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Vol. 7 (January-April 2008)

ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF AFRICAN WOMEN

No. 4 - April

REFLECT-IONS ON THE ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN MALAWI

By Charlotte Wezi Mesikano The REFLECT project in Malawi is a good example of a programme that not only teaches literacy but also empowers participants to analyse their social context and address the causes of poverty. In this article, Charlotte Mesikano outlines some of those causes, especially ones perpetuating the impoverishment of women. She also identifies areas in key sectors where improvements must be made, for women and for all of society.

No. 3 - March

THE "DUBAI WOMEN" OF EAST AFRICA AND THEIR INCREASING ROLE IN TRADE

By Elinami Veraeli Swai & Maurice N. Amutabi The economic ascent of ordinary East African women who have taken advantage of some of the central features of globalisation – including trade liberalisation, new forms of collateral and credit, electronic banking, Internet orders, and efficient transportation and shipping – raises some interesting questions about male dominance in African economies and the freedom afforded some women by an often despised international economic system. Elinami Swai and Maurice Amutabi introduce us to the entrepreneurs known as the "Dubai women" and highlight both the reasons for their extraordinary success and the obstacles they face.

No. 2 - February

SEX, MONEY AND POWER: CONSIDERATIONS FOR AFRICAN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

By Danai S. Mupotsa Based on her research and personal experience in Zimbabwe, Danai Mupotsa argues that efforts to empower women economically will be unlikely to achieve very much unless people first have a clear understanding of the underlying gender-power discourses in Africa and are committed to guaranteeing the sexual rights of African women. Even with Zimbabwe's failing economy and high HIV/AIDS rate, the "pre-existing gender discourse of power" with its contradictory positions on "traditional" and "modern" cultural practices must receive attention before the economic empowerment of women can be realised in any substantial way.

No. 1 - January

EDITORIAL: "LET THE WOMEN SPEAK! AND LISTEN"

By Anene Ejikeme Anene Ejikeme, a Nigerian woman who teaches at a university in Texas, volunteered to edit this series on the economic empowerment of women in Africa. Her editorial focuses on the need for African women to be *agents* of their own empowerment. Too often the idea of *tradition* has been used by African men and by world organisations to prevent the voices of ordinary women in Africa from being heard.



Women working in a small cashew processing business in Mozambique.

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REFLECT-IONS ON THE ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT OF WOMEN IN MALAWI

by *Charlotte Wezi Mesikano*

In a small village by the shores of Lake Malawi, a group of women sits down four days a week, for three hours a day, to reflect on the missed opportunities of their childhood and

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Facilitating discussion of social issues: members of a microenterprise development programme in Malawi join in a condom use demonstration.

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to get educated and join the literate masses. In Malawi, as elsewhere in Africa, there have been many self help projects designed to promote women's economic empowerment by granting them small business loans. However, the question still remains, why is it that women in Malawi and all over the continent in general remain poorer than men despite these efforts?

Here I want to consider one particular project, REFLECT, which aims to emancipate women at an individual level and as a social class by assisting them to join the ranks of the literate and facilitating the discussion of social issues such as gender-based violence, HIV/AIDS, property

dispossession and maintenance of children. In Malawi, women's high illiteracy perpetuates the notion that women's work requires no skill and thus should be done for free, especially if that work is done for the immediate or extended family. Because women's higher illiteracy rate is directly related to their lower level of economic empowerment, tackling the issue of women's literacy is a foundational component of REFLECT Malawi. The REFLECT phenomenon (to be examined below) has been embraced by the women's movement in Malawi as one of the ways of addressing the feminisation of poverty in Malawi. My thesis in this article is that it is necessary to re-conceptualise the work that women do and to acknowledge it as a valuable resource that contributes to the economy at all levels. This re-conceptualisation is a necessary first step in order to break the bonds of poverty that bind women in Malawi. The question of how to conceptualise women's work must be tackled at the legal, social and institutional levels.

"It is necessary to re-conceptualise the work that women do and to acknowledge it as a valuable resource that contributes to the economy at all levels."

Malawi is one of the 10 poorest countries in the world with a general population of 12 million people; women account for 52 percent of the population. Factors which impact poverty are access to education, family planning, family size, access to formal employment, promotion of equitable wages, and participation in cash crop production. Consider the report of the British Department for International Development (DFID) Country Assistance Plan to Malawi 2007. This report highlighted the fact that women work longer hours but earn less, receive less education, are subject to high levels of domestic violence, are more at risk from HIV, and have limited access to resources and decision making. Furthermore, although the ratio of literate women to men is increasing it remains unequal (56% of women and 79% of men). These gender specific indicators underscore the fact that women continue to be the poorest demographic group in Malawian society.

To address the problem of the feminisation of poverty, the need to re-conceptualise the understanding of work both in our day-to-day lives as women and in the development of economic policies is urgent. We must shine light on the contributions women make to society and the economy. Acknowledging women's work empowers women in a real sense by valuing their contributions to society. This paper explores the REFLECT project undertaken by a women's organisation in Malawi to empower women through adult literacy and capacity building in both legal and social issues. I will also look at the ways in which specific areas of the Malawian economy and society continue to reinforce the feminisation of poverty.



Empowering women by valuing their contributions to society: a young woman in Lilongwe, Malawi, cooks lunch at a self-help centre.

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Women and the REFLECT Project

REFLECT is a methodology developed by the organisation ActionAid in the early 1990s which, based on the ideas of Paulo Freire, fosters change by facilitating adult education

in an innovative and organic way, with the participants themselves generating their own agendas and "texts." (REFLECT stands for Regenerated Freirian Literacy through Empowering Community Techniques.) REFLECT circles began in Malawi in 1998 with 70% of the participants women. Topics selected for discussion were family planning, health and conservation issues. Despite the extremely high rate of participation by women in this initiative, there were nevertheless several challenges, such as the need to provide incentives to participants in the form of honoraria and materials such as paper and pens and notebooks for facilitators. In 2006, a feminist organisation called Women and Law in Southern Africa (WLSA) Research and Education Trust initiated the REFLECT project in Malawi sponsored by HIVOS, a Dutch non-governmental organisation inspired by humanist values and one of Malawi's prominent development partners. This dynamic approach brings about adult learning and social change. By integrating a rights-based approach, it empowers women to defend their rights. REFLECT is now also being used by the women's movement to emancipate women from illiteracy and directly empower them both financially and socially by teaching them the three Rs: reading, writing and arithmetic.

"This dynamic approach brings about adult learning and social change... it empowers women to defend their rights."

The uniqueness of WLSA's approach is the manner in which the organisation places emphasis on the gender and human rights agenda, and inspires the participants with a spirit of volunteerism and learning. Individuals who wish to participate in REFLECT circles as students receive nine months of training, at the end of which they are awarded certificates. WLSA implements this project by identifying facilitators who are then trained and given materials including a facilitator's manual. Facilitators are paid a monthly allowance of only K7000 (USD\$45) and they teach three-hour classes in the selected villages for four days a week, everyday between 2pm and 5pm. Through this initiative women come together to discuss ways in which their lack of access to resources affects all aspects of their lives and to find means to empower themselves.

The REFLECT methodology requires that each lesson given by the facilitator starts with the drawing of a diagram, map, matrix, or calendar on the ground using any available materials. These visual aids are then used to analyse a problem or situation under discussion. They can also be used to introduce reading and writing as well as numbers. For example, the facilitator will use these skills while leading a dialogue with participants to establish ideas for action. The facilitator is guided in her discussion by a manual prepared by WLSA. Finally, a register is kept by the facilitator to monitor the attendance of the learners.

In Chindamba Village, under the traditional authority of Chief Chowe, located in Mangochi District along the shores of Lake Malawi, 38 women learners started the REFLECT classes, and within three months 17 women could read and write. One of the successes of this project was an increase in participation in decision-making by women, which indicated that women became more comfortable in their interaction with their male counterparts. The women in this community, similar to women at the national level, identified the gender and development theme as a focus for action. They stressed that women are over burdened with work and therefore need to be assisted by men in the community. The issue of women having too great a workload, a factor that increases poverty at the individual, community and national levels, cannot be overstressed.

