

# Journal of African Law

<http://journals.cambridge.org/JAL>

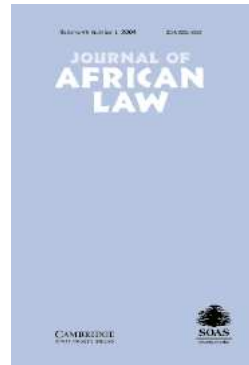
Additional services for *Journal of African Law*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)



---

## Gender trauma in Africa: enhancing women's links to resources

Sylvia Tamale

Journal of African Law / Volume 48 / Issue 01 / April 2004, pp 50 - 61

DOI: 10.1017/S0021855304481030, Published online: 26 May 2004

**Link to this article:** [http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract\\_S0021855304481030](http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0021855304481030)

### How to cite this article:

Sylvia Tamale (2004). Gender trauma in Africa: enhancing women's links to resources. Journal of African Law, 48, pp 50-61 doi:10.1017/S0021855304481030

**Request Permissions :** [Click here](#)

## GENDER TRAUMA IN AFRICA: ENHANCING WOMEN'S LINKS TO RESOURCES

SYLVIA TAMALE\*

### INTRODUCTION

In this new era of reeling technological advancement and the information superhighway, I never cease to be amazed at the way the world is fed on facts that many of us have always known. Such information is couched and presented in ways that make it seem like a “new revelation”, an eye-opener of sorts. One latest such exposé came out of Mexico during the United Nations Development Summit a few weeks ago. The developed countries “discovered” that there is a linkage between global instability and global inequality! Surprise! Under the “Monterrey Consensus”, they went on to pledge (without any overt commitments) to lift hapless countries like ours out of poverty as a solution to put an end to terrorism.

A week before that, with tremendous pomp and grandeur, the World Bank released a new report entitled *Engendering Development*.<sup>1</sup> Released on International Women's Day, the report basically informed the world that there is a correlation between gender equality and economic development. In other words, that the wider the gender gaps in all spheres of society the slower the pace that society strides towards economic growth. Surprise again! We were reminded, for example, that improving rural women's access to productive resources including education, land, and fertilizers in Africa could increase agricultural productivity by as much as one-fifth.<sup>2</sup>

Gender inequality has persisted despite all the scholarship highlighting the drawbacks that are associated with it. In circumstances of weak state structures, corrupt leadership and civil instability, African women realize that they need to be more resourceful in order to enhance their access to and control over resources. This is not to suggest that women in Africa have not been ingenious and practical. We all know that millions of citizens on this problem-ridden continent would not be alive today were it not for the ingenuity of the African mother, grandmother, wife or sister. The point is that African women are seeking to sharpen their ingenuity further, to hone and broaden their skills in order to tackle this problem effectively.

How do we move from the continental “gender trauma” towards real equality? What are the challenges that we face in achieving this? How

---

\* Faculty of Law, Makerere University. This article is a slightly revised version of the lead paper presented at a Gender Symposium under the theme, “African Gender Research in the New Millennium: Perspectives, Directions and Challenges”, under the auspices of the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA) and the Arab Research Centre (ARC), 8–10 April, 2002 at Cairo, Egypt.

<sup>1</sup> See *Engendering Development—Through Gender Equality in Rights, Resources and Voice* (co-authored by E. King and A. Mason) at <http://www.worldbank.org/developmentnews/stories/html/030801a.htm> (accessed 7 March, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

many times do we have to repeat and reiterate what has become common public knowledge? Do we need more research, more reports and even more summits to drive this basic point home? How do we make our obstinate, inflexible associates acknowledge these problems and act upon them? How do we concretely take action to deal with the inequality problems that all of us are so familiar with?

Lack of access to and control over resources by African women has been identified by numerous studies as the single most important cause of gender inequality on the continent.<sup>3</sup> The socio-economic and political implications have also been repeatedly highlighted. The contradictions that African women currently face in this era of globalization and the “African Renaissance” have inevitably developed into a particular form of political and resourceful consciousness; the most important resource that they possess currently is their labour—labour that is exploited by the patriarchal state and its patriarchs.

