates for a people-centred approach to sustainable development, aiming to protect the environment while reducing poverty and improving the lives of the unemployed through job creation and sustainable economic growth. According to this paradigm, addressing poverty, inequality, hunger, and other socio-environmental issues necessitates the promotion of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

Most countries have incorporated the concept of a green economy into their policies. However, there has been insufficient gender analysis and limited participation of women in green economy debates. Despite women being disproportionately affected by environmental disasters, their intimate interaction with the environment and indigenous knowledge positions them as valuable contributors to finding better solutions.

The conference discussions acknowledged that, while the green economy presents certain benefits, women still face significant barriers to participation. Consequently, the concept has been criticised for not adequately integrating a gender equality perspective. Policymakers must recognize that climate change adaptation and mitigation strategies through a green economy must specifically target women to enhance women's welfare and economic empowerment.

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6 Empowering Women Entrepreneurs as part of the Green Economy

The gendered transition into the digital economy presents opportunities and challenges for women's economic growth. As digital technologies reshape industries and create new markets, women have the potential to access previously unreachable economic opportunities, such as remote work, online entrepreneurship, and digital skills training. This transition can empower women economically by providing flexibility and enabling them to balance work with other responsibilities. However, gender disparities, such as the digital divide, limited access to education and technology, and social norms, can hinder women's full participation in the digital economy. Addressing these barriers through targeted policies, such as improving digital literacy, providing affordable internet access, and promoting gender-inclusive digital education, is crucial. By doing so, the digital economy can catalyse women's economic empowerment, leading to more inclusive and sustainable economic growth.

The discussion emphasises that integrating women into the digital economy presents substantial opportunities to reduce inequality and promote global development and economic growth. As the digital economy expands, its success is contingent upon the inclusive participation of women, which remains a significant global challenge. Achieving sustainable economic development in alignment with the SDGs and Agenda 2063 requires concerted efforts to dismantle barriers that impede women's participation in the digital economy. Increasing the number of women entrepreneurs fosters technology-oriented businesses and boosts economic growth, mainly when women-owned enterprises thrive in digital-centric industries.

Discussions have highlighted a significant digital divide, with fewer women accessing the internet and digital tools than men. The digital economy offers many opportunities for women's economic empowerment, including access to education and healthcare services, increased economic opportunities, enhanced



MISS NANA WANJU, - VICE PRESIDENT, COMMONWEALTH BUSINESS WOMEN-AFRICA, CHIEF GENDER OFFICER FOR PAN AFRICAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE.

Source: IPATC

social status, autonomy, participatory decision-making, and financial empowerment. Historically, women have been excluded from accessing and utilising digital technologies; therefore, initiatives to enhance digital literacy and skills development are crucial for bridging the gender digital divide. If this gap persists, women will miss out on potential opportunities for economic empowerment, and existing inequalities may widen, or new ones may emerge.

Conference discussions also identified challenges and considerations regarding women's participation in the digital economy. Despite the rapid growth of

the digital economy, women entrepreneurs remain marginalised and underrepresented. Globally, women continue to face technological discrimination, with Africa having the lowest number of women engaged in technology sectors. Addressing these issues is vital for fostering a more inclusive and equitable digital economy.

7 Addressing the Cost of Gender-Based Violence and Trauma of Women's Leadership, Innovation and Sustainability

Gender-based violence (GBV) and the ensuing trauma profoundly impact women's capacity to lead, innovate, and contribute to sustainable development. Despite progress in acknowledging and addressing GBV, its prevalence remains a significant global issue. The UN Agenda 2030 explicitly acknowledges violence against women, underscoring that achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030 necessitates effective mechanisms to combat GBV, which exacerbates existing gender inequalities. Specifically, SDG 5 aims to ensure equal opportunities for all women, with sub-goal 5.2 focused on eradicating all forms of violence against women and girls in both public and private spheres, including sexual exploitation and trafficking.

GBV is a pervasive global problem, affecting one in three women worldwide, regardless of race, economic status, or social situation. According to the World Bank, 35% of women globally have experienced either physical violence, sexual intimate partner violence, or non-partner sexual violence. The prevalence of violence against women is exceptionally high in regions where women possess less social and economic power. In many developing countries, GBV is often attributed to poverty, lack of education, and financial exclusion. The repercussions of GBV extend beyond the immediate victims and their families, leading to substantial social and economic consequences.

A non-linear yet substantial correlation exists between women's economic empowerment and the prevalence of violence against them. It is crucial to engage men in discussions concerning gender inequality as their involvement is essential in challenging detrimental gender norms, promoting gender-responsive policies, and ensuring equal opportunities for women in various spheres, including the workplace. Therefore, involving men in advocating for women's economic empowerment is important.

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PANEL DISCUSSION ON STRENGTHENING INSTITUTIONAL AND POLICY FRAMEWORKS, FUNDING AND NETWORKS TO ADVANCE WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP.

