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WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA: FROM MARGINALIZATION TO GENDER INEQUALITY

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of women in economic and political development, attempts made by women to overcome their socio-economic and political underdevelopment and marginalization, and the role of the international community in addressing these issues. It begins by arguing that although women play a very important role in development, their status in African countries does not reflect their contributions. Therefore, enhancing this status would not only go a long way toward overcoming population and food production problems, but it would also help boost economic growth and development. The key to accomplishing womens status is to ensure that women have greater influence on social, economic and political status, particularly in the areas that affect them most. Achieving this goal will require the collective action of women from the grassroots to the national and international levels as well as overcoming gender stereotypes and institutional discrimination.

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing acceptance and recognition of the important role women play in the development process. Women are crucial to the success of family planning programs; bear much of the responsibility for food production and account for an increasing share of wage labor in Africa. Despite their significant contributions, women continue to face formidable social, economic and political barriers. Also, while the growing scarcity of resources within subsistence economies increases the burden on women and erodes their productivity, little is being done to reverse this trend. Therefore, by failing to address the pervasive gender bias that neglects and/or discounts the contributions of women, many development policies and programs designed to alleviate impoverishment actually are making the problem even worse.

This article addresses the following challenging questions: What types of cultural, economic, and political barriers do African women face? How does the empowerment of women contribute to reducing population growth? What are the factors that contribute to gender bias? How does discrimination

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contribute to female poverty? Why is gender an important part of development programs? And why do women continue to experience discrimination despite their major contribution toward independent movements in Africa? The answers to these questions will be provided somewhere along the line in this analysis. This article further examines the role of women in economic and political development, attempts made by women to overcome their socio-economic and political underdevelopment and marginalization, and the role of the international community in addressing these issues. In the final analysis, the article recommends policy measures that will improve the status of women in Africa.

Despite the tendency to treat women as a homogenous and unified group, they hardly constitute a monolithic group with identical problems. Women live in countries with diverse historical experience and development levels, and within each country, the issues pertaining to women vary according to race, ethnicity, class, religion, tribe, residence, and educational levels. Despite these differences, the common denominator of women in all societies, including the industrialized ones, is their subordinate status. Women compose the poorest and the least powerful segment of the population throughout the world.

The exploitation or oppression of African women is even more intense due largely to the legacy of Western imperialism, which culminated in economic dependency and crises. Also, the economic and political structural changes introduced by colonial powers, and later imposed by international lending and development agencies, have further widened the gender gap in these countries. Unrecognized as full partners either in the family or in society, women have been denied equal access to education, job training, employment, health care, ownership, and political power.

Furthermore, in order to address the conditions peculiar to Africa that affect women status and roles, the following observations must be made. First, the overall economic and political problems of Africa make life difficult for most African men as well as women. Inequality, oppression, poverty, and lack of opportunity are widespread societal concerns. Nonetheless, women as a group suffer more and have access to fewer resources and opportunities than do men. It is important to note that African societies and gender roles are highly diverse; this makes efforts at generalization somewhat tentative and not applicable to every society.

Second, class and gender influence status and opportunities of individual women. That is, girls born to more elite families will typically have the opportunity to acquire a good education and prestigious career, although they are unlikely to achieve great political or economic power on their own. However, they are prime candidates for marriage to the African men who do wield power and influence. The results are that although women as a group suffer from

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inequality, the interests and perspectives of elite women often diverge from those of poorer women.

Finally, the form gender inequality takes in Africa reflects indigenous, pre-colonial, and European influences. European expansion into Africa during the colonial period both undermined sources of status and autonomy that women had and strengthened elements of indigenous male dominance or "patriarchy." At the same time, Western gender ideology and practices that promote male dominance and female dependency have been superimposed on Africa. Since independence, Africa's male leaders have continued to add laminations to the patriarchal structures they inherited from their colonial masters, often so with the support of Western international investors and donors whose "development" assistance mostly goes to men.

This article begins by arguing that although women play a very important role in development, their status in African countries does not reflect their contribution. Therefore, enhancing this status would go a long way toward overcoming population and food production problems and would therefore help boost economic growth and development. The key to accomplishing women's status is to ensure that women have greater influence on social, economic and political issues, particularly in the areas that affect them most. Achieving this goal will require the collective action of women from the grass roots to the national and international levels as well as overcoming gender stereotypes and discrimination.

THE THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

More often than not, Western scholars and experts associate traditional religion and cultural values with rigid social and economic systems that relegate women to an inferior status. Hence, it has been generally believed that the imposition of European colonialism in Africa and the subsequent spread of modernization and Western ideas offered women greater opportunities and improved social status. Implicit in the theory and practice of conventional economic developments are three assumptions that are influenced by gender differences, which reinforce biases. First assumption is that within a given society, economic growth is gender neutral or blind, and as such, both men and women will benefit equally from it. The second assumption is that within households in any society, the burdens and benefits of wealth and poverty will be distributed equally regardless of gender. The third assumption is that the traditional Western model of a "household," in which a father, a mother, and children share common interests and work toward common goals, is applicable to all societies (Brown, 1988). Unfortunately, none of these assumptions holds true.

