

Africa's growth rests on economic empowerment of women

 By [Louise Marsland](#)

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Putting women in Africa back into the African economy is crucial to the continent's economic growth, as well as its peace and stability, said Dr Vera Songwe, United Nations Undersecretary General and Executive Secretary, UN Economic Commission for Africa (ECA).



Dr Vera Songwe.

Dr Songwe was a keynote speaker at the Africa Women Innovation and Entrepreneurship Forum (AWIEF), this week 29-30 October 2019, at the Cape Town International Convention Centre (CTICC), Cape Town, South Africa.

Songwe had just returned from Dafur, Sudan, and recounted how she met with women victims of war. The message she brought back from those survivors was that they wanted to start businesses, because their dignity was restored when they could put a price on a commodity or service they were selling.

Dr Songwe said there was a need for women to stand together, for each other, for women's rights and women's economic empowerment.

One of the significant ways the ECA is making sure that every African woman has dignity, is to make sure they have an

identity, because with identity comes dignity, Dr Songwe pointed out. The fact is that the girl child in many countries does not get registered at birth.

“Identity can help give them their dignity back, make them visible and then we can look at what they can do for the economy. Then we can talk about restoring growth. As a continent we need to grow at about 10% and create 130 million jobs a year. Digitisation can do that. We are working on the continental free trade agreement because we believe our leaders have taken the steps toward a stronger Africa.



AfCFTA must be linked to women empowerment

Louise Marsland 31 Oct 2019



“There is a new economic Pan-Africanism on the continent, we have fought for our rights, we now need to move to the economic space,” Dr Songwe emphasised.

“This is the promise: Africa needs skill. In many of our countries, we don’t have the skill required to grow. You need to claim the continent as your marketplace. We can do more, we can do better. We must ensure we can do that together.

“These events help us to connect. We need to ask, did that help me raise another woman somewhere else? That is the power of African women. When we meet as leaders, when we meet in these groups, we need to remember that connecting is the basic human factor. We need to connect with success.

“There’s 500 million of us African women, we need to be collectively connected.”

Dr Songwe has met with women in countries such as Eritrea and Mauritania, which are not economic hubs in Africa, and who are producing products to high quality global standards and selling globally.

How to put more women back into the African economy

Dr Songwe reported that the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is talking about a ‘synchronised slowdown’ in the global economy. “That is not good news for Africa which needs growth to make it economically; to meet the SDGs (United Nations Sustainable Development Goals); to send our girls to school; to light our continent; to ensure that climate change is not taking us under... But to do this, we need to bring women in.”

She talked about how women can get involved in combatting climate change by taking control of the value chain and committing to using recycled materials in products. The ECA stopped using plastic bottles and went paperless at their conferences, which has spawned an industry of wooden bottles – which actually keep water fresher for longer.

“An important conversation we must have is about intellectual property rights. We need to take businesses continental. If we do not do that, we will never be able to have the Fortune 500 businesses. It starts with an idea. Now we must make sure we are protected. At ECA we are working on IP rights. Africa cannot come late to the conversation. The power of digitalisation is the speed at which that idea travels,” she said.

In conclusion, Dr Songwe spoke about the power of the collective of women: “The power of this collective is to ensure we protect women’s ideas as we fund them and lift them up. Once again, we must protect woman’s dignity; secondly, we must connect, we must raise each other up; and finally, we must protect those ideas, otherwise our sustainability on the continent will be at risk.”

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