SDGs KENYA FORUM
Coalition for Sustainable Development

WOMEN POWER 2030

FEMNET
The African Women's Development and Communication Network

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TURNING THE TIDE THROUGH SDG 5 INTEGRATION:

Why Gender Equality Must Anchor Africa's Sustainable Development Agenda

Position Paper

THE AFRICAN REGIONAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The Africa Regional Forum on Sustainable Development (ARFSD) is the continent's annual intergovernmental platform convened by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA) in collaboration with the African Union Commission to review progress on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and Agenda 2063 (UNECA, 2026). The Twelfth Session (ARFSD-12), will be held in Addis Ababa from 28 to 30 April 2026 under the theme "Turning the Tide: Transformative and Coordinated Actions," focused on SDG 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), SDG 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), SDG 9 (Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure), SDG 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and SDG 17 (Partnerships for the Goals) (UNECA, 2026; EnviroNews Nigeria, 2026).

These goals are often treated as technical and infrastructure-focused priorities. However, consultations conducted by FEMNET with women, girls, feminist organizations, youth advocates, and civil society actors across Africa demonstrate that these goals are deeply political, gendered, and shaped by unequal power relations (FEMNET, 2026). Access to water, energy, infrastructure, digital systems, safe cities, and development partnerships continues to be experienced unevenly across gender, geography, disability, age, class, and rural-urban divides.

"Policies are useful. They give us measurable goals. But they have not yet begun to be mainstreamed in a way that they make a real difference in people's lives." (Tatenda E., Stop the Bleeding Consortium (Zimbabwe/Latvia)

This paper argues that SDG 5 (Gender Equality) cannot remain isolated from the broader development agenda. Gender equality must function as the integrating lens across all goals under review. Without this integration, Africa risks advancing infrastructure, economic growth, and partnerships while reproducing structural inequalities that continue to exclude women, girls, and marginalized communities.

BACKGROUND: REGIONAL COMMITMENTS AND PERSISTENT GAPS

Africa's commitment to gender equality and sustainable development has evolved through major regional and global frameworks, including the Beijing Platform for Action, the Maputo Protocol, Agenda 2063, and the SDGs (African Union, 2026; Oxfam, 2025). Successive ARFSD declarations from Niamey, Addis Ababa, and Kampala have increasingly emphasized gender-responsive planning, financing, inclusion, and women's access to economic and technological opportunities. However, despite these commitments, progress remains uneven (African Union, 2026). Consultations with African youth and civil society organizations have highlighted persistent implementation gaps, especially in rural, informal, and conflict-affected settings (UNECA, 2026; Sonke Gender Justice, 2025).

This paper draws extensively from consultations conducted with women's rights organizations, feminist networks, youth advocates, grassroots actors, and civil society representatives across several African countries including Uganda, Kenya, Ghana, Sierra Leone, Tunisia, Mali, Zimbabwe, Nigeria, Mozambique, and South Africa (UNECA, 2026). The consultations included contributions and reflections from organizations and actors across the continent participating through ARFSD consultation processes (UNECA, 2026; Women in Mining Africa, 2026).

Across the consultations, participants consistently highlighted the widening gap between policy commitments and lived realities (UNECA, 2026). Contributors repeatedly emphasized that despite strong continental and global commitments, women and girls continue to face structural exclusion linked to unequal access to water, sanitation, energy, infrastructure, digital systems, financing, urban services, and decision-making spaces (UNECA, 2026; African Union, 2026). The consultations further highlighted that these inequalities are intensified by climate change, economic exclusion, shrinking civic space, weak accountability systems, unpaid care burdens, and underfunding of grassroots feminist organizations (Sonke Gender Justice, 2025; Oxfam, 2025; UNECA, 2026).

The consultations also demonstrated that women and girls do not experience the SDGs in isolation. Water insecurity affects education, health, safety, and unpaid care work. Energy poverty affects digital inclusion and economic participation. Urban exclusion affects safety, livelihoods, mobility, and access to services. Weak partnerships affect financing, accountability, and participation (UNECA, 2026; Sonke Gender Justice, 2025).

"Deep-rooted cultural norms and gender stereotypes, limited economic opportunities, unequal access to resources like land and finance, weak enforcement of laws, and low political representation of women continue to limit inclusion and equality." Mercy Ainomugisha (GYW Uganda).

Participants repeatedly stressed that development failures are not caused by the absence of policies, but by weak implementation, limited financing, exclusionary systems, and unequal power relations.

ASSESMENT OF THE SDGS

Water is often discussed as infrastructure. For women and girls, it is time, labour, survival, and dignity. Globally, women and girls spend an estimated 200 million hours daily collecting water (UNICEF, 2021; UN General Assembly, 2021).