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Thus, available evidence indicate that the problems of gender inequality could not be fully explained with the orthodox or conventional theories of development and this enables us to search for an alternative analytical and conceptual framework. However, the theoretical and conceptual framework used in writing this article is based on dependency theory as perceived by feminist scholars such as Boserup (1970) and Harris (1979). The choice of this theory is well thought out because many women in Africa and other developing countries are still suffering from the political economy of underdevelopment, marginalization, dependency, and gender inequality since their nations independence.

Also, as African scholars, we believe that we cannot fully understand or explain the causes of underdevelopment and marginalization of African women based on the orthodox approach. As Harris (1975) indicates in his book: *The Political Economy of Africa*, the study of Africa in Western academic circles has been hopelessly biased by the influence of government funding on academic research, grants from large private foundations, the bureaucratization of knowledge by disciplines, the prevailing social and political ideologies, and the general ethnocentrism of Western scholars, experts and policy makers. To correct the distortions resulting from this situation, a great deal of intellectual effort and research needs to be concentrated on the real barrier to development in Africa and the manner in which these barriers can be overcome. This means that womens economic dependence and subordination to male dominance must be openly acknowledged. In addition, attention must be focused on those strategies of development and configuration of power which will lead to a political economy of "rapid, self-sustained expansion, controlled and directed by and for the African women themselves" (Harris, 1975, p. 13).

Furthermore, we believe that we cannot hope to build effective or efficient development theory and policy for the majority of Africas population which suffers from underdevelopment and dependency without first learning how past economic and social history gave rise to present underdevelopment. Yet most historians study only the male contributions in the development process and pay little or no attention to the role of women in economic and political development in Africa. However, while modernization theorists would have us believe that urbanization, industrialization, and the diffusion of Western values and lifestyles have a positive emancipating impact, many "feminist scholars [generally oriented toward dependency theory] have produced a wealth of literature that suggests that political and economic modernization have overwhelmingly negative effects for women" (Brown, 1992, p. 31).

While the status of women in precolonial Africa varied greatly, the impact of European colonialism was mainly to reverse or further diminish their position in society. It must be noted that colonial rule was introduced at a time

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(in the nineteenth century) when Victorian England and other European societies had rather restricted views of women's roles (Charlton, 1989). Therefore, colonial masters in Africa were often less equitable in their treatment of women than were traditional societies. In some West African cultures, for example, women occasionally served as chiefs or held other important political positions. However, as the influence of chiefs and other traditional leaders declined under colonialism (and continued to decrease after independence), these women lost their influence to male-dominated colonial or national governments. Among the Nigerian Ibo, women had exercised significant political power prior to British colonialism. Colonial administrators, however, perceived politics as "a mans concern" and thus, female political influence declined (Gordon & Gordon, 1996).

The establishment of commercialized agriculture also contributed to the loss of women's economic power. In Africa, commercialization begun under colonialism, often led to the granting of government titles to the land. Consequently the effect was to transfer farmland that had been controlled by women to male ownership (Enabulele, 1985). In addition, as families moved from subsistence (family consumption) agriculture to commercial agriculture and as commercial plantations were developed by foreigners, men were more prone to do the farming unlike before. The commercialization of agriculture also made farmers more dependent on the state for credit and technical training. In the colonial period and in the early decades of independence, women found themselves frozen out of such aid.

In Uganda, for instance, it was women farmers who first started cotton cultivation. Yet in 1923 the British administrator in charge of agriculture declared that "cotton growing cannot be left to the women and old people" (Freeman, 1993, p. 21). Thus, as new technologies were introduced for cotton growing they were taught only to men, ultimately driving women out of that occupation. After independence, a similar pattern continued in most of Africa and Asia. Government extension agents offered modern technologies, credits, and other assistance fairly exclusively to men. Foreign aid programs were often no less sexist. Thus, when a Taiwanese foreign aid team went to Senegal to improve rice cultivation, it trained only men even though women did most of the rice cultivation. As a result, the men ignored the instructors, the women were not taught, and the new techniques never took hold (Cutrufelli, 1983).

