

WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT: REFLECTIONS FROM ZAMBIA

What would social and economic development in Zambia be like if women did not contribute to it? And how much more development would take place if women were allowed to contribute more? These are two burning questions when we talk about “women and development” in a country like Zambia, a “developing country” with rich potential.

In Zambia, some 80% of maize, a food staple, is produced by small-scale farmers. And in some parts of the country, some 80% of those working on farms are women. This is a great contribution to development – putting food on the table, but still more could be done if these women had easier access to title deeds for the land they work on. Frequently it is very difficult for a woman to get title to the land she is working on and this certainly affects output because it affects her sense of ownership, determination and creativity in farming as well as the investment she will put into a farm that is not hers, for example, digging wells, and so on.

Education is a number one priority in securing the future development of a country like Zambia. But often girls from poor families do not have good opportunities to get an education. If resources are scarce in a family to meet school fees and other needs, then boys are usually the first to be sent to school. Cultural biases negate the girls’ chances because it is expected that they will get married and will not need much formal education.

These are just two examples of how women’s involvement in development is frequently frustrated through discrimination from legal or traditional structures. In all too many instances, this discrimination tends to build psychological blocks to the contributions women could make.

There can also be difficulties in enabling women to participate actively and constructively in the political processes necessary for development. For instance, in Zambia today, among the 158 Members of Parliament (MPs), there are fewer than 25 women. Long-established prejudices against women serving in important positions in the public sphere influence voting patterns. This can, however, be overcome by specific efforts to get more women in Parliament. In Rwanda, specific efforts at public education, political party facilitation and accepted quota targets have made a difference, since now more than 50% of the MPs there are women.

However another factor that also needs to be overcome is a prejudice that sometimes exists among women themselves. Some discourage others from

too much public involvement or assertive leadership. This is something that women's groups are struggling to overcome.

Something that occurs to me as important to remember is what Archbishop Telesphore Mpundu of Lusaka said during the Second African Synod in Rome last October. Identifying the negative discrimination against women in the Church, he stated strongly that the Church is simply poorer because women are not allowed to contribute to the full with their gifts and charisms, commitment and hard work. Canonical and cultural structures inhibit women's effective participation. And we in the Church are all poorer because of that.

Despite the outlined barriers to women's participation in development, women continue to significantly contribute to development within the 'set boundaries' at every level. It is women, for instance, that you find at the centre of keeping families going. Especially in the era of HIV and AIDs, women are ready to abandon their own aspirations to provide care to sick members and everything else needed to help others lead dignified lives.

Though rarely found in formal politics, nowadays we are seeing more and more educated women organising Non-Governmental Organisation (NGOs) and being Executive Directors in Companies which they are effectively running because they have the capacity to. Their visibility in such key arenas, traditionally considered 'no go areas for women', is making them be slowly perceived as figures of authority.

The visibility of women in different spheres where they are not expected to be, is partly due institutional arrangements. Affirmative action, for instance, has been expressed in government policy where a percentage of women is expected to occupy certain spaces either in politics or education. Women themselves too have been able to demand the rights due to them through organisations such as Women and Law in Southern African (WLSA) and Women For Change (WFC), JCTR and Carita-Zambia, that have been instrumental in public education on gender. However, what must always be recognised is the fact that talking about women taking up roles traditionally associated with men is seen by many, both men and women, as akin to dismantling the whole Zambian culture. Therefore, the gender discourse is often met with resentment. But slowly and with many voices coming from all corners of society, women's ability to contribute to development will gain much appreciation.

Indeed, in society at large, especially in developing countries like Zambia, women's effective participation in development is all too often hindered. And we are all the poorer for that. Women's groups, human rights institutions and Church organisations of both women and men must work together to assure

that *Women in Development* is more than a slogan but a reality for everyone to benefit from.

Sr Kayula Lesa RSC coordinates the Church's Social Teaching Programme at the Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection in Lusaka, Zambia.

Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR)

JCTR Repository

<https://repository.jctr.org.zm>

Statements

Advocacy on Socio-Economic Development

2019

Women and Development: Reflections From Zambia

Lesa, Kayula Sr

Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection

Lesa, K. (n.b). WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT: REFLECTIONS FROM ZAMBIA. Jesuit
Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR).

<https://repository.jctr.org.zm/handle/20.500.14274/160>

Downloaded from JCTR Repository, Jesuit Centre for Theological Reflection (JCTR)