UNICEF and WHO (2023) confirm that gender remains a structural determinant of unequal WASH outcomes globally, noting that in 7 out of 10 households without water on premises, women and girls aged 15 and older are primarily responsible for water collection. Integrating SDG 5 into SDG 6 means recognizing water not only as a service issue but as a gender justice issue.

"Rural women are particularly affected, as they are primarily responsible for collecting water and rely on it for agriculture, food production, and household survival. In many communities, women and girls must walk long distances to access water, exposing them to gender-based violence, harassment, and insecurity along these routes."- Rabeb Aloui, Tunisia

The 2026 Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) from Burkina Faso, Rwanda, Togo, Cabo Verde, Gabon, Somalia, Mozambique and Cameroon report progress in access to water and sanitation across several African countries. However, persistent rural-urban inequalities, climate-related challenges, and inadequate sanitation services continue to limit equitable access. Notably, most VNRs lack gender-disaggregated data, obscuring the disproportionate burden borne by women and girls in securing and managing water resources. These findings underscore the need for gender-responsive monitoring and investments in climate-resilient and inclusive water and sanitation systems to achieve SDG 6.

The consultation process called for:

- Increased investment in climate-resilient water infrastructure in rural and underserved communities.
- Gender-responsive WASH systems that integrate menstrual health and dignity.
- Stronger accountability for declining public investment in water and sanitation.

- Institutionalized participation of women and feminist organizations in water governance.
- Mandatory gender disaggregation in all national water and sanitation reporting, including VNRs.
- Climate adaptation strategies that address the links between water insecurity, displacement, and gender-based violence.

Energy access is often framed as a technical challenge. In Sub-Saharan Africa, nearly 600 million people lack access to electricity (IEA, 2025a; IEA, 2025c). Women are disproportionately affected, relying on traditional fuels that are time-consuming, unsafe, and harmful to health (Oxfam Uganda, 2025).

Energy poverty reinforces unpaid care work, limits productivity, and restricts women's economic participation (UNU, 2026). The World Bank, IEA, IRENA, UNSD, and WHO (2025) tracking report confirms that Africa continues to experience the world's largest energy access gap, with 85% of the global unelectrified population residing in Sub-SaharanAfrica. Integrating SDG 5 into SDG 7 requires shifting from energy access to energy justice (Musango & Chicombo, 2025).

“Energy poverty goes beyond the absence of electricity. It directly translates into limited opportunities and constrained development.” (Joy Ohaegbu, GEN-CARE).

The World Bank’s (2023) Digital Development Report confirms that access to modern energy significantly increases women’s income-generating opportunities but only when women are actively included in energy planning and financing systems.

The consultation process called for:

- Expansion of decentralized renewable energy systems, especially solar energy.
- Prioritized investment in clean cooking solutions, with explicit targets for households relying on biomass.

- Affordable financing models for low-income and youth-led energy access.
- Support for women-led renewable energy enterprises.
- Inclusion of women and youth in energy planning and implementation at all levels.
- Mandatory rural-urban and gender disaggregation in energy access reporting.

9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Energy access is often framed as a technical challenge. In Sub-Saharan Africa, nearly 600 million people lack access to electricity (IEA, 2025a; IEA, 2025c). Women are disproportionately affected, relying on traditional fuels that are time-consuming, unsafe, and harmful to health (Oxfam Uganda, 2025).

Women in low- and middle-income countries are 14 to 19 percent less likely than men to use mobile internet (GSMA, 2025), with sub-Saharan Africa experiencing a stubborn gap of 32 percent. The International Telecommunication Union (ITU, 2024) confirms widening gender gaps in internet access across the least developed countries, where the gender parity score declined from 0.74 in 2019 to 0.70 in 2024, indicating that the digital divide is actually growing in the world's poorest nations. UNECA (2022) further notes that only 12 percent of women in Africa have sufficient digital finance-related ICT skills, significantly below the global average.

“The digital divide is creating a new form of inequality. If Africa’s future is digital, then digital inclusion must become a justice issue, not a privilege. Too often, young people are told they are the future while being denied the tools needed to build that future.”- Vaati Natasha, FEMNET Kenya.

The 2026 VNRs on SDG 9 show expanding digital connectivity, industrial growth, and infrastructure investments across several African countries, including gains in internet access, digital governance, and industrial zones.

However, persistent rural infrastructure gaps, weak industrial transformation, and limited job creation continue to constrain inclusive development. The absence of gender-responsive data and planning risks excluding women, youth, and rural populations from the benefits of innovation and industrialization.

The consultation process called for:

- Investment in women's digital literacy and STEM participation.
- Affordable and equitable internet access, with explicit rural gender targeting.
- Increased financing for women and youth-led enterprises.
- Inclusive industrial policies that prioritize marginalized groups.
- Gender-responsive digital transformation strategies.
- Requirement that all infrastructure investment plans include gender impact assessments.

