

Ashaki “Nzingha” Hall, MPH

Ethel Payne Project: To Understand Gender Equity, We First Look to Africa

Fall 2023

In 1994, conveners of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) gathered in Cairo, Egypt to define an agenda that prioritized human dignity and sustainable development. Government entities, civil society members, non-profits, international agencies, and social justice leaders from around the world attended this conference. From this meeting, a “Program of Action” was created and for the first time, “reproductive health” was defined in a global policy document. The policy stated that: “Reproductive health is a state of complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity, in all matters relating to the reproductive system.”

One of the most remarkable statements from various parliamentary members of the United Nations was the Cairo Declaration on Population and Development. Article 7 of the declaration affirms that sustainable development is directly tied to gender equality. “The empowerment of women and the improvement of their political, social, economic and health status are highly important ends in themselves. We further believe that human development cannot be sustained unless women are guaranteed equal rights and equal status with men. In this process women should be seen not merely as the beneficiaries of change but as the agents of change as well...we therefore strongly support the education goals set forth in the ICPD Programme of Action as adopted in Cairo, and commit ourselves to removing all legal, social and cultural barriers in our countries that discriminate against women and prevent their full participation in society, including in public and political life.”

Nearly thirty years later, we look to these documents to understand the strides made to achieve gender equity. Who are the leaders we look to for understanding our next steps? Which countries have brilliantly changed the landscape for gender equity and parity? What work needs to be done to ensure we preserve and uphold gender justice? How can we learn from the initiatives that weren’t successful?

To answer these questions, we look to Africa.

The 2023 World Economic Forum Gender Report ranks the countries of Rwanda, South Africa, and Mozambique as three of the top countries in sub-Saharan Africa committed to closing the gender gap and making progress towards gender parity. According to the Global Gender Gap

Index ranking by region, the three countries are consecutively listed as #2, #3, and #4. Namibia leads the list, and Burundi closes the top 5.

Sub-Saharan Africa			
Country	Rank		Score
	Regional	Global	
Namibia	1	8	0.802
Rwanda	2	12	0.794
South Africa	3	20	0.787
Mozambique	4	25	0.778
Burundi	5	35	0.763

Figure 1.0: World Economic Forum Report Data



Photo Credit: Rwandan Women Doctors for Reproductive Justice.

Rwanda

A small country in eastern Africa boasts a population of over 14 million people. Rwanda, affectionately coined as the “land of a thousand hills”, is known for its thriving metropolis and capital city, Kigali. Rwanda is also known for its lush, flourishing rainforests, and clean city

streets (no plastic bags allowed). The country is dedicated to eco-friendly technology; it is estimated by 2030 that it will cut 38% of carbon emissions. The country prides itself on community revitalization and volunteerism. Every last Saturday of the month, citizens participate in “Umuganda” or national day of community service. The word in Kinyarwanda means, “coming together in common purpose.” Cities and towns nationwide close down to participate in projects that help clean and structure communities.

What truly makes Rwanda unique is its commitment to gender equity. The country was the first in the world to hold a parliament with a women majority. The parliament consists of over sixty-percent women, while the senate holds nearly forty percent women. Rwanda has laws that mandate equity between men and women. There are regulations that enshrine men and women’s equal access to inherited assets from parents or family members. There are also laws that prevent and punish acts of gender-based violence. Rwanda undoubtedly stands out.

