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**IMPORTED RELIGIONS, COLONIALISM
AND THE SITUATION OF
WOMEN IN AFRICA**

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Wendpanga Eric Segueda

Abstract

Women are a key to development, and gender is crucial to development policies. However, Western development organisations often promote gender equality as something valued in the West, or even as a new idea altogether, rather than taking the time to research how it was rooted in African societies. The same holds true for many Africans who frequently argue that gender equality is a Western idea. This paper intends to show that gender equality or complementarity is not an altogether new phenomenon to African societies, but that it existed in pre-colonial Africa. Raising awareness on this within African societies can help to put in place strategies for gender equality and facilitate change from within.

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1. INTRODUCTION

For many years now, efforts for African development have mainly come from the “outside”: donors, mostly Western, invest money in African development based on their own concepts of what development means and how it can be achieved.

In these efforts, African traditions and history have been cast aside and regarded as unimportant – or even a hindrance to African development. However, change and development must come from within and can only be successful if one takes into account what is or has already been in place. This concerns many aspects of culture and identity, among them gender and the role of women.

Women are a key to development because “whenever there is progress in rights for women other things change for the better. For example, when a girl is able to go to school, she transforms her future prospects for employment and earning money” (DFID 2007: 2). Since the 1980s, much focus has been put on the role of women in development. It has often been stressed that African culture and tradition are inherently contrary to gender equality and that the Western concept of gender equality needs to be introduced in order to change things for the better. Only a few studies have tried to shed light on the role of gender and women in Africa’s ancient societies.

Thus, little is known about the situation of women in precolonial African societies. What was it like, compared to today? Why did it change? By shedding light on these questions, this paper will attempt to point out that Africa’s own culture and traditions bear important potential for improving gender equality and development.

While I am well aware that Africa is a large continent with many diverse countries, histories and cultures, in this paper I deliberately refer to “Africa” and “African Cultures” to show that the role and position of women in Africa’s past was different from today not only in isolated cases, but as a pattern across the continent.

2. THE SITUATION OF WOMEN IN PRECOLONIAL AFRICA

Many publications and also public opinion claim that African traditions are inherently biased against women. It is important to note that most of these accusations against African traditional cultures are unjustified. Let's examine some aspects of precolonial African culture.

2.1 African languages

Language is a fundamental part of culture and shapes the mindset of society. As Stanford University psychology professor Lera Boroditsky writes, "all this new research shows us that the languages we speak not only reflect or express our thoughts, but also shape the very thoughts we wish to express. The structures that exist in our languages profoundly shape how we construct reality" (Boroditsky 2011: 65). Do African languages create differences between male and female?

If we take the specific case of personal pronouns, most Western languages, such as English, have pronouns for male, female and even neutral genders (he, she, it). In contrast, most African languages only have one word for all the personal pronouns. For instance, among the most widely spread African languages, which are Swahili, Bambara, Hausa, Lingala, Zulu and Fulbe, only Hausa makes a distinction between masculine and feminine genders. They are all Bantu languages. The *EOLE Glossaire des langues* confirms that Bantu languages are gender neutral, apart from Hausa, and that the gender distinction in Hausa is due to the influence of Islam (Eole Glossaire des langues 2005).

In Swahili for example, the words "he", "him", "she", "her" are expressed through the single word "yeye". Also, nouns in most African languages are to some extent gender neutral. Surveys at least on Bantu languages show this: "As it is usually the case in the Bantu languages, it is impossible to predict to which gender a noun belongs on the basis of its semantics" (Van de Velde 2006: 3). Apart from gender specific nouns such as "man/woman" = "mwanadamu/wanawake" and "mother/father" = "mama/baba", nouns in Bantu languages are largely gender neutral. The following nouns are neutral for instance: "actor/actress" = "mwigaji wa hadithi" and "waiter/waitress" = "mtumishi mezani".

Other examples of gender neutral languages are: Igbo and Yoruba in Nigeria, Wolof in Senegal, Eton in Cameroon and Mooré in Burkina Faso.

