Two main arguments have been advanced on the importance of gender equality in development.

• First, gender equality is a human rights issue, a prerequisite to the advancement of human dignity and social justice. In this regard, gender equality is seen as the “right thing to do.”

• Second, a business case can be made for gender equality. In this instance, gender equality is seen as smart economics – the “smart thing to do.”

The reasoning behind the second argument, gender equality as a business case, is that economies grow faster when both women and men have equal opportunities to resources. In most African countries, women comprise the backbone of rural economy. The logic is simple. If women are empowered, the result is nothing less than the transformation of livelihoods and national economies.

The recently launched Third Billion Campaign makes this point graphically. China and India together represent 2 billion emerging participants in the global marketplace. Half of them are women. Added to women in other developing countries, the total represents a third billion people whose economic lives have been stunted, underleveraged or suppressed. Women have also been referred to by some as the “third emerging market.” In essence, gender equality is therefore the “smart thing to do” from a purely economic perspective (Kebeer and Natali 2013).

The quest for gender equality is not new. In 1430, Christine de Pizan, an Italian writer, wrote “If it were the custom to send little girls to school and teach them all sorts of different subjects there, as one does with little boys, they would grasp and learn the difficulties of all the arts and sciences just as easily as the boys. (Brown-Grant, R. 1999) ” Yet nearly 700 years later, girls represent 54 percent of the 32 million children out
of school in sub-Saharan Africa (UNESCO 2010). In the 21st century the proposition or even suggestion that gender equality is an impossible dream is simply unacceptable.

**Gender equality is the goal; gender mainstreaming the means**

Two major International Women’s Conferences, Mexico 1975 and Beijing 1995, established a global consensus and commitment to promote gender equality, which was reaffirmed by the Millennium Summit in 2000. In 1995, the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action endorsed gender mainstreaming as a global strategy for promoting gender equality (AfDB 2011). In 1997, the Economic and Social Counsel of the United Nations (ECOSOC) defined gender mainstreaming as

…the process of assessing the implications for women and men of any planned action, including legislation, policies or programmes, in all areas and at all levels. It is a strategy for making women’s as well as men’s concerns and experiences an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally and inequality is not perpetuated.

Gender mainstreaming should not be pursued as an end in itself. The ultimate goal of gender mainstreaming is to achieve gender equality (United Nations University- World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER) 2012). But has gender mainstreaming succeeded in hardwiring men’s and women’s concerns and experiences into project designs? Evaluations have concluded that gender equality is not yet integrated into the mainstream operations and organizational cultures of national and international development organizations. In fact, there is no example of a development organization that has successfully mainstreamed gender to the degree that it has been incorporated into its DNA (AfDB 2011). A recent AfDB synthesis report on mainstreaming gender confirms this (AfDB 2012a).

**So, what will it take to deliver the gender equality goal?**

**1. Vision, strategy and tactics**

The African Development Bank Group Strategy (2013–2022) has a focus on two objectives to improve the quality of Africa’s growth: (i) inclusive growth, and (ii) the transition to green growth. Gender equality is a crucial component of inclusive growth. The Bank defines inclusive growth as economic growth that results in a wider access to sustainable socio-economic opportunities for a broader number of people, regions or countries, while protecting the vulnerable. All these ought to be done in an environment of fairness, equal justice, and political plurality (AfDB 2012b). The Bank further elaborates this growth as one that protects disadvantaged, marginalized and excluded groups from adverse shocks and takes into account age, gender, regional or geographical concerns. In its 10 Year Strategy (TYS), the Bank therefore identifies gender equality as an area of special emphasis for the advancement of inclusive growth (AfDB 2013a).

To implement this commitment to gender equality, the Bank has elaborated a strategy to guide efforts to effectively integrate gender equality into its operations and to promote gender equality in Africa. The recently adopted a gender strategy, *Investing in Gender Equality for Africa’s Transformation 2014–2018*, which envisions an Africa where women and girls have easy access to knowledge, where women’s skills and innovations are optimized and their capacities tapped to contribute to greater economic opportunities, and where women fully participate in the decision-making process.

