A number of social, economic and political realities in southern Africa have worked to confine women in general and young women in particular to the unfortunate situation that they find themselves in. I will try in this article to examine some of these harsh realities and proffer in my own thinking, how these can be addressed.

The elite nature of the women’s movement

The women’s movement is a key vehicle in the fight for the realisation of women’s rights. However, in our countries, this movement has assumed an elite form that has privileged the urban woman more than those in marginalised geo-localities. As is the norm, the young women in these marginalised communities are the most affected. The reasons why women’s movements have been struggling in our region is because they are not broad-based and have not adequately reached out and sought representation from women in rural and other marginalised communities. This elitist nature of the women’s movements is evidenced by the fact that demographically, these marginalised areas have a larger population of young women and women in general compared to urban areas. Thus, just like any elite system, it is the few that benefit on behalf of the masses because of their elitist nature. Even where women’s movements have successfully lobbied for inclusion in policy dialogue, this have often been gravely misdirected and inadequate as it has not taken into account the lived realities of the young women in marginalised communities. Such systematic discrimination of young women in marginalised communities has made their situation more deplorable, as they are not recognised and subsequently left out by the very vehicle that is supposed to champion their inclusion and fight for their rights.

Limited access to education

In the words of iconic former South African president Nelson Mandela, ‘education is the most powerful weapon in the fight for development’. However, the reality in most of our region is that education has continued to be evasive for young women, both pre-
and post-independence because of the exorbitant fees required by most schools. Many parents in rural communities sacrifice the girl-child’s education on the basis that she will eventually get married and leave the family and so they focus on educating the boy-child. The 2010 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) Status Report on Zimbabwe noted that although there is gender parity in primary level education, there are lower completion rates by girls at secondary level and upwards.

While education is regarded as vital in fighting poverty, it is not seen as fundamental in the development of the girl-child among the marginalised populace. The girl-child is seen as an economic tool in the sense that she can easily be married-off (or rather traded-off) for economic advantages to older men in society, who are regarded as economically advantageous to the family. As a result young girls are forced into early marriages – as young as 12 – and many times into polygamous marriages with men who are old enough to be their fathers. Some parents and even the girls themselves argue that their religion allows them to be married at any age as long as they are marrying their God-chosen suitors. However, the law according to the Marriages Act in Zimbabwe sets the minimum age of marriage at 18. Thus these marriages are unlawful.

The sad reality for the few young women that manage to access education is that the quality of education in these marginalised environs is lower than in urban centres. In Zimbabwe, due to the unprecedented brain drain, an entire school may have unqualified or under-qualified teachers. Furthermore, the infrastructure at these rural schools is sub-standard and some science labs do not even have a single beaker for the most simple science experiment. To compound the already dire situation, the young scholars are forced to walk very long distances to and from school. Eventually, many drop out of school and for those who do finish, their competitiveness and results are impacted.

**Limited access to employment opportunities**

In their 1989 book on the feminisation of poverty, Drèze and Sen explain the intra-household inequalities in terms of opportunities of getting outside work and paid employment and the perception of who is contributing how much to the joint prosperity of the family. Combined with the perception of the greater investment value of boys in comparison to girls, these factors led to a situation of extreme vulnerability for the girl-child and young women. The intra-household inequalities and boy-child preference in African societies were linked to the perception that boys and young men contribute more to the household economy and that boys can be counted on to provide security for their parents in old-age security, while the money invested in the girl-child is perceived to go to waste upon marriage as she leaves the family. These economic calculations, coupled with gender concepts regarding the importance of marriage for women, led to many families under-investing in girls relative to boys. To date such perceptions are more profound in the marginalised environs as compared to urban centres due to the residual nature of patriarchal beliefs in the marginalised environs.

The situation described above, and obvious lack of access to education coupled with less investment towards educating the girl-child has meant that young women are generally less competitive in the employment market. And when they are employed, they are paid less compared to their male counterparts. The scenario is more amplified in rural communities compared to urban communities, where there is a semblance of parity between males and females, though this is not geographically uniform. Rural and other marginalised environs have also remained generally underdeveloped as there is an unhealthy concentration of industry and business (key employers) in the urban centres, which in turn fuels rural-urban migration. While many countries in the region, notably Zimbabwe, have tried to reverse rural-urban migration through the promotion of industrialisation at rural centres (known as growth-points) this has done little to ensure that there is uniform development in rural and urban areas.