2.2 The roles of women in Africa's past

In precolonial times, respect for women was inherent in most African cultures. Many natural processes related to women, such as childbirth, were considered mysterious, and thus women enjoyed great prestige. Charles Finch has been engaged in private research into African antiquities, comparative myth and religion, and anthropology since 1971. In his book "Echoes of the Old Darkland: Themes from the African Eden", published in 1999, he came to the conclusion that early African men did not know the link between sex and birth. Therefore, it was believed that

new life was created by the woman, the mother alone. It was perceived that all life in nature emerged from women alone.

This perception of birth also led people in many African societies to conceive God as female. Historian Rosalind Jeffries documents the concept of the Supreme Mother. In her essay entitled "The Image of Woman in African Cave Art", she demonstrates that it is not only God who is female in ancient African culture, but also the main guardian spirits and sacred principles. Women thus were highly respected, which was an interesting factor for gender cohesion in society.

While some modern scientists argue against theories of matriarchy in Africa, historians suggest that matrilineal societies have existed and still exist today in Asia, Africa, the Americas and Oceania (e.g. Sanday, Birnbaum, or Rigoglioso). UNESCO even takes up the debate about matriarchy in its initiative to further the mutual understanding of peoples and nations. A Report of the Experts' meeting on the General History of Africa under the auspices of the UN organisation provides extensive evidence that there was a vast number of matrilineal societies in African societies: "In Africa the typical pattern has been the matriarchal clan (absolute matriarchy)" (UNESCO 1984: 100).

The progeny was matrilineal, meaning the lineage was based on the mother rather than the father as we experience today. Examples of African matrilineal societies are: the Akan in Ghana, Ivory Coast and Togo; the Bainouk in Guinea, Gambia and Senegal; the Bantu in the whole central African region; the Chewa in Malawi, Mozambique and Zambia, as well as the Makonde in Tanzania and Mozambique.

Under matriarchy, women in most ancient African societies did not experience discrimination. "Women were permitted to inherit property and a husband was expected to move into his wife's house" (Duiker/Spielvogel 2013: 268). In some domains, women were even considered as superior to men. Indeed matrilineal societies in central Africa privileged women as owners of land. This has been well described by Anthropologist Brooke Grundfest Schoepf, who writes that among the Lemba of Zaire "Men say; we live at the homes of the women; the land here belongs to women; women have a say in everything we do; we listen to the opinions of women; and so on" (Schoepf 1985: 5).

This does not mean that matriarchy is a sort of paradise, in which women had absolute power over men. The point is rather that while the natural differences between sexes in matriarchal societies were recognised they were never instrumentalised to create hierarchies.

The Ghanaian sociologist Elizabeth Annan-Yao writes in the introduction of an essay that "in matrilineal communities, although women are submissive to men, they have some decision-making powers and liberty of expression and can generally choose their own husband. They can be Queen-Mothers in the political domain and can even inherit property from their maternal uncles and their mother etc." (Annan-Yao 2002: 1).

Furthermore, women carried important roles at the political level. They were queens, princesses, and warriors. Examples are numerous. Llinga fought the Portuguese in 1640 in Congo. Nehanda led the MaShona nation of Zimbabwe between 1862 and 1898. Taytu Betul (1850-1918) was an Ethiopian Empress who reigned and personally led troops to establish the modern capital of Addis Ababa. Yaa Asantewaa (1850-1921), Ghana Queen, led her army in continuous battles against the British until her capture. The Hausa warrior Queen Amina extended her nation's boundaries to the Atlantic coast and personally led her army of 20,000 soldiers from 1536 to 1576. The following two examples illustrate in more detail the role and position of women:

Example 1: The legendary princess Yennega in the Mossi kingdom

In Burkina Faso, the story about princess Yennega as an example of a woman with an independent mind is a well-known story. Yennega was the daughter of Nedega, a powerful king of the Gambaga Kingdom, which is now northern Ghana. She lived between the 14th and the 15th century (UNESCO 2014).

Yennega is a prime example of a woman being treated equal to men. Different sources report that she remained her parents' only child for a long time until her two or three brothers (depending on the historical source) were born. She did not experience discrimination in her education and in the functions she occupied later.