The strategy identifies three mutually reinforcing pillars to tackle the underlying causes of gender inequality:

- Women’s legal status and property rights
- Women’s economic empowerment
• Capacity development and knowledge management for gender equality

Advancing progress in each of these pillars will be fused into the core operational areas identified in the TYS – infrastructure development, governance and accountability, private sector development, regional integration, skills and technology – as well as the areas of special emphasis – fragile states, gender, agriculture and food security.

2. Leadership
Development of a strategy must be moved and supported by strong leadership. The responsibility for promoting gender equality is system-wide and rests at the highest levels of management. The Bank leadership must consistently guide and support the mainstreaming of gender equality and policy to ensure the translation of formal commitments into specific decisions and operational actions. It means bringing on board the right talent and capacity, as well as creating accountability measures at various levels. Ultimately, the strategy entails ownership and commitment at all levels. Critical to the attainment of these goals is the strong, active support of top management.

3. An inside-out transformation
A focus on internal transformation is crucial for credibility and reputation. The Bank must lead by example. Hence to be successful in the implementation of the strategy, the Bank needs to transform itself internally. This transformation is a long-term process that will require reflection and introspection. It will require a cultural change as captured in the People's Strategy (AfDB 2013b). What does an internal transformation entail?

• A clear policy on gender equality and equal opportunities that is both implemented and assessed
• Sufficient attention to gender equality at all management levels
• Collective responsibility – each person in the organization needs to know how they contribute to gender equality in their work and interactions
• A gender-responsive physical work environment and organizational practices
• A gender-responsive organizational culture with zero tolerance for inequalities and exploitation on the basis of sex

Creating a gender-responsive organization means a change in institutional systems and practices – that is, transforming things that on the surface appear to be merely routine and gender-neutral, and changing them in ways that will not only benefit women, but men and, very importantly, the organization (Merrill-Sands and others 1999).

4. The right architecture: a critical mass of skilled individuals
The strategy makes everyone responsible for implementation of gender mainstreaming. The danger of universal responsibility is that when no single entity is in charge there may be a sense of being “nowhere at all.” A specialized unit is therefore needed to take overall responsibility for monitoring the implementation of the strategy. The success of such a unit will often depend on its placement within the Bank’s organizational structure. The unit responsible for gender must be adequately staffed in order to have traction in the Bank. Adding a few junior gender staff is not enough.

5. Carrot and a stick
Gender mainstreaming is often viewed as an “optional extra” and, when included in project documents, is sometimes done superficially. Project documents frequently include the line “Gender will be mainstreamed across the project” and this is perceived to be adequate. It isn’t. Incentives and sanctions are necessary to ensure that task managers do not evade their responsibilities. Such incentives could be provided by making certain resources available for projects or by encouraging career progression and advancement.

6. Putting your money where your mouth is
At the international level, the Beijing Platform for Action called for adequate financial resources for the advancement of gender equality, particularly in Africa and least developed countries. The Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness called for harmonization of efforts on cross-cutting issues, such as gender equality and other thematic issues, including those financed by dedicated funds. Yet, even with these global commitments, coupled with the increasing evidence that promotion of gender equality is smart economics, most public sector expenditures still fail to reflect gender equality concerns. Gender equality work must be properly funded.

What are the potential weak links?
1. The process… are we doing enough?
Successful work on gender requires a significant level of analysis that informs actions taken as well as the reason why those actions were chosen. Such an analysis cannot be broadly conceived; it has to be contextualized. Often there is insufficient time or effort provided for analysis, yet this could make or break the initiative. Vision, strategy and tactics depend on the depth of analysis.