This heavy workload is often reflected in the traditional responsibilities for women in Malawian society. When they were girls, today's women did not have time to go to school because they were being socialised into exclusively working for their families for no pay. In Malawi 90% of households are engaged in agriculture, with 81% of the active rural population classified as subsistence farmers. In subsistence farming women provide free labour since the assumption is that food crops are intended to feed the family. However, even in cash crop farming women provide free labour. The failure of government to invest in its people filters to individual families due to a competition for resources which results in the boy child being given preference when it comes to education. This preferential treatment provides men with an added advantage because they become literate, educated, with more options to earn income and make a living. Despite their position of disadvantage, women are the glue that keeps the family together, ensuring that all members are in good health by nursing the sick, providing child care and assuming responsibility for all household work. These unremunerated responsibilities inside the home severely hamper women's abilities to engage in income-generating activities outside the home. For example, women who have just had children find demands placed on them that restrict their reentry into the work force, both in the formal and the informal economies. As a result, women are compelled to stay at home



Overburdening women with work increases poverty at all levels: these women from Mhinga, Malawi spend hours daily getting water.

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performing unpaid child care work in addition to their other responsibilities.

By providing adult women with literacy training and facilitating their discussions, REFLECT makes women more conscious and aware of their situation, provides them with information and opportunities to gain access to more knowledge and enables them to compete with men in commercial and economic activities. Through the education and increased participation of women in social, political and economic activities REFLECT has challenged the male dominated social culture. By providing them with literacy, the REFLECT project enables women to have the confidence to approach banks to apply for loans to enable them to start small businesses. The numerous responsibilities women in Malawi face is a major challenge to their ability to participate fully in the REFLECT project. In Bwananyambi and Makanjira Traditional Authority areas the facilitator reported absenteeism due to the requirements of the planting or fishing season, or initiation ceremonies. Personal visits are at times made

by facilitators to the homes of those who skip class in order to explain to them the importance of the classes. Such visits also provide an opportunity to understand the real reasons why women do not participate in activities which are eventually supposed to benefit them.

Women and Crops

During planting season, women play a crucial role by providing free labour for tilling the land and planting maize, highly labour intensive exercises. In a country where maize is the staple, it is important that women participate in its production to ensure food security for the family. Women are not paid for providing this food for the community. When it comes to cash crops like tobacco, women provide much of the labour but don't get to sell the crop. Men do. It is this kind of continued disenfranchisement experienced by women that deepens poverty and perpetuates social problems and inequity.

Because women provide so much free labour, society in general and men in particular now feel entitled to demand labour from women without compensation. Essentially women do not even own their own labour, but rather it is society which dictates how and what a woman should do with her labour; yet in contrast, men can sell their labour and in doing so continue to reap benefits economically and socially as compared to women.



Weeding a field in Karonga, Malawi: women provide much free labour to ensure food security.

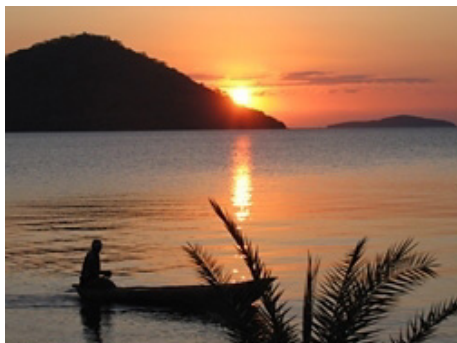
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"Because women provide so much free labour, society in general and men in particular now feel entitled to demand labour from women without compensation."

Women and Fishing

The participation of women in the economy as exploited labour, often for their family, including parents and spouses, can also be witnessed in the fishing industry. In fishing communities such as in Mangochi district, which is along the shore of Lake Malawi, women sell firewood, which is used by fishermen to treat their nets and to dry the fish. Rarely do women actually go out to catch the fish; rather they support the fishermen by providing the firewood which the men use for drying the fish, so that they can sell later. Women get some financial benefit from this industry, but the amount of money they earn is very limited compared to the amount of money the fisherman get from selling the fish. Fishing is a very profitable industry; however, for women, not only do those who sell firewood to the fishermen not gain as much financially, they also run the risk of sexual exploitation since firewood supply greatly outstrips demand and fishermen may seek to extract sexual favours in exchange for the purchase of firewood. Such high risk behaviour further exposes women to the possibilities of HIV/AIDS since the women are unlikely to be able to negotiate safe sex because of the imbalance of power between themselves and the fisherman. If women are to benefit fully from their engagement in

the economic sector, the element of sexual exploitation needs to be eliminated to make the exercise a purely commercial transaction without the element of favour.



A Malawian fisherman goes out at dawn to get the best catch: women earn less from the fishing industry and face risks of sexual exploitation.

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What the fishing industry exemplifies is that women are very marginal economic actors. This is a direct result of the social perception that places little or no financial value on actually going out there to look for the firewood. Similarly, work involving child care, nursing the sick, food preparation, food crop production and other support work is mostly considered women's work. The perception of women's work is that it requires no qualifications or training; rather it is something which nature has taught them. Even when women do the same work as men outside the home they do not get the same reward as their male colleagues because of society's perception that such

work by women requires little effort. These examples of women's labour within two different economic sectors show how the belief that women don't really need to be educated functions to perpetuate the feminisation of poverty.

"The perception of women's work is that it requires no qualifications or training; rather it is something which nature has taught them... the belief that women don't really need to be educated functions to perpetuate the feminisation of poverty."

Women and Initiation Ceremonies

Chinamwali ceremonies are initiation rites in which girls and boys are socialised into appropriate forms of conduct once they come of age. Gender specific roles are designed to orient children at this stage in life. Girls are taught sexually provocative dances and how to behave as women. It is at these ceremonies that girls are taught by older women what is culturally expected of them as women in marriage and society. Since older women play a crucial role in these initiation ceremonies, they may not be able to attend REFLECT classes, which last nine months.

While it is the case that in some districts initiation ceremonies are now restricted to school holidays in order to enable children to go to school, at the heart of the matter is what children are taught at these ceremonies. The principal lesson that boys and girls learn is that women are junior to men, that they should earn less than men or should earn no income at all. The concept of womanhood and manhood taught in the formative years of life affects how individuals perceive themselves and how they believe they should conduct themselves with others. Initiation ceremonies teach girls to be women, which means to accept a position junior to men, economically dependent and primarily as homemakers. Boys in turn are taught to be providers, strong and entrepreneurial. Male domination is reinforced in these initiation ceremonies. Given these prevailing notions of masculinity and femininity, it is no surprise then that family resources are allocated in a way which inclines girls towards early marriages, thereby further limiting their access to education.



A pregnant adolescent sells mangos in Malawi: marrying young limits girls' education.

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"The concept of womanhood and manhood taught in the formative years of life affects how individuals perceive themselves... Initiation ceremonies teach girls to be women, which means to accept a position junior to men, economically dependent."

Women and the Law

The 1994 Constitution of Malawi enshrines the protection and equal rights of women as

individuals and as members of a family. Under Section 22 of the Constitution each member of the family is protected from all forms of exploitation and neglect. Section 24 is even more detailed in according protection to women and granting them the same rights as men. Much as the Constitution of Malawi is liberal and grants women rights in principle, enjoyment of these rights is limited and defeated by the neglect, exploitation, and discrimination that women face in reality. It is important for policy makers, law interpreters and the general public to have a basic understanding of the rights that Malawi women are provided by law.



Adolescent girls perform a skit as part of a Girls' Empowerment Programme in Mzimba, Malawi: women's constitutional rights on paper need to become a reality in society.
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Granting women rights on paper protects the principle behind gender equality and women's rights. However, in reality, such gains are watered down; women continue to be victims, with only token protection from the law. Women do not enjoy their full legal rights because society is resistant to women's empowerment and their emancipation from oppression and poverty. Essential to achieving equality and the empowerment of women is to enable them gain the skills they need, as the REFLECT program does in order to make a practical difference in their lives. Only then will women be able to achieve real change at the community and national levels.

If society continues to perceive the work that women do as customary and "natural", then women will never be appreciated and recognised financially for their work. When a man prepares food in a hotel, he is considered a skilled worker and gets a good salary to cook food; but if a woman is working outside her home doing the equivalent job she is paid the minimum wage because she is doing something which she is "naturally" supposed to do as a woman.

Conclusion

Social change is essential if women are to be emancipated from the chains of poverty; and this must begin with a re-conceptualisation of women's work which acknowledges that women make valuable contributions to the economy at all levels. Time is the most important resource in order for a woman to be able to emancipate herself from poverty: to engage in commercial activities, to attend literacy initiatives or to pursue other avenues for self-improvement all require time. Malawian society must realise that the work that women do and the time they spend doing it is valuable and should not be taken for granted. It is imperative to give women their power back and treat them as equal partners in the development of Malawi.

