

Equal Opportunities for Women: A Systematic Review

Rose Njoki Mutuota and Mutuota Kigotho

Abstract

For women to be empowered and achieve equality, they need to be participants at the decision-making tables and conferences where important decisions are made. Equal opportunities for women translate into the improvement of the lives of families and communities. This article reports on a systematic review of articles related to equal opportunities for women through education, mentoring, skilling and innovation. Research published between 2010 and 2021 was reviewed. The outcomes show that a lot more needs to be done to support women achieve their goals in education, work and politics. Providing equal opportunities for women is the responsibility of all and needs commitment and a wholesome approach. The paper discusses the issues that need to be addressed to ensure equality for women and explains the implications for governments, Non-governmental organisations, universities and philanthropists.

Key Words: *Opportunities, Women, Systematic, Review*

Introduction

Equal opportunities for women matter. Having equal opportunities leads to better outcomes for women, their families and the community in which they live. Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 5 call for elimination “of all forms of discrimination against women and girls”. Empowerment of women can only be achieved where women have equal opportunities.

This article looks at the social, economic and political dimensions to explain the presence and absence of equal opportunities for women. Chapter 4, Article 27 (3 & 4) of the Kenyan constitution (2010) states that:

Women and men have the right to equal treatment, including the right to equal opportunities in political, economic, cultural and social spheres. The State shall not discriminate directly or indirectly against any person on any ground, including race, sex, pregnancy, marital status, health status, ethnic or social origin, colour, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, dress, language or birth.

In Australia, for example, equal opportunity Legislation (The Sex Discrimination Act, 1984) was passed to remove sex discrimination in the workplace and to improve employment opportunities for women. Equal opportunity was regarded as a fundamental and individual right, regardless of race, sex and marital status.

For women to participate in the social, political and economic spheres of society, they need to have equal opportunities. Barriers that have stopped women from achieving equal opportunities are both structural and political. They include first and foremost lack of sufficient policies. Where policies have been formulated, they are not implemented or enforced or are poorly implemented without the consultation of women (Debusscher et al., 2013). There is, therefore, need for government to

consult women about policies that concern them before their implementation, For example, funding for universities and other parastatals should be tied to not just increasing the number of women in senior positions but also ensuring that the institutions have put in place mechanisms for gender equity. According to Klenk et.al., (2022) Sweden, Norway and Germany have policies prescribing equal opportunities for women. Sweden employs regulations while Germany and Norway use incentives and regulatory sectorial policies. As a result of these policy decisions, there are more females than males in Higher Education in Sweden.

Social norms have for centuries disadvantaged women in ownership of assets and control of land and other resources (Hills, 2015; Hingston, 2016; Midema, et al., 2018; Syed, 2019; United nations, 2019). Many communities have upheld patriarchy which treats women as subordinate to men. These social norms also deny women agency so that they do not always have the ability to make choices about the household, their health (including their reproductive health), education and even the choice to take up economic activities to improve their economic welfare.

Women face unequal access to economic opportunities in both formal and informal labour markets. Men own the property, land and the means to work on the land. Enrolment and retention for girls and women in education remains lower than that of boys/men. Reasons for this vary from region to region. In some pastoral communities, such as the Maasai of Kenya, the education of girls is not considered important because they will get married and move away from home and any educational benefits will be drawn by her husband and not by her parents. In other places, religious beliefs deny or limit women's opportunities to education.

Women who have disabilities have lesser chances of having equal opportunities to get an education, health care and economic (Varshney, 2022). Women who live in remote communities also have few opportunities yet where one lives should not limit their opportunities in life.

Equal opportunities alone do not limit the disadvantages women encounter in society. For equality of women to be achieved, society must also think about equity. According to Graham (2020, p. 42.) "substantive equity recognises the need for the removal of barriers through affirmative action. This involves policies that aim to increase the participation of specific groups through provision of reasonable adjustments, which are changes to what is usually available in order to provide equal opportunity for participation. Substantive equity requires us to treat groups differently". So, to ensure women get equal opportunity, we need to treat women differently. Without the changes to policies and laws, barriers to equality will remain in place.