11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

African cities are growing rapidly, but not equitably. The continent's urban population is projected to triple between 2015 and 2050, making it the fastest-urbanizing region in the world (UN-Habitat, 2025). Women in urban areas face compounding challenges related to safety, housing, transport, and access to basic services.

Poorly lit streets, unsafe public transport, and inadequate sanitation facilities limit women's mobility, economic participation, and access to livelihoods (UN-Habitat, 2020; UN-Habitat, 2025). Gender-based violence in public spaces remains a critical barrier: globally, 1 in 2 women have experienced or fear harassment in public spaces, and 9 out of 10 women in cities across the Global South feel unsafe using public transport (UN-Habitat, 2025). The United Nations (2024) confirms a deepening global slum crisis that requires urgent action on housing, transportation, and services; a crisis that disproportionately falls on women and girls, who constitute the majority of slum populations and bear the heaviest burden of inadequate housing, insecure tenure, and lack of basic services (UN-Habitat, 2025).

Women's access to urban land remains severely constrained: globally, less than 20 percent of agricultural landholders are women, with evenlower rates in Africa where customary laws and discriminatory practices continue to exclude women from land ownership and housing rights (UN-Habitat, 2025).

“For many young people, cities represent opportunity but also exclusion. Girls and young women continue to experience harassment, exclusion, unsafe transport systems, and limited access to safe public spaces.” (Nkakara Mercy, Youth Reflection on SDG 11 (Uganda)

The 2026 VNRs on SDG 11 highlight rapid urbanization across Africa, with growing pressure on housing, transport, services, and infrastructure in countries such as Gabon, Rwanda, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, DRC, Togo, Malawi, and Tunisia. While some countries report improvements in urban planning, housing delivery, and land administration, these gains are undermined by expanding informal settlements, inadequate mobility systems, and weak service provision.
A key gap is the limited integration of gender-responsive urban planning, with women’s safety, mobility, and access to services largely absent from indicators. Overall, the evidence shows that urban development remains infrastructure-driven rather than people-centered, reinforcing inequalities for women, girls, and marginalized urban populations.
The consultation process called for:

- Gender-responsive urban planning processes that center women’s safety, mobility, and livelihoods.
- Safe and affordable public transport systems.
- Investment in climate-resilient urban infrastructure.
- Inclusive sanitation and housing systems.
- Meaningful participation of youth and women in city governance.
- Protection of vulnerable communities from forced displacement.

17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS

Partnerships are central to sustainable development, yet they often exclude those closest to the challenges. Grassroots women's organizations remain critically underfunded: direct funding to women's organizations accounts for less than one percent of global official development assistance provided for gender equality (UN Women, 2021).

A prominent 2015 review of funding for women, peace and security initiatives similarly found that only one percent of funds provided was targeted towards women-led organizations, including women human rights defenders (OECD, as cited in ASPI, 2022).
The evidence on grassroots women's organizations is compelling: they are deeply rooted in their communities, know local contexts first-hand, and are trusted by those hardest to reach yet they remain systematically excluded from partnership and financing structures (UN Women, 2021). As the UN Secretary-General has recommended, realizing genuine partnerships requires raising the percentage of official development assistance that goes directly to women's organizations, alongside increasing access to direct, flexible, and multi-year funding for feminist movements. Integrating SDG 5 into SDG 17 means transforming partnerships from extractive relationships into equitable collaborations that resource grassroots leadership, not merely consult it.

"Participation without influence is not participation. It is tokenism." (FEMNET)

The 2026 VNRs on SDG 17 show a mixed picture of financing, with some countries benefiting from debt relief, stronger domestic revenue mobilization, and innovative financing reforms, while others face persistent fiscal constraints and debt pressures. Across all cases, weak data systems, limited accountability, and constrained partnerships especially for civil society continue to hinder inclusive and effective SDG implementation.

Across these VNRs, grassroots women's and feminist organizations are largely absent from partnership frameworks. Even where civil society engagement is mentioned as in Cabo Verde and Egypt it is typically framed at the NGO or national level, not the grassroots. The Liberia VNR is notable for framing governance reform as an investment in itself, generating fiscal dividends. The consultation process called for this logic to be extended: investment in feminist and grassroots organizations must be recognized as a development accelerator, not a charitable residual.

The consultation process called for:

- Direct and flexible funding for feminist and grassroots organizations.
- Transparent and accountable partnership systems.
- Shared decision-making power within partnerships at all levels.
- Institutionalized youth leadership and participation.
- Long-term financing for community-led initiatives.
- Stronger civic space protections.
- Debt justice mechanisms that free fiscal space for gender-responsive social investment.

