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**Future Perspective on Promotion of Gender Equality- through the eyes of
young women and men**

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* The paper has been reproduced as submitted.

Introduction

The world today has taken action since Beijing 1995 to ensure gender equality and empowerment of women. Among these are the promotion of women's full participation in the economy, improvement in collection, dissemination of gender disaggregated data in all sectors and ensuring that educational institutions provide equal access for women and the protection of the girl child against harmful practices. However, there are difficulties with efforts being made to change attitudes and perceptions towards gender due to socio-cultural barriers, unequal educational opportunities for women, ineffective advocacy and program strategies for promoting women rights and lack of male involvement in the gender programs. Youth organization and young women have also not been fully involved as stated in the Beijing Platform of Action.

This paper examines the current efforts in achieving gender equality and the challenges involved in meeting young people's needs in response to promotion of gender. It analyses the current achievements, weaknesses and gives suggestions for the future perspective on promotion of gender equality among young women and men. The first part of the paper looks at the importance and need for involving and integrating both young women and men in gender initiatives. The second part examines the achievements of women movement and the challenges which exist among them intergenerational gap, girl child education, culture and tradition and development. I conclude with some suggestions for the way forward.

Ladies and gentlemen, you may ask why I and other young people in Africa are shifting attention to the policy realm and gender? Some people here are asking why me not a young woman to present this paper. If I were asked a few years, I would not know. I find that the difference between then and now is that my peers and I in Africa have the knowledge and belief that we can (and must) shape the course of our destinies through policy advocacy and shared responsibilities, as we are being bombarded with numerous external factors that have the potential to jeopardize our well-being especially the status of women and adolescents.

We are now empowered with the confidence that we can change the course of our destinies and also that of our nations and continent. We strongly believe that the future of the world and the world's best chance to find lasting solutions to some of its most pressing problems lies in today's youth and by creation of equal opportunity for both young women and men and empowering them to be equal citizens of the world. Our actions today as young people will determine the future of this world.

Young people regardless of sex, race or religion need the capacity, support and opportunity to lead and develop skills that will propel them to take on leadership roles at all levels so as to realize a peaceful and prosperous future. Current policies polarize the needs of young women and men and set them up in competition against each other, which means mutual disadvantage. As young people we would like to move away from this approach and think about a gender relations approach. Young women and men need to be understood within the context of interrelations between men and women.

We know that we as youth are not homogenous. From a gender perspective, young men and women may not have the same opportunities to participate or to take leadership around issues that affect them. So in our strategies, we are cognizant of that. We strongly believe in good mutual working partnerships between young women and men, because we believe in the importance of separate and collective initiatives and strategies targeting young people.

As future leaders, we have an opportunity to model leadership that is not gender-neutral or gender-blind, but rather we are promoting leadership that takes gender issues into consideration and seeks to transform existing models that perpetuate inequalities.

At the same time I have to acknowledge that ensuring that young women's rights are protected and guaranteed today presents a unique challenge that will require a tremendous amount of energy, new actors, new visions, new skills, new analysis and new strategies. Youth organizations and young women and men have not been fully utilized in the implementation of Beijing Platform of Action. Currently there is a lack of young women involvement in different spaces gender policy formation, and development. Whilst the few young women who are engaged in various activist spaces are marginalized and issues affecting young women today are ignored not only by the men but also by women and feminist movements. For instance when you talk about women empowerment or gender in Africa you only think of adult and well to do women.

This is worsened by the existence of an intergenerational gap in the women's movement, which has an impact on the strategic future of the movement. As a young man and a strong supporter of gender equality and equity for all. I am deeply concerned about the older feminist and gender activists that do not involve young women in all the progress that is being made in the fight towards equality between men and women. We hear about 30% or 50% inclusion of women in decision-making bodies but most of these successes do not include young women. As a future measure for ensuring equity between women and men we would like to see 50% of these achievements given to young women as well.

At the same time I would like to have this opportunity to strongly condemn the quota system approach misinterpreted by most of our governments, institution and organizations of creating gender corners, where a woman is put in isolation in a corner of a large institute as gender officer, as a young leader I would like to question this, and see equal opportunities being created for everyone, equal distribution of the workforce, equal access to education and leadership opportunities.

In my view the percentage approach weakens the whole purpose of gender equality it simply redefines women and men as different market segments and forgets about the relations between them and separates men from women. I am saddened that all women's capabilities are measured only in 20% or 30% of the men's world.

I strongly understand the background of the quota system approach but as young person with new leadership I would love to see a fifty-fifty situation, a world where both young

women and men are given what rightfully belongs to them, power, equality, equity, control and rights regardless of sex, race, culture or religion. If we as young Africans have to change our cultures, our education systems and family or society structures in order to attain an equal world for all then we have to start changing now.