It is truly one of the world’s epicenters of gender equity. For the first time on the African continent, the Women Deliver Conference held its triennial convening in the nation’s capital. Over six thousand people attended to discuss issues related to gender equity, reproductive health, sustainability, and advocacy. Many Rwanda-based organizations attended the global meeting, including Rwanda Women Doctors for Reproductive Justice. The group was founded in 2021 by a cadre of Gen-z and millennial women physicians who work to “strengthen a feminist network of girls and young women to advance the right and access to safe abortion, bodily autonomy, and sexual-reproductive rights.” The students formulated the idea to create the organization after their ardent participation and leadership in a student organization known around the world as, “Medical Students for Choice.” Rwanda Women Doctors for Reproductive Justice trains medical doctors in Rwanda on safe abortion protocols, procedures, and access. The organization is also involved in public advocacy and intergovernmental affairs. Acting Director Dr. Clarisse Mutikeye and Director of Monitoring and Evaluation, Dr. Yvette Nkurunziza both emphasize the importance of educating doctors on the lived experiences of marginalized populations. “We also add the concept of gender in our trainings,” says Dr. Nkurunziza. They believe that by having knowledge about populations impacted by gender and sexuality biases, physicians will be more prepared to interact and treat patients. The members of the organization understand that medical and public health education extends to not only women, but also men. Dr. Mutikeye believes that in the future, Rwandan Women Doctors for Reproductive Justice will be one of the premiere organizations championing women’s health and rights, “we believe that women are responsible for their health and they can advocate better for their reproductive rights in a way that is different from mixed or male-led organizations.” By creating more avenues for women to be involved in their own destinies, Rwanda will continue setting the global example for gender equity and women’s visibility in healthcare.

Rwanda has made history in its pursuit of gender justice, but some believe more efforts can be made for LGBTQ+ justice. Albert Nabonibo, famed gospel artist and activist is a coalition facilitator for Isange. Isange is an umbrella group for LGBTQ+ persons in Rwanda. Its mission is to empower and advance LGBTQ+ rights. “Rwanda has a long way to go and has some work to be done,” says Nabonibo. Technically, the expression of tenderness and love by same-gender loving couples is not illegal, however it is still highly scrutinized and stigmatized. Marriage is not legal for same-gender loving couples, and Nabonibo says that people who are out struggle to access services and resources. In 2021, he helped organize the country’s first Pride event. The event was centered around a football match between members of the LGBTQ+ community and members of the media. The event was successful and a lot of attendees enjoyed the festivities. Nabonibo believes that government representation is crucial for LGBTQ+ advocacy. He notes that there are ministerial divisions that specialize in the issues of marginalized groups, women, people living with disabilities, etc. He believes that an active, designated parliamentary member focusing on the concerns of LGBTQ+ people would help with progression and rights.



Photo: Albert Nabonibo

South Africa

A country that touches the Atlantic and Indian oceans, known as the “Rainbow Nation” South Africa boasts a rich history and diverse topography. An economic hub of the grand continent and cultural melting pot, South Africa sets itself apart as a historical and political wonder. From the dismantling of apartheid to the Durban Declaration of the early 90’s, the country has led the world into imagining a nation that upholds human rights. In 1996, South Africa instituted the Commission for Gender Equality. The office monitors and evaluates policies and practices that protect gender equality. The South African government has several regulations that observe

women's rights and gender equity. How do these laws protect civil society members? How are organizations and civil society groups creating spaces for conversations and gender equality?

In 2006, Sonke Gender Justice was founded as an organization that contributes to the development of gender-just and democratic societies free from poverty. The organization is multi-faceted and works in the spheres of communications and advocacy, reproductive health and rights, and policy development. Rumbi Elizabeth Chidoori is the Regional Policy and Advocacy Coordinator at Sonke. She believes that finding solutions to gender equity is a collaborative effort. Sonke distinguishes itself as an organization that invests in educating men and boys on gender equity and parity. "We try to ensure that men have some voice and become allies to women's rights groups and be a part of the conversation in trying to find solutions to issues of gender-based violence. We know this lies in unequal power relations between men and women, and it's important that we confront these issues and interrogate these issues." Chidoori also does work with the "Power to Youth Project," a coalition that works with young folks to be meaningfully engaged in issues related to reproductive health, rights, and democracy. "We just want to strengthen our capacity, and strengthen the capacities of the citizens of the countries that we work in. We want to engage policymakers and the private sector. We don't live on islands. We like to say we are intersectional. It is important to carry that lens in the work we do."