**The economics of empowerment: Lack of access to, control and ownership of critical resources**

In the development practitioner’s world, empowerment is generally believed to be an attitudinal, structural and cultural process whereby an individual or group gains the ability, authority and agency to make decisions and implement change in their own lives and, the lives of other people (Wikipedia). However, at a more practical level, empowerment has more to do with economic independence – as it is a type of independence that really empowers an individual to be able to make and implement decisions that best suits them.

Empowerment in the economic sense has everything to do with the access to, and ownership of, critical resources for production, chief among them being access to, and ownership of, land. For the young women in rural and other marginalised areas, land is the principal resource for production. The plight of the present generation of young women vis-à-vis ownership of critical resources such as land is only perpetuated by the historical realities that have over time forbidden women from owning land in most of the region. This is despite the fact that it is the same women who provide the bulk of the labour in the localised subsistence farming production chain. They do most of the work, from preparing the farming land right through to harvesting. However, their contribution ends at harvesting as it is usually the husband or the naturalised male owner of the land who usually assumes responsibility for marketing any surplus produce and ultimately coming to control any liquid cash that comes out of the
emphasis has been put on poverty reduction strategies, especially policies, aiming to boost industrial production, very little if any among them being the issue of poverty.

issues affecting young women and the majority of the citizens, chief such policies have not tried to address some of the most pertinent planning and policies have improved since then to a certain extent, dollar, which had become almost worthless. While macro-economic a shift to the use of multiple currencies in place of the Zimbabwean 2009 and was dependent on the liberalisation of the economy and halted at the consummation of the inclusive government in February which saw the country's economy nearing total collapse, was only worthless currency by the central bank. This economic meltdown, general liquidity crunch that was fuelled by wanton printing of a economic decline that saw the economy being characterised by world-record inflation rates, shortage of basic commodities and a general liquidity crunch that was fuelled by wanton printing of a worthless currency by the central bank. This economic meltdown, which saw the country’s economy nearing total collapse, was only halted at the consummation of the inclusive government in February 2009 and was dependent on the liberalisation of the economy and a shift to the use of multiple currencies in place of the Zimbabwean dollar, which had become almost worthless. While macro-economic planning and policies have improved since then to a certain extent, such policies have not tried to address some of the most pertinent issues affecting young women and the majority of the citizens, chief among them being the issue of poverty.

While the authorities have looked at overhauling macro-economic policies, aiming to boost industrial production, very little if any emphasis has been put on poverty reduction strategies, especially as they affect rural and other marginalised communities, including those in mining and former farming areas. Furthermore, these macro-economic policies have not been tailored to mainstream the participation of extremely marginalised social groups such as young women. The policies have tended to be more capitalistic, with an emphasis on those that already own the means of production and very little attention being paid to those who do not control any production means and have no access to any form of credit. Subsequently, such policies have negatively impacted the poor. This is well exemplified by a case study of Zambia Consolidated Copper Mines (ZMMC), which was cited in Body Politics and Women Citizens by Sida Studies (2009). The ZMMC, which is involved in most of the mining operations in Zambia, was privatised by the Zambian government in 1997 resulting in the laying-off of many people. And because of lack of employment many of them were compelled to engage in illegal activities at mining dumpsites. However, it was the women and children who took the risk and conducted the illegal activities because the men said that women and children are less likely to be prosecuted.

Thus, even if the macro-economy improves, the poor and marginalised young women are likely to maintain their present situation as no deliberate policies for poverty reduction at the micro-level have been put in place to ensure that, for example, the poor have access to micro-credit to ensure that their liquidity level is improved (2003 Poverty Assessment Study Survey, Summary Report, Zimbabwe). As a result even if production in industries improves, these can only be consumed by those that have access to liquid cash, and marginalised communities continue to be left out, further widening the already wide gender gap between poor young women and those who control the means of production.

Closely related to the formulation of macro-economic policies is the national budgeting process, which is a crucial process for any country. Whether it is at a central government level or at local government level, the participation of young women in the process is of paramount importance. Budgeting at a local government level would be more practical for the marginalised young women in these geo-localities – if only such processes could incorporate the voices and aspirations of these marginalised groups. However, participation is not just about making up the numbers with young women who attend a budgetary consultative meeting. It has more to do with translating gender commitments into budgetary commitments that eventually see the national budgets transforming the lives of young women in rural, farming and mining communities. All governments bear an obligation to utilise sources of revenue at their disposal for human development and hence should ensure that the national budgeting process is a people’s process that does not only focus on fiscal policy but also considers a clear gender framework within the poverty reduction strategies provided for by the national budget (Zimbabwe Women’s
Resource Centre and Network, 2009). More often than not, budget allocations for various ministries have not been influenced at all by grassroots communities.