The spirit of an “African Renaissance” has brought forth several home-grown continental initiatives to shape the new beginning of a transformed Africa. Perhaps the most promising would have been the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD). I say, “would have” because sadly and unfortunately the architects of the NEPAD blueprints have repeated the mistakes of old, providing us with a formula that reads something like: “NEPAD by the men, of the men and for the men”. This type of NEPAD is doomed to end in stillbirth.<sup>4</sup> As the Africa Women’s Forum observed in their conference, there is a conceptual gender gap in NEPAD.<sup>5</sup> It is quite obvious that gender issues in NEPAD are reflected as an afterthought and are generally relegated to only footnote status.

This article seeks to bring into clear focus the link between the “resources problem” and the wider problematic of African domesticity. This important linkage is often glossed over or even ignored. The fact that women’s lives are defined by the ideology of domesticity, that their unwaged productive and reproductive labour in the domestic arena is unacknowledged, undervalued and invisible in economics statistics, largely explains their resource-less status and points to some radical ways of tackling the problem.

#### DOMESTICITY IN AFRICA

Domesticity as an ideology is historically and culturally constructed and is closely linked to patriarchy, gender/power relations and the artificial private/public distinction.<sup>6</sup> The way patriarchy defines women is such that their full

---

<sup>3</sup> L. Wanyeki (ed.), *Woman and Land in Africa—Culture, Religion and Realizing Women’s Rights*, London: Zed Books, 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Another characteristic of NEPAD that reflects its snubbing of history is its strong neo-liberal underpinnings which have in the last three decades spelled disaster and disempowerment for the majority of Africans.

<sup>5</sup> See Preliminary Report of the African Women’s Forum (AWF) of the Regional Conference on African Women and the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (NEPAD) held at the International Conference Hall, Africa Leadership Forum, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria, 3–5 February, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. K.T. Hansen (ed.), *African Encounters with Domesticity*, New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1992.

and wholesome existence depends on getting married, producing children and caring for their family.<sup>7</sup> In Africa, it does not matter whether a woman is a successful politician, possesses three Ph.D.s and runs the most successful business in town; if she has never married and/or is childless, she is perceived to be lacking in a fundamental way. Girl children are raised and socialized into this ideology and few ever question or challenge its basic tenets. Single, childless women carry a permanent stigma like a millstone about their necks. They are viewed by society as half-baked, even half-human. Thus, the domestic roles of mother, wife and homemaker become the key constructions of women's identity in Africa.

While patriarchy defines women in terms of domesticity, it simultaneously draws an artificial line to separate the domestic (private) arena from the public one. The public sphere represents men and is the locus of socially valued activities such as politics and business, while the private is representative of domestic activities centred around the family. The former represents society, while the latter represents culture. Women are confined to (read trapped in) the domestic arena—a space where men rule over them as heads of the family—while men spend most of their time in the public realm. The rationalization is that women's reproductive roles make them biologically and “naturally” predisposed to rearing children and taking care of the domestic sphere. Biology, instead of gender,<sup>8</sup> is used to explain social differences between men and women. In other words, gender differences are reduced to and justified by biological differences. Because it is perceived as their “natural” calling, women's work is performed altruistically. Men, who are the public actors, are supposed to represent “their women” (as fathers, husbands or brothers) in the public sphere. Thus women depend on “their men” to access the public realm.

In Africa, the process of separating the public/private spheres preceded colonization but was precipitated, consolidated and reinforced by colonial policies and practices. Where there had been a blurred distinction between public and private life, colonial structures and policies focused on delineating a clear distinction guided by an ideology that perceived men as public actors and women as private performers.<sup>9</sup> Where domestic work had coexisted with commercial work in pre-colonial satellite households, a new form of domesticity, existing outside production, took over. Where land had been communally owned in pre-colonial societies, a tenure system that allowed for absolute and individual ownership in land took over. At the same time politics and power were formalized and institutionalized with male public actors. The Western capitalist, political ideology (i.e. liberal democratic theory) that was imposed on the African people focused on the individual, submerging the African tradition that valued the collective. All these changes had a profound impact on African women's access to and control over resources.

