

Gender experts and women leaders in Africa including youth have urged Africa leaders in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia to include Girls and Women as they discuss the trade pact- African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA).

The experts spoke at a side event dubbed the 39th Gender Is My Agenda (GIMAC) Youth Summit that comes on the sidelines of the African Union Summit of heads of Government and State that is discussing the trade pact.

GIMAC spotlights women and youth in all their diversities in the trade discussions taking into account that their voices are seldom included in the continental free trade conversations.

“Our focus as women in trade should not be just on cross border trade but also on the macro level systems. We need to engage Central Banks, customs unions and the office of registration among other partner stakeholders. AfCFTA shouldn’t just be looked at in one economic dimension but the social, political and environmental aspects matter as well,” said Memory Kachambwa, the Executive Director of The African Women’s Development and Communications Network.

Madame Bineta Diop the African Union Commission’s Special Envoy on Women, Peace and Security however called upon the African leaders to first guarantee peace within and between countries. She noted that the youth, would want to take advantage of the free trade area pact but without peace and security, this won’t happen.

“The youth are the leaders of today and can transform Africa if engaged in the trade discussions. AfCFTA will not make sense for women, girls, and the youth nor be beneficial to the African people without peace and stability for trade,” she said.

The African Union Youth Envoy Chido Cleo Mpemba said, “the success of AfCFTA will depend on inclusion of the youth because they constitute over 60 per cent of the continent’s populations.”

She noted that the youth are not passive recipients but they are also agents of change and are critical actors in the trade discussions.

Jill Anami, from the African Women’s Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) said: “We should strive to support a gender-inclusive economic development by strengthening the mobility of women across the African continent.”

On her part, Karen Ondwasi, Chairperson, GIMAC Young Women Network noted that meaningfully engaging youths in the AfCFTA includes giving skills, resources and an opportunity to participate in trade beyond borders.

Sam Norgah, Plan International urged the young people to use their skills and expertise to engage on continental agreements. He challenged the youth to review and feedback into the continental pacts at any given opportunity.

“Make use of the internet and turn social media into a tool of creating and seizing opportunities,” he said.

Their views come at a time when African youth are facing numerous challenges; including but not limited to unemployment.

Gender experts are of the view that whereas the AfCFTA proposes a free access to commodities, goods, and services among all 55 African Union nations the extent to which this will impact the youth needs to be reviewed.

Fatimah Kelleher, independent women’s rights social justice professional, emphasizes that, “The question of what goods and services will be fully liberalised, phased, or restricted by each country is the critical factor within the negotiations. Agriculture particularly, presents a challenge for women across the continent as competition is opened-up on many similar crops between nations.”

Kelleher noted that in Nigeria for example, rice, groundnuts, and palm fruits are all key crops that women process and trade-in as finished or semi-finished products.

Competition from a stronger producing country in these products would have a detrimental impact on women’s livelihoods and could warrant being declared sensitive based on gendered considerations.

Similarly, competition that affects key subsistence crops farmed by women – from plantains and tubers in Uganda to beans and other pulses in Tanzania – could also have gendered impacts given that women also supplement their incomes by selling any surplus they have either at the farm gate or local market

The gender activists particularly will demand the African Union to give special attention to Article 6 of the pact that urges member states to commit to “ensuring the active promotion and protection of all human rights for women and girls”