

The river god may strike again

By Eunice Menka, Ghana

BELIEVE it or not, a river god has disenfranchised women voters in a by-election held here – and all because it was held on a Tuesday. Hundreds of women voters in villages beyond Offin River in Upper Denkyira constituency in central Ghana could not take part in the by-election because of a taboo that bars women from crossing the river on a Tuesday – when voters went to the poll to replace an MP who died in late April.

Local government officials say they learnt of the case on the day of the election and there was little they could have done that late. Had they been informed earlier, they say, traditional authorities would have performed some rituals to allow women safe passage across the river.

A sheep would have been slaughtered to pacify the river god. Girls who have to cross the river to reach school reportedly do not travel on Tuesdays. Such beliefs, according to locals, have been reinforced by accidents in the past involving women who tried to defy the river god.

The crisis is not over: Ghana's elections are slated for December

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5. Say 'yes' to children or lose out

7. No justice in the streets

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THE MERRY WIVES OF MANZINI: A smiling King Mswati appears in public with Zena Mahlangu (extreme right), the maiden he chose to be his 10th wife. LaMahlangu's mother fought a High Court battle to have her daughter released from the royal household. The king made his first public appearance with LaMahlangu at the launch of the country's international trade fair in Manzini.

KING MSWATI'S RUNAWAY QUEENS

By Lifaqane Nare, Zimbabwe

THERE were 11 beautiful women in a small kingdom. Two ran away, and then there were nine.

One could come up with beautiful rhymes on Swaziland's King Mswati III and the women in his life. Scandal continues to dog one of Africa's last absolute monarchs after two of his queens fled their palaces in June. Completely unfazed, the king added another wife, Zena Mahlangu, to his coterie a week later.

The newspaper *City Press* reported that the two young queens, LaHwala and the fiery LaMagwaza, feared being infected with HIV/Aids. It was also reported that they had decamped because their husband had "taken an interest in teenagers as brides" and they could no longer be certain that he was practising safe sex.

No one outside the immediate

He chooses a prospective wife every year from a choice of teenagers who throng the palace for the Reed Dance

royal circle seemed to know where the two were, but word got out that King Mswati was not at all impressed by the publicity. The small kingdom still runs along traditional lines. According to Swazi custom, the woman chosen by the king remains the official fiancée until she falls pregnant, proving that she can indeed bear heirs to the throne. Only then can the king marry her.

This has raised suspicion among the royal wives, considering that the king cannot practice safe sex if he is to make his official fiancée pregnant. Following her recent marriage, it is believed that the latest addition, 19-year-old LaMahlangu, is pregnant.

The escapees were reportedly

unhappy with the attention they were getting. Indeed, LaMagwaza was involved last year in an affair with South Africa Lizo Shabangu, who spilled the beans when she told him she was ending the romance.

According to the jilted man, LaMagwaza had told him she was not getting enough attention from the king as Mswati did not visit her for months on end. LaMagwaza is said to be in London.

The never-ending flow of young women into the king's bed has not helped matters. King Mswati chooses a prospective wife every year from teenagers who throng the palace for the annual reed dance.

The wives are worried about the calibre of young women that the king has taken to selecting. Some are believed to have had previous relationships. LaMahlangu is reported to have had a highly publicised affair before being picked to be Queen Number 11.

Choosing her proved almost too costly for the king in other ways. Her mother took him to court alleging LaMahlangu had been kidnapped by two royal officials and forced to be the king's fiancée.

Royal sources reported, however, that she was happy enough in the palace. Royalists overlooked the Swazi high court ruling that LaMahlangu should appear before it and confirm that she was happy living in the royal household as one of the king's two fiancées.

The 18-year-old former Miss Swaziland, Nomonde Fihla, is now queen-in-waiting.

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The river god may strike again

FROM FRONT PAGE

7, which is a Tuesday. Women voters may have to cross over on Monday evening and return home on Wednesday at their own expense. It is as if there will be no end to the battle for women's rights.

Although the Ghanaian government recognises that the needs of women and children can best be catered for through greater participation of women in decision-making, a proposal that 40 percent representation goes to women has yet to take root. Worse still, political parties have not heeded the call to field more women candidates if the number of women in parliament – currently standing at 19 in the 200-seat legislature – is to rise to levels good enough to have an impact on women's rights.

The third ordinary session of the assembly of the African Union in Addis Ababa in July adopted a declaration to promote gender equality. In 2003, the AU elected five female commissioners but women's status remains a big issue as continental leaders pay lip service to

protocols on affirmative action.

According to Foreign Minister Nana Akufo Addo, the Assembly made a "solemn declaration on gender equality in Africa by which the heads of state reaffirmed their commitment to expand and promote gender equality at all levels and build on the progress so far achieved in addressing issues of major concern to women of Africa".

Addo told his colleagues, just before the house went on recess, that "it is rather distressing, however, to note that in spite of the high profile that Ghana enjoys in the affairs of the Union ... we are yet to ratify several African Union legal instruments, including important documents such as the Protocol of the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa".

He added: "I will certainly need the urgent assistance of this august house in rectifying this anomaly." He will certainly need all the help he can get if the challenge posed by the river god and other cultural beliefs are anything to go by.



LIMITED CHOICES: Women should not have to wait for the river god to 'give them permission' to exercise their democratic right.

In a report released this year, the Economic Commission for Africa said that an estimated 80 percent of the continent's poor are women. In sub-Saharan Africa, women comprise 60 percent of the informal sector, including informal trade. Yet women lack equal access to health, education, finance and other essential resources. Gender inequalities in education and employment combined are estimated to have reduced sub-Saharan Africa's per capita growth in the 1960-1992 period by 0.8 percent per year – leading to gender considerations being called the "missing link in achieving sustained growth".

Ethiopian Prime Minister Meles Zenawi told a forum of fellow leaders that he supports "meaningful" affirmative action for African women – as long as it is not tainted with tokenism. He exhorts women to be agents of their own development, saying, "in my experience, if you want something you have to take it, no one is going to give it to you".

Ghanaian women could well have heeded the advice to take their destiny in their own hands. They are producing the Women's Manifesto, which addresses concerns about gender equality and equity in national development. Issues tackled include the low participation of women in governance and access to resources.

Clearly, these women are determined not to wait on the whims and fancies of a river god who is in a particularly vicious mood on a Tuesday.