As Monique Ilboudo narrates, Yennega was initiated into the skills of a warrior by a man and a woman when she was not even ten (Ilboudo 2014: 213). While Yennega was educated just like male members of society in her time, today her father would have most likely withdrawn her from school, and it would have been a family tragedy not to have at least one son. According to oral records, Yennega was a match for any of the men in her father's armies that she led to success in many battles. However, as she grew into a young woman she longed for more than the glory of battle. She wished for a family. She made her father aware of her feelings, but he did not want her to get married. He wanted her to remain at the service of the kingdom and pursue a career. This attitude is rare in African societies today, in royal as well as "normal" families. An unmarried woman is less respected in the community, and parents, especially fathers, prefer having their daughters married soon, rather than encouraging them to build a career.

As her father was opposed to her marriage plans, Yennega decided to chart her own destiny. When the father realised that he could no longer prevent her from fulfilling her own decision, he organised a big wedding party for her. However, the father stuck to his plans for his daughter to be a brave warrior and a woman with an independent mind. At her wedding, he overwhelmed her with princely presents, and gave her an army with the recommendation to establish a new kingdom (ibid). The ethnic group "Mossé" in Burkina Faso comes from the marriage between Yennega and Riaré. Their son Ouédraogo founded the Mossé kingdom. The Mossé today inhabit the central region of Burkina Faso.

It is therefore curious that today this ethnic group is the most conservative in Burkina Faso as far as gender equality or complementarity between men and women is concerned.

Example 2: Women in the Kingdom of Dahomey

The political organisation of the precolonial Kingdom of Dahomey, which is present-day Benin, shows how women exercised political power in Africa's past. The Queen Mother, called "kpojito" in the local language, was the female reign-mate of the king of Dahomey. She was the richest and most powerful woman in the kingdom. The role of the queen mother was not only to help in cementing the power of the king. She also helped to bring kings to power in the first place. "No one could reach the king without securing the approval of the powerful palace women. It was they who spoke directly to him. And only they knew when a king died, which gave them time to position themselves so as to have an influence on who would be the chosen king next". (Berger/White 1999: 75).

Another characteristic of the Kingdom of Dahomey were its elite troops of women soldiers. They were often recruited as teenagers and lived in the royal palace. "Their lives were devoted to weapons training, fighting wars of conquest and protecting the king" (Unesco 2014: 7). Admired in their country and feared by their adversaries, these warriors never fled from danger.

Despite the fact that the Dahomey army was armed only with rifles while the French had machine guns and cannons, the Amazons attacked when the French troops attempted a river crossing, inflicting heavy casualties. They engaged in hand to hand combat with the survivors, eventually forcing the French army to retreat. Elite troops of women soldiers thus contributed to the military power of the Kingdom of Dahomey in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Today, it is highly uncommon to see women in African armies. Colonisation played a big role in this change, as the independent consultant on gender and development, Marie-Odile Attanasso argues. In her essay about female leaders from the Dahomey kingdom until today she draws the conclusion that "the colonial overlords were watchful in order to discourage female activists" (Attanasso 2012: 54).

Looking at these historic examples, women did indeed play important roles in precolonial Africa, whether in economic, social or political life. This does not imply that the position of women at that time was ideal. Women then, as today, faced many hindrances and discrimination. However, in precolonial times women were equal or complementary to men, rather than subordinate. Bonnie G. Smith writes about the precolonial situation of women in West Africa: "Women in precolonial West Africa enjoyed many liberties. Government was divided between men and women in a dual-sex complementary political system in which each sex managed its own affairs" (Smith 2008: 359). African traditions therefore do not seem to be inherently biased against women. What, then, led to the situation as we see it today?

3. INFLUENCE OF IMPORTED RELIGIONS AND COLONIALISM

It is difficult to separate colonialism from religion, especially Christianity. Christian missionary activity has been proven to be an operational strategy of colonialism. However, I will consider both separately because it helps to better grasp the immediate impact of both factors on gender.

3.1 Influence of imported religions (Christianity and Islam)

Christianity first arrived in North Africa, in the 1st or early 2nd century. In the 7th century, Christianity retreated in the North under the advance of Islam. From the north part of Africa both religions then spread rapidly into sub-Saharan Africa. In most African countries people abandoned their former beliefs, which mostly meant ancestor veneration, and converted to Christianity or Islam. According to estimates in the World Religion Database “there were around 470 million Christians and 234 million Muslims living between the Sahara and the Cape of Good Hope in 2011” (Zandt 2011: 33).

