

# GENDER POLICY AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN SUBSAHARAN AFRICA: AN AUTHENTIC MODEL FOR CULTURAL TRANSFORMATION AND RENEWAL

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the past three decades, the global community has witnessed an upsurge of remarkable national and international development efforts to transform the political economy that conditions the status of women in developing countries. Development experts and scholars continue to experiment with social policies and programs that would ensure an equitable extension of moral and material benefits of development to individuals irrespective of their gender. This paper presents an analysis of trends in gender policy thinking and planning- highlighting the contradictions, tensions, and inter-relationships between the various approaches. Further, the paper introduces an authentic model for development in Africa that focuses on cultural transformation and renewal.

## ORIGINS OF GENDER INEQUALITY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Any writer intending to discuss Africa is faced with the challenge of generalizing the experiences of more than 650 million people living in a vast continent with over 43 nations. Africa embraces numerous ethnic groups, religions, traditions, political systems, ideologies and histories. Admittedly, the status of women differs significantly from country to country according to divergent cultural practices, political systems, and social arrangements such as urban and rural, or privileged and underprivileged. Yet despite the diversity, African women share a common plight in that they comprise the largest group of poor and illiterate people in the world (Ivan-Smith, 1992).

Until recently, women remained a group of exploited and unrecognized potential in Africa. In sheer numbers alone, they account for more than fifty percent of the population. Through their involvement in agricultural and food production, and their

unique role in social reproduction, women are indeed essential to Africa's sustainable development (Savanne, 1991). But the majority of women in Africa today are poor, overworked, undernourished and unhealthy. Most of them are forced to earn a livelihood from unfertile land which they do not own or control. Women in rural areas are left with almost total responsibility for food crop production, household management, and child rearing, often using traditional and inefficient technologies. Despite some recent changes in matrimonial laws, the patriarchal system still predominates in most African societies. Evidence from the literature shows that through prejudices of a series of taboos, laws, and patriarchal conventions, men have maintained a strict posturing over women's mobility and control over their lives, imposing values of superiority, competition and hierarchy (Milimo, 1987). As Savanne (1991, p. 18) put it, "the African man, a powerful patriarch, who benefited from enormous privileges and prerogatives is not prepared to share his power."

The underdevelopment of women in Sub-Saharan Africa is placed within the historical context of colonization and neo-colonization. Many scholars agree that although women in pre-colonial Africa were subordinate to men in terms of status and influence, there existed certain institutional relationships and arrangements that provided them a certain degree of prestige, power, and autonomy. Such structures included the matrilineal systems of marriage in most of Central and Southern African regions, and the dual sex political systems in many societies in West Africa (O'Barr, 1975). Women cultivated their own food, sold surplus food products, provided health care, and generated income through enterprising activities (Stamp, 1989, Potash, 1989).

It is believed that the interaction between Western patriarchy and colonial policies led to a decline and the substantial loss in women's social, political and economic status. With colonialism came class formation and the development of private and public sectors of capitalist economies. Created and carried out by men who internalized Western gender stereotypes, colonial policies relegated African women to the domestic domain like their European counterparts (Parpart, 1989, Van Allen, 1987, Hafkin & Bay, 1976). Agricultural technical advisers introduced cash crops to men, dismissing women as mere subsistence food producers. Colonial policies sought to promote the production of export crops and the creation of a migrant labor force by involving men through taxation and

forced cultivation (Potash, 1989). In the process, women lost their farmlands because, in the absence of men, a wife could not have legal ownership of land. The monetarization of African economies required women to add income-earning activities to meet their traditional obligations without access to the means to do so since men were the ones given priority in paid employment (Boserop, 1970, 1985, Charlton, 1984).

After independence, the situation of women did not improve and in some cases worsened. Borrowing heavily from their European predecessors, African administrators continued to perpetuate the subordinate status of women (O'Barr, 1975). These men were heavily influenced by Western Christian and commercial values that looked to men as sources of unskilled and semi-skilled labor, tax revenue, and the prime conveyors of political and religious ideologies. In their employment strategies, training, and educational programs, governments paid more attention to men and boys. Educational institutions were designed to filter women into traditional professions such as nursing and teaching, while men were taught technical skills such as engineering, carpentry, and construction. As a result, women continued to adopt marginal attitudes, typified by withdrawal, submission, dependency, and feelings of inferiority and passiveness (Ngwira, 1987).