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King Mswati and his two disappearing wives

FROM FRONT PAGE

Mswati's wives range in age from the late teens to 34. They are LaMatsebula, LaMotsa, LaNganganza, LaMbikiza, LaMagwaza, LaMasango, LaHwala, LaGija, LaMagongo, LaMahlangu and fiancée LaNtentesa.

Only two have tertiary education. LaMbikiza is an advocate who received her degree from the University of South Africa while LaMatsebula has a degree in education. LaNgangaza and LaMagwaza are into fashion design.

It is said that only LaMbikiza's was a love match. She had an affair

with the king prior to their marriage and bore his first child.

Although Swaziland is reeling under poverty and debt, King Mswati continues to lead a lavish lifestyle.

He recently attracted a lot of criticism after he ordered the building of new palaces for his then 10 wives and two fiancées. He also ordered a private jet.

King Mswati III was born Makhosetive Dlamini in 1968, the only child of Dzeliwe Shongwe, one of the many wives of King Sobhuza II. Mswati was educated at Eton and when Sobhuza died in 1982, his

mother ruled Swaziland for a year. He officially became king in 1986 when he was 18. He and his mother have since run the kingdom.

Sobhuza banned all political parties in 1973 and Swaziland continues to be ruled by royal decree.

Lavish palaces and lifestyles regardless, the king's women appear to be quite dissatisfied. With 11 of them plus fiancées, it was bound to happen that the king would take months to do the rounds.

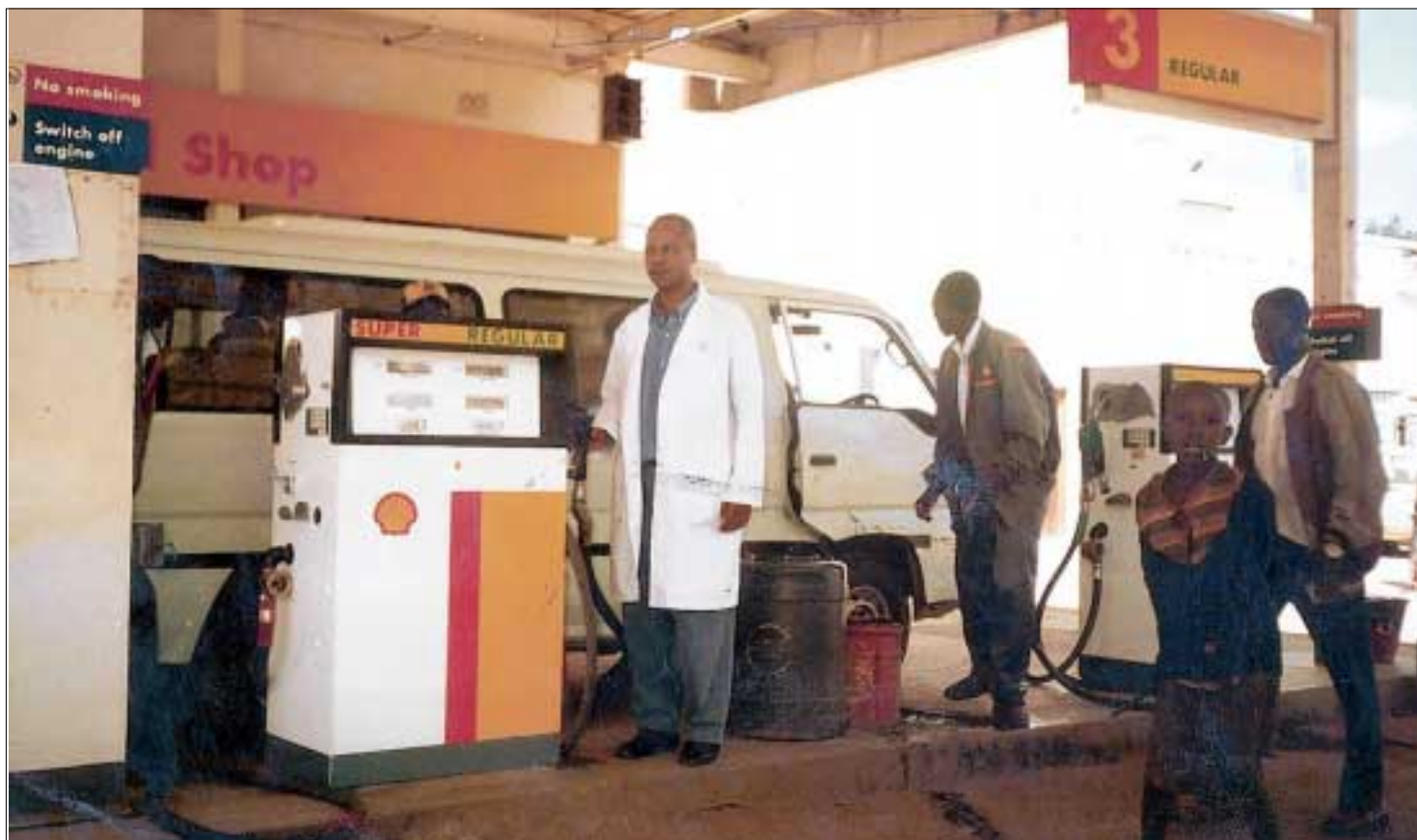
The "little women", it would appear, are quickly getting tired of entertaining themselves. What next in King Mswati's burgeoning



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NO RESPITE: Levies on pump prices have raised the cost of living to almost unbearable levels

Fuel taxes hit the poor

By Elizabeth Lisuntha-Banda,
Malawi

PAYING taxes may have become a way of life for those in business and employment, but Malawians are reeling under a burden heavier than most: workers can expect to surrender part of their income in the form of Pay As You Earn at the end of every month. If they go to a shop, they will probably pay extra tax on almost 80 percent of their needs. Yet more taxes are factored into their electricity bills. But that is not all. Whether or not they own vehicles, they must also contribute to levies incorporated in the fuel price build-up.

Certainly, fuel drives world economies. You need not be a student of economics to realise that when pump prices go up, the prices of all other commodities – and transport – will rise too. But the opposite is true when pump prices drop. Nothing ever follows suit.

Recent erratic oil prices have made life particularly difficult for poor Malawians. A survey conducted by the Malawi National Statistical Office indicates that 65 percent of the people do not have enough of an income to meet their requirements of food and other basic necessities.