The negative effects of modernization on women have mainly not been limited to economic aspects alone. In *Gender and State in Africa*, Anthony Nwankwo (1997) found that modernization has not always been politically beneficial to the mass of underprivileged African women. In fact, in Africa, where traditional cultures sometimes portray women's organizations and production techniques that bind women together, urbanization and the spread

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of nuclear families have deprived women of the organizational establishments they had enjoyed in the past. In Nigeria, Africa's most populous sub-Saharan nation, women in the urban informal sector have been less prone to demonstrate politically since independence than they were under colonial regime (Elson, 1989). In Africa, the modernization and commercialization of agriculture and the resulting decline of traditional labor relations have further deprived rural women of their specialized labor functions. As a result, these transformations may, at least in the short run, reduce women's political influence and power.

The debate on the state, democracy and civil society in Africa as engendered by modernization or conventional wisdom has tended to ignore the gender dimension and has mainly adopted a "gender neutral" approach. For instance, elections, campaigns and party politics have been perceived as gender-neutral processes that affect both men and women equally. In a similar fashion, the democratic process has further been treated as a gender-neutral process in which women and men have equal access to the opportunities, resources and instruments that enhance their participation and winning elections. Gender-neutral approach further assumes a dichotomy between the public and private sphere so that all political activity takes place in the public area from which the majority of women for historical reasons are excluded, due largely to the patriarchally determined division of labor.

However, a growing body of feminist literature has indicated that the private sector is also political, and that political processes such as democratization take place in both private and public arenas. This section of the article takes as its point of departure the thesis that the institutions of the state, democracy, and the democratic process, as well as the phenomenon of civil society are not gender-neutral. Therefore, meaningful debate on and analysis of the dynamics of these phenomena and processes must account for the gender factor. As Tripp (1991, p. 26) has succinctly demonstrated:

The debate on the nature of civil society in Africa... has yet to fully incorporate and problematize the gender implications of civil society as it has been conceptualized in liberal theory.... Gender differences remain unaccounted for. Participation in the public sphere is assumed to be governed by universal, impersonal and conventional criteria of achievement, interest, rights, equality and property liberal criteria applicable only to men.

This article argues also that while both the colonial and postcolonial states have maintained a linkage with the women's movement throughout the postcolonial period, this process has led to the states' desire to exploit women's labor, their numerical strength and their mobilizational abilities for economic and political benefit.

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Although recent feminist contribution in this area has not produced a consensus, it has indicated many ways in which gender relations and gender meanings pervade state policies and, moreover the whole concept of the state as institutionalized relations of power (Gordon & Gordon, 1996). Most of the work in this area demonstrates the ways in which gender relations and gender dichotomies are constructed and continue to be constructed by the state. This means that the state at all level is male-dominated, and that those bureaucrats and political authorities who run the institutions of the state are largely men. As a result of this male-domination, state policies may intentionally or unintentionally disadvantage women. Or to put it differently, men and women experience state policies and actions in different ways. Therefore, the results of state policies and/or actions are not gender-neutral, no matter the intention.

Parpart (1988) and Staudt (1987) argue that through their ideological, legal and material efforts, states foster the mobilization of certain groups and issues. This mobilization generally benefits men rather than women (Parpart, 1988; Staudt, 1987). This method can take many forms involving, for instance, laws that define sexuality, mobility, marital relations, including rights to property and child custody, or access to land settlement schemes, education, and economic resources. Also, states are characterized by gender ideology that is manifested through "the norms, laws, ideologies and patterns of action that shape the meaning of politics and the nature of political discourse" (Scott, 1995, p. 106).

In light of this, many feminist theorists have been critical of seeing the gender dimensions of states mainly in terms of the different ways that men and women experience the policies, actions, and practices of the state institutions. Feminist critics of Western liberal democracy see the state not as an arena in which relations between gender-neutral individuals are mediated, but as a set of institutions that uphold gender inequality through the division of public and private spheres.

Examining the gender dimensions of the state in Africa is further complicated because the modern state has its roots in the colonial experience; that is, the state did not emerge from indigenous social structures, but it was imported by outside forces with their own imperialist agendas. Political analysts and historians have pointed out the ways in which gender and sexuality were central to the colonial enterprise, not only in terms of the ways African relations were altered in light of colonial notions of gender and sexuality, but also in terms of the ways in which gender relations among Africans set the parameters for economic relations and the state (Lima, 1994). Thus, assumptions about gender that shape state institutions, policies, and practices are rooted in the colonial experience. In support of this argument, Villalon and Huxtable (1997, p. 260) have this to say:

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This is true in the case of Zimbabwe, where the policies and practices of European settlers in what was then called "Southern Rhodesia" fundamentally reshaped gender relations among Africans. Incorporation into expanding markets, creation and codification of African customary laws, colonial education, and increased demands for labor not only affected men and women differently but also were premised on particular meanings of gender that changed over time. Throughout the colonial period, state authority, institutions, and practices were premised on particular assumptions about race and gender. There is also ample evidence that the colonial state was keenly interested in and involved in shaping gender relations among Europeans and Africans.