Charlotte Wezi Mesikano is a women's rights researcher, advocate and educator currently practising law with the Office of the Ombudsman in Malawi.

THE "DUBAI WOMEN" OF EAST AFRICA AND THEIR INCREASING ROLE IN TRADE

by *Elinami Veraeli Swai & Maurice N. Amutabi*

This article focuses on a very important phenomenon in the economic history of East Africa which started in the 1990s and in which women were the major actors. The phenomenon began just after the end of the Cold War and was dominated by jet-set women engaged in import/export trade on their own terms without the usual male support. These women took the market by storm. They sold expensive electronics such as radios, televisions, CD and DVD players; they also sold furniture, bed sheets and blankets, shoes, watches, dresses, and household appliances such as fridges and cookers, iron boxes, and cars from Dubai (the free port of the United Arab Emirates). These women started off small, but by the late 1990s, they were controlling large business empires and living in exclusive neighbourhoods such as Oyster Bay in Dar-Es-Salaam and Lavington in Nairobi. They frequented fashionable shopping stalls, created by women and which became popular from the 1990s among middle class women in Dar-Es-Salaam and Nairobi.

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**"These women took the market by storm...
(They) started off small, but by the late 1990s, they were
controlling large business empires and living in exclusive
neighbourhoods."**

In Nairobi, Kenya, these women operate from Eastleigh's Garissa Lodge (named after the popular lodging and eating house from which they initially operated), Sarit Centre, Village Market near Gigiri and Westlands shopping center. Over the years, their activities have spread to other leading urban centers in Kenya. In Dar-Es-Salaam, Tanzania, these women operate at Namanga and Kariakoo market centers. Spurred by trade liberalism, these women travelled extensively to places such as Dubai, Taiwan, South Korea, Japan and South Africa from where they got their merchandize. Because most of their merchandise came from Dubai, they came to be known as "Dubai women". The name has lingered on, even after Dubai has ceased to be the principal source of their commodities. "Dubai women" may be compared to the West African market women, known as "Mama Benz", who dominate the business scene and who have attracted a lot of scholarly and general attention (See film: *Mama Benz: An African Market Woman*, 1995, produced by SFINX FILM/TV).

Like the "Mama Benz" of West Africa, the "Dubai women" in Tanzania and Kenya are transforming the face of business in East Africa. For the first time, women are able to shop in places where both owners and attendants are female like themselves. These women have gone against the grain and now own property in prime areas in major cities in the region; they have formed influential business associations, and are rising in influence. As an extraordinary phenomenon, these women need to be studied, and their unique contributions and defiance of gender stereotypes documented. In the past, trade in Kenya and Tanzania had always been controlled by men, who were privileged by both the colonial system and local patriarchal structures. These women are overhauling this, by controlling price and determining where to buy and sell their commodities. These enterprising women dominate the worlds of fashion, domestic appliances and automobiles in Kenya and Tanzania today, and are treated with admiration. Despite these great accomplishments, scholars have not attended to their business acumen, which has enabled them to amass a great deal of wealth while also sponsoring and mentoring younger female traders. This article seeks to fill this scholarly lacuna, by bringing the achievements of these women to light. It highlights the impact of free market enterprise and globalization on the "Dubai women" of Tanzania and Kenya, showing the various obstacles they have encountered and continue to confront.



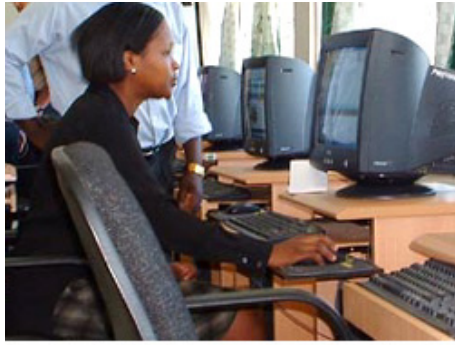
A bustling business area of Nairobi: 'Dubai women' are transforming the face of business in East Africa, including prime commercial areas in the major cities.

Women and Trade Liberalization: Taking Advantage of Globalization

We argue in this paper that whereas globalization has been regarded as a negative force in many parts of the developing world, it has had a liberating effect on women traders in East Africa. "Dubai women" now own business empires extending across the countries in the region - Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi - largely as a result of the opening up of trade. They import electronic goods and second hand cars from Dubai and Japan. Many of them make regular flights to these foreign countries to make business deals, things that would have been virtually impossible in the rigidly structured import/export licensing regimes of centrally-controlled, pre-liberalization East Africa.

**"Whereas globalization has been regarded as a negative
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Despite their contribution to economic growth in Kenya and Tanzania, "Dubai women" have been called all kinds of names, and labeled as "rebels" because they have ignored social barriers and pressures, and in the process achieved extraordinary success. They



A woman in Iringa, Tanzania, makes use of a new Internet and telecentre facility: the Internet and electronic banking are enabling women to cross economic and national boundaries.

© USAID

are unique because they started their own businesses without the support of men, becoming actors in global finance and trade. Driven forward by the engines of modern capitalist business dynamics and by expanded interests and desires, these women have been able to build their niche, venturing into domains that were previously regarded as exclusively male. The Internet, electronic banking and credit facilities have given these women new opportunities and enabled them to move across economic and national boundaries with ease.

Women Matter: Problems of Recognition

Due to the patriarchal structures and institutions in East Africa, it has not been easy for many in society to recognize and acknowledge the important role that "Dubai Women" have played in the region. It is unfortunate that the activities of these women entrepreneurs have not been thoroughly researched and documented in Kenya and Tanzania, unlike sectors such as agriculture and education, where scholars have explored women's agency in recent years. Our contention is that the "Dubai women's" stories have not been told due to power hierarchies that refuse to recognize women's contributions as meaningful and legitimate within a global business framework and therefore not deserving of any attention. We seek to correct this and illuminate what we believe is a significant contribution of women to the economic development of the two countries but also point out the ways in which societal structures and institutions have often acted to disrupt women's participation and contribution to development.

Scholars are starting to accept the fact that women's role in development in Africa needs to be acknowledged (Amadiume, 1987; Amutabi and Lutta-Mukhebi, 2001; Oyewumi, 1997, 2003; Swai, 2006). It is true that many African societies are patriarchal in character, and this affects how society views power. This fits the post-developmental perspective that sees discourses of development as pervasive forces, which shape behavior, class, gender, knowledge and relations of power (Crush, 1995; Escobar, 1992, 1995; Ferguson, 1990; Peet and Watts, 1996). In Kenya and Tanzania, men have dominated power, which resides in state structures and institutions. Since economic and political actions are shaped by power, the "Dubai women" have been acting against the grain, and this in itself is valiant, and needs to be recognized. Their actions should be seen as constituting critical sites of female innovation, where they have clearly demonstrated their agency and capability against great odds, and yet some scholars still ignore them, choosing instead to focus on the "big women", which to us, is problematic and needs to be redressed.

"Many African societies are patriarchal in character, and this affects how society views power... the 'Dubai women' have been acting against the grain."

Much of the existing literature on African women has focused on elite women. An example of this is Susan Geiger's TANU Women, which focuses on Bibi Titi Mohammed, a former Member of Parliament and Assistant Minister in Julius Nyerere's government – although we know that there were many other women in TANU, whom Geiger ignored. Other scholars have fallen into the same trap of emphasizing the privileged "big women" in studies on women in Africa.¹ There are many reasons why the focus on "big women" has dominated scholarship. These "big women" are easier to research because there are all kinds of records about them, in newspapers and other popular media. But the main reason, we believe, is that many scholars use a Western approach in the study of society, one which assumes that celebrities are the trendsetters. Such assumptions are wrong, for they undermine a holistic representation of African women and the predominant role of ordinary women in development.

This study of "Dubai women" is an attempt to look at women's role in development using a bottom up approach as opposed to top down, using their own voices. We do not want to privilege politicians and business executives. This study of "Dubai women" focuses on ordinary, enterprising women, showing that they matter and are important mediators in international trade.