Indeed, the United Nations Development Programme's 2003 Economic Report says Malawi is poorer now than it was a decade ago. And a survey conducted in six townships in Blantyre, the commercial capital, in January this year revealed that 54 in every 100 of the city's residents are running businesses, even when they have jobs. The majority of Malawians live on less than US\$1 a day.

Two-thirds of Malawians do not have enough income to meet basic needs

Women, who comprise 52 percent of the population, have been affected most as they are the ones who run their homes. "Life is tough," says Sarah Chagwera of Ndirande township. "It is not easy to make ends meet with the increase in prices of almost all basic commodities. It is really difficult to ensure there is food on the table every day."

Chipo Salijeni of Chilomoni township, a mother of six, says she is having difficulties paying fares for her school-going children. "I am a widow who looks after six children in primary and secondary school. I have to provide transport and pocket money for the children, yet I run only a small business. Where do I get the money to buy food, which is now so expensive?"

Being landlocked, Malawi has to pay a higher premium on oil because it has to be transported from sea ports by road and, to some extent, the rail. But transport costs from Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, Durban in South Africa and Nacala in Mozambique are not in themselves the key factor in high fuel prices and, therefore, higher cost of living.

Levies on the pump prices are the major factor, according to the Economics Association of Malawi. A study conducted recently under the auspices of the association recommended that the so-called "safety net levies" be removed as they have become a burden on the people. "Government should consider removing some safety net levies

since the current levies are generating more taxes than budgeted for in the 2003/04 national budget," the report proposed.

Levies proposed for removal include Safety Net Levy 2 was introduced on October 18, 2003, as a temporary measure "imposed by a ministerial decree without the approval of the National Assembly" and Safety Net Levy 3, the US95 cents per litre petrol and diesel which is hidden in the road levy but not remitted to the National Road Levy. The Road Levy for 2003/04 financial year, says the association, had already raised about US\$9,200 through the end of January 2004 while the target is just over \$10,000.

Lack of transparency in government over the use of the funds raised has emerged as the major concern for the stakeholders in the study, who also include the Malawi Confederation of Chambers of Commerce and Industry, Society of Accountants in Malawi, Malawi Economic Justice Network and Civil Society Agriculture Network.

Petroleum Pricing Committee Chairman Chancellor Kaferapanjira, who is also chief executive of the chambers of commerce and industry, says pump prices and the cost of living could be lower if government agreed to drop the levies.

Other levies in the petroleum price build-up include the Petroleum Control Commission levy of 0.35 cents and price stabilisation levy of 77 cents per litre, the Malawi Bureau of Standards access levy of 0.35 cents and price sta-

bilisation levy of about two cents per litre.

Since fuel drives the economy, he adds, unnecessary increases trigger price hikes and higher inflation. Since February this year, according to the Consumers Association of Malawi market guide, the price of maize flour has risen by 12 percent, table salt six percent, bread flour 6.9 percent, ration meat by 15.67 percent and eggs by 13.46 percent.

Former Finance Minister Friday Jumbe dashed all hopes of lower prices, however, insisting that the levies on fuel were here to stay. He said he too "wished all levies were removed from fuel prices" but that this would be possible only if he were given alternative sources of revenue for budgeted programmes.

Economics association spokesman Perks Ligoya says the minister missed the point: the issue is not an alternative source of revenue but where the money goes and how it is used. Donors have echoed the association's concerns over lack of transparency in the management of road levy funds.

Despite road maintenance levies, major roads are riddled with potholes and over half of city roads have no tarmac. Safety net levies are also still being charged on fuel prices, but Malawi continues to rely on donors for emergency assistance.

Former Energy and Mining Minister Hetherwick Ntaba, announcing the introduction of unleaded petrol soon, said the country would save \$400,000, which could result in lower pump prices over time. But this is unlikely because a new Energy Sector Regulatory Bill is expected to introduce extra levies on fuel, electricity and gas.

WOMEN'S VOICES

Tough choices: Food or condoms

By Africawoman Correspondent
Zimbabwe

HIV/AIDS awareness posters plastered in hospitals, clinics and other offices urge men and women to follow the A, B and C of safe sex. For many Zimbabwean women, however, the options end abruptly at the point of behaviour change. Using condoms is out for these women, and not necessarily because they are averse to either the male or female versions.

For a start, the female condom is not readily available. In Bulawayo, Zimbabwe's second city, the health department distributes an average 72,000 male condoms a month compared with 81 female condoms. The price difference is staggering: a pack of three male condoms sells for ZM\$100 (two US cents) while a box of two female condoms costs ZM\$7,600, the equivalent of US\$1.43.

In a hyperinflationary environment, ZM\$100 cannot buy much. The cheapest sweets cost ZM\$200. You can get a loaf of bread and a packet of milk out of ZM7,600. The same amount of money will buy you half a kilogramme of beef.

This means that women have no access to a contraceptive that they have direct control over. Because of the cost, many women choose not to use the female condom each time they have sex. It is reserved for "special occasions". Besides, women who can afford it complain that the female condom is not user-friendly. According to the findings of a study on female condom use by the Horizons Project of the Population Council and Population Services International, "fifty seven percent of women reported some difficulty with use, such as problems with insertion, discomfort during sex and excess lubrication".

Married women said they would want to use the female condom to avoid contracting HIV from promiscuous husbands but they could not broach the subject with their partners. Said the report: "While some women, particularly married women, are interested in the female condom for disease prevention, they are not comfortable discussing this openly with their partner. Instead, they reported using strategies such as telling their partner that sex would be more enjoyable than with a male condom or that sex would be possible during menstruation."

Clearly, there are issues of pricing and power relations that must be resolved before Zimbabwean women can stop being vulnerable to HIV/Aids and other sexually transmitted diseases.

EDITORIAL

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Complaining is not enough

There is a strong temptation to laugh out loud at the very idea that Africa's last absolute monarch should be snubbed by none other than two of his queens. Yet queen's LaHwala and LaMagwaza have reportedly turned up their noses at the man best known for his appetite for young brides, who are hand-picked at the annual Reed Dance held in his honour.

They cite their sense of insecurity given Swazi tradition that demands that the chosen ones first get pregnant before being invested with the honour of being queen. There's some smart thinking there, we think, as the young women worry that they may well be exposed to HIV. After all, there is no guarantee that the women may not contract the disease either before or after marriage.