---

<sup>7</sup> In Luganda there are several proverbs that mirror domesticity. For example: “*Ekitibwa ky'omukyala ekisoka, bufumbo*”, meaning: “Woman's principal dignity is derived from marriage”; “*Bulikugwa, obukyala si bumbejja*”, meaning: “A woman loses her dignity when her husband dies or when she falls out of his favour”.

<sup>8</sup> Gender as used here connotes the social and cultural meanings that are attached to the sex categories of male and female.

<sup>9</sup> Such colonial structures were seen in the law and religion that were introduced, and backed by sound policies such as those in the educational sector.

Thus, womanhood became synonymous with domestic life—childbearing and rearing, cooking, subsistence farming, scrubbing, cleaning and other household chores became their inescapable destiny. These duties were and still are performed gratuitously, without formal recognition and remuneration. African women engage in the drudgery of domestic work for an average of 17 hours a day. Domestic work is unacknowledged and invisible in traditional economics and GDP statistics, facts that attest to its denigration.<sup>10</sup> The ideology of domesticity is so efficient that the majority of African women have internalized it and it informs their self-identity.

#### PRESENTING DOMESTICITY AS A HINDRANCE

Domesticity is deployed in the African context to systematically disenfranchise women from accessing and controlling resources. Indeed, the gendered public/private spaces carved out of and reaffirmed by the ideology of domesticity have overarching consequences for men and women in Africa. Domesticity confines African women both conceptually and practically in ways that limit their access to resources. Here, I analyse three important ways that domesticity restricts women's access to and control over resources.

#### Space as a resource

The gendered male “public” space is the key to power, privilege, opportunities and wealth. And the ideological boundary between the private and the public spaces was designed to limit and control women's access to the resources associated with the public space. It is important to note that while women are generally restricted to the marginal domestic “private” space, men not only have free and easy access, but they are also the bosses in this space. Women's access to the public space, on the other hand, is extremely limited and is controlled by men.

Patriarchy uses several tools including culture, the law and religion to safeguard the public sphere as a domain of male hegemony; it will resist any attempts by women who try to make the transition to the public sphere. Setting male values and interests as the norm in the public sphere easily achieves this purpose. Hence any woman who wishes to make this transition is forced to meet the male/masculine standards required in the public world (e.g. by employers, voters, etc.). Masculine standards operate as a delicate “glass ceiling” that stops many women from entering the public world. In that world the female becomes the “other” who is constantly confronted with obstacles that impede her access to and control of other resources.

Because of the marginalized nature of the physical and metaphorical space that women occupy, their legal and social status is subordinated to that of men. Their mobility and erudition is significantly curtailed and their potential considerably limited. Where roles are divided into breadwinner

---

<sup>10</sup> Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women CEDAW—General Recommendation No. 17 (Tenth Session, 1991)—*Measurement and quantification of the unremunerated domestic activities of women and their recognition in the gross national product*. U.N. Doc. A/46/38.

and homemaker, the law decrees that the breadwinner is the owner of resources.<sup>11</sup> He can decide how these are to be allocated. For instance, it is the husband that has control over the proceeds derived from selling off the surplus produce grown by the sweated labour of his wife. He has automatic access to the outside world, not only through his employment but also through his ability to spend what he likes. She, by definition, has none of these things and is further confined by her prior responsibility for household tasks and childcare. In practice, African women's legal status,<sup>12</sup> social standing, political participation, and national membership are largely appended to that of their male relatives.