Just like floods devastate places, both religions have taken their toll on African cultures. Missionaries generally regarded Africans as primitive and pagan, and encouraged them to abandon their old beliefs and ways of life. As a result, social structures and traditions were severely impacted, if not completely lost. This had a severe impact on women’s rights. As a result, the status that women had enjoyed before almost entirely disappeared with the invasion of Christianity and Islam.

3.1.1 Gender in Christianity and Islam

In Islam and many Christian congregations, women still cannot become ordained as priests or imams. Moreover they cannot assume roles in church or mosque services, especially during worship and in spiritual matters of the community. There is a gap between men and women, advocated by passages in the Bible and Quran.

Pieter Oberholzer, Director of the Christian organisation Inclusive and Affirming Ministries (IAM), rightly criticises the role of Christian scriptures as a key patriarchal narrative. For instance, one could read in the Bible that wives should submit themselves to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22). Another passage orders a women to learn in quietness and full submission and not to teach or assume authority over men (1 Timothy 2:11).

Islam has similar teachings with Quran in Sura 4:34 asserting that “men are superior to women on account of qualities which God gave men” and hence order women to be obedient to men. Some scholars point out that, in comparison with Western religions, the patriarchal motivation is even greater in Islam. Fatima Mernissi, an Arab feminist, explains that: “in Western culture, sexual inequality is based on the belief in the biological inferiority of woman. In Islam, it is the contrary: the whole system is based on the assumption that woman is a powerful and dangerous being. All sexual institutions (polygamy, repudiation, sexual segregation, etc.) can be perceived as a strategy for constraining her power” (Mernissi 1975: 16).

According to both religions, women should also be regarded as unclean and excluded from religious service during their periodic menstruation. On menstruation, it is for instance written in the Quran 2:222: "It is an impurity, so keep away from women during it and do not approach them until they are cleansed; when they are cleansed you may approach them as God has ordained". In the Bible, similar statements can be found, for example in Leviticus 15:19-23:

"When a woman has her regular flow of blood, the impurity of her monthly period will last seven days, and anyone who touches her will be unclean till evening. Anything she lies on during her period will be unclean, and anything she sits on will be unclean. Anyone who touches her bed will be unclean; they must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening. Anyone who touches anything she sits on will be unclean; they must wash their clothes and bathe with water, and they will be unclean till evening."

Over time, these teachings and practices had a significant impact on gender roles. Gender equality means providing equal opportunities, rights, obligations, value and equal treatment to both men and women. But neither the teachings of Christianity nor of Islam are productive to this.

In ancient African societies, menstruation was not a general taboo. They even saw power in a menstruating woman. Blood remains one of the most important elements in the practice of African traditional religions, and female blood has a remarkable potency in the ritual imagination for Africans. For example, in Benin the menstrual blood of a woman is viewed as sacred and it has the power to ward off evil spirits. Others see the ability to shed blood as an example of the unique fertility of a woman.

But when Islam and Christianity reached Africa, people started stigmatising women because of their menstruation. The consequences today are enormous. UNESCO estimates that one in 10 African adolescent girls miss school during menses and eventually drops out; one of the reasons being the social taboos related to menstruation, and the culture of silence that surrounds it. According to the Kenyan writer Felix Muvea, menstruation causes Kenyan adolescent girls to lose an average of 3.5 million learning days per month: "This hinders their ability to compete in the classroom, leads to low self-esteem, higher drop-out rates and, in some regions, makes them vulnerable to early marriage" (Muvea 2011).

3.1.2 The impacts of Christianity and Islam on the status of women

Islam and Christian teachings led Africans to deny their own perceptions of things, viewing them as primitive, backwards and worthless. Now, Christian and Muslim values seriously impact African ways of living. Socialization works in a way to make women subservient to men.

As mentioned above and shown by the UNESCO survey "African ethnonyms and toponyms", most of ancient African societies were matriarchal. Children were named after their maternal uncle. While previously men moved into their wives' homes, now women have to leave their homes and take on their husbands' names upon marriage. Similarly, while women were previously able to own land, they now have lost access to and control of land, becoming increasingly economically dependent on men.

In combination with the belief that all new life was created by women alone, the matriarchal system gave women a respected and significant position in society. And yet, Christian and Muslim social values led to an intensification of domestic patriarchy.

