

United Nations
Division for the Advancement of Women (DAW)
Expert Group Meeting on
“Empowerment of women throughout the life cycle
as a transformative strategy for poverty eradication”
26 – 29 November 2001
New Delhi, India

Topic 2: Empowerment of women as a transformative strategy for poverty eradication

*“Transforming Tradition as a Vehicle for Women’s Empowerment:
A Critical Dimension for Poverty Eradication”*

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The Truth of things is that only human work produces wealth. When people are given enough incentives to work and are allowed to keep the fruits of their labour, they unshackle themselves from poverty and acquire dignified wealth (Unknown Author).

1. Introduction

Women constitute a large proportion of the poor in Africa as elsewhere in the world. Addressing the survival needs of women is therefore central to the formulation of policies aimed at eradicating poverty. It will require more than policy formulation however to eradicate poverty. Addressing poverty requires approaches that do not view women as mere objects of policy who are instrumental to development but as agents of production, growth and change whose potential has been constrained in many countries by social and cultural norms underpinned by traditions.

In many African countries, there is still a lack of appreciation of women's rights and gender equality. Thus, women and girls face discrimination in areas ranging from ownership of assets to access to social and economic services. This discrimination, coupled with the influence of traditional practices is a significant obstacle in the quest for women's empowerment. The empowerment of women is an absolute necessity for countries that are prepared to face the challenges of globalisation, as reflected in the global integration of trade, finance, investment and use of new technology.

The thesis of this paper is the proposition that the transformation of traditions is a crucial prerequisite for poverty eradication. For the purposes of this paper, *traditions* refer to long established beliefs and customs that govern access to power and decision-making positions, and to information and communication technologies. Other significant long established beliefs and customs that fall within the sphere of this working definition include specific harmful traditional practices and gender insensitive laws.

2. Access to Decision Making Positions

Decision-making positions remain predominantly male domains in Africa¹. There is a historical reason to account for this state: most political decisions in traditional societies took place at the household and community levels. In these contexts, women and men "were organised separately, with women involved in decision-making within the household on such aspects as food production and child care, and men on issues that concerned the relation of the household to the outside world." This demarcation of roles meant that from the outset, women were excluded from taking decision-making positions in the public domain". (Republic of Kenya 1999 [a]: 32) African societies also happen to be highly patriarchal. Longwe (1995:7) contends that it

¹ Taking Eritrea as an example, 33 out of the 150 members in the National Parliament are women. This 22% representation is far better than what is the norm in many countries. It is however due to the government's decision to reserve 30% of assembly seats for women. The Nigerian Federal House of Representatives had 360 seats being contested in the 1998 elections. On this occasion, 13 out of 29 women contestants won. In Namibia, the number of women magistrates stood at less than 30% as at March 1998. The number of women holding cabinet positions in Uganda was only 7 in 1997 compared to 47 for men. (Sources: National Progress Reports on the Implementation of the Dakar and Beijing PfAs).

is because of patriarchal principles that there are few women in Africa who are in decision-making positions in the public domain.

Taking Kenya as an example, there was no female member of parliament in the 1963-69 period. This situation improved slightly in the 1969- 74 phase when the number of female representation in parliament reached 2 out of a total of 172. Subsequent figures were only slightly encouraging. In this regard, the, the number of female members of parliament stands at 6 in the current Parliament (1999-2002) while the figure for male representation is 196. These figures call for some action since women constitute 60% of the total voting population in the country. Whatever action is taken will need to address the problem of stereotyping as etched in the minds of males who have been socialised to believe that women's empowerment will remain largely elusive. It is for this reason that one male Member of Parliament is quoted as having observed that in the political domain, "women candidates are *captured* or penalised by marriage in that if married *she is neglecting the guy*; if divorced, *she couldn't keep him*; and if single, *she cannot get a man*." (Republic of Kenya 1999 [a]: 32)

Given such attitudes, the poor representation of women is evident in other political decision-making positions² in the country. It was not until 1995 that the first female Cabinet Minister was appointed but she only served for a limited period of time. Available figures show that in local government, women's participation in elective posts at the county, town, city, and urban and municipal councils remains generally insignificant increasing only marginally from 2.1 % in 1986 to 2.7% in 1992.

Another notable example is the poor representation of women in Kenya's civil service. In the period between 1988 and 1994, women constituted only 23% of the civil service workforce. Significantly, during this period, men largely held the senior positions in the service. As an example the percentage of women holding positions in the top ranking job group Q in the civil service was only 3.6% in 1994 while in job group A, the lowest ranking position, they constituted 15.6% of the labour force (DPM: Complement Control Statistics, 1994). With the recent retrenchments and layoffs in both the private and public sectors in Kenya, the number of women in decision-making positions has continued to remain low, given their initial disproportionate representation in these positions.