Against the Grain: A "Dubai Woman" in Dar-Es-Salaam

Aisha Karim has been operating from Kariakoo Market in Dar-Es-Salaam for ten years. Initially, Karim and her fellow businesswomen shunned the name "Dubai women" because of the negative connotations associated with "Dubai", which was the term used to refer to second-hand cars imported from Dubai. Now, they are happy to be known as "Dubai women". Karim recalls, "Not many people took us seriously until we started to prosper. They saw us start to sell our imported products to the mainstream traders at Kariakoo and other retail areas in this city. Everyone liked what we sold them and suddenly we had more orders than we could meet." The successes that Aisha Karim talks about led other women to take up the import/export trade in Tanzania. Stalls and boutiques that deal in clothes and electronics from many parts of the world now dominate retail business. Karim has a business enterprise that now employs about 30 people, some of them university graduates. Her first trip to Dubai was to Mecca for the Islamic hajj in 1995. On her layover in Dubai, she bought cheap watches and perfumes at the airport. She sold them in Dar-es-Salaam at a profit, making enough money to go back to Dubai, rather than to Korea and China where she used to go for her business. What started off as a small cloth and perfume business soon expanded to car sales when she started to import used vehicles.

"Karim has a business enterprise that now employs about 30 people, some of them university graduates... What started off as a small cloth and perfume business soon expanded to car sales."

Today, Aisha Karim lives in Oyster Bay, one of the most exclusive areas of Dar-es-Salaam. She owns a BMW and a Mercedes Benz, models that have been associated with successful politicians in Tanzania for a long time. Talking to Karim, and observing how she carries herself as she negotiates business with her customers, recalls the famous description of a market woman in Agulu, Nigeria, who would plant her feet firmly on the ground and with arms akimbo look any man in the eye and speak her mind (Nnaemeka, 1997:2).

Despite her success, Aisha Karim has had to confront social opprobrium. Although her husband Yohana Karim is very supportive of her, she has had to justify her success to her in-laws at every point. She says, "I am very fortunate because my husband believes in me and supports me, unlike many of my colleagues. This gives me courage to go on... When I go to the ports to clear my goods, clearing officers and custom officials do not believe that I am the owner. There are times I have even been stopped by traffic police who ask me whether I own the car I drive or if it is for my husband or boyfriend" (interview in June, 2006).

Karim's experience is not new in a society where success is often associated only with men. Like other "Dubai women", she has had to defend her success. Many have doubted her legitimacy as a business person, with some believing that her businesses are fronts for men. She has had to confront detractors constantly and has even had to fire male chauvinists from her own companies for refusing to take orders from her. This is the type of female boldness that one comes across among "Dubai women". She is aware of the fact that she is flowing against the current, but is aware that it is hard work that has placed her where she is, and is determined to continue working hard.²



Entrepreneur Anna Temu (above), who runs a successful nutritious food business in Dar es Salaam, became successful by facing problems and overcoming obstacles.

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Confronting Stereotypes: A "Dubai Woman" in Nairobi

In Nairobi, Amina Gamadid was one of the "Dubai women" pioneers who started the very successful Garissa Lodge which transformed retail trade in Kenya in the late 1990s. Following her hajj to Mecca in 1998 Gamadid, like Karim, expanded her business from the sale of food and drink to include cars. After that initial trip, her customer base increased so rapidly that she started taking monthly trips to Dubai, then weekly trips, until finally she hired her younger sister Mwanaidi to be her on-site agent to buy and send merchandise to Mombasa. She says, "Men who visited our first stall did not believe it when they were told that the businesses are owned by women. Some people thought that we were proxies for rich husbands or merchants, rather than sisters.

No one seemed to believe that we were just ordinary women. There are some who still doubt that we founded these stalls" (Interview with Amina Gamadid in July, 2006). These two sisters, along with other women, transformed the Nairobi business market, and provided consumers with a greater choice of goods. Their ability to offer shoppers, female and male, an expanded menu of choices is directly linked to changes brought about by liberalization.

Gamadid identifies six reasons for the success of her business and those of fellow "Dubai women" in their various specializations. First, she says that she owes her success to her parents and friends, who, along with loyal customers, support her. She says, "My parents are very supportive of me, they have not in any way pushed me into getting married or anything like that, so I am left to make my own decisions on my own time." As for customer support, "In my 'women's only' store, women are excited to come and meet with other women. They are happy to have a place to meet and talk about their concerns and even secrets, to talk about things like underwear, braziers and petticoats without whispering. They always come back because they freely ask what they want and I accommodate their needs. Orders of things like cookers, fridges and carpets go fast because women like to compare notes with friends and neighbours, when it comes to home decoration. In this way, I have constant customers."

Second, Gamadid believed that it was the trade liberalization that allowed the "Dubai women" to succeed. She believed that in the period when states controlled business licensing and currency, men were favoured through patronage and nepotism. Free market forces shifted the balance and evened the playing field for women. Third, she said that her sister's and her own personal discipline have allowed them to save the profit they earn and plough it back into their business.

"In the period when states controlled business licensing and currency, men were favoured through patronage and nepotism. Free market forces shifted the balance and evened the playing field for women."

Fourth, she credits the arrival of global capital that did not focus on land as collateral. Unlike the pre-liberalization period when banks demanded unmovable property as collateral, new financial institutions opened many opportunities that allowed greater access to capital through MasterCard and Visa. Women could invest the money into business and pay back the credit, increasing their credit-worthiness. Fifth, improved transport – both air and sea – allowed for better efficiency in the movement of goods. Finally, the Internet became a short cut for accessing and paying suppliers. As Gamadid pointed out, even though her sister is stationed in Dubai, they make 90 percent of their orders online.

Today, she argues, they have proved wrong those who thought that their success was going to be short-lived, demonstrating that women, just like men, can succeed if given the opportunity.

Conclusion

Even with their achievements in the business world, there are pessimists who still feel that the success of the "Dubai women" will not last. In Aisha Karim's view Islam and traditional patriarchal structures in Tanzania have a lot to do with this perception. She says, "I have seen men come to our shops and when they see only female staff, they demand to speak to a male attendant. When they are told that there is no male attendant, they walk away. I feel so terrible for them, but I wonder if they stop to think that that is perhaps how women have felt when shopping in stores with only male attendants." Such challenges have confronted "Dubai women" in Nairobi as well as in Dar-Es-Salaam. Some men feel uneasy in shops with only female attendants. Many men believe that women are not as good at haggling as men and when such men see female attendants they imagine they will get whatever price they wish. There have been cases also where men were reluctant to buy large household items such as fridges and cookers from female attendants. However, it must be noted that since the new millennium this attitude has been changing and many are beginning to accept now that the "Dubai women" are here to stay. Starting with a handful of women in Dar-es-Salaam and Nairobi, "Dubai women" now are found in almost every major city in East Africa where they supply electronics, clothes, household appliances and cars.

Recommendations

Our research into the "Dubai women" has suggested the following recommendations towards the economic empowerment of women everywhere in Africa:

- More research is needed on the contribution of ordinary women to the development of society.
- There is a need for governments to establish new forms of collateral for women by changing laws that govern inheritance from parents, spouses, etc.
- Governments should also change laws of sharing and liability in the dissolution of partnerships.
- Legal language such as that governing the establishment of small limited and unlimited liability needs to be simplified so as to be understood by common people.
- Licensing for women in new businesses should be simplified to eliminate the over-abundance of paperwork and complicated legal jargon.
- Women should not be discriminated against at licensing and passport control offices. Regulations that require the permission of male spouses or relatives in order to register a business or acquire a passport should be eliminated.
- Financial institutions and organizations that cater to the interests of women should be created.
- Education for business management should be made available to women.



A need to change inheritance laws and establish new forms of collateral: Kenyan participants in a workshop on women's inheritance rights.

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Notes:

1. See Wendy Urban-Mead, "Dynastic Daughters: Three Royal Kwenya Women and E.L. Price of the London Missionary Society, 1853-1881" in Jean Allman, Susan Geiger and Nakanyike Musis (eds), *Women in African Colonial Histories*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002. pp. 48 –70; Holly Hanson, "Queen Mothers and Good Government in Buganda: The Loss of Women's Political Power in Nineteenth Century East Africa", in Jean Allman, Susan Geiger and Nakanyike Musis (eds), *Women in African Colonial Histories*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002. Pp.219-36; Tabitha Kanogo, *African Womanhood in Colonial Kenya*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 2005.
2. In her book *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, Ifi Amadiume discusses the same phenomenon, which she describes as "...female industriousness" (Amadiume, 1987:27).