One more influence of Christianity and Islam concerns African languages. As mentioned above, most African languages are gender neutral. For instance, the corresponding expressions for God in quite a number of African languages included both sexes. It is the case of this expression for "Ataa Naa Nyonmo" in Ga, which translates as the "Father Mother God". Ga is a branch of the Kwa language family. The Ga people inhabited the Greater Accra region of present day Ghana. Ga is nowadays spoken in south-eastern Ghana, in and around the capital Accra.

From the former expression "Ataa Naa Nyonmo" for "God", "Nyonmo" means "God". "Ataa" stands for "he", and Naa for "she". Today, only the word "Nyonmo" is used for "God", and the female Ghanaian Theologian Rose Abbey Teteki complains in her paper that this change happened through the influence of Christianity and Islam (Abbey Teteki 2001).

The Botswanian theologians Ntloedibe Kuswani and Gomang Seratwa also argue that biblical translations appropriated some African designation of God with full patriarchal attributes. They explain that the understanding of "Modimo" in Setswana (a Botswanian language) was gender neutral. But in the Setswana Bible "Modimo" now fully wears the garments of a "Father, who art in Heaven" (Kuswani/Seratwa 2001).

This trend can similarly be noted in the Zimbabwean language Shona. Theologian Dora Mbuyesango argues that the gender neutral "Mwari" now wears a patriarchal identity (Mbuyesango 2001).

This masculine connotation brought a new understanding of God and influenced the mindset of society. Henceforth, men are seen to be more equated with God and thus as superior to women. This is the reason why Alamin Mazrui declares that "African values are distorted not just by imported religions but also by imported languages" (Mazrui 2003: 104).

3.2 Influence of colonialism

Colonialism also deeply impacted African cultures. Its pretext was to civilize the African people. Colonial powers promoted their values over African traditions, which they found far inferior and uncivilized. They completely ignored the local traditions that had successfully regulated African societies for so many centuries, including women's perceptions, representations, and struggles. The colonial period is also often described as gender-blind.

Western countries often criticize Africa for not promoting women's rights. What they often overlook is that Western countries share some of the responsibility for that. During colonial times, they contributed to aggravating the status of women. For instance, historians John Middleton and Joseph C. Miller revealed that in colonial times men were given the role of overseeing and dominating the public realm. They worked outside of the home, including working in positions of political power. The private realm and domestic duties, such as cleaning and food preparation, was reserved for women (Middleton/Miller 2008).

Garikai Chengu, scholar at Harvard University, also writes about this in his paper "A Glorious Past before Colonialism":

"As colonialism continued to entrench itself on African soil, the perceived importance of women's agricultural contribution to the household was greatly reduced as their vital role in food production was overshadowed by the more lucrative male-dominated cash crop cultivation for the international market. Prior to colonialism, women dominated trade. Markets were not governed by

pure profit values, but rather by the basic need to exchange, redistribute and socialize. Traditional African economic systems were not capitalist in nature" (Chengu 2015).

The matriarchal system was a hindrance for colonial capitalistic plans. Colonial masters worked at putting men at the top of agricultural activities, which became more profit oriented. The involvement of women in agriculture has been sacrificed for the sake of capitalistic purposes.

Surveys about women's work during colonial times often show that they lost power and economic autonomy with the arrival of cash crops and women's exclusion from the global marketplace. Even further, men and international commerce benefited because they were able to rely to some extent on women's unremunerated labour.

Another influence of colonialism was the segregation of women and men in education. According to John Middleton and Joseph C. Miller, sexism was an ideal that was apparent and encouraged in colonial Africa. Women did not have the same opportunities as men in realms such as education (Middleton/Miller 2008).

Based on these observations, Professor Ambe J. Njoh of the Department of Government and International Affairs at University of South Florida sees the negative preconceptions against African traditions as unjustified:

"African tradition and culture are not inherently biased against women as widely claimed in the literature. Most of the socio-economic and political problems, which African women face, have their roots in European colonial development policies, which were designed to discriminate against women. Colonial authorities initially established schools and other centres of formal education exclusively for men" (Njoh 2006: 107).

This is how colonial masters contributed in worsening the status of women in Africa. To explain the attitude of Europeans, Phyllis M. Martin and Patrick O'Meara assert: "They were accustomed to the norms of female domesticity in European societies." (Martin/O'Meara 1995: 185).