For these reasons, Boserup (1970) convincingly argues that the bulk of this conventional wisdom is invalid when confronted with the gender relations in Africa and ineffective if not detrimental as an intellectual basis upon which to develop policies aimed at promoting gender development. Boserup (1970), like other radical scholars such as Nelson (1988) and Tripp (1991), disagrees that the underdevelopment of women in Africa is a result of their internal economic, political, social and cultural deficiencies. According to Boserup (1970), the beginnings of women's systematic impoverishment were linked to imperialism, which she posits, not only brought African women into the global economy but did so in a structurally unequal manner. The present pattern of international economic relations results in asymmetrical exchange. The benefits of these ties are shared unequally between men and women in African society.

EUROPEAN COLONIALISM AND THE REDEFINITION OF GENDER ROLE

By the time outright colonial domination of Africa began in the 1800s, some of autonomy for African women may have already occurred. A major reason is that the disease, warfare, and dislocations of slavery introduced in earlier centuries put more pressure on women to reproduce and perform maternal functions in order to offset population losses that were occurring (Nelson, 1988).

The record is much clearer on the impact of colonialism. African societies were forcibly integrated into the expanding global capitalist economy dominated by the European powers. To extract the mineral and commodity wealth of Africa and to ensure a cheap labor supply, radical changes were imposed (Anunobi, 1992; 1994). The commercialization of agriculture through the introduction of cash crops altered the customary gender division of labor in ways that were mostly disadvantageous to women.

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Men were taught to grow new cash crops such as cocoa and coffee for export, while women continued to grow food crops for the family and local consumption. Men were forced into the wage economy to work in the mines, on the plantations, or in town; most women remained in the rural areas. Schooling and the teaching of new skills were made available primarily to males. All in all, although both men and women were exploited within the colonial economy, men gained some access to important resources such as money, skills, land, and education less available to women. Men also gained political advantages as customary sources of female power were ignored or undermined. Europeans imposed their own prejudices about the proper authority of men over women by dealing only with male leaders. All-male "native authorities" were created in many areas to allow for some local government based on frequently arguable "traditional" or "customary" laws.

Tradition was usually interpreted in ways that favored mens control over women, allowing men to gain at womens expense. As men were provided new commercial opportunities in cash crop agriculture, they began to assert their customary rights to land and the labor of wives in order to accumulate income for themselves; they were not obligated to share this money with their wives. In some cases, this resulted in great wealth for some enterprising men. For instance, among the Beti tribe in Cameroon, some men married many women in order to get virtually free labor from them on their cash crop farms.

In the Zambian Copperbelt, wives were required to perform their customary domestic services for their husbands in town, although they were unable to claim any share of their husbands income. Unable to get jobs of their own, women often had to support themselves by selling sex, food, homebrew, or domestic services to other men (Bujra, 1986). Not only were women economically responsible for themselves, but the burden of providing for children also fell mostly on women -- another matter of custom from precolonial times.

Also as their responsibilities were growing, womens rights to land were undermined. Often the most or the best land was given to the men for cash crops, and there were growing pressures to deprive women of their inheritance rights to land in favor of males in the family (Morna, 1994). One of the most damaging colonial land policies for women involved efforts to introduce private ownership of land. In Kenya in the 1950s, the Swynnerton Act provided deeds to male heads of households, replacing the African land tenure system that ensured everyones access to land (Lovett, 1989). Such policies have continued in the postcolonial period. They pose a major threat to the economic well-being of women.

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Colonial officials and male elders often worked together to get better control of women. Frequently, European officials did not want women in the towns; they wanted only the labor of African men. Therefore, many restrictions were placed on the movement of women (Longive, 1990). Zambia (then Northern Rhodesia) is a good example of colonial regulation of migratory labor in southern Africa. In this part of the region, rural tribal authorities were given the right to prevent unmarried women and children from moving to the towns, and urban authorities had the power to send those who defied such restrictions back to the villages (Langley, 1983).

Among pastoralists, the introduction of new property and commercial relations also eroded the status of women. In some regions in Kenya, for instance, womens rights to cattle and the status they once derived from the vital tasks they performed were undermined as men asserted their right to ownership of animals and other property. Ownership rights were redefined in Western commercial terms. This now meant those men, not women, could make decisions and profit from the sale or acquisition of family property. Women themselves became another form of property to be controlled as they lost effective control over their own labor. They had to work for their husbands in order to survive because they had no rights to own wealth-producing property of their own. Compounding her economic vulnerability, a woman, if divorced, had no right to the wealth she helped her husband acquire through her labor (Pankhurst, Donna and Jacobs, 1988).