In effect, African women are relegated to second-class citizenship. Domesticating women subordinates their citizenship, as women are less likely to participate in those activities that are associated with citizenship (e.g. participating in legislation, decision-making, voting, paying taxes, etc.). Society, which perceives them as wives and mothers, persistently refuses to register them in a non-domestic space. Moreover, the labour that they perform in the domestic arena (e.g. mothering) is not inscribed into the construction of citizenship. Thus, alienation, frustration, hostility and hopelessness characterize women's experience of citizenship—so much so that it becomes meaningless. The exclusion of the majority of women from effective control over and access to resources means that as yet Africa has not achieved full citizenship for all. In sum, the concept of separate spheres renders citizenship in Africa to be a gendered citizenship.<sup>13</sup>

Political participation is an essential component of accessing, allocating and controlling resources. This points to two bottlenecks for African women. First, because women are generally excluded from what is conventionally regarded as politics, they miss out on this vital resource. Secondly, because what women do in the domestic domain is not regarded as politics, their "participation" is outside the reach of vital resources. However, it is not enough to increase women's participation in politics without democratizing the "public" spaces where such politics are "done".

Patriarchal politics and the law dictate a policy of non-interference with the private sphere. Issues of the home and family are considered private to be dealt with privately. Most of the traditional wisdom in Africa teaches us that home affairs are not to be talked about in the public arena. The law, for example, is dichotomized into public and private law. To date in many countries across Africa, discrimination on the basis of sex in "private laws"

<sup>11</sup> C. Nyamu-Musembi, "Sitting on her husband's back with her hands in his pockets". Commentary on judicial decision-making in marital property cases in Kenya", in A. Banham (ed.), *International Survey of Family Law*, 2002, 229–241.

<sup>12</sup> C. Bowman and A. Kuenyha (eds.), *Women and Law in Sub-Saharan Africa*, Accra: Sedco Publishers, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> For further reading on the issue of gendered citizenship, see C. McEwan, "Gender and citizenship: learning from South Africa", (2001) 47 *Agenda*; A. Gouws, "Beyond equality and difference: the politics of women's citizenship", (1999) 40 *Agenda*; P. Werbner, "Political motherhood and the feminisation of citizenship: women's activism and the transformation of the public sphere", in N. Yuval-Davis and P. Werbner (eds.), *Women, Citizenship and Difference*, London; New York: Zed Books, 1999; R. Gaidzanuwa, "Citizenship, nationality, gender, and class in South Africa", (Winter 1993) 18(1) *Alternatives*; R. Lister, *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives*, London: Macmillan, 1997; A. Phillips, "Second class citizenship", in N. Pearce and J. Hallgarten (eds.), *Tomorrow's Citizens*, London: IPPR, 2000.

(e.g. marriage, divorce, inheritance and custody) is sanctioned by national constitutions.

Recently, the vice-president of Uganda publicly declared that the reason she separated from her husband was because he subjected her to physical violence. The retort of many Ugandans—men and women—has been to say that such issues do not belong in the public arena (“*Eby’omunju tebitotorwa*”: “Home issues are strictly classified”). However, a close analysis of domestic violence reveals that in fact by shielding the private sphere from state interference, patriarchy lends men considerable liberty to dominate women. Furthermore, studies have revealed the adverse effects that domestic violence has on national economies. In sum, the distinction between the public and the private serves the twin aims of (1) keeping women in a relatively deficient space and (2) ensuring that women lack both the capacity and the means to access and control material resources. I now turn to a more detailed discussion of how the latter aim is achieved.

### **The practical limits of domesticity**

During the past four decades of post-colonial Africa, a small but significant percentage of women have managed to break through the glass ceiling that separates the private and public spheres. This has been possible partly because of women’s own struggles against all the odds and partly because of some deliberate policies (e.g. affirmative action) on the part of some “benevolent dictators” to increase women’s representation in the public sector. However, such women represent only a small drop in the calabash and are yet to make a significant impact on the “gender trauma” barometer of African societies.<sup>14</sup>

A key element of domesticity is that it protects men’s privileged access to resources. On the one hand, the ideology of domesticity in Africa marks the maternalization (and sexualization) of women’s bodies. By so doing, it effectively stifles their potentialities, signifies their social isolation and increases their vulnerability to all forms of abuse. On the other hand, the dualism between private/public life constructs social structures in a way that normalizes gender inequality. Male domination as the status quo is constantly defended and protected.