Intersectional activism is all but too familiar for local South African youth activist, Thato Mputhi. She is the Founding Director of Enabled Enlightenment. Enabled Enlightenment is a disability justice organization that seeks to educate, empower, and sensitize people on issues related to disability. The vibrant, worldly, well-rounded millennial is also a sexual health advocate. She uses her platform to elevate the experiences of people living with disabilities. Enabled Enlightenment offers training sessions and provides resources for people living with disabilities. She also focuses on empowering young women and girls living with disabilities to be confident and "take up space." Though there are measures that recognize persons with disabilities, such as Disability Awareness Month, Mputhi believes that only scratches the surface. "I feel it is very problematic in the sense that persons living with disabilities do not only exist in that month of the year." She advocates for young people with disabilities to access reproductive health care resources. She also fights for people living with disabilities to have opportunities for long-term careers, not just for the purposes of tokenism, but due to the fact they have the skills and knowledge for those positions. "We need to be inclusive in all that we are doing." Enabled Enlightenment is building a continental and soon-to-be global network for people living with disabilities.

Mozambique

Imagine a country with gorgeous beaches, abundant biodiversity, ancient colonial ruins, and fine cuisine. Mozambique, a country located in southeastern Africa is known for its rich landscapes

and natural minerals. Its capital, Maputo is the business hub for the country and offers a marvelous restaurant scene, artisanal shops, and vivacious nightlife. In 2003, Mozambique and several African countries adopted the Protocol to the African charter on the Rights of Women in Africa. This policy is known as the “Maputo Protocol.” The protocol ensures that women and girls in Africa have roles in government and politics, access to education, measures to prevent violence, and rights to reproductive healthcare. In its constitution, Mozambique upholds equality between men and women, “Men and women shall be equal before the law in all spheres of political, economic, social and cultural life.” The government structure prioritizes gender equity, but is it implemented in civil society?

Tânia Tomé is an entrepreneur, motivational speaker, polyglot and President of Womenice foundation. She founded the organization as an integrated platform to support women and youth development in Mozambique and countries across Africa. Their programs include women’s mentorship, entrepreneurship, and opportunities for networking and building community. Tomé believes that training women leaders will lead to closing the gender gap. “In Mozambique we have more women than men, but paradoxically we don’t have the same access to education. We need to promote and leverage the voices of women and to empower leaders.” The notable author also speaks to the importance of integration of media, civil society, and government entities to solve issues related to gender inequality. “We need to embrace other initiatives, other projects, we need to do partnerships. This will be a huge opportunity for us to move to a better world.” Youth initiatives are creating needed change in the country. Youth activist Whitney Sabino is a consultant, entrepreneur, and founder of Manas Magazine. The socialist and feminist magazine is the first publication of its kind in the country. She believes that the country has done “brilliant” work collectively in terms of women’s advocacy and legislation for ethical marriages. “I am very proud of the opportunity we have to engage different groups and activists. The LGBTQ+ communities, the widows association, feminist leaders from the 90’s and young women leaders. The fact that we can unite and pass bills and do our advocacy collectively, we do that very well.” Sabino says Mozambique culturally needs to shift to a society that understands the gravity of gender-based violence. There are issues that are still common in the country such as young girls marrying as minors, and young women being forced into domestic work-positions that impact their educational attainment. Ideally, Sabino would like to see more funding for women-led youth organizations in Mozambique, “the funds we have in the country are going to mainstream organizations.” It is perceived that organizations led by mature adults are more prepared to take on the work for gender equity in the country. Support for youth initiatives is crucial. Sabino is proof of their productivity.



Photo: Whitney Sabino

Rwanda, South Africa, and Mozambique are prime examples of perfectly imperfect works in progress. The drive, motive, and desire to transform civil societies are boldly visible. The youth, women, and members of the LGBTQ+ community are showing up consistently to fight not only for the rights of women and gender minorities, but for all people who are impacted by unbalanced, outdated gender norms and practices. We look to Africa as the global nucleus for the progression and advancement of gender equity.

I would like to thank the National Association of Black Journalists for funding my work as a 2023 Ethel Payne Fellow.