#### GENDER POLICY IN DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

Gender policy in development planning became prominent in the early 1970s when development planners began to realize that women played an important role in socio-economic development. Ester Boserop's (1970) ground breaking study on the role of women in economic development, brought awareness to the understanding that women stand at the intersection between production and reproduction, and between economic activity and the care of human beings. By providing women more access to resources that would improve their living standards, nations would resolve problems of poverty, malnutrition, population growth, and environmental degradation. The Women in Development (WID) movement emerged into the international policy arena as part of the echoing and growing demands of the women's movement in Europe and North America (Tinker, 1990). During this period a deeper understanding of the psychological, social, sexual and cultural roots of discrimination was driving feminist demands for women's

rights all over the world. The WID movement became a transnational movement, encompassing the search for practical solutions to the failures of development, and a more systematic assessment of the roots of women's oppression.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, WID initiatives gained national recognition after the declaration of the United Nation's Decade for Women in 1976. African political elites symbolically showed their support for the advancement of women through the establishment of women's ministries, organizations, and the incorporation of WID agendas in development planning. By 1987, WID had been endorsed by Commonwealth Heads of States as part of each nation's development policy. Development planners capitalized on the WID approach, utilizing it as a strategy for providing welfare to the most disadvantaged groups of society, which were mostly women and children. Women were seen as passive beneficiaries of development. Donor agencies promoted WID as a means for improving women's productivity and performance in their productive roles. Some international development agencies even went a step further to utilize WID as an anti-poverty and efficiency policy instrument, arguing that economic inequality between men and women is linked not to subordination but to poverty, and that development would become more efficient through women's economic contribution. The assumption was that increased economic participation of women would automatically be linked to increased equity.

The major criticism of WID as originally conceptualized is that it led to the continued marginalization of women (Ashfer, 1991, Bernia & Sen, 1982, Charlton, 1984, Kandiyoti, 1990, Kaushik, 1985, Modgham, 1992, Mommsem, 1989, Moore, 1988, Tinker, 1990, Ostergaard, 1992, Staudt, 1989, Parpart, 1993). Many feminist scholars and progressive men and women have argued that the results of WID during the first decade were minimal because its agendas reinforced gender roles and perpetuated the subordinate status of women. WID activities overlooked the importance of women as active participants in the development process. WID programs emphasized on responding to women's practical and perceived necessities such as safe water, labor-saving technology, employment and income-generating projects. Evidence from many developing countries shows that the effects of the early WID approach resulted in longer and harder working days for women, who were forced to increase their labor both within

the market and in the household (Iain, 1990, Joekes, 1987, Modgham, 1992).

The inability of WID to remarkably impact the status of women led to a search for newer strategies for incorporating gender issues in development planning. By the early 1980s, gender analysis emerged as a promising gender policy instrument. Development planners, scholars and practitioners recognized the limitations of focusing on women in isolation and the need to focus on gender. It became understood that gender is socially and culturally determined, and that differences between men and women's roles are created by society, not transcribed by physiological or biological attributes. Gender systems reflect an asymmetrical cultural valuation of human beings in which the ranking of traits and activities associated with men are normally given higher value than those associated with women. Women face the problem of balancing multiple roles, exacerbated by their lack of control and power over resource allocation and decision-making. The gender analysis approach allows development planners to identify social and economic factors for which male and female roles are likely to be significant such as the gender-based division of labor, income expenditure patterns, and control over resources. Gender analysis therefore represents a framework for facilitating the awareness and utilization of knowledge on men and women as separate social categories with similar or separate needs in the design and implementation of development programs (Bortei-Doku, 1989).

Gender analysis has been utilized at both the macro and micro levels of development planning. At the macro level, development planners are drawn to the need to segregate data according to gender. This way, planners are able to recognize gender gaps. For example in education, they examine the differences in male and female enrollments, completion rates, and adult literacy rates. They also consider gender-based constraints to education and training and their impact on national development policies. At the micro level, the contribution of men and women during project implementation is examined. Planners take into consideration women's roles as mothers, wives, and family providers. Adult literacy programs, for example, are planned in such a way that women are given the flexibility to breast feed, to cook for their families, and to perform other domestic duties while attending the program (Stromquist, 1989). What is clear from this oversimplified example is that gender analysis creates gender awareness and increases

women's effectiveness and productivity, but may not necessarily lead to equalizing opportunities between men and women. Although the unequal relationship of power between men and women is recognized and examined, nothing is done to correct the root causes of unequal development. Gender analysis does not challenge gender hierarchies and ignores the possibility that achieving gender equality might require fundamental social change (Staudt, 1989).