**Cycle of poverty and inequality**

The cycle of poverty and inequality has not only become feminised but is also significantly more entrenched in rural, mining and farming communities. Poverty in these marginalised environs is driven by numerous factors – chief among them is the lack of access to education and resources for production. As explained before, such factors are more acute for young women than their male counterparts. This has led to the concept of the feminisation of poverty. This concept, which initially emerged in the United States after an analysis of poverty trends among female-headed households (FHH), has also found its way into sub-Saharan Africa. FHH, particularly those led by young women in rural areas, have been found to be acutely impoverished with the poverty marker being categorised as chronic poverty, which has been transmitted generationally from mother to daughter. The current statics in Zimbabwe indicate that the poverty prevalence rate among FHH increased between 2000 and 2008 to 68 percent (2010 MDGs Status Report, Zimbabwe).

The irony of it all is more than exemplified in the fact that rural and farming communities are the bedrocks of agricultural production, itself driven chiefly by women and young women, yet it is in these areas where there are higher incidences of poverty and malnutrition among FHH. In the Zimbabwean example, the situation is not any better for young working women in farming communities. They have also ceased receiving payment for their labour since the invasion of the former commercial farms by war veterans beginning in 2000. Their labour is still needed by the new farm-owners but it is no longer rewarded and some of the farmers regard the young women’s labour as ‘payment for rent’ for staying in ‘their’ compound. With such a reality it is despicable to even start talking about the health hazards that some crops like tobacco pose to the young women as they come into contact with the crop during the various stages of harvesting and packaging of the crop. Since these women do not have any income, they cannot easily access health care facilities, as they are required to produce some form of cash up front. It is in these marginalised areas that young women have hardly any access to sanitary wear and also where maternal mortality rates are highest, as the cost of maternal health is well out of their reach.

**Deliberate political exclusion: The militaristic culture of politics and the centralisation of governance structures**

The militaristic nature of political power that is prevalent the world over has often dictated that political power can only be achieved through a certain degree of force, which is contrary to the naturalised female psyche. Women have been forced to play second fiddle to men in the political arena as a result of notions that male politicians have built over time whereby politics is regarded as being ‘not for the faint-hearted’. Furthermore, most countries in the region have developed highly centralised political systems that have disempowered the local government structures, which makes it almost impossible for those (especially young women) in these geo-localities to participate in policy formulation and to influence developmental processes.

The political culture in most of southern Africa and indeed across the African continent is premised on violence. In the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), for example, rape is a common tool used during political contestations. In Zimbabwe, no election since 1980 has been held free of violence. This only worsened after 2000 with each election being defined by a death toll – when the only crime committed by those with died was that they dared to participate in a process whereby they freely chose those they wanted to govern them. Such a scenario has meant that young women have have become perpetually afraid to participate in politics, to the extent that very few young women have been brave enough to contest and stand for political or public office for fear that they would not be able to match the militarism that can be unleashed by their male counterparts. The result has been leadership structures and decisions that are devoid of the feminine voice and perspective. Thus, instead of participating in the mainstream governance process, young women have become perennially marginalised with little room to add their voice to the overall governance processes on which everyday life is ultimately premised.

To rub salt into the wound, even where young women have braved the violent political terrain to run for political or public office, this has usually been at the behest of male counterparts who have come to view the participation of women in the mainstream governance process as just a game of balancing the numbers, just a way of living up to the expectations of regional and international statutes that women should also be in leadership positions. As a direct result of their economic marginalisation, young women candidates often find it difficult to fund their own campaigns, a situation that has forced young women out of the political arena. Those that ultimately find their way into the arena, albeit without any funding of their own, often find that their level of independence is very limited as they have to follow the whims and caprices of those that funded their ascendency to power.