DEPENDENCY AND INEQUALITY OF WOMEN IN POSTCOLONIAL AFRICA

It is important to note here that the problems of women since independence are a continuation of policies and forces established during the colonial era. Although African gender relations were transformed during the colonial era to further European economic and political exploitation of Africa, such distorted and unfair policies often continue to be justified by African leaders. Despite womens contributions to the struggle for political independence and rhetoric in favor of equality for all, the new African states and social organizations are mainly Africanized replicas of their colonial predecessors. Advantages men had gained in access to education, jobs and property helped them to gain control of most of the wealth, jobs and leadership positions in newly independent African states.

Also, male dominance has been strengthened and enhanced as many of Africas new Westernized elite individuals, both men and women, have modeled their own gender roles on those of their Western colonial masters. These roles are, in turn, disseminated to the general public through education, the media,

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government and womens institutions (Palmer, 1991). Instead of promoting political equality and economic rights for women in their societies, women are often encouraged to pursue domesticity and economic subordination to a male who serves as a head of family (Nweke, 1985).

Furthermore, while housewives in European and North American countries have a measure of legal protection to compensate for their economic dependency on their husbands, economically underdeveloped and dependent women in Africa generally do not have guaranteed rights to their husbands property or income. This applies to their children should their husband die or their marriage end in divorce. For one thing, male political power is no longer exercised primarily through families and local institutions in which women have leverage in the decision making process.

Even those few Africans who would challenge pervasive male dominance face a double obstacle. Not only must they contend with the structures in their societies that perpetuate existing gender inequality, but also the foreign institutional establishments that African states depend on for any type of assistance are imbued with many of the same biases against women. Western corporations, international financial institutions, governments and development agencies are all male-dominated institutions from male-dominated societies.

In sum, the article strongly argues that regardless of who the colonial power was and the variations in its policies toward women, the overall impact of Western domination was negative for women. The capitalist mode of production introduced by the West facilitated private ownership, nonagricultural employment, waged labor, money economy, replacement of food crops with cash crops, and the concentration of the land and capital (especially in the hands of the colonists). All of these changes reinforced the division of labor between the two sexes and sharpened the distinction between reproductive and productive labors. Womens labor, especially in horticulture and food processing, was crucial for the survival of the family in the face of meager wages earned by men.

Since women lacked access to the labor market and could not generate cash income, their labor continued to be devalued. Since the colonial governments recognized men as the heads of the households and relied upon mainly male labor, the economic position of women was marginalized. Moreover, regulations and taxes imposed by colonial government help in establishing centralized state control over people, which has been more suppressive for women.

As mentioned earlier in this analysis, although women were mobilized and played active roles in independence movements and revolutions, national liberation did not bring about the emancipation of women. Women were

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complimented on their sacrifices and their contributions to the liberation movements and expected to join their male compatriots in the national struggle for development, but they were not given equal power and responsibility to be full partners in the formation or operation of the new state.

GENDER BIAS AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Gender bias is especially pernicious in African nations where most of women's activity takes place in the non-wage economy. Women's work is essential to survival, but because little or no money changes hands, it is not counted as economically productive. The United Nations data indicate that on average, women work longer hours than men in every country except Australia, Canada, and the United States (Weekes-Vagliani, 1985). Hours worked in producing subsistence goods are rarely offset by a reduction of duties at home. Moreover, gender disparities in total hours worked are greatest among the poor and developing African countries.

Since the cultivation or collection of food use for the family is not considered a "business," the women who engage in such work usually are not granted access to land, credit, or other resources. While men are more likely both to have access to resources and to earn cash wages for their work, they are less likely than women to spend it on family maintenance—food, clothes, health care, and the like. Such patterns are disturbingly prevalent across countries and cultures.

Gender bias or gender discrimination is thus a fundamental cause of poverty, because in its various forms it prevents hundreds of millions of women from obtaining the education, training, health services, childcare, and legal status needed to escape from poverty. Gender bias is also the single most important cause of high birth rates. Where women have little access to productive resources and control over family income, they depend on children for social status and economic security. A necessary step in reducing births voluntarily, then, is to increase women's productivity and their control over resources.

Agriculture represents a major area of female economic activity in Africa. Therefore, the United Nations data on sub-Saharan Africa, for example, has suggested that 60 to 70 percent of all food production and 50 percent of all animal husbandry is carried out by women (Ferguson, 1990). Other country-specific studies in Africa show a smaller but still very significant female contribution to family farming. Boserup's (1970) early landmark study indicated that in Ghana, Sierra Leone, and Liberia, for example, women contributed approximately 40 percent of family labor in agriculture. Even in the Muslim

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North African countries of Algeria and Tunisia, women put in close to 40 percent of family farm labor, with another 20 percent done jointly by men and women (Gordon and Gordon, 1996). Despite the importance of women in agricultural production, "too little attention has been given by researchers and administrators or planners to women and the roles they play in rural society" (Gordon and Gordon, 1996, p.130).