A more recent gender policy approach that considers fundamental issues pertaining to the in-built structural bias against women participating in power allocation, or exerting influence on the critical questions of resource distribution is what is known as the gender planning tradition. According to Caroline Moser (1993), a leading proponent of this approach, the goal of gender planning is women's emancipation and their release from subordination. Its specific objectives are identified as the achievement of equality, equity, and empowerment. Recognizing that the goal of overcoming subordination is not easily achieved, gender planning is both political and technical in nature, assuming conflict and debate in development planning, and involving a transformative process. Gender planning considers the argument that integration cannot occur unless gender equality is achieved. Gender planning strategists advocate that WID programs should address those needs arising from women's subordination in society (Tinker, 1990, Staudt, 1989, Papanek, 1989). These strategic gender needs relate to gender divisions of power, reflected in such issues as domestic violence, equal wages, and women's control over their bodies.

Gender planning tools are in form of performance indicators designed to monitor and measure changing processes rather than technical interventions. There are six principles associated with the gender planning tradition which are (a) Gender role identification- which involves making visible the roles men and women play in the existing division of labor, to ensure equal valuing of these tasks; (b) Gender needs assessment- which involves recognizing women as active participants in development through the fulfillment of their practical gender needs, and recognizing that women do not participate on equal terms with men because of their subordinate position; (c) Intra-household resource allocation and desegregation of data at the household level- in terms of ensuring equal control over resources and power of decision making between men and women within the

household; (d) Balancing of roles and inter-sectoral linked planning- related to coordination of women's triple roles of reproduction, production and household consumption activities; (e) Relationship between roles, needs and planning processes- to ensure better balancing of tasks within the existing gender division of labor, bearing in mind that meeting strategic gender needs changes gender roles; and (f) Equality between men and women in the planning process- introducing mechanisms to incorporate women and representative gender-aware organizations into the development planning process (Moser, 1993, p. 89-96).

#### ANALYSIS OF APPROACHES TO GENDER AND DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

What I visualize as the major constraint to the utilization of the gender planning tradition in Sub-Saharan Africa are the prevailing negative attitudes and beliefs about women's roles and status in society. Gender discrimination is deeply ingrained in the consciousness of both men and women and is reinforced through many cultural, traditional, and religious practices that continue to assign women lower status and less power (Kainja & Okwane, 1992). This is not to imply that African women are the only ones experiencing gender-based oppression and discrimination. But experience shows that many African men are resistant to progressive changes that are likely to empower women. Because gender planning focuses more on equality and empowerment, development planners in highly patriarchal societies such as those found in Africa and Asia find this approach challenging. In the past, national governments and donor agencies were more willing to endorse WID policies that target the equalization of women's access to education, employment and health facilities as opposed to those that aim at meeting women's strategic needs such as men's involvement in domestic responsibilities or the payment of a wage for domestic work (Loutfi, 1980).

The fact that gender planning locates its theoretical foundation in feminist philosophy is in itself a major constraint to its utilization by African nations. Many Africans - scholars and practitioners alike believe that feminism is a Western concept and therefore not applicable to the experiences of women in non-Western societies (Jawardena, 1986). Development planners are reluctant to be involved in the political dimension of gender policy and to embrace feminist tendencies that look more towards

the elimination of the root causes of gender subordination. They would like to believe that women's issues could be dealt with from a rational development perspective and not from a feminist perspective. This conservatism towards feminist gender ideology is an indication of the desire to protect institutionalized male privilege in patriarchal societies. The institutional constraints of gender planning are overwhelming, ranging from gender-blind, male-dominated development policy and planning institutions, to WID practitioners who do not have formal training in gender and development planning. For example, I attended a training workshop on gender and development planning in an African country in 1994 and was amazed at how most participants were determined to keep feminist agendas out of the development planning process. All the technical experts at this workshop were men while the participants were women working in agricultural, health, and other development sectors. I also recall how a well-educated professional female participant argued vehemently against shifting traditionally assigned domestic responsibilities from women to men. Thus, for as long as African men and women continue to protect and retain certain cultural practices even if they disadvantage women, the gender planning approach will not be fully utilized in development planning.

#### An Authentic Model for Cultural Transformation and Renewal

Viewing development as the sociocultural, political, economic, physical, moral, and intellectual growth of the human being, improving the status of African women should mean elevating them at every level of social stratification. Africa needs a cultural revolution in which women's involvement in development should not only be of a quantitative nature but include the challenging and re-thinking of the foundations of its societies. Culture is a way of thinking, feeling, and behaving. It includes knowledge, values, beliefs, customs, technologies, traditions, and attitudes. Every society ensures its unity and survival by cultural means. There are so many admirable embodiments of the African culture including respect for elders, friendliness, communal living, ingenious recycling technologies, and exotic music and dance. It is important to protect, cherish, and nurture these qualities in the face of modernization and globalization.