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SEX, MONEY & POWER: CONSIDERATIONS FOR AFRICAN WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT

by Danai S. Mupotsa

Growing up in Zimbabwe, I was constantly forced to observe the "appropriate modes of conduct" for a young woman. Maintaining "respectability" was paramount and young women were policed constantly. The constant (and consistent) reminders of appropriate parameters for women's bodies and sexuality, as I experienced it in Harare, drew me to reflect on the historical underpinnings of what my peers described to me as "our culture".¹ Interrogating this national culture, it became curiously clear to me that at the crux of these constructs of "tradition" and "modernity" in these discussions were women's bodies: the success or failure of the project of "national culture" (if we are to call it that) appeared to reside in the "national family's" ability to manage and control the mobility and sexuality of women's bodies, be it through parents and kin at home, or through the police forces on the streets of Harare.²

When I consider the question of women's economic empowerment in Africa, these contentious issues immediately come to mind. A range of sexually violent relationships³ — from families accepting bribes to withdraw charges for sexual assault,⁴ to young girls (and their families) accepting money and gifts for relations with older men — are commonplace and commonly *accepted*.⁵ Regarding the latter issue, a social worker in Harare observed with despair, "How do you say to people, 'Stop having the relationship,' when they want food on the table!"⁶ In recent years, in a variation of the "sugar daddy" phenomenon, Zimbabwe has seen the emergence of the infamous "small house" — the second (or third, or fourth, etc...) young wife. Like a BMW, or Mercedes Benz car, it's a status symbol for every successful man! A cynical perspective, perhaps, but what is interesting is how women, women's bodies and sexuality have become increasingly commodified in the context of extreme economic inequality. In a country with an economy in crisis, women appear to be hardest hit by poverty, and transactional sex (by choice and otherwise) has emerged as one means of survival.

"What is interesting is how women, women's bodies and sexuality have become increasingly commodified in the context of extreme economic inequality."

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All this begs the question, if women were economically empowered, would they be in a better position to negotiate sexual relationships?

What I want to do here is, first, to state my central thesis. Then I will use a personal anecdote to illustrate the complexities of the issues at stake. In conclusion, I will return to the question of women's economic empowerment by examining the close relationship between discourses on sexuality, culture and women's economic empowerment.

Dominant views on women's empowerment suggest that offering women economic independence and empowerment can enhance the cause of gender equality and women's sexual rights. I wish to extend this argument by suggesting that because of the manner that dominant discourses on culture have been socially engineered (in this case, in Harare), women cannot achieve economic empowerment if we take no account of the ways in which different gender and sexual relations operate.

Whatever the economic conditions in different countries, women the world over continue to face the violation of our sexual rights because of a historically produced and artificially maintained gender discourse of "our culture" or "our tradition" — that not only entitles men to women's bodies, but also informs our views on economic activity. What I wish to interrogate are the multiple representations and interpretations of tradition and modernity as they are applied in relation to women under the present economic crisis in Zimbabwe. Taking one specific example, I want to consider how young women rationalize their choices (or lack thereof) and agency in these situations and how families use "culture" and "tradition" to defend or define what appears to be a fairly modern phenomenon. I also wish to consider the multiple legal frameworks under which these relationships occur. How does one protect the rights of young girls when there are laws defending them as minors that consider these acts to be statutory rape while another set of laws that have been defined as "traditional" can also be applied to counter such charges of rape? Given the implications of the constraint on women's mobility and bodies, what are the economic possibilities for young women?



Silindeni Mpala, age 29, has a husband who is ill and little to feed her family of eight: "tradition" provides few economic options.
© WFP / Richard Lee

"Women cannot achieve economic empowerment if we take no account of the ways in which different gender and sexual relations operate."

I have elected to focus on sexuality, as this is a topic on which African feminists have often been silent. Patricia McFadden speaks to this, describing the fear of sexuality amongst us African women as "socio-sexual anxiety". She says that "the intensity of this anxiety is generated by the fact that there is an extremely intimate relationship between sexuality and power, a connection which is manifested in a range of circumstances and experiences."⁷ Like McFadden, I am concerned that this socialization has depoliticized our discussions of sexuality when they do occur and most often such discussions do not even take place. Barbara Klugman endorses McFadden's position in an essay interrogating the discourses that took place in Beijing on sexuality in Southern Africa,⁸ noting how previous silences on sexuality are being challenged by the advent of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. While discussions on sexuality in Africa have emerged in recent years, in large part because of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, these discourses continue to fail to address the intersections of power, sexuality and culture. Some have noted that in fact what is produced is the notion of "African sexuality" as deviant and the producer of an "African AIDS".⁹ I want move away from HIV/AIDS, not because I do not see the importance of these debates, but because like many others I see the prevalence of the pandemic in Africa as symptomatic of a pre-existing gender discourse of power: it is precisely this discourse that I wish to investigate.

"I want move away from HIV/AIDS, not because I do not see the importance of these debates, but because like many others I see the prevalence of the pandemic in Africa as symptomatic of a pre-existing gender discourse of power."



Members of the popular Zimbabwean TV drama 'Studio 263' after undergoing HIV/AIDS testing: Women's economic empowerment requires a much more radical commitment to sexual rights.

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The decision to focus on young women is another methodological choice because young women are rendered particularly vulnerable in Zimbabwe. Recent statistics with regard to HIV/AIDS bear this out. In sub-Saharan Africa young women have substantially higher rates of HIV infection compared to young men of the same age. In Zimbabwe specifically, it is estimated that 26% of females aged 15-24 years are infected with HIV, compared to 10% of males in the same age range.¹⁰ Such statistics reflect the particular vulnerabilities faced by young women. Richard Mabala, who coined the term "Generation", argues that "If women are a disempowered majority and young people an invisible majority, girls and young women stand at the interface of gender and generation.

They have far less power and resources than older women and are even more invisible than adolescent boys and young men."¹¹ Like Mabala, I contend that there is a need to focus on the lives of young women. As a young woman myself, I am able to reflect upon my own daily experiences.

I will enter this discussion with a personal anecdote to demonstrate the complexities I have outlined above. In conclusion, I will return to the question of economic empowerment by examining the close relationship between discourses on sexuality, culture and women's economic empowerment.

Living in a world that hates women!

What unfolded in my family when my 13-year old cousin became pregnant illustrates the ways in which calls to "tradition" are often fought over the bodies of young women. The father of my cousin Susan's child was a man more than twice her age and the second *older* boyfriend that she had had, or that my family had got to know about. When asked why she was sleeping with anyone at all, let alone someone so much older, she simply said "I also want to be loved." This was on the previous occasion and her boyfriend had been charged with statutory rape that time. Not surprisingly, the charges were dropped after another family member accepted a bribe from the accused man without informing the extended family. This time she was pregnant and my mother reported the case to the police.

"What I found most interesting was the fact that my mother's decision to pursue the legal avenue in which Susan was defined as a minor was considered to be 'non-traditional', even *against* tradition."

My mother soon became the target of an onslaught of criticism from the majority of the family. Many thought that she should have approached the situation more "traditionally," especially since the man wanted to marry Susan. Additionally, Susan insisted that she was in love and wanted to marry this man. While my mother and I insisted that this was a case of gender-based violence on the girl-child, others in the family defined my cousin as a *woman* and, for their part, insisted that the appropriate course of action was for the man to marry her. In their opinion, since the man was not denying his responsibility, there was no need for legal action. What I found most interesting was the fact that my mother's decision to pursue the legal avenue in which Susan was defined as a minor was considered to be "non-traditional", even *against* tradition. On the other hand, an alternative legal system defined her as a woman/mother/wife and considered her situation to be not only culturally justifiable, but almost desirable. Susan herself refused to be viewed as a victim of assault, embracing this "traditional" discourse as it offered her a means to her desired end: marriage.

