

Graça Machel calls on Africa to 'aggressively address its gender-specific challenges'

Graça Machel has called on African women and policymakers to challenge gender inequality and inadequate female representation in the continent's business and economic, political and policy space. She was speaking recently at the 22nd Eminent Speakers' Lecture of the African Development Institute held at the Babacar N'diaye Auditorium in Abidjan, Cote d'Ivoire



Graça Machel is chair of the Graça Machel Trust. Founded in 2010, the trust advocates for women's economic and financial empowerment, food security and nutrition, education for all, as well as good governance.

Her address was titled: 'Educating the Girl Child, Empowering Women, and Enhancing Female Entrepreneurship in Africa'.

"Africa's socio-economic transformation will only be realised once we aggressively address gender-specific challenges, prioritise gender equality and women's participation, and firmly entrench women in leadership positions at all levels in society," Machel remarked.

"African women need to be in the driving seat of national discourse... Women need to be at the centre of our economies," she said. "They must also pro-actively seek to correct the status quo."

"We have a remainder of 45 years to achieve the goals which we have set out for ourselves in Agenda 2063. Within these 45 years is a lifespan of an entire generation of young girls who will grow to become active citizens whose potential must be unlocked. To ensure that we achieve the goals for our development by 2063, we need to fully invest in and optimise the continent's other half, which for too long has been neglected: the African female!" Machel said to a packed hall.

Increased investments in education

The former freedom fighter who was also Mozambique's first education and culture minister, following the country's independence in 1975, also called for increased investments in education, especially girl child education, agriculture and nutrition.

She remarked that, “Investing in education from early childhood has a lasting effect on the survival, development, protection and active participation of children in social, economic and political activities. Knowing what we know, we must demand that governments fully meet their commitments to investment in education.”

Education transforms the lives of individuals, communities and nations and is a prerequisite for sustainable development, Machel said, emphasising that, “Education, particularly for girls, is a catalyst for reducing child and maternal deaths and lifting people out of poverty.”

No meaningful development of an ECD system

She observed that Africa as a whole has no meaningful development of an early child development (ECD) system and that World Bank estimates paint a dire situation for investments in ECD in Sub-Saharan Africa. “Nations in the region devote just 2% of education budgets to pre-primary education and early childhood development programmes. This small percentage is committed in the face of overwhelming evidence that an additional dollar invested in quality early childhood programmes yields a return of between \$6 dollars and \$17 dollars,” she said.

National spending commitments in education and early child development systems in Africa vary widely, with Zambia and the Central African Republic allocating just 1% of their GDP to education, according to Save the Children International and the Africa Policy Forum. And average spending across Africa has almost stagnated at around 4% of GDP over the past two decades or more.

There is therefore an urgent need for a joint coalition of the private and public sectors collaborating with civil society organisations to design and develop programmes that address this scenario, Machel said, even as she sought for increased oversight of investment in human capital from Africa’s foremost development finance institution.

“While the African Development Bank is doing a good job leveraging its might, it still needs to exert pressure on governments and private sector partners to encourage investment in nutrition and ECD, as well as allocate its own resources to help build these building blocks of Africa’s human capital. What good is your power and influence as the AfDB if you are not leveraging your ability to truly impact change on the continent at the most fundamental of levels?”

Machel was honoured by African Development Bank president Akinwumi Adesina as the first Kofi A. Annan Eminent Persons Speaker, the new name of the Bank’s African Development Institute’s Eminent Speaker Series.