There are certain attributes of most African societies that retard the process of closing gender gaps in society and these need to be eliminated if gender balanced



development is to occur. One of the gravest African rituals is female circumcision. The world is united at assisting African women put an end to this cruel cultural practice. African societies need to cooperate and support national and international efforts to eliminate clitoridectomy. Local leaders and village elders must be educated to understand the harmful effects of this practice. Laws must be enacted to make the practice a crime. A harmful cultural practice cannot simply disappear unless serious communal efforts are exerted. Other customs such as dowry, bride price, polygamy, and widow inheritance have been defended by most African nationals as economically viable and beneficial to poor women. Development planning must include efforts to discourage these practices. Women need not be stigmatized as helpless and dependent on men. People must be made to realize that women too have the right to choose how they want to lead their lives. Dowry and bride price are patriarchal practices that denote enslavement of women by men. The symbolism behind these cultural practices is demeaning to women who are seen as properties to their husbands. There is no reason for any culture to want to preserve practices that denigrate the experience of a large majority of its population.

Africa needs to establish new directions for socio-economic, cultural, and political change that accommodate equal participation in resource allocation by both men and women. African women must gain a voice and participate in controlling their lives and nations. It is not enough to have other concerned women and men speaking for African women. The political transformation and fundamental economic and structural reforms taking place in Africa must be complemented by a change in attitudes towards women's roles in society. That is, African men need to accept the inevitable change in women's status guided by the democratic principle of respect for each individual regardless of race, gender, religion, or political persuasion. They need to recognize that power sharing between men and women is mutually rewarding to both groups. And instead of resisting change, they should find ways to cope with the new dispensation. Existing political structures that allow women some participation in decision-making should be supported and recognized internationally. There is need for more women in political and policy-making positions including parliamentarians, local government leaders, chiefs, and village elders. These positions continue to be dominated by men. And for as long as there is social approval of the existing status quo, women will continue to remain in the

peripheral of mainstream development.

Gender policies should aim at dismantling both the material and ideological basis of gender inequality. Undervaluing of family labor continues to be the biggest obstacle to African women's autonomy and should continue to receive attention. An equitable sharing of domestic responsibilities among adult members of the household, irrespective of gender, should be encouraged by conscious gender policy decisions. Most African men and women disagree with the idea that domestic shores should be re-distributed. From their standpoint, the present gender-based division of labor is culturally acceptable. This resistance to deconstructing repressive cultural tendencies should be discouraged and be replaced by open-minded dialogue and respect for each person's humanity. Besides, I do not see a rational basis for subjecting women to hard work other than oppression. Men often have more physical energy than women. They can use this energy to collect firewood, fetch water from the river, thatch roofs, and cultivate the land more efficiently compared to women. Just because African women have traditionally assumed these roles doesn't mean that the present redistribution of labor may not be changed. Development must mean changing the unfair division of labor. It must mean changing male attitudes towards domestic responsibilities.

The concern for gender equality should not only be limited to the division of labor but to relations between men and women at other levels of social organization. Gender policies need to pay attention to problems of abuse of women and sexual harassment in working environments and educational institutions. Many African men maintain polygamous marital arrangements and extra marital affairs with young girls at the expense of their wives' happiness and health. These practices are protected by many societies under the disguise of being "culturally acceptable." A lot of innocent women are dying of the AIDS epidemic because of sexual contact with unfaithful husbands who have multiple partners. The misconception that African women are capable of dealing with sexual harassment and abuse because "they are raised to deal with it" is perpetuated and used to justify unacceptable human behavior. Africa must find ways to reduce male dominance over women and increase women's control over their lives and bodies through legal protection and awareness. There should be strict laws protecting widows, divorced women, and single mothers. There is nothing "Western" about an able bodied man being

made responsible for supporting his children following a divorce. If men are not forced to take up responsibility of raising their children, it means that a lot of hard working divorced women and their children will continue to live in poverty while their ex-husbands continue to enjoy themselves in bars and night clubs.