This situation involving Susan and my extended family prompted me to pose some questions about the kinds of gender discourses men *and* women invest in, in Zimbabwe. Almost all those who proposed that customary law be pursued were women, despite the prevailing view that customary law is more discriminatory to women.¹² As Joy Ezeilo offers, "universal human rights are used to assert that universal norms of standards are applicable to all human societies. Yet women's freedom, dignity, and equality have been grossly eroded in law and fact. Inequality emanating from cultural patterns deprives

women of the opportunity to full and equal participation as citizens within their own societies and within international society."¹³ She continues, "This paradox recuperates the perennial jurisprudential questions about the universal cultural legitimacy of human rights."¹⁴ The paradox Ezeilo presents occurs because under the guise of "our culture", both men *and* women produce and reinforce the discourses which many of us may view as disempowering. Defining cultural practices as either "traditional" or "modern" perpetuates this gender-power discourse, despite the fact that this binary is not always stable. As a way forward, Sharita Samuel suggests that,

"Disputes under customary law must not be seen as a contrast between equality and culture in the sense that one of them must 'win' over the other. It is in intra-cultural conflict when a woman comes to court to argue about her status. In doing so, she does not dislodge herself from her culture. She just brings an internal cultural dispute to an alternative tribunal in order to be heard. The fight is no longer between equality and culture. Rather it is between two different interest groups battling to retain or change power relations within their very culture — a culture which is constantly evolving."¹⁵



Gender discourse often promotes inequality: Thandi is consoled by her mother in 'More Time', a Zimbabwean film about adolescent sexuality.

© 1993 Media for Development International, Courtesy of Photoshare

This view of a constantly evolving culture is the key to addressing this peculiar paradox.

"Under the guise of 'our culture', both men *and* women produce and reinforce the discourses which many of us may view as disempowering. Defining cultural practices as either 'traditional' or 'modern' perpetuates this gender-power discourse, despite the fact that this binary is not always stable."

I take the view that one must investigate the history of social engineering to begin to understand why people would adopt a particular set of discourses concerning sexuality. Mudimbe holds the view that it is "because of the colonizing structure, [that] a dichotomizing system has emerged, and with it a number of current paradigmatic oppositions have developed: tradition versus modernity; oral versus written and printed; agrarian and customary communities versus urban and industrialized civilization; subsistence economies versus highly productive economies."¹⁶ If we examine the process of colonization, urbanization and the post-independence development of urban areas in Zimbabwe, one sees how these dichotomies emerge and also how they inform the discourses on femininity and masculinity. Rekopantwse Mate notes the role of religion in this project, stating "from the colonial era the Christianization of women was driven by the need to train a corps of women who as wives of already Christianized men could facilitate the creation of 'Christian homes' through teaching about Christian domesticity, Christian wifehood, housekeeping and motherhood. The gendered religious Messages were part of a social engineering project of changing social relations and ways of life, that is civilizing and modernizing locals."¹⁷

Terence Ranger's essay, "The Invention of Tradition in Colonial Africa," examines this process of social engineering. He argues that European imperialism not only produced invented traditions in Europe, but resulted in the invention of traditions in African societies too.¹⁸ The process of "inventing tradition" in Africa resulted in the practical breakdown of many customary institutions regulating relations between the sexes, a breakdown almost always disadvantageous to women. Citing Caroline Ifeka-Moller, Ranger concurs with her assessment that "colonial records on African 'tradition', on which the new invented custom was based, were exclusively derived from male informants, so that 'indigenous female belief' remained unrecorded therefore 'male dominance in society, that is their control over religious beliefs and political organization' was expressed even more clearly in colonially invented custom than it had ever been before."¹⁹ Considering the role of social engineering, and social reproduction during the process of urbanization, Teresa Barnes' *"We Women Worked So Hard": Gender,*

Urbanization and Social Reproduction in Colonial Zimbabwe, 1930 – 1956,²⁰ offers the testimonies of urban life by a group of early African inhabitants of Harare who recount their experiences of life in the city. By focusing on the impact of women entering the city, the book allows us to observe the process, described by Ranger, of "inventing tradition".

"The process of 'inventing tradition' in Africa resulted in the practical breakdown of many customary institutions regulating relations between the sexes, a breakdown almost always disadvantageous to women."

It is absolutely essential that we begin to acknowledge that culture ("tradition") is a "gendered practice which excludes women from sites and statuses related to power (in both social and material senses), as it interacts with notions of citizenship, nation and development," as Patricia McFadden suggests, adding that "culture is a 're-invented' and heavily contested phenomenon."²¹ McFadden is correct when she notes that, "Through the re-invention of culture as the central trope of nationalist discourse, African men were able to position women outside of the most crucial social, political and economic institutions in both colonial and neo-colonial societies."²² As I have already noted, both men and women adopt and reproduce this culture, a culture that is patriarchal, not only in the terms of *agency* but as an investment. McFadden similarly concludes with the postulation that "by positioning women as the custodians of these sacred cultural texts, women themselves become trapped in an unchanging phenomenal reality which allows their exclusion in structural, ideological and other terms."²³

Economic Empowerment, Gender Relations and Women's Bodies

Let us return to the question of women's economic empowerment. How does this revision/examination of "culture" offer us, as activists and policy makers, an opportunity to consider the role of women's economic empowerment? Does women's economic empowerment allow women more agency in negotiating sexual relationships, if sexual relationships are so deeply based in economic transaction? I wish to turn to the reflections of Colletah Chitsike in an article entitled, "Culture as a Barrier to Rural Women's Entrepreneurship: Experience from Zimbabwe."²⁴ She writes:

"For some women, making large amounts of money is a dirty pursuit, full of all kinds of evil. In Zimbabwe, women are traditionally brought up to associate making money with immorality: the Shona expression *anoda mari sehure* ('she wants to make money like a prostitute') expresses utmost disgust. The predominant male view of business is that one has to be acquisitive and assertive — perhaps even ruthless — to be a success. Even where a positive aspect is recognized the titles given to women who are strong and decisive are based on male standards. For example, in one of the Shona dialects, the term *bambo mukunda* (father/daughter) refers to a daughter who takes male responsibilities. The language fails to acknowledge the female gender, and lacks words that express the strengths of women."²⁵

She continues,

"Money is an expression of power, and that culture is used by men as a way to keep women distanced from power. They [the women entrepreneurs she interviewed] said that in contrast to those associated with money-making (and men), the social qualities associated with women in Shona society include skills in fostering peace and preventing conflict; fairness and equity in distributing resources so that society and the family benefit (even to the extent of denying themselves resources for the benefit of others); and the promotion of social justice and reduction in exploitation. With these attitudes within them and surrounding them, it is exceptionally difficult for Zimbabwean women to become entrepreneurs; they will not do so unless there are challenges to culture. They will continue to regard themselves as secondary earners who do not have the responsibility of being breadwinners. They will remain trapped in small-scale, low-investment businesses, which cannot lead to 'liberating economic empowerment' that provides independence from men."²⁶

"Men's economic advantage itself is premised upon a preceding set of gender relations that places women's sexuality in the control of men."

The relationship between money, power and women's sexuality is made clear in Chitsike's examination of the language used to describe women who pursue financial success. Like her, I do not believe that sexual relationships are transactional in Zimbabwe because men are potentially more economically empowered than women; men's economic advantage itself is premised upon a preceding set of gender relations that places women's sexuality in the control of men. We need to pay closer attention to the discourses that young women employ, as the victim/agent binary is insufficient. I return to Susan's lament that she just wanted to be loved. In her mind, it was romantic to be desired by an older man who could provide for her; and Susan's is not an isolated incident.



O. Muchinguri, Zimbabwe's Minister for Women's Affairs, Gender and Community Development, speaks on promoting gender equality and women's empowerment at UN Headquarters: commitment is needed for women's sexual rights.
© UN Photo / Evan Schneider

Policies to address women's economic empowerment must be undertaken in tandem with policies on sexuality. As a young woman myself, I grapple with how best to inform policy in a manner that is meaningful. I also wonder how to define or describe what "sexual rights" should entail. Presently, policy on sexual rights in Southern Africa remains limited to that of HIV/AIDS. Barbara Klugman's review of SADC policy reveals that

"It is clear that the dominant discourse on sexuality within southern Africa attempts to deny it, avoid it, cover it in latex, or protect women from coercion, rather than recognizing it as a dimension of human

experience — a dimension that can and should provide richness and fulfillment in addition to satisfying a reproductive function."²⁷

We must begin with a critique of such limited policies. I want to conclude by indicating that it is my strong contention that if we are to achieve women's economic empowerment, we need policy makers to take on a commitment to sexual rights for women in a manner that moves beyond HIV/AIDS and reproductive health. This will require that we place on the agenda, the challenge of "culture" as Chitsike so aptly recommends.