As mentioned earlier, in addition to these economic activities, rural women perform certain traditional tasks, which sustain the economic well-being of their households. These include collecting water and firewood, cooking and taking care of children. Indeed it is estimated that women in the rural economy work as many as 15-18 hour per day. The World Bank aggregate rough data state that African women provide about 90 percent of the labor for processing food crops and providing household water and firewood; 80 percent of the work in food storage and transport from farm to village; 90 percent of the work in hoeing and weeding; and 60 percent of the work in harvesting and marketing (World Bank, 1996, p. 48).

Womens activities in the food crop and related sectors are characterized by the use of rudimentary tools such as the hoe and cutlass. In most African countries, women farmers are, by and large, neglected by extension officers. Their access to improved technologies, scientific knowledge and improved inputs is very limited. Besides, in spite of the significant role women play in agriculture, the image of the farmer as "male" still persists (Gladwin, 1991). Most women farmers get little help to ease their burdens. As Scott (1995) points out in her research on African economies, only a small share of investment has gone to rural development in most African countries, and investments that are made go primarily for cash crops, mechanization, extension services, and resettlement projects that mostly help men.

Not surprisingly, women as well as men are seeking new employment opportunities in the towns. But here too, women often find their opportunities circumscribed. One reason is that women are not given the same education or training opportunities as men. The gap between schooling for males and females remains wide: 81 girls are in primary school for every 100 boys; in secondary school the ratio of girls per 100 boys drops to 72 (Keller, 1990). While there are educated women in good jobs and professions, most wage jobs for women are in jobs that, in the West, are typically held by women: nurses, teachers, clerks, and secretaries. But even these jobs are hard to get.

Only in the past decade or so have Western development agencies come to realize how their efforts have often hampered rather than helped African women. They erroneously thought that if men were better off, women and general family welfare would improve as well. Instead, it is now recognized that womens economic opportunities and income more often declined while their workload increased. Examples include Bernal's (1988) study in northern Sudan

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and Carneys (1988) study in Gambia; both studies found that irrigation schemes frequently result in men gaining control of, if not always title to, land and production decisions at womens expense. Resettlement schemes also tend to give male farmers land, subsidies, and credit, as in Cameroon and Zimbabwe.

It is not unusual for men to take the income from the farm or other earnings and spend it on beer, women, or goods for themselves. In the Zimbabwe study, several women reported how the state marketing board paid their husbands for their cash crops, and how the men then decided how much to give their wives. If women complained about the lack of money, they were beaten. Some women resorted to selling their sexual services to other men to get additional money for household expenses.

To help address these inequities, women in development (WID) initiatives have been given more attention since the 1970s. For example, to address the inequities in U.S. development aid, the Pery Amendment passed by Congress has required a "womens impact statement" in every USAID project in African countries. USAID now stresses that improving the education and status of women is a key element in its objectives of promoting "sustainable development" in Africa. The UN, European donor agencies, and most major foundations have developed or expanded womens programs as well (Safilios, 1990). The World Bank in its publications stresses the need to redress the neglect of womens education, health, training, and access to productive resources. In 1987, a unit of Women in Development Division was created, and in 1989, a coordinator for women in development was included in the Banks four regional complexes, including Africa. More than one-third of all the Banks 1989 operations in Africa reportedly included actions specifically addressed to women (World Bank, 1992). Nonetheless, the gap between men and women is growing, and only a small proportion of development assistance is directly targeting or benefiting women.

WOMEN AND THE POLITICAL PROCESS

Since political independence, women have been excluded from most of the important political positions in African countries. For example, there have been no women heads of state, and as of the mid-1980s, women held only 6 percent of the legislative positions in Africa. At cabinet-level or equivalent positions, only 2 percent were held by women. In half of Africas countries, there was no woman at all in cabinet-level positions (Anunobi, 1997). Women were better represented at local levels of government. A recent study of twenty-seven countries by the Economic Commission for Africa shows that womens political

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participation at the national level has not increased significantly, less than 8 percent of such offices are held by women. The highest percentage of women in parliament is found in South Africa, where women hold one-fourth of the seats in the new House of Assembly (Lima, 1994). Ruling Africa has been largely a male preserve, and the state has been more responsive to the interests of men than of women.

Africa's male political leaders rarely speak out against the culture of male dominance, most believing that gender arrangements are "natural" or "traditional" and must not change. Daniel Moi, president of Kenya, exemplifies this view. When Kenyan women at the International Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985 recommended that women be more equitably represented in parliament, Moi responded that "God made man the head of the family" and "challenging that was tantamount to criticizing God" (Kabira & Nzioki, 1993).