At the same time we should realize that, equality and achievement should also trickle down even to the grass root and rural women, the poor and other excluded groups not only enabling them gain access to valued goods but also gain access on terms that respect and promote their ability to define their own priorities and make informed choices.

Women with disabilities for instance are the most affected as they are marginalized both as women and persons with disabilities. They are abused by both able bodied persons and persons with disabilities, especially men. As a future measure I would like to see the plight of disabled women fully addressed and included in the success stories of gender initiatives.

As you people we would like to see gender equality being turned into a matter of planning and monitoring not a struggle between women and men. This cause for current players especially women movement and the world at large to concentrate more on gender rather than on women issues only. The world needs more political and social commitment to equity and we should struggle to Create uniform access to education with focus on primary level for both young women and men. And equitable distribution and access to resources, leadership, education and public health care beginning at primary level and reinforced secondary and tertiary systems.

As a sexual and reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) activist for young people who has witnessed the devastating impact of HIV and AIDS in our daily lives, it is important for me, to acknowledge gender inequalities as one of the weakening factors in the fight against the epidemic and attainment of Sexual reproductive Health and Rights in Africa. Gender inequality leads to poor sexual and reproductive health. Young women and girls, living in Africa, are often vulnerable to gender-based violence and are unable to negotiate safe sex due to socialization and lack of education and economic empowerment.

Men today assume to have the right to women's bodies and prioritized their pleasures over women. Compounded to these issues are harmful cultural and traditional practices that impact on young women's ability to realize their basic human rights. This is worsened in the context of civil wars and conflicts where young woman are most victims of sexual harassments including rape. There is also a lack of youth friendly sexual and reproductive health resulting in high rates of teenage pregnancies and unsafe abortions that jeopardizes the well being of young women and increasing in HIV/AIDS among the young people.

Therefore, Gender equality initiatives should be linked to sexual and reproductive health policies and programs, to improve the quality of life, of all Africans. And the Reproductive Health services that currently exist are in many cases not youth friendly or realistic and do not address the needs of young people. We need to ensure that young

people have access to youth friendly sexual and reproductive health care services, and access to accurate information to make informed decisions about their reproductive and sexual health and rights. Particular effort should be made to ensure that all young people immediately have access to services and education to treatment including ARVs and treatment for opportunistic infections.

The social expectations, roles, status and economic power of men and women influence the spread and impact of the epidemic. In my society for example a man can have a number of women as he wishes as a sign of wealth and manhood or inherit a brothers wife after his death. Reducing both women's and men's risk of infection demands an analysis of gender stereotypes, redefinition of male and female relationships and roles, promotion of cultural beliefs and values supporting mutually responsible behaviour, and exploration of ways to reduce inequalities between men and women. To tackle the challenge of HIV/AIDS, we must work to create a supportive environment that will enable both young women and men to undertake prevention and better cope with the epidemic.

I would therefore, urge program planners, designers and implementers to mainstream Gender equality in HIV/AIDS and SRHR programs in an effort to find lasting solution to these perpetuating problems. Gender equality is relevant in addressing the unmet Sexual and Reproductive Health And Right needs for both young women and men.

As a young African, It will be very unfair for me not to talk about some of our cultural and tradition practices in Africa. As Africans, we value the importance of culture and tradition. However, some practices that once protected us now put us at special risk. These include, Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), virginity testing, and certain pregnancy and birth rituals. Culture and tradition should not be used to violate the rights of young women and men.

I believe that culture and tradition are important aspects of African society and it gives us an identity as Africans. Therefore, cultural and tradition should be used as a tool to improve the lives of all individuals in our great continent and not abuse or infringe on our people's rights.

The practice of female genital mutilation, or cutting for instance has been the subject of growing world concern. Years of research on this ancient practice of FGM /C has highlighted many and complex cultural meanings. For women its not only painful ordeal but means of social bargain and negotiation for societies. It is a collective identity matter and a status symbol in the fullest sense. Its continuation is strongly influenced by power dynamics and by the wider social-political and cultural and global context. Some progress has been recorded in many countries in rooting out this problem but lot needs to be done. We need to invest in the creation of awareness and involve men in addressing socially accepted violence against women. As young men we are ready as partners in this regard.

I would like to join the rest of the world to strongly condemn this practice and to call upon countries in Africa to strongly condemn countries who are still practicing FGM and

all forms of violence against women and urge all stakeholders and governments to take stronger actions against harmful practices and work with civil society and communities especially youth, to promote a cultural practice that creates equality.