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1. I draw this conclusion both from general observation, and a series of interviews I conducted in 2005 with a group of 12 women aged between 19 and 22, who grew up in Harare. The study focused on questions of sexuality and articulating the reasons for their decisions and perceptions of appropriate feminine and masculine behaviour as predicated on what they called "our culture". It is from these reflections that I began to think about the discourses of "our culture" as they have been produced in Zimbabwe.
2. For example a study on the status of women in Zimbabwe published in 1998 notes that "in the early years of independence women's human rights were constantly violated when they were picked up off the streets on the excuse that police were clearing the streets of prostitutes." (Tichagwa, W. 1998. **Beyond Inequalities: Women in Zimbabwe**. Harare: ZWRN. Page 38.)
3. I say "sexual violence", but what I hope becomes clear is the expanse of this spectrum: I am speaking here of a variety of experiences and the negotiations of agency that are involved in them. I call it sexual violence to underline the question of power related to them.
4. For example, on a list of the 1000 Worst Cases of Rape in 2005, compiled by Girl Child Network (www.gcn.co.zw) from more than 6000 reported cases, there are a number of cases where either the victim of rape or her parents/family have accepted money to prevent them from reporting the case to the police.
5. See Modola, S. 2007. "Daughters Fetch High Prices As Brides," in *Agenda*. No. 73: Biopolitics: New Technologies Trilogy, vol. 1, 1. Page 130. This brief article reveals how many families have elected to marry off their young daughters to pay off debts, for example.
6. Chase, M. 2004. "African Girls Taught to Say No to 'Sugar Daddies'". *The Wall Street Journal*. February 25, 2004. Page 2.
7. McFadden, P. 2003. "Sexual Pleasure as Feminist Choice," in *Feminist Africa 2*. Cape Town: African Gender Institute. Page 50.
8. Klugman, B. 2000. "Sexual Rights in Southern Africa: A Beijing Discourse or a Strategic

Necessity?" *Health and Human Rights*, vol. 4, no. 2, Reproductive and Sexual Rights. Pages 144-173.

9. See Jungar, Katarina & Onias, Elina. 2004. **"Preventing HIV? Medical Discourses and Invisible Women,"** pp.97-111, in Inge Arnfred, ed. 2004. *Re-Thinking Sexualities in Africa*. The Nordic Africa Institute and Patton. Cindy. 1993. **"From Nation to Family: Containing African AIDS,"** pp. 127 –138, in Abelove, Henry, Barale, Michele Aina & Halperin, David M, eds. 1993. *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Routledge: New York.
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"LET THE WOMEN SPEAK! AND LISTEN"

by Anene Ejikeme

In 1929 women in southeast Nigeria mounted a war against the forces of British colonial rule. The women targeted all the symbols of the new political order – the offices and homes of colonial officialdom, as well as its representatives. The "disturbances" and the



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Sustaining their families: these women farmers in Kano, Nigeria, have increased their income by planting high-yield black-eyed peas.

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demands made by the women at the Commission of Inquiry set up by the colonial government to investigate surprised the British. The women who testified before the Commission consistently demanded that women be represented in the new institutions which had been set up by the colonial government. More than 50 women lost their lives, but colonial authorities failed to appreciate the extent to which women felt aggrieved by colonial policies which rendered them invisible. Although the women organized and carried out this rebellion, it did not stop colonial authorities and missionaries from continuing to insist

that African women were "no better than cattle and sheep" and completely lacking in agency.

"The assumption that African women lack agency continues to be the prevailing view."

Almost eighty years later, the assumption that African women lack agency continues to be the prevailing view about them. This impression is so often at variance with what I see, for example, when I am at home in Nigeria where, every day, I meet women who struggle to feed their families and to send their children to school, daily making decisions that help sustain their families.

The role of "Tradition"

Researchers and development workers appear eager always to point to "Tradition" as the reason for African women's lack of agency. Take, for example, the statement issued by a recent international summit convened to address the economic crisis in Africa.

"In Africa, the gender gap is even wider and the situation is more complex due to the cultural and traditional context which is anchored in beliefs, norms and practices which breed discrimination and feminised poverty. There is growing evidence that the number of women in Africa living in poverty has increased disproportionately to that of men."

This was the conclusion of the 8th Meeting of the African Partnership Forum (APF) in Germany in May 2007. The APF was founded in 2003 as a forum designed "to facilitate Africa's economic growth." The members of the APF are Western donor countries which give more than \$100 million in aid, multilateral institutions such as the UN, World Bank, IMF, WTO, African regional institutions such as ECOWAS, SADC, ADB, as well as the pan-African NEPAD and AU.

There is no doubt that there are many traditions in Africa that hamper women's ability to lead economically prosperous lives, but to point to "Tradition" as the root cause of African women's poverty obscures reality more than it clarifies it. First of all, there is no single "Tradition" which exists all over Africa. Secondly, what is considered "traditional" in African communities is often of relatively recent vintage and was colonially-generated. Foreign aid workers and African men are too eager to point to "Tradition" when excluding women from development projects. For example, in Kenya, local men – and "development officers" – are often quick to insist that it is "untraditional" for women to own land. The truth is, of course, that individual land ownership is not "traditional" for anyone in Kenya; individual land ownership was usefully introduced by British colonial authorities keen to claim the most fertile lands for Europeans.¹



"Traditionally" men did not own land either: a farming couple on their land in Kenya.

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"What is considered "traditional" in African communities is often of relatively recent vintage and was colonially-

generated. Foreign aid workers and African men are too eager to point to "Tradition" when excluding women from development projects."

The idea conveyed when "Tradition" is blamed for African women's economic predicament is that African beliefs and practices constitute part of an ancient, unchanging way of life, not easily amenable to change. The reality too often is that aid and development workers assume that the existence of "Tradition" makes African women incapable of acting as authors of their own lives. Numerous studies now exist which point to the unwillingness or incapacity of development workers to engage African women in dialogue as a fundamental obstacle to the success of many so-called aid programs.²

Fundamental to any task of understanding Africa is the acknowledgment of the continent's diversity. Not even within a single country do sweeping generalizations hold. An absolute priority to ending poverty in Africa is to listen to the experiences and wisdom of poor African women.

As we acknowledge that "Tradition" cannot be the beginning and the end of any analysis of African women's economic realities, we must also acknowledge that the facts of African women's lives do not make for happy reading. The statistics, while they do not capture the reality of women's lives in all the different contexts in which they live, give an overall picture.



Lower life expectancy for women due to HIV/AIDS: a group of women in Malawi in training to deliver home-based health care for those with HIV/AIDS.
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Of all the continents, Africa has the largest percentage of people living in poverty, with signs that ever larger numbers will be threatened by poverty in the future.

HIV/AIDS, for example, is leaving millions of African children as AIDS orphans. The HIV/AIDS epidemic, which is recognized to be of significant consequence for development, affects women in notably higher numbers than men in some African countries. In Zimbabwe, Zambia, Kenya and Malawi, this has resulted in a lower life expectancy for women than men, a reversal of what typically obtains.³ Although African women work longer hours, they own disproportionately less than African men.

African women receive only 1 percent of credit facilities extended to agricultural producers. Yet, at least 70 percent of African women are involved in agriculture. A disproportionate percentage of African babies are of low birth weight, a factor closely related to maternal poverty.

"African women receive only 1 percent of credit facilities extended to agricultural producers. Yet, at least 70 percent of African women are involved in agriculture."

Ending Poverty?

How to end poverty in Africa? This question has become a staple of discussion for commentators from pop stars to world-renowned economists. For decades, the image of Africa in the world has been as the poor neighbor, always receiving charity yet remaining forever destitute and helpless. Despite numerous pop concerts, organizations with a plethora of acronyms, roundtables, meetings and conferences, poverty in Africa remains.

The most ambitious poverty-eradication effort to date is the Millennium Development Project, which was ratified by all the UN member nations as well as major donor and aid institutions in September 2000. Its goal is to eradicate poverty all over the world, especially in Africa. The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) explicitly recognize the centrality of women's economic empowerment to any serious poverty reduction program: the third of the eight goals is "to promote gender equality and empower women."

