

A complicated paradigm change

A background note by Simon Reetz for the Maastricht Debates' event 'What ... if women had more economic options?', April 27, 2010

A recent proposed procurement bill in Swaziland epitomizes opportunities and struggles faced by women doing business in developing countries.

Although women control about 70% of the tiny African nation's small and medium enterprises sector, they have been left out of political processes concerned with procurement and business initiatives. During the last decades, the sharp rise in women-run businesses in the country suggests that the dominance of males over large and lucrative businesses is not rooted in a lack of entrepreneurial will and knowledge by women, but due to a lack of concrete government-policies and gender inequality of opportunities. In fact, "For the longest time, even the procuring officers within government and other big institutions were not doing much business with women," says Lungile Mzizi, Project manager at the Business Women's Forum of Swaziland (BWFS). Additionally, societal constraints often force women to work from home and rural areas, which further deteriorates business-opportunities.

The role of International Organization's and NGO's in achieving gender equality has also been questionable. Although United Nations Agencies operating in Swaziland have pledged to source 50 percent of their goods and services from women in the country, they have not made a serious undertaking to support women specifically yet.

However, the launch of the first ever Women-Owned Businesses Directory of Swaziland at the end of March has opened a new chapter for women in business. The directory will enable women-owned businesses to access some of the procurement opportunities available from the corporate sector, NGOs and government. Nevertheless, while the directory will increase networking and capacity-enlarging opportunities for women, it has been observed that the policies made to benefit women have been exploited as fronts by men to get unfair advantage over their competitors. Additionally, while the bill looks promising on paper, it might turn out to be less effective in practice, due to a lack of affirmative action provided by the bill.

The lack of affirmative action epitomizes more than political reluctance to change, it points towards implementation-problems in developing countries. Due to deeply rooted societal constraints for women, the de-facto equality of opportunity by law has not led to equal treatment of women in business.



Therefore, Zodwa Mabuza, CEO at the Federation of Swaziland Employers and Chamber of Commerce advocates quotas for government-operated tenders to women-owned companies. "We're not saying government should ignore all the principles of doing business when dealing with women," said Mabuza. "All we're asking for is that, after meeting all the requirements, being a woman should be an added advantage."

While such developments give hope for an improvement, it will still be a long way to go. While increased activity by the governments of developing countries is a promising start, it will also take a new approach of International Organizations and NGO's in order to tackle the issue effectively.

Simon Reetz

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