Investment in education, particularly for girls has the highest returns of all development and it fosters the ability of people, particularly poor people to participate in development of the society and a main key in the future perspective for promotion of gender. As we promote the education of the girl child we should not ignore the plight of boy child and the need to involve them as well in the so-called women's arena in order to create an even society. The education of young men as active gender activist at a tender age is an important aspect of creating an equal society for both young men and women. A gender sensitive education at all levels of society should be encouraged and supported.

We should also invest in the rooting out of the unseen or unintentional gender discrimination that affects the girl child's education. Research in education shows that there is a hidden curriculum, the social values that never openly stated but which never the less convey to young people what is expected of them. These constantly favour young men than young women. This has had an enormous influence on educational performance and it works most against equal achievement by young women. This is somehow unintentional on the part of the teacher or the society but it is somehow built into the learning environment.

In order to promote gender equality among young men and women we have to understand this unintentional discrimination and prevent it from happening and it should be checked and discouraged.

The hidden nature of women's central role in the community is also of concern as it hinders the advancement of girl child in education. Young women participate in a range of activities linked to the notion of community or family strengthening. This may be through young women's informal network of support. Usually when a young woman comes from school for instance, she rushes to do domestic or household work in the kitchen while the boy child goes to study or play outside. This unfair cultural practice has infringed negatively on young women's education. It is extremely important to provide cohesion and connectedness among young women and men. Power relations and social inequities that are mostly gender related create and perpetuate vulnerability for young women.

We have to put rights at the center for a girl child education and change the role of men in society. Emphasized should be placed on the development of appropriate information programmes that make the public, particularly parents, aware of the importance of non-discriminatory education and the equal sharing of family responsibility by girls and boys.

The negative economic situation in many African countries have adversely affected efforts to improve the status of women and young people, who are often the worst affected. Limited access to social and health services has been a direct result of poverty with countless young people in Africa today having limited or no right at all. Many

young people have suffered irreversible damage to their reproductive systems and their rights being denied because they are poor or had no access to quality information on prevention methods. As young Africans we note that poverty is one of the underlying issues which create and perpetuate gender inequalities in our continent. Women and young people's rights have been abused because of the economic status in society and we know that there is a reason for such behaviour and that is poverty.

The biggest problem for us now is the question of **HOW** to deal with poverty? We appreciate the numerous attempts by African governments to eradicate poverty but know also that many of these strategies are not tailored in Africa or to harness youth capacity. As the rest of the world implements the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) Africa is still servicing foreign debts. I would like to call for Africa's debt cancellation in order for us to meet the MDGs which is very important in gender initiatives. Lastly, Ladies and gentlemen the way forward, as we understand more of the way society is made and how people interact with one another, how discrimination against women manifests, how people learn and how households and communities respond to gender imbalances. Information collection and dissemination is integral to forward looking. Planning for the future and improving our responses to gender discrimination is dependant on the flow of reliable and sound information to today's young women and men.

Through the depiction of youth as valuable resources for not only one another but to the nations, it is therefore, important for the *Commission on the Status of Women (CSW)* to work effectively with youth organization and support young people's initiatives in promoting gender equality. CSW should strengthen youth organization's capacity to promote and address gender issues.

Through its work with the United Nations, I would like to urge the CSW to encourage the African countries and its leadership to who have not ratified the African Union Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa. I feel this a milestone for Africa to achieve gender equality.

CSW should encourage and support programs aimed at changing the roles of men in societies by all stakeholders. Men should change their attitudes and perceptions towards gender. Men have a misconception about gender equality and the advancement of Women. They feel threatened and should be made to understand to see the importance of equal partnership between women and men. These will open the door to gender equality in all spheres of life, including improving communication between women and men and their understanding of their joint responsibilities, so that men and women are equal partners in public and private life. Young men of today should be encouraged to appreciate and understand these dynamics of gender equality. Women movements and feminist groups should also fully engage young women and men as equal partners in their programs and initiatives.

We all understand that Women alone cannot win the struggle for gender equality or women empowerment. While women can play an important role in challenging these constraints, individuals or women alone cannot address structural inequalities. Gender

inequalities needs collective actions, efforts by men and women as well as individual assertiveness. Today women have been empowered to some degree to address gender issues and concerns on the status of women yet men are less aware that their also gendered species.

The greatest contribution in creating an equal world for young women and young men is to improve their capabilities, Knowledge, skills, attitudes and competences as the foundation of all forms of future gender initiatives and programs. As the saying goes Knowledge is the currency of equity, which leads to better living standards for both women and men, of which is a major indicator for future perspective of gender promotion.

As young women and men of today, we would like to face the future together as equal partners.

I thank you