Gender is the social and cultural constructions of masculinities and femininities, not the state of being male or female in its entirety. According to the philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1989), "One is not born a woman, one becomes one". There is a high degree of inequalities found in the power relations between the male and female despite the many decades of the rise of the women’s movement; all the institutions of society from the home to the school, workplaces and political framework perpetrate the system. Against this backdrop, only a multi-prong approach that targets men and women of different classes, policy makers at different levels and the custodians of our traditional institutions in our communities can effectively dismantle the system. Civil society organisations over the five past decades in Africa have made great efforts but a lot still needs to be done.

Within the African context, little has changed in our child gender socialisation pattern. According to social learning theorists, a child will intensify any behaviour for which she/he receives positive reinforcement and most likely desist from those for which she/he receives punishment. When it comes to gender issues, children receive praise when they engage in behaviours considered culturally appropriate for their gender and punishment if they do not. (Fagot 1978 & Dweck et al, 1978). Early childhood socialisation at home reinforces gender stereotypes, so does the hidden curriculum derived from images in textbooks and instructors’ attitude from elementary school through secondary to tertiary institutions. There is the need to mainstream gender into the learning curriculum of both in-school and out-of-school young people so that as they advance in life, the gender knowledge can be translated into practice. For the in-school young people, every subject/course in the school curriculum should have a gender dimension.

Experience has shown that within the tertiary institutions in the African region, male domination of female students by their male counterparts is
highly prevalent. Discussions with female university students during training workshops revealed that female students in love relationship with their male counterparts were made to perform domestic chores like house servants barring which the male would opt out of the relationship. The kind of educational targets set by the female students was also limited by the notion that post-graduate education would limit the chances of the female securing a life-partner. Even within the lecture room setting, female students are placed at a disadvantage by the subtle dynamics of male domination which intimidate them into becoming passive participants in the lecture process. AAWORD has made tremendous efforts by conducting research to document these practices and in targeting gender sensitisation and empowerment programmes at both in and out-of- school young people.

It is generally recognised that women will benefit more when they are equitably represented in policy-making positions but political leadership aspiration among women has been poor partly due to their socialisation, inexperience, financial limitation and the degree of violence that attends politicking in many nations of Africa. Women political aspirants need skills development training and mentoring by veteran women and men politicians to survive effectively in this terrain. AAWORD has organised skills development training for both female and male young political aspirants with opportunities offered them to be mentored by veteran politicians.

A lot of African women engage in cross-border trades while many migrate from their nations to seek greener pastures in other nations. Attention has been focussed over time on the type of indignities that these women suffer in the hands of law enforcement agents. AAWORD carried out research studies in both Franco-phone and Anglo-phone African nations to document these experiences. At the forum for dissemination of findings the law enforcement agents were brought together with the immigrants and other key players like health care givers and landlords to share experiences culminating in the creation of networks.

The issue of gender and economic justice which has been in mainstream discourse by African civil society organisations has been tackled through documentation and analysis of various positions on the issue and youth involvement through sensitisation programmes by AAWORD. National chapters have organised sensitisation training workshops and with media campaign to register their disapproval of the signing of the EPAs by African governments. Inheritance and land laws still put women at a disadvantage putting the responsibility on gender –focussed legal aid
bodies to fight for the enactment of new laws and where necessary, the abolishment of existing ones.

Largely, generation of data through scientific studies, advocacy directed at key players in the society, youth involvement, male involvement and capacity building through gender education, skills development training and mentoring are strategies that AAWORD has utilised through its national chapters to address the issues of gender inequality. During our numerous training workshops, gender education sections have directed attention to inequalities in the educational opportunities offered to male and female at the all levels, denials of women’s reproductive health rights (FGM, fertility decision, maternal health care etc) gender-based violence ranging from domestic, social to conflict context and media messages/images that are abusive to women among other types. Women and girls’ trafficking for sex or cheap labour often perpetrate with the active collaboration of women, absence of crèches in workplaces and too-short maternity leaves are other issues brought into focus.

It is suggested that women activists pay more attention to issues of early childhood education where gender learning commences, women’s workplace rights, women in conflict situations, promotion of functional literacy for women as part of the empowerment package and the effects of environmental degradation on women by conducting research to document specific experiences of populations and designing intervention programmes in a participatory manner. There is still a dearth of data on real experiences of women. Women activist groups must continue to insist that national data for various sectors be gender disaggregated to depict the impact of policies and their implementation on women. Moreover, the real custodians of cultural traditions that marginalise women must be engaged in consultations to tackle the root of inequalities.