2. Thematic exhaustion
A growing concern within the Bank and other institutions is that of “gender fatigue.” Task managers often have to consider cross-cutting themes such as agriculture, environment, governance, health, education, and so on while balancing the twin objectives of the TYS, operational priorities, and the national priorities from Regional Member Countries. In the face of so many concerns, how do we guard against...
thematic exhaustion? Some development practitioners have proposed a rebranding of the term “gender mainstreaming,” but would this reinvigorate the attention to gender? Simple rebranding is not the answer. Gender equality must not be viewed as a theme in itself that needs to be fully integrated into development projects. It has to be viewed as the missing link for sustainable growth.

3. Need for a reality check
A recent Bank study showed that only 34 percent of a selection of projects and programs included intentionality to achieve gender equality results in their logframes. How can the Bank be expected to advance gender equality with partners if it is not included in the Bank’s own projects? Moreover, the knowledge that gender results are expected to be visible in project logframes often leads to superficial indicators and targets. Many logframes include numbers of women and men trained in workshops, or employed as semi-skilled labor. But these numbers are not transformational, nor do they change the conditions of women. The identification of gender results and indicators needs to reflect ambition towards inclusive development effectiveness. Such results need to show improvement in women’s access to economic opportunities, to opportunities in leadership, and ultimately to the reduction of inequalities. The results must address the structural roots of inequality. In essence, while pragmatism is necessary in framing results, the need for vision and ambition must not get left behind.

4. Dearth of gender expertise
One of the greatest tragedies for gender equality work is the assumption that anyone can undertake gender analysis and mainstreaming work. While each and every person can become a gender equality advocate, gender mainstreaming work requires expertise and experience – just like any other area of specialization. It is not unheard of, for example, for a female staff member of a unit to be designated as the gender focal point simply because of her sex. We need to build a critical pool of experts, through training and re-training, to ensure effective mainstreaming. Having women on the staff is not synonymous with gender equality.

Moving forward
At a satellite meeting of African foreign ministers during the recent 22nd African Union Summit at Bahir Dar, Ethiopia, in January 2014, Dr. Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, Chairperson of the African Union Commission, presented a fictional message in the form of an email. The email, dated 2063, elaborates the progress Africa will have made 50 years from now. Of the areas of progress cited, the major contributions by women to Africa’s development are elaborated.

By the intelligent application of centuries-old indigenous knowledge, acquired and conserved by African women who have tended crops in all seasons, within the first few years bumper harvests were being reported…

…Agronomists consulted women about the qualities of various grains – which ones survived low rainfalls and which thrived in wet weather; what pests threatened crops and how could they be combated without undermining delicate ecological systems.

…The status of women, the tillers of the soil by tradition, rose exponentially.

…The girl child, condemned to a future in the kitchen or the fields in our not too distant past, now has an equal chance of acquiring a modern education (and owning a farm or an agribusiness).

…African mothers today have access to tractors and irrigation systems that can be easily assembled.

…The producers’ cooperatives, (agribusinesses) and marketing boards these women established help move their produce and became the giant food companies we see today…
As the Bank reflects on the past 50 years and plans for the next 50, it has the opportunity and potential to make long-lasting changes to the lives of women and men on this continent. This is a keystone of the future to which the AfDB can and must contribute. A future in which the full involvement of all its citizens is the new norm.

References


Profile of the Author

Geraldine Fraser-Moleketi is the Special Envoy on Gender at the African Development Bank. She previously held the position of Director of the United Nations Development Programme’s (UNDP) Democratic Governance Group, overseeing the organization’s related strategic and policy work in 197 countries and territories around the globe. She was also appointed by the Secretary General of the United Nations as a board member of the United Nations Institute for Training and Research. Prior to joining UNDP, she served as Minister for Public Service and Administration in South Africa (1999 to 2008) and as Minister for Welfare and Population Development (1996-1999). She also served as National Deputy Elections Coordinator for the African National Congress from 1993/1994 in the lead up to South Africa’s first democratic elections of April 1994.