

Development Against Women in Sub-Saharan Africa

Lisa Finneran

The extent to which women are free to make decisions affecting their lives may be the key to the future, not only of the poor countries, but of the richer ones too. As mothers; producers or suppliers of food, fuel and water; traders and manufacturers; political and community leaders, women are at the centre of the process of change (*State of the World Population 1989*).

Introduction

This essay is concerned with the effect of development policies on discrimination against women in less developed countries. It addresses specifically the case of rural women in Sub-Saharan Africa, and the impact on them of agricultural development policies. It finds that, not only has development failed to reduce discrimination against women, it has actually increased it. Such development is indicted not only on the grounds of equality, but also on the grounds of efficiency. It is argued that the reduction in the power of women has debilitated the overall development of society.

Traditions in African culture

There are two traditions specific to African culture which must be noted at the outset. Firstly, women, seen in a life-giving and nurturing role, are expected to provide the family's food requirements. Men's duties extend no further than the maintenance of the family dwelling, and the clearing of new land for planting by women. Secondly, unlike Western society, where income earned by either male of

female is generally used communally for the benefit of the family, in Africa there is a separation of the property of husbands and wives. Bryson (1981) attributes this to polygamy, and to the woman's obligation to help her natal family in times of trouble. Yet within these two cultural constraints, women take pride in their role. In West Cameroon, women are mourned for four days while men are mourned for only three¹.

A woman traditionally could build up wealth by bartering any food in excess of the family's needs. A man bartered any crafts he had produced. However, colonialism upset these traditional roles. Men came to earn their income working in large companies, and consequently, women took on some of the tasks which had previously been in the male domain. The division of income complemented this effect, with the result that women now work much harder and yet are relatively much poorer than was the case historically.

The fact that it is a woman's role to provide food means that women are the main agricultural workers in Sub-Saharan Africa. A study in Togo (INSTRAW, 1987) found that women were involved in agriculture to the extent that they do 40% of field labour, 70% of weeding and harvesting and as much as 90% to 95% of food processing and marketing. Togo is representative of the other Sub-Saharan countries where on average 87% of the

¹ Bryson quotes a native: "A woman is an important thing... a man is a worthless thing indeed... a woman gives birth and feeds, men only buy palm oil and make houses."

female labour force are involved in agriculture. Furthermore, many rural households in Africa are headed by women as their husbands have migrated to the city in search of paid employment. In Zambia, one third of households are headed by women, in Kenya, 40% and in Ghana 50% (INSTRAW, 1987).

The impact of rural development schemes

The development policies that have been implemented in Sub-Saharan Africa to date have taken many forms. Yet almost without exception, their success, if any, has come at the expense of women. They have done little to redress the imbalances detailed above, and they represent a cause, rather than a consequence, of inequity.

Practically all development projects ignore women. Training, advice and technological advance are geared towards male activities. This means that, while men may have access to modern, labour-saving machinery such as tractors, women still work with the most primitive of instruments. One study, which looked at a Gambian rice development project, concluded that women's rain watered rice, which covered twenty-six times more land than the men's irrigated rice, received only 4% of government spending on rice projects (Dey, 1981). The FAO states: "In all regions, the introduction of modern agricultural technology is primarily aimed at male tasks and used almost exclusively by men" (1984).

As regards produce, some agricultural developments - the introduction of high yield variety crops, for example - have meant increased labour burdens for women. This is to their benefit if they are waged. However, most African women only produce for their own family, and hence the production of crops requiring a higher level of labour-intensity may exact a price that African women simply cannot pay.

Land distribution is also highly inequitable. Traditionally, women's access to land was not a problem. Mothers could pass land on to daughters or unused land could be claimed. However, with the rise in the popularity of development-oriented land registration schemes, significant male bias has been introduced into the distribution of land ownership. The UN notes: "Women's rights are often eroded by legislation ... women's property rights are withdrawn as property becomes more valuable" (UN, 1985). Today women are forbidden to own land in Kenya and Ethiopia, and new laws mean that divorced women in Zambia and Tanzania face the same restriction. Given the numbers of female heads-of-households, such laws are clearly doubly discriminatory.

In sum, then, development policies have clearly failed to mitigate the plight of women, and indeed have exacerbated it. "It is virtually impossible to identify any country in which national strategies have generally benefitted women's role in agriculture" (FAO, 1984).

Why has development ignored women?

The question immediately arises as to why this is the case. Three important reasons can be posited.

