IN SEARCH OF PROGRESS AND SECURITY FOR AFRICAN WOMEN IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM: A HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY OVERVIEW

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INTRODUCTION

This study is to underscore the sad and insecure multi-faceted circumstances in which African women vastly find themselves today. This is in spite of the fact that most of the nations of Africa are independent from foreign domination and, in the words of the late President Kwame Nkrumah, in spite of Africans having the right “to govern or misgovern themselves”.

It is also part of the study’s objective to point out some of the gains that African women have made—even if limitedly—in the post-colonial era. Additionally, the prognosis for the future would include suggestions for the sustainable light that, in the quoted editorial, most of these women want to see. This is imperative, as it is the consensus of many women, that the advent of independence has meant more woes for them than what
they experienced in colonial times, as pointed out in November 1994 by Uganda's Merab Kiremire, at the time, a consultant at the Finnish International Development Agency (FINNIDA).

In her paper, presented at a workshop on "Women, Children and Conflict in Africa", at the 1994 Dakar Regional Preparatory Conference, Kiremire, *inter alia*, lamented:

Even though African women had access to decision making in some indigenous African communities, this seemed to cease with the coming of African states' independence. Post-independence governance hardly included women, as almost all parliaments and cabinets were predominantly male. A clear demonstration of this unfortunate omission is seen at the first Organization of African Unity summit, which was attended by an all-male Heads of State delegation. Although the situation has slightly changed since 1963, according to a study commissioned by the Netherlands in Lusaka in 1993, only 2 countries, Mozambique and Seychelles, had more than 15% female parliamentary representation.⁴

Statistically, it is further demonstrated that it was only after 1993 that the first African women were elected as Prime Ministers and, sadly, one of the two was soon assassinated. However, Botswana had been one of the exceptional African countries, where a woman has held the high profile position of Foreign Minister, while perfunctorily Uganda appointed Africa's first substantive female Vice President in November 1994. Unfortunately, only four countries on the continent—namely Burkina Faso, Burundi, Senegal, and Tanzania—have achieved at least 10% of ministerial level positions.⁵ The Mozambican example, referred to in Kiremire's 1995 statement above, was both serious and apt, because, at the time of President Samora Machel's death in a plane crash on October 20, 1986, Mrs. Graca Machel, as Mozambique's First Lady, was also her country's first Education Minister, a position she held by virtue of her competence, qualifications and an active member of the ruling Frelimo liberation movement.⁶

West Africans may argue that in the early radical post-independent regimes of Ghana's late President Kwame Nkrumah, Guinea's late President Sekou Toure and Mali's late President Modibo Keita (among a few others), women were seen as very useful players in the ensuing political game. In Ghana, for example, not only were market women mobilized in support of the socialist regime of Nkrumah, but also well-educated Ghanaian women were given prominent positions. One example is the appointment of Mrs. Susan Alhassan, who became the cabinet member responsible for social welfare activities. In retrospect, one may recall that the Social Welfare Ministry in Ghana later submitted the required legal memorandum which helped in creating
the Maintenance of Children law, by which the Ministry sought and received the legal sanction for fathers to help in maintaining their children. In a radical departure from the norms of polygamy, whereby men often held the upper hand in marital affairs, the Convention People’s Party regime of Nkrumah inserted in its 1962 Seven-Year Economic Development Program, the controversial assertion that the ruling political party and its leadership would promote equality between the sexes.

Indeed, Nkrumah’s willingness in offering high profile cabinet-level and partisan political party positions to several women of Ghana was in consonance with his contention that the very “degree of a country’s revolutionary awareness may be measured by the political maturity of its women.” As a socialist, Nkrumah’s words were a paraphrase of what an earlier writer has explained as coming from a similar statement made by the Utopian socialist of France, Charles Fourier, who lived from 1772 to 1837.