But our concern at Africawoman is not so much over the young king's romantic inclinations as the effect of his lifestyle on governance in Swaziland. Earlier this year, it was reported that the king had asked parliament to approve a massive budget for new palaces for his many wives plus a private jet. And this at a time when the country was sending out an international appeal for aid in the face of a biting famine in southern Africa! King Mswati must be a source of great frustration for many Africans who are increasingly calling for a younger set of leaders in the hope that their greater exposure to education and greater awareness of the need for democracy will lead to change in a continent long bedeviled by dictatorships.

It is certainly no laughing matter that there should still be African leaders who rule by decree as the continent struggles for innovative ways out of the "famine, coup and earthquakes" image that dogs Africa.

True, there have been serious attempts throughout the continent to entrench a more democratic way of thinking and doing government business. In this edition, we write about Nigerian Finance and Budget Minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala's dream for a more streamlined and efficient Civil Service that will be accountable to the people.

We wish the good woman well, but she has a tough fight on her hands. The trouble with Africa, unfortunately, does not just stop at the leaders. We speak of corruption at the top, yet the people who are led are often part of the conspiracy—either by aiding and abetting it or simply letting it be by re-electing dubious leaders who have no track record for innovation and change.

In Swaziland, it is a case of no opportunity for democracy after party politics was banned decades ago. But even where elections are held ever so regularly, the new leaders soon fall back into the "business as usual" mentality in which cronyism, corruption and partisanship are the order of the day—all at the expense of the people. The cynics might say of King Mswati that, at least, you know where you stand with an absolute monarch. What's the excuse for those who are elected on a democratic ticket and then want to corrupt the laws and constitutions to ensure they remain in power for as long as the first generation of dictators?

Africans have paid a high price for this form of highhanded management of government. As we write, famine carves across a wide swathe of the continent from Chad all the way to the southern parts. It could well be a function of nature, but it is not the first time that famine ravages Africa. You would think that four decades and more since the liberation wars, we would have worked out policies, to do with irrigation for example, that would head off the worst effects of famine—or the other disaster, HIV/Aids. But we are more likely to be obsessed with laws that ensure that there is no effective opposition to ensure we perpetuate ourselves in power for as long as possible—even when we are walking disasters as far as our people are concerned.

Mswati's two runaway queens assessed their options and decided to shift camp. It must have taken a great deal of courage in a country where virtually everyone of any importance is a member of the royal family, which is a law unto itself. By doing so, they set an inadvertent example to the rest of us: if the leadership you have is not working to your advantage—or actually poses a threat to your life—either take a walk or show that leader the door. Complaining is not good enough!

WOMEN'S VOICES

Panic as the pill goes missing

By Ruth Omukhango, Kenya

Six weeks after the birth of her second child, Mary Anyango walked into a government family planning clinic in Nairobi's Langata Division determined to ward off pregnancy for another three years. But, to her dismay, the pill she was looking for was unavailable. Micro-Lut, which contains progesterone, offers protection while not inhibiting milk production.

The nurse told Anyango that the pill had been out of stock for almost two years and there was little hope that any would be forthcoming soon. She suggested an alternative, Depo Provera. Despite having suffered side effects from this contraceptive, including weight loss and severe bleeding, Anyango reluctantly agreed to use it. Most women in her situation are too poor to buy even heavily subsidised pills sold at US\$0.26.

Women complain that even when the pills are available in government family planning centres, the supply is erratic. Doctors in neighbouring Uganda have complained too of unsustainable contraceptive supplies. And, according to the Alan Guttmacher Institute, one in six women worldwide do not have effective contraceptive methods and services. It is generally estimated that more than one-quarter of pregnancies between 1995 and 2000 worldwide were unwanted or unplanned.

In East Africa, the problem appears to be a shift by donors—who fund over 80 percent of contraceptives—to HIV/Aids programmes. Reproductive health experts have also accused African governments of not budgeting for contraceptives.

Kenya does not have any allocation for contraceptives in its 2004/05 budget—not even under the ministry of health.

Richard Muga, director of the National Council for Population and Development, has served notice that the country may not achieve the Millennium Development Goals if the situation is not addressed urgently. But even as he sounded this warning, things appeared to move from bad to worse. The yet to be launched 2003 Kenya Demo-

graphic and Health Survey indicates that the use of contraceptives has stagnated at 39 percent in the five years since 1998, with 24 percent of those needing them not getting them.

Because of erratic supplies, the country has lost the gains it made in reducing the number of children born to a woman in the past decade: the total fertility rate has risen from four children per woman in 1998 to about five last year.

The Bush Administration's "Gag Rule" has not helped matters. Under this new policy, clinics supporting safe abortion and those offering post-abortion care have been denied funding.

The International Planned Parenthood Federation, which supports dozens of reproductive health centres in Kenya and other developing countries, was denied over \$18 million by the United States Agency for International Development for these reasons. The Family Planning Association of Kenya and Marie Stopes International-Kenya have also been denied about \$1 million.

And not only has funding been withheld from the United Nations Population Fund for three years, the US announced during the Bangkok Conference that it would block \$34 million Congress-approved funding for the agency.

Stephanie Ettelt of the German Fund for World Population says that while the contraceptives debate rages, African women continue to have more babies than their bodies and their governments can sustain. In Niger, for example,

women have more than seven children and in Swaziland the average is six.

The Bush administration has also opposed the programme of action adopted at the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo on the grounds that it interprets the reproductive rights espoused in this document as code for safe abortion.

The programme asks countries to ensure reproductive health rights and safe motherhood through universal provision of family planning services.

Women like Anyango are now keeping their fingers crossed in the hope that their governments and donors will act in a manner that will boost their chances of not having unplanned babies.

Clinics supporting safe abortion and those offering post-abortion care have been denied funding'

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Safety first, then we can lick HIV/Aids

By Diana Mulilo-Mwilwa, Zambia

THERE was a time Zambia's elderly women could be relied upon to step into the breach whenever family members needed extra hands to care for the sick. But, with the sharp rise in HIV/Aids, TB and other infectious diseases, questions are being raised over who will ensure the continued health of these traditional carers of the sick and dying.