The predominance of males in decision-making positions at all levels is the norm also in neighbouring Ethiopia. According to Giorgis (2001), "women in top policy and decision-making positions in Ethiopia constitute 2%, making it one of the ten countries in Africa with least progress in this regard. (However, there) is a slight increase in the number of women at the Federal Parliament (from 17 to 48 in the May 2000 elections) and at the various councils." (Biseswar 2001). In Sierra Leone, the picture is equally depressing; they hold less than 10% of the posts in the Executive Arm of Government.

Access to decision-making positions hinge at some point on the ability of the education sector to serve as an enabling tool for women's empowerment. The scenario emerging from many African countries illustrates the point that while there is near parity in the education of boys and

² Available evidence indicates that it is easier to know women's share of seats in national parliaments than it is of their share of other public decision-making positions. In this regard, one can count the number of women holding managerial, administrative and professional positions in a certain organization. This indicator fails to take note however of the fact that women tend to be concentrated in the lower levels of responsibility within each of these occupational categories. (UNIFEM 2000:90)

girls at primary school level, enrolment figures are at variance with the completion rates for boys and girls at higher levels. The number of girls who complete secondary schooling tends also to be less than that of boys. Most girls secondary schools also tend to be insufficiently equipped for science and technology based subjects. This limits the options available to girls in the increasingly competitive job market upon completion of secondary schooling. It is also significant that while the number of female students at university level has increased in the recent past, they are still very few in technical-scientific faculties such as engineering, medicine and science. In the Kenyan context, about 80% of females are enrolled in arts oriented programmes.

One of the constraints to women's participation in decision- making thus includes socio-cultural perceptions of women's role in society. This is tradition –bound phenomenon can be addressed through the following means:

- Gender sensitive education programmes
- Provision of information and communication relating to the legal rights and obligations of citizens
- Voter education on the benefits of increased participation of women in the political arena.
- Taking deliberate measures such as affirmative action to ensure there is increased representation of women in decision-making positions.

3. Access to information and communication technologies (ICTs) and to communication in general

Despite the fact that poor telephone connections is a factor of life in many African countries, increased use of information and communication technologies has the potential of empowering communities. Traditionally, people regard new technologies in the areas of information and communication as being gender neutral. Recent research shows however that this is far from being the case. In reality, fewer women than men use new technologies “ out of a sense of pragmatism, that is, out of their need to deal with a multitude of tasks, meet a variety of demands, and play diverse roles with limited time (Rathgeber 2000: 23).

As a long-term development tool, ICTs, even in the form of improved telephone connections can have the following effects (USAID 1996):

- Reduced migration to urban areas, as there will be improved possibilities for small scale business enterprises especially in the informal sector;
- Improved access to assistance in situations of natural disasters;
- Better access to health extension services
- Improved educational services, including distance learning

The ICT revolution is already making an impact in South America and Asia³. African women must be made ready to participate fully in this revolution through a number of measures. These include involving girls in science and technology at an early age. As stated by Rathgeber (2000:26) additional measures entail “ not only improving science education that girls receive in

³ From a global perspective, women are still a minority among Internet users. In addition, they still face huge imbalances in the “ownership, control and regulation of these new technologies (UNIFEM 2000:14)

primary and secondary schools but also including a sensitisation process to emphasize that S&T is of lifelong relevance to both girls and boys.”

At another level, it has been suggested that ICTs have the potential to help meet the needs of rural female farmers. These women require information on agricultural inputs, market prices, transportation systems and new markets among many others. The situation is made worse by the fact that in some instances, women do not know where to find this information. These shortcomings can be lessened by having selected sites with specific ICTs to facilitate access to relevant information (Munyua, 2000: 94).

Access to information that specifically targets women, not necessarily through ICTs, also has a role to play in women’s empowerment in efforts aimed at dealing with some of the factors that contribute to poverty. These include family planning measures and efforts aimed at controlling the HIV/AIDS pandemic, all of which have a contribution to make in the fight against poverty.

With reference to the first set of measures, it has been observed that in the absence of correct information and ignorance on family planning methods, women often find themselves in situations where they are unable to make informed decisions on the number of children they would like to have, and on the appropriate child spacing strategies they should adopt for a healthy family.