**Decisive factor: Limited access to information**

While many of the negatives described above are not unique to young women in rural, farming and marginalised communities, the geographical orientation of such young women also puts them at even greater risk of discrimination and marginalisation, premised entirely
on their geo-location. While the young woman in Harare’s high-density suburb of Glen View can browse the headlines of the main daily newspapers as she passes through the local shopping centre, the same cannot be said about the young woman at Foothills farm outside Bindura. Firstly, there is no shopping centre to talk about and, secondly, no newspaper will ever reach her sight even in the lucky event that she may be able to read. Such is the nature and extent of marginalisation faced by young women in such areas. The mainstream media are almost totally shut out from such communities. Even television reception is so poor that very few people own television sets. Those that have tried to bridge this gap through the installation of cheap satellite decoders have faced the full wrath of political contestations, as they have become targets for political persecution. The result of this information blackout becomes apparent in the fact that very few young women are up to date with current affairs in their country. Political persecution has also hindered their keenness to know about current affairs and this in turn has led to apathy towards civic and political processes, with the ultimate effect that they do not easily participate in the overall governance process.

Many a time, geographical orientation also dictates the pace at which newer technologies cascade down to grassroots communities. Whilst a number of young women are now able to access gadgets for mobile communication, they have not been able to take full advantage of such connectivity, to connect with the outside world in accessing information and also getting information to the outside world. While Internet connectivity has greatly improved in Zimbabwe since the introduction of mobile Internet technology with the consummation of the inclusive government, marginalised populations have not been able to take advantage of this boon and have remained shut out from the World Wide Web, resulting in being shut out from crucial information on what is happening. The other day I asked a fellow sister at Chireka communal lands, about 30km outside Bindura, if she knew what was happening in Egypt (in reference to the mass demonstrations) or what had happened in Tunisia, and it did not come as a surprise to me when she innocently responded that she did not know where Egypt was or what was happening there. Such is the stark reality of young women from these marginalised areas.

**Remedying the situation: Recommendations to improve the situation of marginalised young women**

While the problems and challenges bedevilling young women have been shown to be multi-faceted, the panacea for some of these challenges lie in very simple techniques, which if employed with the full participation of the young women themselves can go a long way in rectifying the unfortunate situation that has seen young women being regarded as second-class citizens in comparison to their male counterparts.

**Employing the rights-based approach to development**

One key strategy that can be employed is the use of the rights-based approach in development, especially as it targets hitherto marginalised communities. Such an approach should specifically be premised on the equal participation of young women in the formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the policies that seek to address their plight. Such an approach has advantages in delivering real development to those that are most in need of it. It increases the relevance of any intervention that may seek to address the plight of young women. Incorporating young women’s perspectives of development and taking into cognizance their knowledge and experience, makes it easier to reach any target that can be set, with their overall participation and input.

**Peer-based efforts for meaningful inclusion and participation**

Another point is that it is the young women themselves that know how to reach out to their peers. Therefore, if consulted and incorporated, they have the best knowledge of what strategies, methods, arenas and approaches for development can be used to effectively address their plight. This increases the efficiency of development initiatives. Furthermore, when young women get to exercise their right to participate, influence and power development efforts, then such efforts gain greater legitimacy and with it greater success.

Any developmental goals and actions gain acceptance among the intended beneficiaries when they are included in the formulation and ultimately in implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the activities for development. Facilitating the effective participation of young women in development initiatives – from identifying present gaps, right through to the formulation and implementation of policies that seek to address such gaps – is a sure way of building and strengthening the culture of democracy and human rights. Strong civic participation with the genuine inclusion of young people, particularly marginalised young women, is a pre-requisite for democratic development and the building of strong, healthy, open and democratic societies.

**A broad-based women’s movement**

The women’s movement is key to putting women’s rights on the national, regional and international agenda and ultimately influencing policy at all levels, hence the need to be an all inclusive movement representative of all women’s interests. There is a need to facilitate and ensure that young women from marginalised communities are accorded an equal opportunity to participate in the women’s movement and contribute towards building a robust movement that makes all women proud to be women regardless of their age and geographical orientation.
Women’s organisations need not see each other as competitors but rather collaborate to build synergies and strengthen the movement’s work. Funding partners are called upon to not only support big and well established organisations but also to provide support for grassroots based initiatives as they can more easily reach out to marginalised young women and women in their various geo-localities. This is strategic in ensuring the meaningful participation of young women from marginalised communities in the creation of sustainable movements, which incorporate these young women’s issues amongst other women’s issues in general.