The need to ensure that these elderly angels of mercy are protected has generated a new interest in training carers to look after their relatives in need while remaining safe themselves. But questions are being raised over whether the church and women's non-governmental organisations undertaking the training ever get to monitor the carers who go out to care for and counsel the patients.

Margaret Mata, 60, is one of the counsellors at the Chongwe home-based care project being managed by the Catholic Church. She says

one of their main tasks is to identify people living with HIV and encourage them to go to hospital and have their CD4 count tested so that they can be counselled on diet and how to start living positively. "Our home-based care involves men too. They help us clean and feed fellow men," she says.

Mata worries that they have not been taught how to administer anti-retroviral drugs. "When we go for field visits, we find it difficult to answer some questions," she adds. "They want to know more about anti-retrovirals and how they can help in boosting their health."

Home-based care

The anti-Aids campaign is compromised by the fact that little is reported about how people are coping in home-based care centres and how grassroots communities are responding to the pandemic.

Jennifer Mwape, 68, has spent considerable time with her granddaughters, helping them during pregnancy and staying on until their babies are aged up to 18



FRESH HOPE: Angela Gondwe (left) and others show off a batik they made at their income-generating training project

months. "My happiness comes from looking after my granddaughters and ensuring the safety and care of the newborn. I offer safety and less worry for the mother when she is away at work and I am there taking care of the child."

She adds: "I need to do this so I can teach my granddaughters to carry on the knowledge. When I die, I hope they can take care of themselves and also teach their friends."

When she has to go out and look after people living with HIV/Aids, the first thing she thinks about is her own safety. "I wouldn't want to bring another problem where there is already one by becoming a patient too," says Mwape.

The traditional way of life and outlook still hold sway in much of Africa, and women are seen as the

natural care givers. "Women are the ones that have an interest in the home-based care training," says Joseph Phiri, 74. "As a man, I can only buy medicines and not give care. Sitting by the bedside is hard for most men."

Given the inroads that HIV/Aids has made into younger generations, governments would be well advised to train elderly women volunteers who are driven by love for their charges rather than material gain. This is especially important at a time when professional nurses are desperately overworked and underpaid. With more children being orphaned and the elderly being left to play out the parenting role all over again, the need to rope in the assistance of elderly nurses in prolonging the lives of the infected cannot be gainsaid.

The Church has shown the way by introducing home-based care and identifying and training elderly helpers. Now it is up to the government to face the challenge and train a greater number of women to help within the community – especially in rural areas, where health services may be few and far between.

For starters, government could supply home-based care projects with materials such as gloves and aprons to secure the health of the care givers.

The counsellors at Chongwe are now being trained to take care of strictly one person living with the virus – cleaning, feeding, and counselling that person three times a week. The foundation has been laid, now comes the more intense work.

Say 'yes' to children, or lose out

By Kwamboka Oyaro, Kenya

RISPER MOKAYA is an Aids orphan sitting her final primary school examinations this year at Mubwayo, about 380 kilometres west of Nairobi. Her father died when she was six and her mother last year. Although there is free primary education here, she still had to raise the examination fees and her classmates contributed the money to ensure she registered.

Although she is assured of completing her primary education and getting a certificate, the future is bleak.

"I have no hope of continuing with secondary education," says Mokaya, 16. "My grandmother is so poor that even having a meal is a problem. It is really stressful that I will go nowhere after my examinations."

She is one of 1.3 million children orphaned by Aids in Kenya. The to-

tal number of orphans is said to be 1.8 million. Mokaya's voice echoes throughout the country and, indeed, the continent.

More than 12 million African children have reportedly been orphaned by HIV/Aids and the number is expected to rise to 20 million by 2010, according to data presented at the 15th International Aids Conference in Bangkok in July.

Besides the poverty usually associated with the demise of a parent, discrimination against children suffering or affected by the disease is rife.

There is something seriously amiss when grandmothers have to start parenting all over again long after the youngest of their brood has flown the nest. Yet, according to No Excuses, a report released last year by the Christian Fund, extended family members are caring for up to 90 percent of orphans. Children as young as seen are

heading households. In Swaziland, for example, one in 10 families are headed by children because their parents have died of Aids-related diseases.

Without clear laws and policies on essentials such as education, food and shelter, Africa is sitting on a time bomb. Children have been left in the care of relatives ill-equipped to cope with more pressure, making the quality of parenting questionable.

It is usual to prepare the young for a smooth transition in taking over leadership from the old. That is why it is common in the West for the state to take away children from parents deemed unable to raise them properly.

But we ignore them in Africa—even when it comes to drafting laws on HIV/Aids that directly affect them.

Kenya declared HIV/Aids a national disaster five years ago. Yet

there has been no visible effort to ensure laws are in place to protect children orphaned or made vulnerable by the disease. Attorney-General Amos Wako commissioned a task force two years ago to assess the legal issues relating to Aids. It came up with the HIV and Aids Protection and Control Bill, but it has yet to become law. This is not necessarily a bad thing since the Bill is seriously flawed, having ignored the needs of orphaned and vulnerable children.

Chambers of Justice, a non-governmental organisation, responded by launching its own proposals. Interestingly, AG Amos Wako launched the document and said the government was keen on enacting a specific law to deal with issues related to children in these difficult circumstances.

Of the more than 600 pieces of legislation in the Kenyan statute books, none specifically addresses

their issues and interests.

Kenyans anxiously await the proposed law and policies. Until they are in place, we can only assume that the powers-that-be are hoping that this particular bomb will quietly detonate and disappear. That can only be a vain hope. The United Nations believes that Aids will eventually kill about one-third of all young people living in Africa today. It is a frightening statistic, yet many of our governments maintain a deafening silence.

Even South Africa, which leads the rest of Africa in many ways, does not have a law on orphans. This in a country where 20 percent of all adults are infected with HIV!

Without government commitment to supporting orphans, it is unlikely that the children will enjoy schooling, basic nutrition, hygiene or shelter. Ignoring Aids orphans means African countries have chosen to ignore the future.

Woman with a mission

*That's Nigeria's Finance and Budget Minister
Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala*



By Nkiru Okoro, Nigeria

Nigerian Finance and Budget Minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala is a firebrand in her own right, having won hands-down her first acid test in office. Soon after her appointment last November, there were suggestions that the budget function of her ministry would be taken away. She threatened to resign, arguing rightly that finance could never be complete minus the budget aspect. She kept her portfolio intact.