The aim of gender equity is to achieve equal outcomes for women which include equal opportunities for women in the whole society. Women's equality will be achieved when they are able to access resources, jobs, promotion and finances. According to the workplace Gender Equality Agency (Australian Government, 2022), in Australia, the current gender pay gap is 22.8 % and only 19.4% of CEOs in Australia are women. The same agency presents that where there is workplace gender equality there is enhanced national productivity and economic growth, better organisational performance, better chances for companies to attract talent and retain employees and enhanced organisational reputation.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this article was to conduct a systematic review of literature to find out the status of equal opportunities for women in society. With this review, we hope to provide a better understanding of the progress made so far in creating equal opportunity for women in political and local representation, the economic and in the social sector. These results will inform researchers, policymakers and donor organisations about what changes need to be made to ensure equity for women

Methodology

The study focuses on equal opportunities in social, economic and political dimensions. The data bases searched included: MEDLINE, Social work abstracts, PsychINFO, EBSCO Databases. Academic Search Complete with full text and Informit. Data bases were queried using the following search strategy focussed on equal opportunities for women: Equal* AND Opportunities AND Women* OR Females* OR Girl*. The following question guided this review: What does the literature tell us about the achievements and barriers to equal opportunities for women? The objective was to draw attention to the existing research on the empowerment of women through realisation of equal opportunities and gaps in available knowledge.

Inclusion criteria

The prime inclusion criteria for the study was research related to equal opportunities for women. Research published between 2010 and June 2022 was included addressing the status of women and how or what measures are suggested for providing equal opportunities for women. The search strategy also included government reports, government agencies reports and semi-autonomous government agency policy documents. The search also included grey literature both published and unpublished such as working papers, published reports and prominent international websites and the Constitution of Kenya. Another inclusion criterion included was that the studies should be written in English.

Results and discussion

Research has identified barriers that stand in the way of women having equal opportunities in society. In many parts of the world, Research points out that women do not yet have equal opportunities. United Nations (2015) points out that “African women continue to face constraints to achieving their potential, as women do in different ways around the world. They face barriers in the workplace and agriculture, and in their access to infrastructure, services and economic opportunities. They experience restrictive cultural norms and practices and discriminatory laws. They are particularly vulnerable to the impacts of climate change”. These barriers are social, economic and political. Below is a summary of research findings.

A summary of barriers that prevent equal opportunities for women

	Research	Barriers to equal opportunities	Countries
1	Wold Bank, 2012	Policy failure, lack of resources and assets	World

		Social norms Not promoting women's health and education Lack of voice and agency	
2	Gudhlanga (2012)	Women not included in history books The dominance of males in Zimbabwean text books Women are referred to as feeble in books. The "hidden curriculum" that promotes men and ignores women.	Zimbabwe
3	Klenk, et al., (2022)	Structural conditions that limit women's opportunities Lack of policies to increase female leaders in Higher Education Lack of government action-Government mandates and regulation needed as criteria for budget decisions	Germany, Norway, Poland, Sweden
4	Zylla-Woellner	Quotas for women	
5	Rendon, Jim	Promotions Double jeopardy of being black and female Women not offered training Women in boards	United States of America
6	2022 Varshney, D	Women with disabilities have fewer opportunities. Discrimination because of their disabilities	India
7	Debusscher et. al	Policies that do not take Gender issues seriously Policies that do not consider challenges in occupations occupied by women Poor implementations of equal opportunity policies Lack of grassroot consultations	Rwanda
8	Syed, et al.,(2019)	Women in Muslim countries treated as different and subordinate	Pakistan Afghanistan Saudi Arabia
9	Clavero (2021)	Gender equity plans (GEPs) Invisible barriers to equal opportunities The sticky floor metaphor- women cluttered in precarious forms of employment at the bottom of the academic hierarchy Need for policies to remove the barriers	European Union countries
10	Hingston, C. A. (2016).	Cultural attitudes that discriminate against women.	Sierra Leone