The spill over effects of such participation enhance young women’s ability to participate in mainstream governance processes so that they also add their voices to the manner in which governments go about their work. This critically starts with electoral processes, whereby young women should be given an opportunity to freely participate in the processes, as candidates or simply as voters. In this regard, there is a need to ensure that electoral processes are free of the militaristic and violent nature that has hitherto dissuaded a lot of young women from taking a keen interest in governance issues. In principle, governments that have acceded to and ratified the African Protocol on Gender and Development need to fully implement the protocol and make it a reality rather than simply another document awaiting filing in the archives. And this principally starts with the women’s movements in exerting greater pressure on their respective governments to respect and implement such regional and international instruments.

Access to information: Provision of alternative media

It is essential to facilitate and ensure that young women in marginalised communities are kept abreast of all developments occurring in their countries as well as in the region and beyond through a robust, non-partisan and young-women sensitive information generation and dissemination initiative. This can be done through alternative media – such as print media that may be printed in vernacular languages. It can also be in the form of community radio stations, which allow young women to participate. There is a need to take advantage of the relative increase in tele-density that has been recorded throughout the region over the last five years, which means that women now have better access to mobile phone technology. Since marginalised young women are gradually having access to mobile phones it will also be important to use the phones as a medium of information exchange through, for example, short message service (SMS). Providing up to date and accurate information promotes young women’s participation from an informed perspective.

Provision of a non-restrictive capital fund and technical support

Another key strategy that can be used in addressing the negative plight of young women is to ensure that they have access to sustainable livelihoods and at the same time are able to have a certain level of liquidity and disposable income. This dictates that they should be able to own and have access to critical means of production, chief among them being land as the principal resource for production. They also need to be assisted to acquire mining rights and be able to have legal and formal access to minerals found in their localities, which they can channel through formal markets.

Easy lines of credit also need to be availed to them to assist them to start and support their business initiatives. Many young women have brilliant business ideas that can contribute towards lifting them out of poverty but many times these ideas remain a dream until they die a natural death because the young women fail to access start-up capital. Therefore, there is a critical need to provide a fund that does not have restrictive collateral requirements for young women. The fund can be in the form of a revolving fund that is made available to young women at zero interest for the sole reason of assisting them to nurture their business initiatives and earn a living out of them. Economic independence among young women is critical as it not only helps to lift them out of poverty but also strategically positions young women to influence decisions and processes.

The provision of start-up capital should be coupled with technical support in the form of entrepreneurial training in order to fully equip young women with the requisite skills for business management. Such training can also broaden their understanding of business structures thereby widening opportunities for young women, which can further aid them to explore and realise sustainable livelihoods that ultimately promote sustainable development.

Mentorship and twinning programmes

The last but equally important strategy is to facilitate mentorship. Records have it that many people who have successfully established empires from nothing have at a certain time in their lives received mentorship from more experienced people. Therefore, it is essential to twin young women with successful women who can walk alongside the young women in their journey to a new life, providing them with the necessary guidance and moral support to continuously inspire the young women not to give up. This would obviously also include twinning programmes across geographical spaces.
Conclusion

In this article I have illustrated how the marginalisation of geo-localities into which young women are born perpetuates economic injustices among young women contrary to those born in urban localities. We have seen how the problems that they suffer are multifaceted, that it starts from their exclusion in accessing education, to lack of employment opportunities, and subsequently limited access to health facilities. This is exacerbated by the fact that rural, mining and farming communities are strongly connected to traditional and cultural beliefs and practices that largely discriminate against the girl-child and favour their male counterparts. It is such beliefs that have further denied young women access to, and control of, resources that could lessen their burden and probably give them a voice in decision-making. As a result of such inequalities, young women continue to live in a vicious cycle of poverty, which is transmitted through generations.

The militaristic culture of politics and the centralisation of governance systems is also a deliberate stance to exclude young women from participating in politics and contesting for public office. Although this applies to all women and young women of different geographical orientations, it is worse in marginalised environs due to a lack of access to information. This paper has further explained how young women are also left out in the women’s movements in our region. The women’s movements in our region are not broad-based, they are concentrated and their interventions are also concentrated in major cities and towns.

Thus, the whole analysis of marginalised young women’s situations makes it imperative to scale up recognition and programming by all stakeholders – including by women’s movements – for young women in rural, farming and mining communities for us to achieve social justice and contribute towards sustainable development in the southern African region.

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