Having asserted herself, she made it clear that she would not stand interference in the affairs of her ministry, which she was taking up at an additional \$2 million over the \$36 million a year she was earning as a vice-president of the World Bank. She has every reason to take a firm stand.

Nigeria's domestic and foreign debt stands at an estimated \$34 billion, which is 100 percent of its gross domestic product. Domestic credit had galloped to 1.36 trillion naira in December 2003, up from 1.1 billion naira in 1970. Most of the debts were accrued by military dictators who plundered the nation's resources, including external loans, for selfish ends. Most of the money was spirited away into overseas and offshore accounts held by the strongmen and their cronies.

Many state governments and parastatals borrowed from the international capital market for so-called development projects that never took off due to mismanagement and high level corruption. Successive governments sim-

ply pushed the debt issue to the back burner.

As if that were not enough, there was also the problem of the high cost of running the government. Federal civil servants make up only one percent of Nigeria's 120 million people. Yet the government spends 80 percent of its revenue on salaries and benefits for this one percent of the population.

In appointing Okonjo-Iweala, President Olusegun Obasanjo said: "Nigeria's economy requires urgent and regular attention. The focus should be on how we have a change of orientation, a change of attitude that would make this country what it should be."



ACID TEST: Nigerian Finance and Budget Minister Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala has the tough task of changing the national attitude to the business of government.

She would be tasked with changing the national orientation from the old "business as usual" to the right way of running government business, the president said. Together with a five-man economic team, she came up with the National Economic Empowerment and Development Strategy touted as a homegrown economic recovery strategy.

"We put them together and asked all Nigerians to comment and make an input. It is not a World Bank or IMF agenda," she said. "Let's not kid ourselves. We need these reforms in order to achieve stable micro-economic growth, stable pricing of interest and the exchange rate. They are necessary so that business can have a predictable environment with which to plan."

During an interview with *Africa-woman*, she said: "It is about making sure there is improvement in our roads, water supply, electricity, books and quality schools for our children, access to better health services, fighting HIV/Aids. This programme is going to be monitored so we have indicators about what we are doing for the public...it will show what we are supposed to do with the resources given and if we do not, we will explain why. If you are the minister for works, we would like to know how many kilometres of roads you built or rehabilitated, where, when and how many you completed. If you are the minister for health, how many health centres did you put into operation during your tenure. This is the key element of what these reforms are about."

Next, she turned to the bloated civil

service—her key task to retrench up to 40 percent of the federal civil servants. She then called directors, deputy directors and assistant directors to a three-day compulsory retreat that ended with a mandatory examination. The first of its kind in the history of Nigeria, the examination was designed to determine the suitability of the directors for the positions they occupied. "The result will determine mental fitness and suitability of the officers for public office in the new dispensation," she said.

Soon she was targeting allowances for top government officials on tours of duty abroad. Even hardened journalists applauded the move. Said Kayode Komolafe, managing editor of the Lagos-based *This Day*: "It is no accountability to conserve money by retrenching workers or imposing fuel tax and spend it later on presidential jets or hosting jamborees and fiestas despite mass opposition. The concept of accountability should go beyond book-keeping. It should encompass responsiveness to the social mood of the nation...."

Justifying his administration's policy of 15 percent women's representation in elected and appointed positions at all levels of government (which falls short of the 30 percent endorsed in the Beijing Platform for Action, which Nigeria is signatory to), President Obasanjo said: "Half of our population are women. If we ignore half of our population, it means we are ignoring 50 percent of the instruments of the development of the economy. It also follows that we will have only 50 percent development."

There's no justice in the streets

Contraceptives are the last thing these women think of

By Ropafadzo Mapimhidze, Zimbabwe

AFRICA Unity Square Park in Harare city centre is one of the most beautiful open spaces in Zimbabwe's capital. It is a renowned tourist attraction, particularly in spring, when the colourful jacaranda trees are in full bloom. Meikles Hotel, once voted the best in Africa, overlooks this recreational area that boasts all kinds of trees and flowers.

In recent times, however, the park has become a haven for the destitute, particularly young women. They have taken advantage of the thickets in the park, where they deliver babies—sometimes in broad daylight.

Sheila Sakala, 22, has lived on Harare streets ever since she was 12. She has two children, one aged four and the other barely one. "When I developed labour pains, my friends and I called the emergency service but, as soon as the ambulance crew realised I was a person of no fixed abode, they slammed the phone in our ears," she says, clutching her baby to her chest.

Three hours later, Sakala delivered her baby near a bench in the park with the help of Alice Danisi and Gogo Chitima, who are also homeless. Says Danisi: "I have never delivered a baby, but I found myself playing midwife with the assistance of Gogo Chitima, an elderly destitute who has assisted with childbirth on the streets. Chitima bought a razor blade, surgical spirit and twine that we used to tie the umbilical cord. The cries of the newborn attracted some clergymen at the Anglican Cathedral that lies across the park, who called an