Several initial meaningful efforts were made by some leaders in Africa to help bridge the yawning gap between men and women in public affairs and national leadership. However, this study adds on more information, by analyzing all of the relevant factors, from primary and secondary extant sources. It suggests further avenues that can help to solve the conspicuous dearth and limitations in female representation in African governance today, as well to limit the abuses they undergo as we approach the new millennium.

DOCUMENTED PLIGHT OF AFRICAN WOMEN: AS REFUGEES AND POLITICAL PARIAGHS

If African male leaders were the ones who were gang raped by marauding soldiers, if they had to watch their children suck at their breasts till there was nothing left then lay down to die, if their daughters were to the ones who had to sleep with [some] peace keepers for a bar of soap, wars would probably stop tomorrow. African women want a new investment in peace processes and justice for all they have suffered. They say the darkest hour comes before dawn. We have been through the darkest of times, and we owe it to ourselves and generations to come to work towards a sustainable light.

The foregoing powerful but disturbing statement is culled from an African Woman Magazine editorial titled, “African Women and Conflict: The Trumpets of Peace versus the Drums of War”. It is not merely a powerful statement about the plight of many women in Africa today, but it is also a serious indictment of the inaction that the dominant male leadership on the continent
seem to exhibit in the face of some of the sexist, degrading and very helpless circumstances in which many of the members of the female citizenry continue to find themselves.

Also, the statement from *African Woman Magazine* was not an exaggeration. An October 1993 study of Somali women refugees in Kenya, published in *News from Africa Watch*, can confirm the specific plight of the Somalis in these words:

> these women are being raped both because they are refugees and because they are women...it is their gender which motivates their attackers to target them—as women—and to do so with sex-specific form of abuse, rape.¹³

The sad situation, in these instances, is that while the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the staff of the commission have tried unsuccessfully to protect these African women refugees from sexual predators, indigenous African regimes and their leaders do very little to help ameliorate the situation. For example, in the sad plight of Africa’s women refugees, *News From Africa Watch* reported that, in the case of Somali women refugees in Kenya, the local authorities have not provided sufficient protection or security to the refugee camps, nor prosecuted a single individual—whether a soldier, police officer or bandit—responsible for the abuse [against women refugees]. Moreover, an official in the Office of the [Kenyan] President has callously accused Somali refugee women of fabricating the claims of rape to ‘attract sympathy and give the government negative publicity’, and has mistakenly claimed that the police have received no rape reports.¹⁴

Although these unfortunate and sad circumstances of the African women refugees have emerged out of civil war situations, there are still several instances of atrocities against women in places where there are no such wars. These situations are escalating because several countries in Africa either do not have appropriate protective laws in place or have refused to become signatories to existing international conventions which, specifically, protect women. A typical example is the cases of Sudan and Djibouti, both of which have, reportedly, not ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. It is also on record that the two African nations have refused to sign the 1967 Protocol on Refugees, through which both male and female refugees receive adequate protection.
As it is widely known, such male African writers as Kenya’s Professor Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Nigerian Nobel Literature Laureate Wole Soyinka, and Professor Jack Mapanje of Malawi, among others, have on varied occasions been subjected to arrests and detentions without trial in their respective nations in Africa. Ngugi discussed his own plight in *Detained: A Writer’s Prison Diary* (1981), and Soyinka’s fate in civil war Nigeria was recorded in *The Man Died*. Mapanje too celebrated his detention and release under Kamuzu Banda’s Malawi in a poetic volume. On the surface, it seems as if, mostly, African men suffer these political detentions, which have appropriately been termed by Ngugi as “a punitive act of physical and mental nature...an act of psychological terror”.15 Yet, wives, children and other family members of the detained men suffer deprivation of all sorts. In fact, in some countries, wives of men hiding from political arrests and detentions are seized as proxies until their men are captured.