In the early 19th centuries, the situation of women in Western Europe was deplorable. They ran the household, were nurses, mothers, wives. In France, for instance, females in society were always hidden behind the men in their lives. Other historians even argue that in spite of all the progress made during the Enlightenment, the condition of women in society was not improved. Women faced the same situation in Germany. Her role in society was summed up and circumscribed by the three "K" words: Kinder (children), Kirche (church), and Küche (kitchen).

Other analysts provide similar reasons, affirming that colonial masters, political leaders and military figures were all men. According to John Eberregbulam Njoku, in the British Legislative Council of the Colonial Masters there was no record of a single woman appointed to represent her country by any of the government bodies throughout the colonial period (Njoku 1981).

Looking at these connections, it becomes clear that the gender inequalities we find in modern African societies cannot be attributed to African traditions, at least not on these traditions alone. Instead, imported religions and colonialism decisively shaped the current mindset in Africa which has a negative impact on the current gender issue in African countries.

4. THE SITUATION OF WOMEN IN AFRICAN SOCIETIES TODAY

Quite an extensive amount of research and evidence shows that women and gender play a significant role in development.

“When women are economically and socially empowered, they become a potent force for change. In rural areas of the developing world, women play a key role in running households and make major contributions to agricultural production. But the inequalities that exist between women and men make it difficult for women to fulfil their potential”. (IFAD 2011: 1).

Looking at women in most African societies, it becomes clear that they are resilient, dynamic and determined to work. The Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) concluded in a survey that women make up 50 percent of the agricultural labour force in sub-Saharan Africa (FAO 2011). Yet, the status of women in African countries today is, to say the least, disadvantaged and underprivileged. Girls and women bear the major burden of their families and communities, yet they face substantial social, economic, and legal constraints.

4.1 The role of women in rural and urban African societies today

The predominant mentality in most African countries is that the women's place is at home. Their role is to do household chores, take care of children and help with working on the domestic field. This seriously limits their chances and ability to get involved in work outside the home and therefore in the development of their countries. In rural areas the gap is even wider.

Often there is a pronounced gender division of labour for particular agricultural tasks, with the result that male and female labour cannot be easily substituted. Moreover, women are time-constrained by domestic tasks such as care-giving and collecting firewood and water.

Indeed, whereas the rural man only works on the field, women do more. Taking the case of a married woman, she has to wake up earlier than her husband and prepare breakfast for him. Then they go together to work in the field. While the husband goes straight home after field-work, the woman collects firewood, which she needs for cooking, draws water from the well, prepares food, takes care of the children, and organises the household. It is not unusual that the husband lays somewhere waiting for his wife to serve him food.

In a very brief outline this is how roles of men and women in rural areas are shaped. The International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) concludes accordingly that in developing countries in Africa, and Asia and the Pacific, women typically work 12 to 13 more hours per week than men (IFAD 2011).

Women and girls, particularly in rural areas, thus bear the burden for their families. And yet they face persistent problems that prevent them from enjoying their rights and improving their lives. One major problem is violence against women. The project “Africa's Health in 2010” reveals that “physical violence has been experienced by one-quarter to one-third of women in Malawi, Rwanda, and Zimbabwe; by half of the women in Cameroon, Kenya, and Zambia; and by 60% of

Ugandan women“ (USAID 2010: 18). Another issue is women’s access to land. Ownership of land is a male privilege in most current African societies. Women usually gain access to land through their husbands, which means that they lose this land if their relationship ends. This puts them in a precarious situation and puts them at a higher risk for poverty.

In towns, gender issues are more frequently discussed and reflected upon. Amongst other reasons, this is primarily due to the higher rate of education in urban areas. According to an analysis of gender relations, social class influences the gravity of gender inequality. Gender relations equally change according to the social class one belongs to, because economically and politically empowered women, usually on top of the social ladder, play roles that make them less submissive to men.

Nevertheless, the underprivileged situation of women remains a significant challenge in all social classes. Women in urban areas face similar issues as rural women, such as domestic violence and unequal role-sharing. In addition, married women’s employment outside the home is still not common. A recent study published by the Organisation WIEGO (Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing) shows that “in Sub-Saharan Africa 74 per cent of women non-agricultural workers are informally employed compared to 61 per cent of women (Vanek et al. 2014: 8).