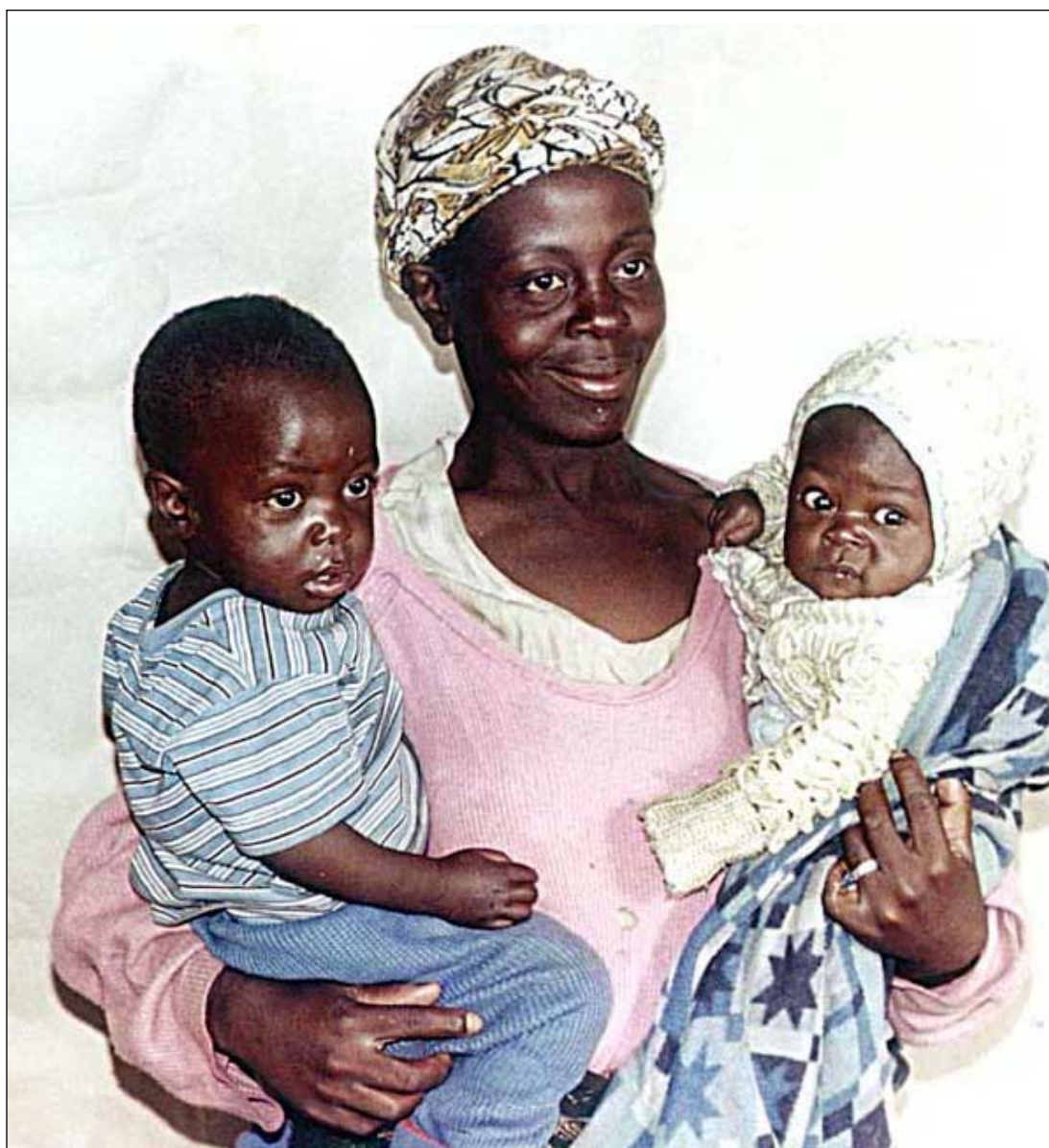
ambulance that eventually came after they had assured them of the fees."

Mother and baby were ferried to a council clinic in Mbare in Western Harare, where Sakala was insulted by the nursing staff. "They all asked me why I had fallen pregnant and also why I did not have clothes for the newborn. I did not have answers to those questions," she says.

Contraceptives are the last thing that street people think of, their first instinct being survival – and that means searching for food at all costs. "It is even tougher for much younger girls, who are driven into sex with older boys for food. The older boys also offer some form of protection," says Danisi, who also has two children with different fathers. "But pregnancy is the result."

Sexually transmitted infections are rampant among women and girls living in the streets. An average 150 aged between nine and 16 are treated every month, according to Masimba Mwazha, who offers free medical services to street people. This has been one of the biggest drawbacks in the fight against HIV/Aids.

Recently, five teenagers raped a woman walking home from college at around 7pm after dragging her into one of the dark alleys along Julius Nyerere Way in the city centre. Three of them later tested HIV-positive. Danisi adds: "Abuse is rife and no girl can light a night on the



HOMELESS: Sheila Sakala clutches her children born on the streets of Harare

street without being sexually abused either by the older street kids or regular men who take them to their apartments. We are aware of the dangers of unprotected sex, but that is something that comes as an afterthought."

Most of them are lured by offers of money and food, and many do not know who fathered their children. Getting them off the streets is not a long-term option since the children inevitably return almost immediately, according to Health and Child Welfare Minister David Parirenyatwa. A clean-up operation early this year following the gang

rape ended up being a waste of time as the people were back on the streets within no time.

"What we need is a proper budget that will deal with the problem," said Parirenyatwa. "This problem involves many stakeholders and needs to be addressed in a wholesome manner in order for us to effectively get rid of the menace. It is a matter of great concern ... what we need is a stakeholders' meeting that will come up with a comprehensive approach."

Many children on the streets are there due to circumstances beyond their control, says Naira Khan, director of the Child Law Foundation, and they need help. Sakala is Zambian and went to the streets when her mother died when she was just 10. Danisi fled from a stepmother who was driving her into prostitution. Their backgrounds may be dif-

ferent, but they have several things in common—neglect, desperation, lost hope and shattered dreams. No one wants to take responsibility for them and many have grown to accept life simply as a matter of survival of the fittest or most brutal.

According to Busie Bhebhe of the Child Protection Society in Zimbabwe, children comprise 5.8 million of the population of 12 million. About 5,000 live in institutions and 12,000 are out in the streets. Zimbabwe has adequate policies for child protection, she says, but the greatest challenge is implementation. "There is need for money to support policies and legislation for many services, including health, justice delivery, psychological support, food security, establishing a child welfare council, reintegration of street children and training of teachers on child rights," she says.

'They all asked why I had fallen pregnant and why I did not have clothes for the baby...'



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Export versus local needs: the cassava war hots up

By Bimbo Oloyede, Nigeria

THE stage is set for the cassava war, pitting Nigeria women versus big time export interests. The women simply want to keep the popular "gari" on their family menu while the government and several donor and international agencies have set their sights on the export market.

Cassava is in demand for several reasons. For countries in central and southern Africa, it is used as a major ingredient in the production of animal feed. Cassava is also useful to producers of paper and gum. It is also processed into high quality starch for industrial and pharmaceutical use.

The United States Agency for International Development, the International Institute of Tropical Agriculture and the Shell Petroleum Development Company have signed a US\$11 million agreement to support the Cassava Enterprise Development Project in the Niger Delta. The crop produced will be for export. The Nigerian housewife, despite the obvious gains, has been left wondering what impact foreign exchange earnings from cassava will have where it matters most – the dining table.