So, how does African women’s occupancy of domestic space inhibit their access to and control of material resources? It is important for us to understand the huge contradiction posed by African women’s domesticity, especially as it relates to gender. Whereas women are always equated with the domestic or private sphere, they nevertheless constitute the most regulated (and thus non-private) social group on the continent. This point can be illustrated by discussing the primary resource and means of production in Africa—land. In most of Africa, land ownership is the gateway to markets and other resources. The division of power between men and women in Africa is reflected in the unequal distribution of land. African states deliberately

---

<sup>14</sup> See A-M. Goetz and S. Hassim, *In and Against the Party: Women’s Representation and Constituency-Building in Uganda and South Africa*, United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), Geneva: Switzerland, 2000.

pursue policies that deny women ownership of land. An example from Uganda will adequately illustrate my point.

While Ugandan women are responsible for 60 per cent of cash crop production and 80 per cent of the production of food crops, only 7 per cent of registered landowners are women. This means that Ugandan women till and toil on land that they neither own nor control. Uganda underwent a land reform exercise in the late 1990s. Women saw this as a unique opportunity to address the problem of women's landlessness. Through aggressive campaigning and intensive lobbying, a coalition of women's rights groups succeeded in inserting an amendment to the 1998 Land bill that guaranteed spousal co-ownership of the matrimonial home. However, through political machination, the said amendment was missing from the final version of the Act! To date, Ugandan women are fighting for the reinstatement of what has come to be known as the "lost clause".

The leadership in most African states is extremely paternalistic towards women and actively works to maintain the status quo of land ownership on the continent. Women from all corners of Africa have made a request for joint ownership of land between spouses but the leadership has largely met such demands with contempt. President Mugabe is on record as advising Zimbabwean women in 1998 that they should not get married if they wanted to own land! But Zimbabwean women were thrown into total confusion when in February 1999 the Supreme Court emphatically reminded them that even unmarried women are more likely to be property than to own it. In the infamous case of *Magaya v. Magaya*<sup>15</sup> the court denied 58-year-old Venia Magaya her inheritance right, holding that the "nature of African society" dictates that women are not equal to men, especially in family relationships. It awarded the father's estate to her half-brother, making reference to African cultural norms, which say that the head of the family is a patriarch, or a senior man, who exercises control over the property and lives of women and juniors. The 5-0 ruling equated the status of a woman to that of a "junior male" or a minor.<sup>16</sup> At the International Women's Day celebrations of 2000, President Museveni also warned Ugandan women to desist from "commercializing marriage". He designated himself the driver of the emancipation vehicle and implored women to slow down in their demands: "Since I am the driver of the vehicle listen very carefully to my advice. Don't make the vehicle collide because of high speed."<sup>17</sup>

But we must also recognize that in this era of globalization and neo-liberal economic reforms, land is steadily losing its importance as a resource in some parts of Africa. Moreover, ownership of land for African women does not always translate into empowerment or real control of such land.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>15</sup> See *Venia Magaya v. Nakayi Shonhwa Magaya* 1999 (1) ZLR 100 (S). Venia Magaya had been married but was divorced and had returned to her parents' home with whom she had lived for over 20 years. For a detailed analysis of this case, see Women and Law in Southern Africa (WLSA) Research and Educational Trust, *Venia Magaya's Sacrifice: A Case of Custom Gone Awry*, Harare: WLSA, 2001.

<sup>16</sup> F. Banda, "Global standards, local values", (2003) 17 *International Journal of Law, Policy and the Family* 1-27.

<sup>17</sup> "Museveni advises women on property", *New Vision*, 9 March, 2000, at 3.

<sup>18</sup> The concept of "empowerment" as used in this paper is not in the restrictive notion reflected in the *power-over* conceptualization. Rather, it is conceived as *power-to* (power which is creative and enabling), *power-with* (involving a sense of collective organizing and unity) and *power-within* (to do

For instance, there are certain traditional practices among many African communities that limit women's work with heavy farm implements or where it is taboo for women to plant or harvest crops (because of the belief that it will adversely affect yields). In such cases female landowners have to rely on male labour, which compromises their control over this particular resource.