Offices in sub-Saharan Africa are also still a strong male-dominated workplace. While most women continue to carry the responsibilities for the home (taking care of children, preparing meals, and doing other housework), the tertiary sector is strongly occupied by men. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs notes that “women spend at least twice as much time as men on unpaid domestic work. Women who are employed spend an inordinate amount of time on the double burden of paid work and family responsibilities” (UN 2010: 10).

The women working in formal labour are frequently experiencing discrimination. Society usually considers roles such as directors, successful traders, ministers, parliamentarians, and mayors as belonging to men. Women in these positions therefore experience difficulties in being accepted as such and have to struggle to earn the respect of their colleagues.

4.2 Education

Education remains one of the key factors that shape the role and image of women in African societies today. Informal education, such as socialisation within families and peer groups, is mostly counterproductive to challenging gender issues. Children therefore grow up with a strong conviction that the boy is always of more worth than the girl.

In the article “Analysis of Gender in the Family,” informal education in most African countries is described and analysed as follows:

“Women socialize boys and girls to accept conditions of exploitation of females by males through the values they transmit. Boys then grow up with a superiority complex while girls are made to accept an inferior position in society internalizing in this way an inferiority complex. Both behaviours are considered by the family to be perfectly normal to either sex even though this form of socialization results in gender inequalities” (Annan-Yao 2002: 2).

Formal education is likewise conducted at the expense of gender parity. School materials, such as texts and pictures in schoolbooks, influence gender perception of pupils immensely. Unfortunately, this often still works to the disadvantage of girls. Research conducted by UNESCO shows that women's potential for excelling in 'non-traditional' endeavours receives negligible mention in educational materials. Materials rarely picture women as managers, pilots, lawyers, scientists, doctors, or heads of state (UNESCO 2004).

Gender parity in terms of access to formal education is certainly improving. According to the Millennium Development Goals Report 2014, 90% of children in developing regions now enjoy primary education, and disparities between boys and girls in enrolment have narrowed. However, the report also states that girls in sub-Saharan Africa still face barriers to entering both primary and secondary school (United Nations 2014).

There are several reasons for these barriers. Poverty, or financial distress, is a foremost reason. Indeed, poverty is pervasive in a vast number of families. According to a BBC report, 47.5% of people in Sub-Saharan Africa live under the global poverty line. Poor parents are not able to pay school fees and materials, shoes and transport. They are not able to send all their children to school and will then most likely give boys precedence over girls – reinforcing gender inequalities (BBC 2012). The United Nations University tackled the issue and sheds light on it:

“When families face economic problems they prefer to invest their limited resources in the education of boys rather than provide what is considered as ‘prestigious’ education for girls who would eventually marry and abandon their professions anyway. Nevertheless, girls are increasingly getting some limited education, and the focus of concern is gradually shifting to providing access to the same range of educational opportunities open to boys” (United Nations University 1995).

Another reason why many women and girls do not successfully complete their education is because of their heavy workload. They are forced to spend many hours fetching water, doing household chores, working on the field, and taking care of siblings, just to name a few. According to the organisations Gender and Water Alliance and CAP-NET, women and girls in developing countries spend an estimated 40 billion hours every year hauling water. Most girls are thus not able to learn properly and they often drop out of school early (CAP-NET and Gender and Water Alliance 2006).

Early marriage and pregnancy are also an obstacle to school education. The practice of early marriage is known to principally affect girls. In several African countries, girls marry as soon as they reach maturity. One of the reasons why parents choose to have them marry early is that poor families still regard a young girl as an economic burden and her marriage as a survival outcome. The US Think Tank Council on Foreign Relations (CFR) estimates that two out of five girls in West and Central Africa are married as children. About the drawbacks of early marriage, the CFR comments:

“A shortened education is both a cause and effect of early marriage. While lack of educational opportunities may contribute to girls’ early marriage, married girls are also likely to drop out of school sooner. This restricts their wage-earning opportunities, and leaves girls dependent on their husbands and with less power in the household.” (CFR 2013)

Finally, there is a recent debate about the effects of menstruation on girls' school attendance. As a study by Sarah Jewitt and Harriet Ryley shows, there are links between girls missing school and menstruation. Particularly girls from poorer families have no means to buy sanitary towels.

