Women in Africa

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WOMEN IN AFRICA

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No generalization can adequately capture the varied conditions of women in Africa. Living in a land area three times the size of the United States, with roughly 450 million inhabitants spread in widely different geographical, climatic, historical, and cultural settings, African women cannot be neatly pigeon holed in a few paragraphs.

The existence of hundreds of differing ethnic groupings, mixed and altered by extensive migratory movements over thousands of years, renders meaningful generalization difficult if not impossible. Widely varying customary attitudes and practices shaped widely differing life experiences for women. In farming communities, the division of labor commonly followed sex and age lines, with women typically caring for children and food farming while men hunted, prepared the land for farming, built houses and fashioned tools and equipment. In nomadic communities, the sexual division of labor varied, as women typically cared for the children and prepared food as well as housing. A few kinship groups fostered matriarchy, more tended towards patriarchy, but most usually permitted polygamy.
Varied indigenous religions typically helped to maintain a woman's status in her family and community. Predating European colonial rule, Islam imposed its own constraints on women's life roles in North Africa and, through missionaries, migratory movements, long distance land trade, and Arab shipping, reinforced various degrees of male dominance over women throughout much of West, East and Southern Africa. Primarily introduced by missionaries accompanying European colonists, Christianity brought notions of monogamy and western education for some women, although seldom as extensively as for men and making few improvements in the status of the majority.

Nevertheless, over a hundred years of direct European colonial rule did introduce fundamental changes in the conditions of life of both women and men throughout Africa. The several colonial governments introduced laws and exercised state power to coerce Africans in Eastern, Central and Southern Africa to work for colonial mining companies and settler farms, producing raw materials for export to their home-based factories. Some used outright force. Others imposed hut and poll taxes that required African families to earn cash. Simultaneously, they pushed Africans off the best lands onto infertile, poorly watered reserves; denied them credit for farm inputs; imported mass produced manufactured goods that squeezed out their local handicrafts; and discriminated against them in the market place -- leaving them no way to obtain cash to pay the taxes (or later
to buy the imported manufactured goods) except by earning wages by working for the colonialists.

The pre-existing sexual division of labor stimulated men -- hundreds of thousands of them -- to migrate to earn wages in the mines and on the big settler commercial farms. In most regions, men even worked for the colonialists as domestic servants. Most women, children and old folk stayed home in the 'reserves,' using age-old techniques to scratch out a living out of infertile soils. Despite the reserves' overcrowded unproductive conditions, on the unrealistic presumption that the women really could support themselves and their families, the colonialists claimed they needed to pay wages sufficient to support the individual men -- well below the minimum which Karl Marx suggested capitalists must pay to cover the costs of the next generation of labor power.

In West Africa, the colonial system worked somewhat differently. Some argue the colonialists feared mosquito-borne malaria, others that the stubborn resistance of the heavily-populated western areas thwarted colonial settlement. Whatever the reason, instead of farming themselves, the colonialists used taxes to pressure Africans to cultivate their own land to grow cash crops for sale at low prices to the big colonial companies that shipped them abroad. Forced labor and taxes pushed hundreds of thousands of migrants -- initially men,
later their families -- down from the Savannah to work as sharecroppers. Typically, the African landowners kept for themselves two thirds of the price the companies paid for the export crop; the migrants received only a third, but could also grow their own foodstuffs. Thousands more migrants -- mostly men -- worked for below-poverty line wages on colonial mines, leaving their women to care for the rest of the family as best they could on the Savannah.

Regardless of these differences, throughout the continent, colonial systems of production disrupted the pre-existing self-sufficient communities, chaining their economies to the vagaries of world markets for their crude exports. They incorporated African men primarily as low cost, unskilled labor. They built a truncated socio-economic infrastructure designed to facilitate the process. Missionary and government schools, mostly at a primary level, taught the three Rs to boys, frequently the sons of chiefs or wealthier families; even fewer went on to secondary school to learn low level clerical skills needed for colonial rule. In West Africa, colonial governments introduced extension education, credit and marketing institutions to help men expand export crop cultivation. For the most part, however, these colonial institutions altogether neglected the health, education and productive activities of women. They actually undermined of largely women-cultivated domestically-consumed food crops. For many women, bearing many
children seemed the only way of gaining status, as well as producing more income-generating labor and perhaps a degree of security in their old wage.

After independence in many countries, the institutions and practices inherited from colonialism persisted. In a few, however, several counter-tendencies supported efforts to end the exclusion of women from the development process. After independence, some governments, starting with Nkrumah’s Ghana, created Women’s Ministries and Bureaus in an effort to ensure that women enjoyed equal access to education, property rights and development programs. Realizing the importance women’s potential contribution to their on-going liberation struggles, some nationalist movements -- in countries as different as Guinea-Bissau, Zimbabwe, and South Africa -- brought women into their leadership. The 1986 UN-sponsored International Women’s Conference in Nairobi, Kenya, symbolized the growing numbers of women across the African continent who, even without the support of their governments, began to mobilize to join the global movement to press for full participation in the development process.

In the 1980s, the African economies’ continued dependence on the export of crude minerals led to a crisis that engulfed the entire continent. The falling real value of their exports and their mounting foreign debts forced many small African states to
abandon efforts to meet the basic needs of the poor majority of their populations. Their austerity programs particularly cut back programs designed to assist women and women-headed households. The crisis served to underscore the need for the full liberation and reconstruction of the continent. Only the building of self-reliant economies capable of providing productive employment opportunities and rising living standards for all seemed likely to create conditions in which African women could participate fully in a meaningful development process.