WOMEN'S STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE ECONOMIC, SOCIOPOLITICAL STATUS

Women have not passively accepted the economic and political disadvantages they face. Formal and informal women's associations have flourished in the post independence period. Many grassroots self-help groups have been formed, often by poor, peasant women who are so frequently neglected by government or development agencies. These groups provide vital economic assistance, such as credit for farming or business ventures, or other forms of mutual assistance to members (e.g., childcare, piped water). They have their roots in precolonial women's groups where women worked together and provided each other assistance within the extended family network or in age-based groups. For many women, groups are the only way they can get power or the resources they need because husbands have no power over the group as they do over women as wives. Group solidarity also builds women's self-confidence, and many women feel groups' efforts have improved their lives and the welfare of their families and communities.

Some women's groups reflect Western colonial influences. During colonialism, many African women's groups were created and modeled on Western "ladies associations." They supported various social welfare activities in the community (such as literacy campaigns) or held classes on such homemaking activities as cooking and sewing for women. Typically dominated by middle-class and elite African women, these groups, since independence, have been active in promoting activities such as nation-building ("good citizenship"). They have also succeeded in making many useful social

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welfare contributions such as promoting health campaigns, environmental cleanups, and female education; providing daycare for working mothers; and assisting orphans and the handicapped (Boserup, 1970).

After the 1975 International Womens Year international organizations began to promote women's groups in the hope of improving women's economic, political, and social positions. Women's groups were used to implement small-scale, income-earning "women's projects," such as commercial handicrafts production. Isolated from mainstream development efforts, however, these projects were rarely successful. Women got neither the training nor the political influence to alter their disadvantaged position (Bloch and Bloch, 1980).

There are other problems limiting the effectiveness of women's groups in advancing the status of women. Some of these problems reflect women's lack of education, management training, or capital. Insufficient linkages between organizations are another problem. Social welfare work performed by women has the disadvantage of putting additional burdens on women's time. While this may help community development, it does not usually earn women themselves commensurate tangible rewards. A good example of this was a water and soil conservation program in rural Kitui in Kenya. Women did most of the work in the project, which involved strenuous activities such as terracing the land and planting trees, but they were given fewer project resources in the way of training, cash or decision making power than the small minority of men in the project (Mbilinyi, 1990).

Perhaps the greatest problem is that most women and women's groups do not challenge the fundamental gender roles that subordinate them to males and that extol the sexual division of labor that gives wealth and power primarily to men. This is partly because most national women's organizations are controlled by more educated, middle-class women who by and large accept a Western "housewife" view of "a woman's place." They can more often afford to imitate the Western housewife role as invented by the West, that is, the woman who manages the domestic arena (home and children) and who is to varying degrees financially dependent on a male breadwinner for money. Their interests and perspectives often diverge widely from the masses of less-educated women who must earn their own incomes to survive as well as take care of the home and children, yet who find that discrimination and inequality too often frustrate their efforts. Rather than offend the male ruling establishment, womens groups tend to be antifeminist and promote their own interests in securing more access to their husbands income, seeking more advantageous marriage and divorce laws, and promoting education in the domestic arts or beauty and fashion. Such groups are sometimes insensitive to or unresponsive to poor rural and urban women and their needs.

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Despite their shortcomings, women's organizations are growing in number and importance as African women struggle for more rights, opportunities, and economic resources. Some have achieved notable success in promoting greater political and economic empowerment for women. In Kenya's 1992 elections, six women were elected to parliament, largely due to the efforts of the National Committee on the Status of Women (NCSW). NCSW's agenda is to increase women's political participation and office holding, eliminate all discriminatory laws against women, mainstream gender issues in political party documents and programs, and sensitize both men and women to issues of gender equity (Nzomo, 1993). In war-torn Mozambique, the almost all-female, 11,000-member General Union of Cooperatives (UGC) has attained remarkable economic success. The union has built 210 farm cooperatives that supply the capital city of Maputo with most of its fruit and vegetables. Recent privatization reforms have allowed them to assist its members to acquire land titles, expand their economic activities, and open their own bank accounts for the first time. Co-op women are breaking gender stereotypes by learning new skills for such nontraditional jobs as electrician and mason.

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In reality, conventional agricultural development strategies have marginalized women farmers. Instead of increasing the productivity of food crops and domestic food production, which are controlled by women, governments and international agencies have promoted cash crops, which are generally controlled by men. For example, large amounts of land once jointly owned and controlled by villagers, and accessible to women, have shifted into the hands of government agencies and private landowners. The distribution of resources on which cash crop agriculture is heavily dependent, including land, fertilizers, pesticides, irrigation, and hybrid seeds, has reflected persistent gender bias. The mechanization of agriculture has reduced or replaced the labor traditionally done by men but increased that done by women without increasing their income. And, also, the labor available to subsistence households in many countries has become increasingly scarce, largely as a result of the shift of male workers away from subsistence production into cash crops and urban-based industries.