		Empowerment in Social, political and economic rights, including the rights to own and inherit property, sign a contract, register and manage a business	
11	African Gender Index 2019	Women’s empowerment Representation in politics Voice Need for laws to be implemented	Africa (Excluded: Djibouti, Equatorial Guinea and South Sudan)
	United Nations (2020)	Low representation and participation of women in leadership Lack of economic autonomy Violence against women	Rwanda

Social Barriers

The African Gender Equality Index (2015), indicates that African women face many barriers that prevent them from achieving their full potential. These range from restrictive cultural practices to discriminatory laws and labour markets that favour men. As much as progress is being made in women achieving equal opportunities in the world, there are three categories of women who have not experienced this shift: women with disabilities (Varshney, 2022), women in Muslim communities (Syed et al., 2019,) and black women in the West. Syed et. al., (2019) explain that there are restrictions on women’s education and health choices as well as lack of agency in some countries such as Afghanistan and the Taliban controlled areas of Pakistan. According to Varshney (2022) the discrimination of women is more prevalent in the private sector than in the public sector and points out that religious interpretations of men’s and women’s roles in society affect opportunities for women.

In Africa for example gender inequality is promoted through text and language. Gudhlanga (2012) points out that textbooks in Zimbabwe promote male figures and present women as feeble, insecure, and needing male support and protection. The texts and the cultural attitudes propagate inter-generational production of patriarchy. In some countries such as Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, there are restrictions on what jobs women can do and how they can travel to work (Syed, et. al., (2019). These restrictions limit opportunities for women to be the best they can in the market economy.

Although the education gap between men and women is closing, women and men tend to enrol in different courses that lead to different trajectories in their careers. Social norms and persistent attitudes limits women’s opportunities to enrol in male dominated courses such as Engineering and Science.

Economic barriers

Researchers cite women’s underrepresentation in leading managerial roles and in higher education (Klenk et al., (2022). There are structural conditions that prevent women from getting equal

opportunities to take up these roles and according to Klenk et al., (2022) these structural barriers can be overcome by putting in enablers within the public and private service to enable women's upward mobility. These enablers could be in the form of regulations, for example, the threat to reduce funding to universities or regulations such as mandatory quotas, and information e.g. equal opportunity campaigns.

When decisions are made on who will be promoted to various positions women are overlooked in favour of their male colleagues (Rendon, 2022). The third barrier is that women are not provided with the training and support needed to ensure they succeed in their jobs (Rendon, 2022).

Women do not easily access credit (World Bank, 2012) to start or grow businesses because they do not have assets to present to banks as collateral. Women are also more likely to work in low-paying jobs in workplaces which reduce their opportunities to rise to positions of leadership in organisations. In the higher education sector, for example, women are relegated to the lower and precarious forms of employment with only a few women rising to leadership positions.

Data shows that men have higher technological advancements than women. Only 69 per cent of women over 15 have mobile phones compared to 73 percent of men (Kenya Bureau of Statistics, 2020).

One of the main barriers to women's advancement is the lack of progress in the acquisition of resources. Women have less access to land and credit therefore economic resources. According to the African Gender Index (2019), "African women are highly economically active and own one-third of small and medium enterprises. However, men tend to manage medium-sized and larger firms. The top managers of African businesses are overwhelmingly male" p. 52. There are few women who get the opportunity to rise to the high echelons of power. There is discrimination against women in hiring. This denies women the opportunities afforded to men.