Africa is replete with stories of wives who have been chased out of their matrimonial homes—homes they have helped build and/or improve; of mothers that have been thrown out of their homes by unscrupulous sons; of sisters that have been denied the right to inherit land by male relatives; of women who have been squeezed onto ever smaller and increasingly more unproductive plots of land.

Domesticity remains the norm for the majority of African women. Even where a handful of them manage to break the barriers and enter the public world of business and politics, their association with domesticity compromises their work. Because they are forced to work double-shifts (in and out of the home), such women have inevitably found that their domestic and reproductive functions have rendered them partial or imperfect actors in their public work. Thus, the ideological prescription that imposes domesticity on African women limits their control over resources while engendering a political consciousness to their plight.

### **Gender and resources in Africa's adjusting economies**

A common feature in all adjusting economies of Africa is the vigorous implementation of various poverty-reducing programmes. However, such programmes are often conceived in a top-down fashion without any input from the poor populations. Despite the fact that women experience poverty in higher numbers and in more debilitating ways than men, such programmes ignore important gender issues and fail to link them to national poverty. Often they only succeed in re-creating domesticity by increasing rather than lessening women's work burden.

A good example of such a programme was the heifer project introduced in Uganda in the 1980s by the US-based Heifer Project International (HPI). The main objective was to empower women economically. Women would be given a "living loan" of an exotic cow. Each beneficiary was required to "pass on the gift"—the first female offspring and animal care knowledge—to another needy family. In this way, each beneficiary becomes a donor and the benefits of the HPI project are replicated and sustained. Women that benefited from the project practised the "zero-grazing" method.<sup>19</sup> It was not long before they discovered that the exercise was too labour intensive. Not only were the animals' feeding habits demanding, but they also required expensive veterinary care. Women found that by the time they were through with cutting grass, cleaning the cow's shed and tending to its other needs, half the morning had gone. In other words, the exercise simply added to their

---

with self-respect and self-acceptance). Adopted from the *Oxfam Gender Training Manual*, Oxfam (UK), 1994.

<sup>19</sup> The innovation of "zero-grazing" requires that animals do not roam freely. They are kept in a shed or stall and the family brings fodder and water to them.

already backbreaking workload in the home and it was simply not sustainable. Many poor rural-based women were forced to abandon the project.

Another problem with poverty alleviation programmes is that they rarely reach women. This is because most of these programmes target “the household”, often ignoring the gender inequalities that exist within it. Women, who neither have access to productive resources nor control over the outcomes, are indirectly written out of such programmes. Moreover, African women have borne the worst effects of structural adjustment economic programmes and emerged as the social “shock absorbers” to deal with its worst consequences. Most significantly, more and more women have been forced to venture beyond the domestic space by engaging in “informal” trade or small-scale urban entrepreneurship. This of course has increased their workload as they are forced to work double-shifts—inside and outside the home. This leaves women with virtually no time for leisure—leisure and time are resources also. But even where women have managed to rise into the public sphere, patriarchal authority in the domestic arena has not lost its grip. In many cases, men still take control of women’s finances and have the final say on how they are to be used.

Again, connected to Africa’s integration into the globalized economy is the fact that the continent has become party to many international trade agreements, some of which are detrimental to women’s links to resources. Most prominent among these is the Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement of the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT).<sup>20</sup> As the primary farmers and the caretakers of the young and sick, African women are highly knowledgeable in seed preservation, herbal medicines and other ecology-related resources. By a stroke of the pen, TRIPS allowed for the patenting of such knowledge whereby African people would find themselves in the position of paying royalties to powerful multinational corporations say, for saving seeds of their crop yields or for administering herbal treatments based on indigenous knowledge that has been passed down for generations! The resource in African women’s individual and collective intellectual property is not protected by TRIPS and is the subject of gross abuse and exploitation by foreign multi-national corporations.

#### FORGING AHEAD

In as far as “domesticity” is inhibitive and perpetuates patriarchy, some feminists have rejected the terminology and replaced it with concepts that are more empowering to women. Diane Elson, for example, in attempting to capture the role that unpaid domestic labour plays in sustaining the economies of Africa, suggests use of the term “care economy”.<sup>21</sup> Such a concept not

<sup>20</sup> See generally papers in 47(2) *Journal of African Law*. In particular see M. Echols, “Geographical indications for foods, TRIPS and the Doha Development Agenda”, [2003] 47(2) *J.A.L.* 199–220.