Firstly, because women are usually working on their own family's land for the same family's consumption, neither production or consumption involves the monetary economy. This means that these figures are not included in the national statistics. It is easy to pass over this subsistence agriculture, then, when there are other sectors making demands on scarce resources. This is reinforced by the fact that women are not organized politically and so it is easy to ignore their needs.

Secondly, there are no women involved in the formation or implementation of development policies. A review of

government projects in developing countries in 1983 found that only one female adviser was involved.

Thirdly, there may be resistance by men in the community to projects which improve woman's income. This hinges on the fact that a woman is only entitled to divorce her husband if she can pay back her "bridewealth" herself.

In short, the main reason for development passing over women is patriarchy. This is prevalent at both intra- and international levels.

The consequences

What have been the consequences of this? Because development has not produced any labour-saving devices targeted at women, their work burden has increased. Sometimes, this means that total resources are under-utilised. In Zambia, for instance, the amount harvested does not generally depend on the fertility of the land but rather on how much work women can get done in the daylight hours. This extra work burden has impacted on family consumption. In Burkino Faso, it was found that families lost weight during the rainy season, not because there was not enough food available, but rather because women had less time to cook it due to the demands of work. In Ghana, yams had to be replaced by less nutritious but easier-to-tend cassava for just this reason.

Ignoring the primary producers can also mean loss of valuable experience. In the Gambian rice projects mentioned above, investment in expensive capital intensive irrigation schemes proved a failure, while it is arguable that a few inexpensive improvements in women's rain-fed and swamp rice would have proved far more constructive.

When land registration schemes deprive women of access to land, they cannot grow food for their families. Because it is not their role to provide food, when men obtain land, they are more likely to grow cash crops. Yet the severe terms-of-trade effect that Africa has suffered in the last decade has resulted in a situation in which many countries are not earning enough from these exports to cover the goods they must import to live on. This increases debt and dependency.

Because men reap the benefits from cash crops, while women do most of the work, production more often than not does not reach full capacity. In both Zambia and Tanzania, when maize profits were soaring, women refused to produce the crop as the income would simply accrue to their husbands. In Zimbabwe, by contrast, where the seeds were supplied directly to women, there was a bumper harvest.

Finally, it is important to note that because women are not sufficiently politically organized, they fall easy prey to public sector exploitation. The temptation is for governments to subsidize certain sectors of the economy at the expense of agriculture. Hence debilitating taxes are levied, which act as a disincentive to work.

Conclusion

These then are some of the effects of the "development" policies which have been pursued in Sub-Saharan Africa. It is clear that such policies have militated against equality of the sexes. By ignoring women in the provision of training, technology, land and credit, they have also been detrimental to the agricultural sector itself. In this light, it is little wonder that food production in Africa has been steadily falling throughout the last decade, with the catastrophic consequences that were brought so vividly to the attention of the world in the mid- and late-eighties.

More direct aid is not the answer.

2 A bridewealth is the opposite of a dowry - it what a man pays to a woman's family in order to be allowed to marry her.

Attention must instead be directed towards collection of statistics on the importance of women to Sub-Saharan economies, integration of women into the policy framework, and greater equality in the eyes of the law. Until the direction of endeavour shifts towards such objectives, the sexual inequality in these countries will persist, with its concomitant negative economic consequences. Birdsall (1983) writes that: "The "woman issue", once thought of as no more than a welfare issue, affects the prospects for efficiency, growth and development in the economy as a whole." "Trying to develop without acknowledging or involving the people who do two-thirds of the work is inviting failure"(UN,1989).

References

- Birdsall, N. (1983) in Buvinic, M. et al (eds.) *Women and Poverty in the Third World*. Baltimore: London John Hopkins University Press.
- Bryson, J. C. (1981) "Women and Agriculture in Sub-Saharan Africa," in Nelson, N. (ed.) *African Women in the Development Process*.
- Dey, J. (1981) 'Gambian Women: Unequal Partners in Rice Development Projects', in Nelson, N. (ed.) op. cit.
- FAO (1984) "Women in Agricultural Production," *Women in Agriculture* no. 1, Rome.
- INSTRAW (1987) *Women in the World Economy*.
- Togolese Federation of Women in the Legal Profession - *Women's Participation in Development: The Case of Togo*.
- UN (1985) *State of the World's Women 1985*.
- _____(1989) *State of the World's Women 1989*.
- World Bank (1990) *World Development Report*.