Research indicates that even where women have risen to leadership positions they earn less than their male colleagues (Rendon, 2021) and this has been made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic. Where there are opportunities for women to take up leadership positions, they are often reluctant because of their caring duties (Rendon, 2021). Rendon, (2021) adds that often women are overlooked and points to the discrimination of black females in the Western world a situation he refers to as 'the double jeopardy of being black and female because of structural problems black women face more issues related to promotion at work or selection at interview panels even when the directors at these companies are white women.

Poor implementation of economic policies which sometimes lack grassroots consultation denies women opportunities in the economy because the policymakers do not know women's capacity and their needs. Some of the policies do not take into consideration the challenges women face in the occupations that mainly employ women such as childcare and agriculture (Debusscher et. al., 2013).

Political barriers

All over the world, there are very few women elected into high political office. However, the 2021 Presidential elections in the United States of America produced a remarkable outcome with the defeat of the then Republican President Donald Trump. The Democratic Party led by President Joe Biden and his running mate, Kamala Harris won that election. The significance of Kamala Harris rise to such a powerful office cannot be lost. The most powerful western democracy became a leading light in the empowerment of women by electing Kamala Harris to the constitutional office of vice president. Prior to this, women in the United States had occupied positions such as Secretary of State (Hilary Clinton, 2009-2013, Madeleine Albright, 1997-2001, and Condoleezza Rice, 2005-2009).

Australia, another western democracy, had an elected female Prime Minister in the name of Julia Gillard (2010-2013). She served as Australia's 27th Prime Minister. She held office as leader of the Australian Labor Party. She was the first and only female prime minister in Australian history. In a television interview with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, Julie Bishop who had served as Australia's foreign Minister (2013-2018), is quoted as saying"

When Julia Gillard became prime minister, I think there was a sense of pride across Australia that we had reached another milestone in terms of equal opportunities and the representation of women. But I feel that Julia could never shake the circumstances leading to her assuming the role of prime minister. And clearly, there was a deep well of resentment that she took the job off a very popular, at one-point, prime minister, in Kevin Rudd (Crabb, 2021),

In electing women to powerful positions in government, the United States of America and Australia have significantly altered the political narrative showing that it is possible to give women equal opportunities in life as their male counterparts.

The May 2022 federal elections in Australia continued to change the political narrative in this western democracy. A group of six elite women driven by a clear 'agenda of climate change, political integrity and gender equality' secured six parliamentary seats. This small band of political class were known as 'teal' candidates'. 'Teal' was their colour of choice. This band of independents demonstrated that it was possible to mobilise community support and collectively secure political power. This is an illustration of women successfully fighting for empowerment and being rewarded for it.

Another western democracy that presents a useful example of a nation where women have broken the glass ceiling is New Zealand. The current elected Prime Minister is Jacinda Arden. She is serving as New Zealand's 40th Prime Minister. Helen Clark, New Zealand's 37th Prime Minister, was the first elected female prime minister serving between 1999 and 2009. Helen Clark is also New Zealand's fifth longest serving prime minister. There is much to learn about women empowerment from the nation of New Zealand.

In Africa, Rwanda stands out as one of the countries that has achieved equality for women in politics. According to the United Nations (2020), women in Rwanda occupy 61.3 seats in

parliament. By contrast, in Kenya, 21.8 % of women hold seats in the National Assembly and 31.3% in the Senate (Kenya Bureau of statistics, 2022). These facts show that in Kenya women do not make up a third of representatives both in Parliament and in the Senate. The political elite in the country have not implemented the gender rule to the letter as stated by the Constitution of Kenya 2010. 'Kenya has failed to fully implement its gender quota' Berry et al., 2020).

Steps towards equal opportunities for women

Women require an equal voice and representation in politics. Having women in decision making forums is likely to bring about better outcomes for society, women and families (United Nations, 2020). Changes need to be made in order to provide equity. Such changes include quotas in parliament and local representation, targeted financial assistance/credit, enrolment to higher education institutions among others. Quotas have been used in many countries (Berry et al., 2021) to increase the number of women representatives in formal politics.