As for the second set of measures, it is now known that women are physiologically more vulnerable to HIV infection than men partly due to notions of female inferiority and social structures that keep them vulnerable. Current estimates show that women’s risk of HIV infection from unprotected sex is at least twice that of men. The reason for this is the relatively long period of time that semen with a high concentration of the virus remains in the vaginal canal. The extensive surface area of the mucous membrane in the vagina and the outer cervix through which the virus may pass also poses additional hazards for women.

The social structures that expose women to the risk of HIV infection relate to norms concerning parenthood and power relations. Many societies regard women’s primary role in life as being to bear and nurture children while men are expected to earn a living for the family. This norm makes it mandatory for women to care not only for children but also for those who are ill with HIV/AIDS, a factor that exposes them to unnecessary risks in the absence of relevant information on how to deal with such patients. The norm that women’s role is essentially reproductive has the effect also of making childless women experiment with a number of partners in trying to become “fully adult.” This increases their risk of exposure to the HIV/AIDS virus.

In the sphere of power relations, many societies have social structures through which men are expected to control women in most aspects of social relationships. For this reason, men determine when and to whom a girl or a woman will get married, sometimes when and how she will have sexual relations and at other times when and how many children she will have. This type of male power often reinforces community norms that assert that male relatives must assume authority over widows leading to the practice of wife inheritance. The use of relevant information tools to target attitude change could help women overcome some of the inherent dangers of the imbalance in power relations that characterises societal norms. A significant reduction in this imbalance depends however on the abilities of societies to lessen women’s economic dependence on men. This dependence is partly due to harmful traditional practices in

resource ownership patterns that have over the years given males an advantage in asset ownership.

The priority area for immediate action is therefore the need to disseminate information to women and policymakers on the potential impact of ICTs on women in Africa. There is need also to categorise female users and conduct a needs assessment to establish the priorities of various women's groups. These groups may include businesswomen, rural women, parliamentarians and health care providers. The success of these recommendations depends on the ability of governments to improve not only the educational standards of girls and women, through among other available options, distance learning, but also on their ability to improve physical infrastructure.

4. Harmful traditional practices and gender insensitive laws.

There are a number of traditional practices that are inconsistent with women's empowerment initiatives. One such practice relates to the issue of land rights. It has been noted that in many countries, women tend to enjoy use rights⁴ as wives and mothers for instance; however, few enjoy transfer rights⁵. In Kenya for example, while women usually have use rights, they generally lack transfer rights. This is a significant dis-empowerment element since while transfer rights are protected legally, use rights are not enforceable. The implications of this reality are far reaching.

It means firstly that although a large proportion of the labour force in the agricultural sector consists of women, they have no legal rights over the land they work on. This explains why in Kenya, women own only 1% of the land although they make up 75% of the labour force in the agricultural sector. The second implication concerns the point that in an agriculturally based economy, land is the primary form of collateral through which there can be economic empowerment. This requirement excludes women from credit facilities in contexts where land can be used as collateral to secure loans.

There is no constitution that overtly sets out to encourage discrimination on the basis of sex. It is the case however that in some countries, discrimination arises in matters concerning property inheritance. In Kenya, *the Law of Succession Act* enables children to inherit property where a father dies without leaving a valid will. Unfortunately, the provisions of this Act do not cover agricultural land and produce. Consequently, in cases where a man dies who had registered his property only in his name, his widow and daughters can be disinherited under customary law. Discrepancies of this nature require urgent attention.

Policy recommendations that can be used to deal with traditional legal practices that lead to the impoverishment of women include the following:

- Provision of free legal services to vulnerable groups such as poor women;
- Amendment of sections of constitutions that can lead to discrimination on the basis of culture and /or custom in matters of personal law.⁶

⁴ Use rights include for instance the right to grow perennial and annual crops, bury the dead, collect firewood and graze animals.

⁵ Transfer rights include the right to register, sell, give, mortgage, lease, rent and bequeath.

⁶ Personal law pertains to matters of marriage, devolution of property (inheritance and adoption).

5. Conclusion

As reflected in the quotation presented at the beginning of this paper, it is only when people are given enough incentives to work and are allowed to keep the fruits of their labour that they can unshackle themselves from poverty and acquire dignified wealth. In this regard any policy or strategy that seeks to empower women throughout their lives, as a transformatory strategy for poverty eradication must create conditions that will strengthen women's capacity to participate in decision-making. When this happens women will be able to increase their income and to exploit available opportunities for economic growth and sustainability. The strategies adopted should seek to change the long established beliefs and customs that govern access to power and decision-making positions, and to information and communication technologies that do not strengthen women's belief in their internal strength and make their contribution to development visible. They should seek to change the institutional practices through which the woman's subordination is reinforced and sustained.

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