Regardless of the uphill task women now face keeping their families well fed, the long term economics gains from cassava exports cannot be ignored. With a potential income of \$5 billion – about one-third of the income from crude oil – every effort is being made to put agriculture back in pride of place, thereby lessening Nigeria's dependence on oil.

President Olusegun Obasanjo set up a committee, headed by federal Attorney-General Akin Olujimi, to prepare a draft bill on the use of cassava for bread making. This came almost three months after the inaugu-

ration of another presidential committee on cassava – this time on preparing and developing cassava products for export in accordance with international standards and practice.

Ironically, these initiatives are coming to the fore at a time when cassava meal, popularly known as gari and the staple for more than 60 percent of Nigerians, is becoming increasingly scarce. Some recall the government's earlier moves to protect the cost of this staple, conserving it for home consumption, and the resulting export ban.

Since the ban was lifted, gari smuggling has become a thriving business across the border with Benin. With the ban still in force in that country, surplus quantities have led to a crash in prices in Cotonou and it is now cheaper to buy gari smuggled into Nigeria than buy locally from the southern regions.

With a potential income of \$5 billion – about one-third of the income from crude oil – every effort is being made to put agriculture back in pride of place, thereby lessening Nigeria's dependence on oil

Says Deborah Daramola, a matron in a private hospital in Lagos and mother of three: "We are tired of the whole situation. We eat more gari than any other staple. This is something we produce in Nigeria, so why is it that the price only goes up?"

She claims market women have let it be known that local gari is loaded into vehicles

and taken to the north or exported. "Where does that leave us? Why doesn't the government do something to increase gar production at home, so that it will be within the reach of everyone? We are not prepared to make any more sacrifices."

Some farmers are also unimpressed by the potential gains from exporting cassava. There is an underlying feeling that hard currency transactions are only for the big mechanised farmers who are not interested in home consumption. Says Victor Roberts, a farmer who grows cassava in Lagos State and produces gari for local consumption:

"These new initiatives will benefit only the agents, who are few in number. The market has already become closed and these agents only exploit the smaller farmers. Although they offer slightly higher prices, the agents make the real profit without going through the headaches of growing and nurturing the tuber."

According to Roberts, the government should be funding ways of improving gari production methods, which would eventually lead to a drop in costs for the end user.

Funmilayo Ajayi, director of the Ekiti State Department of Agriculture, says Nigeria is the largest producer of cassava in the world and, since it grows easily on most soil types, earning from oil should be invested in cassava production for food security. "Oil money should be given to research institutions to look into preservation methods and peasant farmers should cultivate food for consumption while surpluses can be used for industrial purposes," she says.

These fears are well founded, especially when you take into consideration the painfully long process the small producers go

through to get their product to the market. Mama Folarin has only recently been able to significantly reduce production time after buying both frying and sifting machines. She confides: "My assistant and I used to fry 10 hours daily for five days to produce 200 kilos of gari – that is four bags. Now I can do it in an hour."

Now she is able to sift 100 kilos in 45 minutes instead of the five it used to take her prior to buying her equipment. With improved production, she will be trying for a pressing machine to dry the cassava before sifting and frying.

External pressures on cassava are also likely to affect the hospitality industry. In major towns across the country, private businessmen have invested heavily in hotels, guesthouses and tourist resorts that are popular venues for conferences and other meetings. For such establishments, haphazard and unstable pricing can have devastating results.

Bassey Eyo, restaurant supervisor in one of the larger hotels in Calabar, capital of Cross River State which is some 500 kilometres from Lagos, says:

"The cost of gari has already gone up by 60 percent, but that will not stop our customers from eating it. All we have to do is adjust our prices."

The average Nigerian housewife has little leeway to be so optimistic. It all boils down to whether or not food will be available to the child who expects to come home from school to a nutritious and filling meal, the distraught mother at her wits end to stretch the ever-shrinking naira to meet her family needs and the harassed father eking out a living in the face of an ever-rising family budget.

The old lady and her manifesto: will it wash?

By Audrey Dekalu, Ghana

WHEN a crucial decision needs to be taken in traditional Ghanaian society, elders always say, "let us consult the old lady". This grand lady is considered supremely wise and has, since time immemorial, played an important role in the selection of chiefs and in their installation.

She also arbitrates among elders and opinion leaders in search of peaceful solutions to vexed issues.

Despite the unique roles that women play in cultural and natural development, however, they are still portrayed as the weaker sex and often dismissed as people who must ride on the backs of men to realise their dreams and ambitions.

This often means that their needs are rarely taken into consideration: Ghana's rate of maternal deaths currently stands at an unacceptably high 214 per 100,000 live births and girls routinely record lower levels of school enrolment in most African countries.

Says Mensah Kutin, regional programme manager at Abantu for Development, a non-governmental organisation: "The need to empower women and protect them to meet the challenges of playing equal roles as partners of men in the developmental tasks of the nation cannot be over-emphasised."

Abantu is spearheading the campaign for a Ghanaian Women's Manifesto, which aims at enhancing the role of women in policy-

making processes.

The manifesto will set out critical concerns and point to the way to solve them. A broad coalition of non-governmental organisations is lobbying among themselves, government and political parties to ensure it is adopted.

The manifesto is the result of intense consultations within Ghana's 110 districts and tackles matters such as women's low participation in leadership, poverty and inability to lay their hands on the resources to earn a decent living and health concerns.

"The idea of women's manifesto is not new," says Dzodzi Tsikata of the Institute of Social, Statistical and Economic Research of the University of Ghana.

"Women have improved their representation in politics as a result of the work done around common platform issues."

South Africa, Uganda and Zambia are among countries that have come up with a set of demands to lobby Parliament and their national leaders.

Women's manifestos will hopefully serve as a reference point for those seeking to improve their lives, says Tsikata, who champions forming coalitions to put up a united front – especially in pushing governments to act on international commitments such as the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (Cedaw) and the Millennium Development Goals.

Although many African governments readily ratified and signed most of these conventions and treaties, they have yet to incorporate them into domestic laws and policies.

Admittedly, women's groups have made some effort to address gender issues under the umbrella of Ghana's National Council on Women and Development. Modest gains have been made in areas such as the ban on female genital mutilation, sanctions for rapists and the Intestate Succession Law. Nevertheless, these laws have not boosted the status of local women enough to participate more effectively in decision-making processes and, therefore, directly address their concerns.