African political leaders must be exemplary in their behavior and conduct towards women. How can African men respect and value monogamous relationships if heads of states and chiefs, for example, have more than one wife? African women need to protest and refuse to vote for political leaders that abuse and disrespect women. Political leaders must be made accountable for their behavior towards women. A lot of African women are forced into extra marital relationships with powerful men for their own social mobility. If a woman gets promoted at work or is given a high position in public service, the overwhelming assumption is that she must be sleeping with a powerful man to get recognized. This becomes a hindrance to women who work hard to earn high social status. Legal mechanisms must be put in place to ensure that women's potential is rewarded on the basis of merit. Working conditions and institutional policies must include sexual harassment clauses so that women have a way to legally readdress problems of abuse in the work place.

Research has indicated that some secure, self-sufficient and self-actualized African women are not supported by their societies because such women contradict the female expectations of their societies (Malmquist, 1992). I have listened to voices of many African women who have been judged in sexual terms and whose talents and credentials have been undermined and disregarded by male colleagues and bosses (Mbilizi, 1992). There should be public recognition of women as equals especially through the promotion of positive role models (Hussain, 1992). Women who have demonstrated leadership potentials must be recognized and encouraged to participate in policy-making and political life. It is not enough to have token women in positions of power. Gender equality should mean equal representation of men and women in all public and political decision-making positions. African women who have credentials must be fully absorbed in strategic positions nationally and internationally. African girls need to see African women performing important functions and being respected as professionals by their male counterparts.

The link between education and development remains undisputed. The more educated women become, the more potential they have to compete for better paying jobs, participate in politics and decision making, and maintain good nutrition and reproductive health. By empowering women through education, African countries can increase food security, improve family well-being, reduce the incidence of AIDS, and ease population pressure. But if women who attain the kind of education they need to enter the work force or take up leadership roles are not given the opportunity because of gender bias, then education fails to achieve its goals. Even more critical to this analysis is the fact that education can be a useful tool for fulfilling not only practical development needs but also strategic needs. I believe that education and schooling can lead Africa's cultural transformation and renewal.

Based research on conducted in a number of African countries and Western countries schooling plays a significant role in reproducing gender role expectations (Sadker & Sadker, 1985, 1994, Biraimah, 1992, Hyde, 1993, Mbilizi, 1997). In schools, girls and boys are taught appropriate gender roles, attitudes, and behaviors by teachers and peers. Gender policies need to include strategies for undercutting stereotypical gender structuring in education. Young girls and boys are the future of Africa's economy. They need to grow up in an environment undamaged by sexist expectation of them. Gender policies should incorporate gender sensitivity training for parents, teachers, and students. Teacher education must include training that prepares future teachers to understand equity issues and be able to use intervention strategies that result in equitable outcomes. Teachers can act as communicative agents in promoting equitable gender role socialization and discouraging those sociocultural aspects that undermine women's potentials.

Boys, particularly those in single-sex schools, should be socialized into adopting non-stereotypical masculine identities. Boys must grow up knowing that their manhood is not defined by their ability to control women. They should be raised not to see girls as sex objects but as friends, counterparts, and future partners. At home, parents must create a conducive environment for the development of non-sexist identities. They must be made to understand the cyclical nature of gender structuring and the significant role they can play in social change. Social transformation can only take place if all segments of the

political economy are involved in instigating change. The actions of parents, sibling, teachers, politicians, civic leaders, mass media, and community members- all work together to influence gender role structuring. Schools and families must take the lead in the social and cultural transformation and renewal of African communities so that in the future, both men and women can participate in vibrant global economies and lead healthy and filling lives.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT PLANNING

No social system automatically provides equality for women or any other marginalized group without resistance and dissenting views and actions. To achieve cultural transformation, progressive men and women in Africa need to be critical, forceful, and observant about the impact of development policies on women's status and mobilize collectively for change. Women's organizations, NGOs, and activist groups are very instrumental in instigating social change. In all development efforts, equality should be interpreted not only as the elimination of discrimination, but the equality of responsibilities, rights, and opportunities for equal participation of both men and women. Equality should presuppose access to resources, and the power to make decisions equally at all levels of social stratification. In particular, the joint responsibility of men and women for the welfare of the family and children must be affirmed if Africa is to achieve a society in which men and women participate equally in socio-economic and political life in the real and full sense.

Just like their Western counterparts, African women want to be in control of their sexuality and to take equal roles in governance, economic development, and civil society. Cultural transformation is critical to social and economic progress with women in Africa. Women in Western countries had to struggle for recognition and empowerment to enjoy the freedoms, rights, and responsibilities accorded to them today. Similarly African women and development planners need to be united in this struggle to remove cultural barriers that continue to retard the process of including women in Africa's socioeconomic sustainable development.

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