<sup>21</sup> D. Elson, “Gender-Neutral, Gender-Blind, or Gender-Sensitive Budgets?: Changing the conceptual framework to include women’s empowerment and the economy of care”, Preparatory Country Mission to Integrate Gender into National Budgetary Policies and Procedures, London: Commonwealth Secretariat, 1997. Elson’s first articulation on the “Care Economy” was in her article, “From survival strategies to transformation strategies: Women’s needs and structural adjustment”, in L. Beneria and S. Feldman (eds.), *Unequal Burden: Economic Crisis, Persistent Poverty and Women’s Work*, Westview Press, Boulder, 1992, 26–48.

only recognizes the economic value in the work of care giving, but it also shifts such work from the deficient space of the domestic arena.

Public space is a crucial resource for African women—a social group that makes up 52 per cent of the continental population and represents 70 per cent of the agro-processing sector, and yet remains largely landless or owns very small and fragmented holdings. They lack the power to decide on the use of the land or the means to improve its productivity. The gender-blindness in agricultural policies across Africa needs to be seriously addressed, with the view to promoting women's rights and lessening their domestic burden.<sup>22</sup> The doors to the public space need to be flung open for African women to access freely and share in policy- and decision-making. Africa cannot afford to ignore women if it is to achieve democracy and sustainable development. The illogical artificial line that separates the public realm from the private sphere needs to be blurred, with men and women sharing in the tasks performed. Paradoxically, hope for the African woman lies in the present unstable character of the African gender regime.

### **Enlarged spaces for women**

Enlarging the domain that African women occupy would entail a total redefinition of womanhood and femininity in our societies. It would also require a redefinition of the concept of domesticity itself. As we speak now, the ideology of domesticity is undergoing some form of metamorphosis in the face of larger forces, such as the HIV/AIDS scourge, the structural adjustment of African economies with its related entry of women into the economic sector (through micro-entrepreneurship) and, of course, the pressure from women's movements across the continent. The reality of enlarged spaces for women is illustrated by the growing number of women across Africa who literally travel to the market place every day with babies strapped to their backs. Charcoal stoves are permanently stationed at the market where women prepare their meals. For such women, the dichotomy between the "public" and "private" spheres is deconstructed. By shifting the ideological domestic space to the market public space, they are rejecting the artificial separation.

These changes have thrown African social and gender systems into unprecedented flux. They have begun to upset the very meaning of domesticity and the *raison d'être* of African women's identity. It is a paradox indeed that women's consciousness and their space have enlarged through their added burdens and difficulties. Thus necessity, for African women, has truly been the mother of intervention.

To be sure, the current backlash against the women's rights movements on the continent has doubtlessly been unleashed by the fact that the position of women in the African family and society is no longer a given but an open-ended question at best, and at worst, a sizeable threat to patriarchy. Yet as noted earlier, women's performance in their enlarged spaces is still rendered invisible by their domestic and reproductive roles. Domesticity still ensnares women generally and continues to inhibit their control over and access to

---

<sup>22</sup> See D. Kasente, M. Lockwood, J. Vivian, and A. Whitehead, "Gender and the expansion of non-traditional agricultural exports in Uganda", UNRISD Occasional Paper, <http://www.unrisd.org/engindex/media/press/opb12.htm>

resources. Therefore, much more has to be done in order to completely change African women's station in life. For instance, women's domestic burden has to be eased somewhat. One important way of achieving this is through men taking a larger share of the burden.

### **Men sharing domestic work**

All programmes that seek to transform African economies must simultaneously seek to transform African masculinity, femininity and gender relations.<sup>23</sup> Domestic work should be reconstructed into a valued occupation; it should be calculated in official economics statistics. We need to enact laws and create initiatives that would make domesticity a desirable goal for African men too. Paternity leave, for example, would encourage fathers to actively participate in childcare; encouraging boys to engage in household chores and to study domestic classes would ease young men into domestic responsibilities; state incentives such as tax relief for fathers who share in housework may also assist in achieving this goal.