Governments need to target the barriers that deny women equal opportunities and pass policies that support women. In the last ten years Rwanda has passed legislation that address areas that are critical in equality for women. These include succession rights, gender discrimination in political parties, and equal land rights. Africa needs to look at ensuring gender equality through law and in practice. Many countries have passed gender equity laws which need to be enforced.

Lesotho and Rwanda have both taken steps to increase women's participation in political leadership, and Namibia and Lesotho are amongst those countries where more women than men are in managerial and professional posts (United Nations, 2019).

Mandatory quotas in public and private sectors will offer women equal opportunity in boardrooms, community groups and in political representation. Norway introduced quotas in 2006. These quotas were to be enforced in 2008 and they have proved successful. The European Union voted in 2013 to legislate for 40% participation of women in boards. (Hills, 2015).

There is an urgent need for governments to shift consciousness so that the beliefs that keep women subordinate and dependent on males are challenged (Cornwall, (2016). This also includes introducing laws and policies that allow women access to resources such as land (Cornwall, 2016). Programs that raise consciousness to both men and women need to be run in communities to open people's eyes to the rights of women as human rights and also to train women in skills traditionally considered male dominated. Such skills include welding and plumbing.

Implications for Governments and Aid Agencies.

The 2030 United Nations Agenda for social change includes the need to achieve gender equality and empowerment among all women and girls (United Nations, 2015). Changing institutional structures and cultures is suggested as one way of making equal opportunities accessible to women. Gender equity policies in and of themselves are not enough. They need to be implemented and include women in their interpretation and implementation.

It is therefore imperative that governments, aid agencies, and philanthropists make changes to the way they conduct their business in the provision of financial assistance to individuals and

groups. Chapter 4 of the Kenya Constitution 2010 article 27, (6) states that there that it would take affirmative action and policies to redress disadvantage and
to give full effect to the realisation of the rights guaranteed under this Article, the State shall take legislative and other measures, including affirmative action programmes and policies designed to redress any disadvantage suffered by individuals or groups because of past discrimination.

When women have individual and/or collective agency, there are better outcomes for them, their families and their communities. Agency refers to “a woman’s ability to make choices and to transform them into desired actions” (World Bank, 2012, p. 6). Women do not always have agency. In light of this, the government of Kenya has enacted some affirmative actions and created the National Government Affirmative Action Fund, the Women’s Enterprise Fund, and The UWEZO Fund (United, 2020). Women in various parts of the world have begun movements to mentor other women to develop resilience and build strategies to rise through the ranks (Rendon, 2021).

Education for women is key to achieving equal opportunities. Schooling improves a woman’s cognitive abilities (Kabeer, 2015) and as a result has a direct link to better well-being for them and their children. (Carlson et al., 2015; Pratley, 2016).

The presence of women on boards can make a difference in the provision of equal opportunities in organisations. Promoting women’s access to economic resources such as credit should be encouraged (World Bank, 2012). The pace of achieving what women want -equal opportunities and empowerment - is slower in some countries than others. In Muslim countries, women’s issues are looked at through the Islamic lens therefore, women are treated as different and subordinate in society (Syed, 2019).

Conclusion

Research indicates that women’s empowerment is an individual and collective process (Eger et al., 2018; Kabeer, 2011). Therefore, to enable women to make progress in society, social, political and economic changes are required. Achieving equal opportunities is multi-dimensional. It requires mandates from the government and enforcement through the law. Policies that ensure women have equitable opportunities must be passed and implemented. Governments and organisations should introduce changes that encourage equal distribution of funds and resources. In addition, efforts should be made to change social attitudes toward women in society. The education of women and girls should be at the heart of these changes so that women and girls are knowledgeable about their rights. Women have agency to make their own choices. This will help them to rise above social and cultural norms that hold them down and deny them equal opportunities.

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