The shifting of land out of the hands of those who are most responsible for producing food for domestic consumption has been hastened by development strategies that make false assumptions about who benefits from gross economic gains. Governments throughout the less-developed world since the end of the colonial era have privatized land in favor of male

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landholders. As a result, the amount and quality of land available to women food producers in large parts of the developing world is declining. Legal and cultural obstacles prevent women from obtaining title to land and, therefore, from participating in cash crop schemes.

Since the 1970s, the international donor community has promoted women-specific projects in Africa. A review of some of these projects shows that African women in a variety of small-scale activities have been helped to improve their productivity and incomes and thus strengthening the security of their families. But the impact of such donor-financed, women-specific projects on the overall improvement of women's economic status and the integration of women's issues into the development process has been quite diffuse with limited impact. For one thing, these projects have consisted of scattered efforts uncoordinated either with donors or national government efforts and undertaken outside the planning processes of African countries. For another, the financial sustainability and the capacity to grow or expand, of these projects were not adequately considered. They had petered off as funding had dried up. Furthermore, since some of these projects excluded women from the various stages of the project cycle, differences between donors' priorities and those of the women themselves reduced the impact of the projects. Sometimes, donors' priorities have not coincided with the priorities of the women's organizations.

Improving the status of women, and thereby the prospects for humanity, will require a complete reorientation of development efforts toward establishing an environment in which women and men can prosper together. This means creating mainstream development programs that might increase women's control over income and household resources, improving their productivity, establishing their legal and social rights, and increasing the social and economic choices they are able to make.

The first strategy toward achieving these goals -- a strategy that is consistently overlooked is to ask women themselves what needs should be afforded top priority. Some answers were provided in a forum on international health held in June 1991. Among the key needs identified by participants from Africa, Asia, and Latin America were investments in the development and dissemination of appropriate technology to reduce women's work burden, and access for women to credit and training programs.

The second strategy is to act immediately to increase the productivity of subsistence producers, whether in rural or urban areas. Immediate gains can be realized by increasing women's access to land, credit, and the tools and appropriate technologies. Enforcement of laws guaranteeing gender equity in the distribution of land resources, for example, needs to be assigned high priority. Given the intimate connections between women's lack of access to land, their increasing work burden, and their dependence on children as a

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force of labor, land distribution and allocation policies should be at the top of the agenda for groups concerned about the environment, human rights, hunger, and population issues.

The third strategy is to change the definitions and assumptions made by conventional development policies in order to collect information that creates a realistic picture of subsistence economies. A redefinition of the concepts of "productivity," "value," and "work" is needed in many places to include activities that are indeed productive. These activities are those that may yield family income in goods rather than in cash or that support people without degrading the environment—which would dramatically alter the base of relevant information sought by those who are truly interested in improving human prospects. This recognition, in essence, is a necessary precondition to environmentally sound economic systems.

The collection of this type of data on a small scale already has helped policymakers to recognize the different effects on men and women of conventional gender-blind development practices. But for many areas of the economy in which women play important but officially ignored roles, there are still too little data available to truly inform public policy. Such data need to be incorporated into all relevant areas of economics, health, and environment.

Research and development in the sciences and in appropriate technologies need to be far more gender sensitive, not only to benefit women, but to benefit from them, especially in areas of crop production and bio-diversity. Focusing research on the needs of women in subsistence economies could dramatically boost food crop and forest production within a decade.

But these objectives cannot be met unless women enjoy the same degree of independence and freedom of choice as men. Governments and international agencies also need to be pushed to recognize the effects of their policies on how such resources as money, food, and opportunities for learning are allocated within the household. Development should encourage more cooperation between the sexes with the goal of ending poverty, reducing fertility, and securing the environment. These ends can most easily be achieved by directing resources into the education of young girls and the training of women, and by establishing policies that increase women's access to credit and opportunities to establish businesses, earn income, and create jobs.

In conclusion, therefore, it is unclear what African women's long term role in development will be or how development will alter women's roles. Much will depend on the external environment: the changing global economy and its effects on the division of labor, investments, credits, and development assistance in Africa. Political pressure on multinational corporations, governments, lenders, and international donors by men and women dedicated

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to sexual equality will be vital to ensure that women's interests are not neglected. Within Africa itself, independent and representative women's organizations, from peasant cooperatives and credit associations to large nationwide groups, need to be supported and expanded. Nonsexist education and training for women and men as well as equal access to jobs, property, and leadership positions must be provided. Finally, women's full humanity and citizenship must be legally acknowledged and vigorously protected.

Given Africa's critical economic and political problems, it appears increasingly obvious that suppressing the talents and skills of women to protect men's privileges is an enormous waste of human resources that Africa with its vast potential can no longer afford.

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