

Chrispus Mayora, academician

Improving women's health, critical to role in economy

Today, the world is celebrating international women's day. The theme for this year – *Women in the Changing World of Work: Planet 50-50 by 2030* – is quite fascinating in a sense that it's a call for equal opportunity for men and women especially in the world of work by the year 2030. This is a challenge that all of us will have to stand up to especially given our largely patriarchal settings and communities, that have traditionally drawn clear lines around gender roles and expectations.

The theme, therefore, is an implied call for a deconstruction of long-held attitudes and perceptions about roles that women play (or can) for the wider benefit of society. The Government of Uganda has been credited for removing women "out of the kitchen" and now being able to play roles at the forefront especially in the area of politics and in boardrooms. However, the dynamic is quite different in the areas of employment outside the political sphere. The ratio of women to men in work is still quite low. While this fact may have historical context, it is exacerbated by the high levels of unemployment that currently obtain.

We must identify mechanisms of sustaining achievements so far registered in the sphere of politics, but also cascade this in other areas of work for women. Women participation in the economy will be very critical especially in the era of global sustainable development goals. But beyond concepts of women empowerment and emancipation, a deliberate attempt must be made to focus on the drivers of meaningful women participation. We must address issues around constraints to improving women health and empowering women to take charge of their own health choices and decisions. Such decisions include: choice to seek health care, and decisions over childbirth.

Institutions and workplaces must also create an environment that affords an opportunity for working mums to breastfeed, for example, seek maternal leave without existential threats to losing a job, etc. If smokers can be afforded an opportunity to have smoking zones or facilities within workplaces, why would breastfeeding mums be denied the same?

The Parliament of the Republic of Uganda recently established a similar facility for the

Honourable Members of Parliament, and if this could be extended across the board, it would go a long way in reducing the fears that most working women have around child bearing. The dynamics of the working world will require that for women productivity to be enhanced and tapped, incentives that maintain women in work will no longer be an exception but a norm.

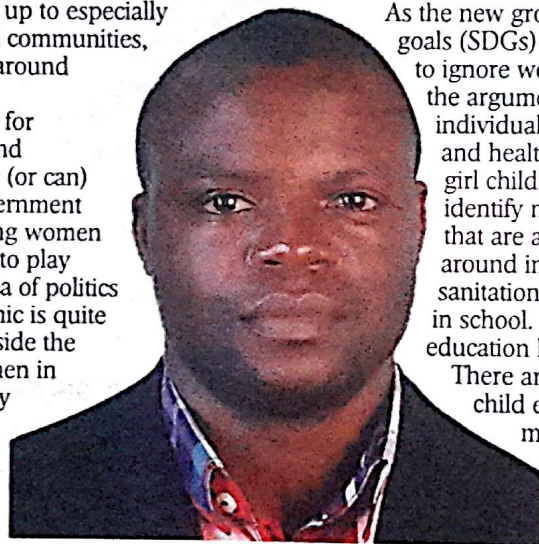
As the new growth agenda – the sustainable development goals (SDGs) – dawns, no country will afford the luxury to ignore women and their contribution. Returning to the argument about empowering women to make individual choices, two issues are critical – education and health. While families will strive to educate girl children, they must together with government identify mechanisms to reduce school dropout rates that are alarming in Uganda. Focus here must be around improving menstrual hygiene and general sanitation for young women to feel comfortable in school. The whole mindset around girl child education has got to be dismantled and reconstructed.

There are higher returns on investment in girl child education and only through this, will more women join the labour market and make meaningful contribution. In terms of health, access to information and services, for example, on family planning, antenatal and postnatal services, and empowering women economically to make choices about when and where to seek these services without necessarily relying on husbands or male partners is essential.

Going forward, as a country we must recognise that women participation in work is critical not only for themselves and their respective families, but also for the country's economic growth and development. We must constantly seek to enable women to occupy their rightful place in the work arena.

This, however, will only be realised when women are not only empowered to determine their destiny without encumbrances that relate to the sociocultural landscape, but also creating an enabling environment for work choices. And we have to be ambitious about these targets!

The writer is a lecturer and health economist for 'Supporting Policy Engagement for Evidence-based Decisions' at Makerere University School of Public Health



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