Apart from going through these punitive and psychological sufferings because of the arrests or detentions of their husbands or loved ones, many of Africa’s women suffer other forms of humiliation throughout the continent. They include female writers, as was the unfortunate plight of Egypt’s Dr. el-Cede, whose literary works have either been censored or banned in her own country since the presidency of the late Anwar Sadat. In an interview, it was reported that since el-Cede found

the medical profession too commercial and narrow-minded, she turned to writing when she thought she would be more effective. Many of her books, including *The Hidden Face of Eve and Women at Point Zero*, sold well abroad but were banned in Egypt.16

In her own explanation, the Egyptian female writer told her readers:

Because I linked family and sexual oppression of women to international oppression, my books were banned. I find it extraordinary that I live in a society that can encourage pornography but opposes the analysis of the sexual oppression of women.”17

As confirmed in the available literature, both the highly educated and the lower-educated African women can suffer at the hands of the politically powerful and armed persons anywhere on the continent. Mike Adjei, a Ghanaian journalist, has taken the time to document several of the abuses that occurred under the two military regimes of, now, elected President Jerry John Rawlings of Ghana. In *Death and Pain in Rawlings’ Ghana: The Inside Story* (1993), Adjei offered the contrasting situation.

For example, Justice (Mrs.) Cecilia Koranteng Addow, a high court Judge of Ghana, was among the four Ghanaian citizens—three High Court Judges
and a retired officer of the Ghana Army, with the rank of a Major—who were singled out for abduction and murder in an execution-style, allegedly, because of the suspicion that they were opposed to the then military regime. The nursing mother was, on June 30, 1982 seized from her home by junior officers of the Ghana Armed Forces—reportedly in the company of the ruling military council, Mr. Joachim Amartey-Kwei—and, together with the three others, shot to death on the Accra Plains; their bodies were partly burned in order to disguise their identity. For his alleged role in the murders, the ruling PNDC member Amartey-Kwei was arrested and later, executed.

In contrast to the well-educated and highly placed women having their share of instant but unnecessary justice, market women in Ghana, who sold food and other societal needs, could also become casualties of military excesses. An example was Madam Larmiokor Adjebu, a 63-year old seller at Ghana’s Kaneshie New Market, who was killed by two stray bullets meant to kill a young boy, who had challenged armed military men when they wanted him to sell his domedo (roast pork) at their controlled price. As Adjei reported, when Adjebu was hit by the bullets and she “fell, the soldiers left without attending to her and she subsequently bled to death. The [local] Kaneshie Police removed the dead body later.”

THE GOOD OMEN FOR AFRICAN WOMEN IN DIPLOMACY

Professor Ali A. Mazrui and Alamin M. Mazrui, in their 1998 study, have offered very salient perspectives on gender issues. They have stated their opinion as, “African women have made their mark on African foreign services more firmly than on African Parliaments.” The main reason for this assertion, where African women are concerned, is that they tend to be interested in foreign languages, which are needed in the foreign services of the various countries. The Mazruis confirm this, as they wrote, “Competence in two European languages (Euro-bilingualism) is often a major credential for rapid promotion in the diplomatic service.”

It is very fascinating that Liberia led the way in the promotion of a woman to the highest levels of diplomacy. The Mazruis confirm that too, as they wrote that the African woman, who makes it diplomatically, does not necessarily have to be Euro-lingual, adding:

Indeed, it was not entirely accidental that the first African woman to be a major diplomatic success had the English language as her mother tongue. This was the Liberian woman, Angie Elizabeth Brooks [Angie Brooks-Randolph, when she married], who in 1969 became President of the United Nations General Assembly...
Making a distinction that her gender had something to do with her diplomatic successes, including her position as Liberia’s U.N. Ambassador at the time, Ms. Brooks-Randolph—who was also the first woman and African, to preside over the U.N. Trusteeship Council—reiterated, “I am proud of my continent, my country and my sex [gender]”.24 It is also on record that, in 1970, Idi Amin saw the wisdom in appointing Cambridge-educated Lawyer Elizabeth Bagaya, who happened to be known as Princess of Toro, as Uganda’s Roving Ambassador, as well as Delegate to the United Nations and, later in the 1970s, as Uganda’s Foreign Minister. Other Ugandan high-profile earlier diplomats were the country’s German Ambassador Bernadette Olowo, Canada-based High Commissioner Anna Amailuk and then, later in the 1980s, the country’s France-based Ambassador Freda Blick. Throughout eastern Africa, women distinguished themselves in a variety of ways. In Kenya, Margaret Kenyatta and Grace Ogut, the novelist, played roles in diplomacy. Among Zambia’s high-profile women were Mrs. Mutumba Bull, who was a low-ranking cabinet minister, as well as a well-known scholar, and Alice Lenshina, the famous prophetess and leader of the Lumpa Church.25