THE CARE ECONOMY: THE INVISIBLE FOUNDATION OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Across consultations, unpaid care work emerged as one of the clearest examples of structural gender inequality. Women continue to perform disproportionate unpaid labour linked to water collection, caregiving, cooking, sanitation management, and household survival. Participants stressed that infrastructure failures deepen unpaid care burdens.

- When water systems fail, women walk further.
- When energy systems fail, women rely on unsafe fuels.
- When transport systems fail, women's mobility becomes restricted.
- When sanitation systems fail, women's health and dignity are compromised.

The care economy therefore cannot remain invisible within development planning. FEMNET calls for all SDGs under review to integrate care economy analysis by measuring how policies reduce or deepen unpaid care burdens on women and girls.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND PROGRESS: WHAT "ON TRACK" REALLY MEANS

Assessing progress on SDG 5 and related goals requires moving beyond aggregate indicators to country-level realities. The 2026 VNR cycle reveals significant accountability gaps. Burundi reports that 16% of SDG targets are deteriorating or stagnating and 35% are non-assessable due to data gaps. The DRC reports only 14.8% of targets are on track to be achieved by 2030, with 49.2% displaying limited progress or stagnation and 36.1% regressing. Guinea-Bissau notes that only 27.9% of gender-monitoring indicators were available in 2022. Somalia improved SDG data availability from 39% in 2022 to 70% in 2025 demonstrating that data investments can rapidly transform accountability.

"Kenya is investing resources in access to clean and safe energy. But there are other goals around environment and climate change that are not tracked at all. Countries have national policies to address care and support gaps. But how much of those policies has been implemented?" (FEMNET Kenya).

Consultations across Africa reveal that even where strong progress is reported nationally, women and marginalized communities often experience a different reality. The measure of progress must include gender-disaggregated data, community-generated evidence, and feminist monitoring mechanisms that track the quality of participation not merely its occurrence. The SDGs Kenya Forum (2025) highlights that gender-responsive budgeting and citizen participation are essential accountability mechanisms that remain underutilized.

Notable approaches from the 2026 VNR cycle that merit scaling: Burundi's administrative reform giving greater autonomy to provinces and municipalities; Senegal's Joint Annual Review process involving all stakeholders; Egypt's multi-stakeholder process including government, private sector, civil society, parliament, and development partners alongside Voluntary Local Reviews; and Liberia's honest self-assessment framing its VNR as a "credible baseline, not a curated success story". Each of these offers models that, when combined with gender disaggregation and feminist monitoring, can transform accountability.

CONCLUSION: SDG 5 AS THE ENGINE OF TRANSFORMATION

Africa's development challenge is not only about resources or capacity. It is about priorities. As long as gender equality is treated as a standalone goal, progress across the SDGs will remain limited. But when SDG 5 is fully integrated, it becomes a multiplier accelerating progress across all sectors. Turning the tide requires recognizing that water systems are gender systems, energy systems are gender systems, cities are gender systems, and partnerships are gender systems.

The 2026 VNR cycle offers both warnings and models. It documents countries achieving GDP growth of 6–10% (Guinea, 2026; Rwanda, 2026; Cabo Verde, 2026) while simultaneously reporting stagnating gender indicators, invisible unpaid care burdens, deteriorating rural infrastructure, and absent feminist voices in governance. Economic growth and genderequality are not automatically linked. The integration must be deliberate, financed, and accountable.

Across Africa, women and girls are not asking simply to be consulted. They are demanding accountability, redistribution of power and resources, recognition of unpaid care work, protection of civic space, and meaningful participation in shaping development priorities and solutions.

CONCLUSION: SDG 5 AS THE ENGINE OF TRANSFORMATION

1

Institutionalise annual SDG 5 review alongside SDG 17 at ARFSD and HLPF, recognising that gender equality is a cross-cutting accountability condition for all SDGs.

2

Require all VNR countries to report on gender-responsive budgeting, care economy investments, feminist civil society participation and gender-disaggregated outcomes across the goals under review.

3

Establish direct regional and national funding mechanisms for feminist, women-led, girls' and young women's, youth-led and grassroots organisations implementing SDG solutions.

4

Adopt a feminist care infrastructure approach across SDGs 6, 7, 9, 11 and 17, including childcare, WASH, clean cooking, public health, social protection, safe transport and accessible public services.

5

Strengthen public financing through progressive taxation, action against illicit financial flows, debt justice, gender-responsive public spending and safeguards against austerity and harmful privatisation.

6

Protect civic space and human rights defenders, including environmental women human rights defenders, youth organisers, feminist activists and community data collectors.

7

Ensure infrastructure, energy and urban investments undergo mandatory gender, climate, disability and human rights impact assessments before approval and during implementation.

8

Create accountability mechanisms that measure the quality of participation, the adoption of civil society recommendations, budget execution and impact on women's and girls' lived realities.

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