From the left: Prof Alex Nunn, Dean of Research and Humanities, Trinity University, UK; Ms Jennifer Marcus, Marcus Brand, Texas, USA; Dr Sophia Price, HOD Department of Politics and International Relations, Leeds; Beckett University, UK; Ms Isabella L. Isiji, Senior Consultant, Cullien Scholefield, Investors in People, UK; Ms Pinky Mokamoane - Pinky Mokemane Consultants, South Africa.

Source: IPATC

Challenges to Sustainable Women's Economic Empowerment Economically empowering women is widely recognized as a crucial strategy to combat global gender inequalities. However, women continue to encounter numerous barriers to economic empowerment, including limited access to financial opportunities, low income, workplace discrimination, and restrictive legislation. Addressing these challenges is essential for achieving sustainable development and gender equality.



PLENARY PANEL ON WOMEN, CLIMATE CHANGE AND THE GREEN ECONOMY.

From the Left: Ms. Nonzuzo Makanda, Chairperson of National Financial Literacy Association, South Africa; Mr Robert Jacobs Director Solar Clusters; Ms Augusta Seneisse, Head Research, Walinda Lingo, UK; Ms. Engr Lightness Salema, Country Head, Tanzania, Commonwealth Business Women-Africa; Ms Bertha Chiroro, GenderCC South Africa and Dr Dorcas Ettang, Senior Lecturer, University of KwaZulu-Natal.

Source: IPATC

8 Policy Recommendations

Building on the discussions from the two-day conference, several policy recommendations were formulated to enhance women's empowerment and promote sustainable development in Africa. These recommendations are as follows:

1. Policymakers are encouraged to implement gender-responsive policies and initiatives to promote access to education, healthcare, and economic opportunities for women, particularly those from disadvantaged communities.
2. It is imperative for policymakers to increase and strengthen institutional structures that promote women's leadership and participation in decision-making processes at all levels of government, including more excellent representation in political and business leadership positions.
3. To address the rising incidence of Gender-Based Violence (GBV) in Africa, policymakers should reinforce legal frameworks and law enforcement mechanisms to combat GBV effectively. Additionally, there should be increased funding and support for survivor-centred services such as shelters, economic empowerment initiatives, counselling, and legal aid, ensuring comprehensive support and resources for GBV survivors as they rebuild their lives.
4. Women's leadership and engagement in climate change adaptation and mitigation activities should be encouraged, recognizing their unique expertise, experiences, and perspectives as natural resource stewards and agents of sustainable development.
5. Investment in green technologies and renewable energy solutions should be prioritised to promote women's participation and benefit underprivileged areas, generating income, creating jobs, and ensuring environmental sustainability.
6. A supportive ecosystem for women entrepreneurs in the technology sector should be established by providing mentorship, networking, and investment opportunities to enable women-led firms to scale and thrive in the digital age. Additionally, digital skills training and capacity-building efforts for women and girls should be promoted, equipping them with the tools and knowledge necessary for economic empowerment, education, and civic engagement.
7. Health systems must be improved to meet women's specific health requirements, such as maternal and reproductive health, access to contraception, and the prevention and treatment of non-communicable diseases, including breast cancer and cervical cancer. Advocacy for gender-sensitive health policies and programs that prioritise women's health and rights is essential, including comprehensive sexuality education, maternal and child healthcare, and access to safe and legal abortions as permitted by law.
8. Collaboration among governments, civil society organisations, and the business sector should be encouraged to mobilise resources supporting women-led innovation, entrepreneurship, and sustainable development initiatives.
9. Advocating for data collection and research on women's issues is essential. This will provide a deeper understanding of the intersectional challenges that African women face. Data collected will help policymakers develop evidence-based policies and initiatives that address women's unique needs and goals.

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UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG, SOUTH AFRICA**





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The Institute for Pan-African Thought and Conversation (IPATC) Policy Briefs are a series of reports from the Institute’s research-based and policy-oriented seminars on relevant themes, intended for policy practitioners and decision makers in foreign policy, Pan-African issues, security, governance, aid and development. They aim to inform public debate and generate input into the sphere of policymaking. The perspectives expressed are outcomes from strategic engagements and those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Institute and the University of Johannesburg.



About the Authors:

Dr Tinuade Ojo is a Program Director and Head of Pan African Women Studies Unit at IPATC. She is a feminist political economist who explores the gendered dimension of trade, financial inclusion, digital transformation in policy, politics, and digitalisation. She specialises in international political economy, gender inequality, and poverty reduction strategies.

Ms Alison Zuva is a Research Assitant at IPATC. Her main areas of research are climate change, gender equality and sustainable cities and communities.



About the Institute

IPATC was established at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) in 2016 as one of nine flagship centres of excellence to conduct research. It provides a forum for scholars, practitioners, and civil society actors across Africa and its Diaspora to dialogue and contribute to the rigorous production and dissemination of Pan-African knowledge and culture. The Institute seeks to promote original and innovative Pan-African ideas and critical dialogue in pursuit of global excellence in research and teaching, and to contribute actively to building an international profile for UJ on Pan-African issues.



This policy brief is research based on several aspects of the SDGs in relation to gender equality and empowerment of all women and girls.