While it is clear that Africa will not meet *any* of Millennium Development Goals by the 2015 deadline,⁴ it is important that the MDG acknowledge that development cannot take place in a vacuum. In 2005, five years after the MDG were passed and ten years before

their due date, the UN issued a major report assessing achievements so far and delineating what needs to be done. According to the UN 2005 MDG Report, in 1990 44.6 percent of Africans were living on less than a dollar a day; by 2001 the percentage of Africans living on less than a dollar a day had actually increased to 46.4 percent, a goal even further removed from the Millennium Development Goal of about 25 percent by 2015 (MDG 2005 Report). Since 1990, millions more people are chronically hungry in sub-Saharan Africa, where half the children under the age of five are malnourished. (MDG Report 2005)



"To promote gender equality and empower women": UN Deputy General-Secretary Asha-Rose Migiro briefs reporters re new Africa Steering Group for the MDGs (Sept. 2007).

© UN Photo/Paulo Filgueiras

Despite these disheartening statistics, aid is certainly not the panacea. In the first place, "aid assistance" and "development programs" have typically discriminated against women. In the second place, attempts to incorporate women into development programs may be tempted to "bring women up to men's standards." The economic situation of African men is no model! But the strongest argument against aid is the fact that 30 years of ODA have produced little beyond huge amounts of crushing debt. In 2000, African external debt accounted for over 51 percent of GDP; by 2003 it had fallen to 49 percent of GDP. Such global figures obscure the particularly harsh reality for individual countries: for Malawi external debt was almost 200 percent of its GDP in 2006; for Sao Tome & Principe it was 350 percent!⁵

"Aid is certainly not the panacea... the strongest argument against aid is the fact that 30 years of ODA have produced little beyond huge amounts of crushing debt."

Fortunately, in 2006 debt was about 25 percent of GDP for Africa as a whole. There are other signs for cautious optimism. For example, several African countries have reported economic growth rate of 5 percent or more for the last two years.⁶

A stronger economy is the only path poor countries have to get out of poverty. In 1980 Africa contributed 5 percent to global trade. By 1995 the figure was 2.2 percent. In the 1990s Africa was attracting 3 percent FDI. Compare this with 20 percent for Latin America and 50 percent for East Asia.⁷ On practically every indicator used to measure poverty, and in contrast to Africa's continued weak position, Latin America and East Asia have made positive gains, and this is no doubt a direct result of the positive gains in their position in the global marketplace.

Rather than idealistic slogans about making poverty history, we need to attend more closely to practical ways to increase Africa's share of the world market. Here, the role of African governments is paramount. Clearly, investors will invest only in places where profit seems likely and stability can be guaranteed. For too long, African regimes have failed to provide a climate attractive to investors.

"Rather than idealistic slogans about making poverty history, we need to attend more closely to practical ways to increase Africa's share of the world market."

Related to economic development must be the question of arms sales. Africa is awash in arms, from small ones to massive missiles. Armed conflict makes agriculture impossible and does not allow for the kind of stability that investors want. The number of Africans affected by armed conflicts is staggering. Between 1994 and 2003 more than 9 million Africans, mostly women and children, perished as a result of armed conflict. That's the entire population of Sweden. Much more than the population of Switzerland. No region in the world comes close to such statistics. In Southern Asia, the region next in terms of casualties from armed conflict, the figure was under 2 million. War produces not only casualties in terms of deaths, but also refugees and other displaced peoples. It will come as no surprise that Africa far exceeds any other region in the world in its refugee and displaced populations. People cannot farm or run factories if they are dodging bullets or coerced to fight wars. Governments cannot invest in infrastructure if



Kavira Nuasi, now 26, was forced into a militia in the eastern DR Congo at age 13. "It is not a Christian life there," she says.

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they use their country's wealth to buy military equipment.

It is almost impossible to imagine a world in which the arms producing nations of the world agreed not to sell to impoverished countries. Impossible to imagine, but what a world of difference it would make!

Women and Economic Development

For Africans, women and men, to become economically more prosperous, African economies have to be radically restructured. Most of the economies in Africa remain monocultures. There can be no prosperity for the majority of its citizens if a country relies on the exportation of low-value raw materials that are sent to other countries where they are processed and then returned to the world market with a much increased price-tag. Exporting copper or coffee will only make a few individuals or a multinational rich; copper and

coffee alone will not a country enrich.

Greater diversification of African economies has to incorporate a more inclusive and empowered role for women. Today, individual experts and agencies all claim to acknowledge that African countries can move significant proportions of their populations out of poverty only if women are able to improve their economic lot. "Women in Development", from its start in Western feminist circles, is now a staple concept in all multilateral agencies. Yet the success of Women in Development programs has not been much better than that of development *tout court*. This is because too often a paternalistic approach persists and projects are designed without any consultation with the target women who are seen only as recipients.

"Greater diversification of African economies has to incorporate a more inclusive and empowered role for women."

It is critically important not to make assumptions or to behave as if categories from Western societies can be uncritically used to analyze African ones. We have to be vigilant not to be careless in our thinking: too often, for example, education is treated by experts as a fetish. Because people are poor or "uneducated" does not mean they are stupid. The success of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh provides one example that poor, uneducated women know what they want and will successfully implement it if they have the opportunity (via credit, for example). In my own research on Onitsha, Nigeria, an



West African women have long been familiar with microfinance projects: these Senegalese women are distributing loans to microfinance recipients.

© USAID / R. Nyberg

important center of trade where women controlled the marketplace in the nineteenth century, I found that lack of literacy was no bar to the ability of women to accumulate enormous wealth. Students of West African history are very familiar with self-help microfinance groups organized by women; such groups have a deep history, long predating the current "discovery" of microfinance in the West, due in large part to the award of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize to Mohamed Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank.

The kind of aid with which we are most familiar, involving "experts" going from the global north to tell people in the global south what to do, especially in the form of government to government monetary packages, cannot bring poor people permanently out of poverty. On the other hand, assistance which is conceived as a partnership and actually involves the "recipients" in the planning as well as implementation, can succeed. And there are examples of such successes. The Canadian organization, Match International, was founded on just such principles. According to the organization's mission statement, "Match supports initiatives identified by women in the global South, led and

implemented by the women, and innovative in their context. This approach is based on Match's belief that women's development must be considered within their own context, and for strategies to succeed, women's views and agendas must be taken into consideration." In Nigeria, the organization Baobab for Women's Human Rights, has achieved notable successes. It is worth noting that, in one campaign, Baobab was forced to expend much energy and resources in asking women's groups in the global north to scale back *their* activities as these were negating their own local initiatives, threatening to derail the goal on which all were agreed. Baobab's activities have focused in the primarily Muslim parts of Nigeria, and under the rubric of "women's human rights" the organization has been able to address a wide range of issues, including women's economic empowerment.

A work that remains - unfortunately - very relevant is Barbara Brown's book *The Domestication of Women* which shows just how expensive can be well-intentioned but ill-conceived projects devised by men and women who "go to help" without ever bothering to listen or even consult with those whose lives are supposed to be impacted by their projects. Her book is a catalogue of failures spearheaded by various branches of the United Nations and other multilateral organizations. One tragicomic scenario involving the building of wells comes readily to mind: exasperated, "aid" workers abandon the building of wells because, despite all their efforts, local men do not maintain the wells as instructed. The fact that it is women who fetch water had never been taken into consideration by the "aid" workers. The poverty eradication programs which have been shown to produce significant *and* lasting results tend to be smaller in scale and *always* involve the active participation of the so-called "target women". The point is not that large organizations are doomed to failure but that they must learn to listen as well as to acknowledge that poor people are not only students but also can be teachers. Women at the so-called grassroots level must be heard because only they have the intimate knowledge of their lives and needs.

**"Women at the so-called grassroots level must be heard
because only they have the intimate knowledge of their
lives and needs."**

Conclusion

Who should speak for African women? Too often it is either African men or Western women. We need to hear more from the African women themselves whose lives we all claim we wish to improve. Also, we must incorporate the important critiques by African women scholars of the flawed categories that continue to be used to describe African women's lives and African societies. Scholars such as Felicia Ekejiuba, Achola Pala, Nkiru Nzegwu and Oyeronke Oyewumi have written about how the categories used to describe African women's lives often are derived from very different realities in other parts of the world and end up doing more violence to the women whose lives the activists/scholars claim they seek to ameliorate.

In the context of the discussion here, it is important to note that the UN Commission on the Status of Women has declared its theme for 2008 as "Financing for gender equality and the empowerment of women". In February 2007 the Commission convened an informal expert panel to discuss how to move forward on this agenda. It is disheartening - but, unfortunately, not surprising - that no African women were amongst the list of panelists; indeed the only African - the Minister of Finance for Zambia - was also the only man.

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