But most importantly, the ideological pressure that discourages African men from involving themselves in housework, childcare and care giving generally (through culture, the media, religion, education, etc.) must be checked.<sup>24</sup> Transforming the masculine institutional culture and existing psychosocial attitudes towards a gendered domesticity would best be achieved by according domestic work a true valuation. Sharing domestic tasks between African women and men would ultimately tilt the scales to a more balanced workload, liberating women to contribute more meaningfully to sustainable development. It would represent an important watershed in beginning to address gender inequality in our societies. New emancipatory masculine identities would also go a long way in checking the heinous crime of domestic violence.

### **Reconceptualizing African citizenship**

In all African countries citizenship is construed as a formal legal status, neglecting the practical notions of the concept. In fact, citizenship is currently confined to the male "public" sphere of formal power structures and is largely absent from the female "private" sphere. As I have demonstrated in this article, structural, economic and social hurdles stand in the way of the majority of African women's enjoyment of full citizenship; all the hurdles reflect women's resource-less status. Thus, women's full citizenship depends on their accessing and controlling resources on equal terms with their male counterparts. Women's citizenship rights are further compromised by the absence or underdevelopment of democratic institutions in our countries.

---

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, 1979, reprinted in (1980) 19 *I.L.M.* 33, article 5(a).

<sup>24</sup> For further reading on how the concept of "masculinity" can be shifted and reconstructed for African men, see F. Cleaver (ed.), *Masculinities Matter!*, Zed Books, 2003; C. Jackson (ed.), *Men at Work: Labour, Masculinities, Development*, London: Frank Cass, in association with European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes, Bonn, 2001; C. Sweetman (ed.), *Men's Involvement in Gender and Development Policy and Practice: Beyond Rhetoric*, Oxford: Oxfam, 2001.

Hence there is an urgent need to reformulate the notion of citizenship with the aim of making it less exclusive and far more inclusive for women as a social group. This would entail a reconceptualization of social organization. Most importantly, we need to reject the artificial separation between the gendered public/private spheres. We should move away from the liberal democracy definition and borrow a leaf from legacies of African systems in reformulating citizenship. For example, taking into account human survival and African philosophies (such as communitarianism).

#### CONCLUSION

Resources for African women constitute a complex and broad concept that goes beyond a laundry list of assets that would not go far in empowering them. More important are the institutional and ideological factors that inhibit women's access to and control over resources. For any talk of a renaissance to have substance in Africa we must seriously address issues of gender inequalities. This means that African leaders and the population at large must be prepared for changes of revolutionary proportions. It is very sad indeed that we have to speak of "a revolution" in reference to granting the continental majority their full dignity and rights. However, it is quite clear that without liberating the womenfolk, any attempts to rebuild Africa will be truncated, an exercise in futility. In brief, there is no short cut to Africa's liberation other than through women's empowerment.

Throughout this article I have deliberately used the term "African women". This is not because I am unaware of African women's heterogeneity and the significance such differences hold. I know that because of the rich and diverse socio-cultural, as well as some political, differences across African societies, the status of women differs based on class, race, ethnicity, religion, age, sexual orientation and so forth. However, my reference to African women as a collective in relation to resource accessibility and control stems from two important factors. First, the glaring statistics that show that the overwhelming number of resource-less people on the continent are women—so much so that one loses track of the very few who actually have control over and access to resources. Secondly, and more important, is that regardless of the differences that may exist between and within African women, all are affected by and are vulnerable to the conceptual and functional space that they occupy in the domestic sphere. Moreover, no African woman can shield herself from the broad negative and gendered legacies left behind by forces such as colonialism, imperialism and globalization. Thus, the term is used *politically* to call attention to the common oppression that African women endure by virtue of their simple membership to the social group called "women".

You may have noted by now that there is nothing I have said in this article that has not been said before. Déjà vu is our collective affliction! It is time for action now!