Chapter 9
Gender, Youths, and Sustainable Development

Women and youths are critical agents of change and development in Africa. Together, they constitute the largest proportion of the population of African countries and play important roles in African economies. In 2013, women accounted for 50 percent of the population of Sub-Saharan African (SSA) countries and 48 percent of Middle East and North African (MENA) countries (World Development Indicators Database). In the same year, 20 percent of the region’s population fell between ages 15 and 24, while those under 15 constituted about 41 percent of the population (United Nations Population Division Database). Given the large youth population in Africa, as well as the central role of women in African economies, development policies in the region must explicitly incorporate the role of women and youths. Special attention should be paid to the potential impact of development programs on women and youths. Africa’s economic performance would improve significantly if policymakers can explore ways of using the skills and talents of women and youths more productively. The current use of these skills and talents are not only inefficient, but also threatens the sustainability of growth in the region. This chapter discusses the role of women and youths in Africa and some of the challenges they face.

The Role of Women in Africa

African women have always been known for their entrepreneurship and acumen in trading. Sylvanus (2013, p.69), for instance, discusses how “Nana-Benzes” dominated the lucrative Lome textile market for many years.¹ Women play an active role in agricultural production, the mainstay of African economies. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), African women contribute 60–80 percent of the labor used in food production in the region.² Women are the bedrock of African households, not least as providers of food and childcare. In fact, many African households are now headed by women, with important implications for resource allocation, education, and economic development.
Africa’s informal sector is dominated by women and young girls, a result of gender discrimination in the labor market as well as lack of educational opportunities. There are three major categories of women in Africa’s informal sector. The first consists of those with little or no education who often engage in the selling of low-value items such as handkerchiefs, chewing gums, bread, and various perishable food items. The second is made up of those with primary education, and their focus is mainly on serving as helpers/cleaners at hotels and restaurants, as well as engaging in trades such as tailoring and petty trading. The third category consists of secondary school graduates who focus mainly on high-value trading such as retail and wholesale trade. It is important to note that men in the informal sector tend to focus more on the high-value areas of the sector, leaving the low-value activities to women.

Given low regional mobility (discussed later in this chapter), there are more women than men in rural communities of many African countries. Most rural men migrate to urban centers in search of formal-sector jobs or jobs in the mining sector. They leave their wives and children behind and only visit the village periodically. Rural women engage in agricultural production (usually subsistence agriculture), small-scale processing of agricultural products, and petty trading. Women’s agricultural production is characterized by inefficiency and low productivity. They typically cultivate nearby lands year in and year out, resulting in loss of soil nutrients. Poverty and low income preclude many women from purchasing fertilizers, as well as hiring workers to cultivate large areas of land. Thus, they tend to produce mainly low-value products such as vegetables, cassava in West Africa, and maize in East and Southern Africa.

Despite their important roles, African women have not received the attention they deserve in economic policymaking, as well as in resource allocation. In a 1994 Cairo summit organized by the United Nations, countries all over the world were urged to create an enabling environment for women to have greater control over their health and destiny. Since that summit, great strides have been made with regard to maternal health, safety of childbirth, and women’s control over fertility rates (New York Times, February 13, 2014, p.A9). Table 9.1 shows some of the indicators of African women’s health. Indicators such as maternal mortality and life expectancy have improved over the past two decades, though they are still below global averages.

Although progress has been made with regard to gender equality in Africa, there is still a wide gulf between the welfare of men and women. A UN report notes that in poor communities of developing countries, women’s status, maternal death, child marriage, and other markers of women’s welfare have not improved significantly over the past 20 years (New York Times, February 13, 2014, p.A9). The UN report also notes that too many women, especially those aged 15–19 years, are still dying from pregnancy and childbirth. Other inequities against women, according to the report, include lower wages and unattractive working conditions, such as the lack of secure jobs with benefits.