How can the gender gap in Africa be closed?

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The World Economic Forum has launched an Africa Gender Parity Group to work to close the continent ' s gender gap. It comprises 40 influential female and male leaders from business, politics and civil society launch the first Africa Gender Parity Group and is intended to foster collaboration on new ways to close economic, health, education and political empowerment gaps between men and women

" Women account for a sizeable portion of Africa's economies and could contribute considerably more if there were greater gender equality. The Africa Gender Parity Group believes both women and men need to work together to close the gender gap, and thus better leverage women's talents to increase productivity and prosperity in all of society, " said Saadia Zahidi, Head of the World Economic Forum ' s Gender Parity and Women Leaders Programme.

Members of the Africa Gender Parity Group include Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Deputy President of South Africa; Linah K. Mohohlo, Governor of the Bank of Botswana; Jay Naidoo, Chairman of the Board, Development Bank of Southern Africa, South Africa; Elisabeth Tankeu, Commissioner, Trade and Industry, African Union, Addis Ababa; Reuel Khoza, Chairman, Nedbank, South Africa; Amadou Mahtar Ba, President, AllAfrica Global Media, USA; Mandisi Mpahlwa, Minister of Trade and Industry of South Africa; William Mzimba, Chief Executive, Accenture, South Africa; Nku Nyembezi-Heita, Chief Executive Officer, ArcelorMittal South Africa, South Africa; Ndi Okereke-Onyiuke, Director-General and Chief Executive Officer, Nigerian Stock Exchange, Nigeria; Gisele Yitamben, Founder and President, Association pour le Soutien et l'Appui à la Femme Entrepreneur (ASAFE), Cameroon; Nyasha P. Zhou, Chief Executive, PG Industries (Zimbabwe), Zimbabwe.

At their first meeting at the World Economic Forum on Africa, the Group called for:- Greater government commitment and funding for primary, secondary and tertiary education, focusing in particular on increasing the retention rates for girls.- Better legislation to fight discrimination against women, including in the area of property rights, and effective implementation of this legislation.- A comprehensive overview of the policies and programmes that have been effective in narrowing gender gaps in the region's best performing countries and a transfer of these best practices to low performing countries.

Africa lags behind most parts of the world in closing its gender gap on education and health, but is well ahead of many emerging regions on closing the gap in political empowerment. In the World Economic Forum ' s Global Gender Gap Report, which ranks 128 countries according to the size of their gender gaps, the performance of Sub-Saharan African countries is greatly varied. South Africa, ranked 20, is a leader in the region, boosted by its scores on the political empowerment of women.

However, the region also contains some of the lowest ranking countries in the world, including Zimbabwe (88) and Nigeria (107), hampered by particularly poor performances in the areas of education and health.

More than 800 leaders from 50 countries are participating in the 18th World Economic Forum on Africa in Cape Town from 4 to 6 June 2008. CNBC Africa is the host broadcaster of the World Economic Forum on Africa.

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