Furthermore, shyness and embarrassment about menstruation are reasons why girls do not attend school during menses: there is often a lack of privacy by toilets, lack of facilities for cleaning and disposing of used sanitary products. Jewitt and Ryley write about their study in Kisumu/Kenya that “a key factor contributing to embarrassment about menstruation in the study area seems to be role of wider cultural taboos/etiquette in inhibiting open discussion of the topic in many Kenyan family settings” (Jewitt /Ryley 2014; cf. chapter 3.1.1 above).

Regarding all the above challenges for women in African societies today, it becomes clear that women are still generally underprivileged and have significantly fewer possibilities to partake in the public spheres of power. It is widely argued that this is a vestige of old African traditions. This conclusion, however, is oversimplified and deceiving. Women in ancient Africa often enjoyed more rights and equality than women today.

5. WHY HISTORY MATTERS

By knowing our history we create our cultural and individual identity. Our history offers us role models, heroes, lessons learnt; it provides us with a common narrative. To understand the past means to understand patterns and how the society we live in has become what it is. To establish a sense of pride and identity about who we were and who we thus are helps to make us more aware of our real identity and how we want to be. It constructs our national identity.

However, by and large, history is written by those in power, by those determining the narrative and discourse of a given period in time. As George Orwell famously wrote: "who controls the past controls the future. Who controls the present controls the past."

History has largely been written by men, and by whites. Even today, African history is often told from Western perspectives: most publications are written by Western scholars, and there are only very few by African scholars. One only has to look at the available literature on the subject to see that for most, it seems, African history started only with colonisation. Those writing history select what they deem as important and historically significant; and more often than not they value their own experiences over those of the "other".

This results in a one-sided and distorted view of African history. Africans, and African women in particular, have been taught that they have not made important contributions to their own histories and societies. The colonial narrative about black primitiveness has influenced African national identities until today.

Gerda Lerner writes: "People without a history are considered not quite human and incorporate that judgement in their own thinking. Unaware of any possible alternative, they cooperate in their own oppression. Not having a history truly matters" (Lerner 1997: 208).

This is especially true to African history, which has been shaped and defined by centuries of oppression; by colonialists, missionaries, and – most recently – Western scholars. The image thus created is one of "poverty, barbarism, irresponsibility and chaos" which has been "projected and extrapolated indefinitely in time, as a justification for both the present and the future" (Ki Zerbo 1981: 2). Ki Zerbo even goes as far as to say that "all the evils that afflict Africa today, as well as all the possibilities for the future, are the result of countless forces transmitted by history" (ibid). It becomes clear, then, that it is relevant for African development to know its history, in order to have her develop her possibilities and potentials for the future.

The position of women in Africa has not always been so dire. Quite to the contrary, in Africa's precolonial past women had a better position and enjoyed more rights than today. As I have tried to show on the subject of women in Africa, there are positive lessons to be learnt and positive role models to be drawn from African history and traditions. Africans need to become more aware of this. African women need to know more about the potential of their own history and traditions in order to better root themselves in the present, and to develop a better sense of who they are and what they can do. There is a rich potential for change in African culture and history. Knowing that African traditions and culture valued women can give African women's rights activists more tailwind. It can inspire African men and women for positive change.

6. CONCLUSION

Women are “a key driving force against poverty” (UNDP 2014: 1). Yet, they are still often excluded from equal access to education, participation in business and the economy, and decision-making. Religion and colonialism share significant responsibility in aggravating the situation of women.

Worse still: Africans have long been told to denounce their traditions as backwards, primitive and destructive. In a publication entitled “Africa’s development: The word is emancipation”, Nigerian blogger Mazi Nwonwu complains that: “Africans have forgotten their culture or know so little about it that they easily deride it for being what they term ‘fetish’ – a consequence cleaving to a European heritage Christian church that found new expression in Africa” (Nwonwu 2011).

Their societies have been dismantled and put together again by Western religion and culture, typically leaving them on shaky ground and with little respect for their own past. How can we expect that African societies adapt to change if they know so little about their past?

To borrow the words of the French Agronomist René Dumont, let’s say that “black Africa had gotten off to a bad start”. Development efforts and policies have long failed to take into account the strengths of African cultures. If Africans today start taking their countries’ future into their own hands, they can account for their own identity and roots, drawing from the best of both cultures.

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