In northern Africa, where Islam has sometimes been blamed for making the women apathetic to politics, it is still a fact that several women have led very visible lives, including Dr. el-Cede and former First Lady, Jehan Anwar Sadat of Egypt. As the Mazruis reported in their published study, among “conservative Muslim men in the Middle East, Mrs. Sadat’s public posture and visibility were often a liability rather than an asset. But to many women in the Arab world, Mrs. Sadat became, at least for a while, a role model.”26 It is a fact, however, that in Muslim or northern Africa, Tunisia is considered a nation which has improved the lot of its women, including encouraging them to be in the professions, although women in most places of Africa are known to be hard-working entrepreneurs.

In fact, the late Mr. Diallo Telli, an accomplished male diplomat from Sekou Toure’s Guinea, became the first Secretary-General of the OAU. Even though he was succeeded by only male African diplomats from Cameroon, Togo and, now, Tanzania, there was still the debate about “whether a woman Secretary-General of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) would come before or after the first woman president [or prime minister] of an African country.”27 The Mazruis offered the following lively report in their monumental work:

In July 1993, Africa took a step towards those goals. Two Francophone African countries chose women for Prime Ministers—the first female heads of government in post-colonial African history. Mrs. Sylvie Kinigi in Burundi and Ms. Agathe Uwilingiyimana in Rwanda, each country polarized ethically for so long between Hutu and Tutsi, took a momentous step toward narrowing the gap between genders.28
CONCLUSION

To narrow the gap between genders—as advocated by many Africans, including the Mazrui— one has to take seriously Richard Sandbrook’s admonition about true empowerment, as eloquently discussed by Professor Julius O. Ihonvbere. In his view, such an empowerment, for durable security and progress, should involve the transformation of the economic, social, psychological, political and legal circumstances of those who remain powerless, including women. Furthermore, Professor Ihonvbere expatiated further that empowerment includes access to educational institutions as well as the requisite minimum resources that one needs to sustain one’s household.

If so, then African women have been left outside the center stage of everything that it takes to bring about a meaningful empowerment that would include them. Towards that end, it is not an exaggeration to note that many women in several countries on the continent have been encouraged to be excellent marital partners but not to be scrupulously trained as professionals. Hence one can make the clarion call that the time has come for them to be visibly and actively included in the attainment of higher education, high-level, as well as skilled professions. Also, national and international banking institutions should open their doors to African women, who need financial support to start businesses and, where necessary, to finance their educational pursuits. In the past, the practice had been for husbands of such women to stand as sureties or guarantors for such loans.

Diplomatically, many countries of Africa have been able to encourage the employment and promotion of their women. That is fine, although it is also necessary that in national governance, many more women should be “encouraged” to become forces to be reckoned with. In doing all of the foregoing, the continent’s women would be able to make viable contributions to all aspects of its development and growth.

REFERENCES


NOTES

1 This study was presented at the 17th Annual Meeting of the Association of Third World Studies (ATWS) at Universidad de Costa Rica (University of Costa Rica), San Jose, Costa Rica, November 18-21, 1999.


7 Arthin, 1993: 117.


13 Africa Watch, 1883:8; also quoted in Nyakabwa, 1995.


15 Ngugi, 1981:14; and also in Assensoh, 1990:66.

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Adjei, 1993: 110.


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Ibid.

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Agbango, 1997:312.

Assensoh, 1985:2-6.