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# DEVELOPMENT AND WOMEN'S POLITICAL LEADERSHIP: THE MISSING LINK IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

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With the majority of its population existing in poverty and most countries unable to produce an adequate food supply, sub-Saharan Africa is facing some of the world's most acute development problems. For virtually every indicator of development, the region ranks the lowest in the world. It has the lowest GDP per capita growth rate, the lowest life expectancy, the lowest daily caloric intake, the highest rate of infant mortality, and the highest percentage of people living under the international poverty line (two-thirds of the rural population, one-third of the urban population). Less than half the population has access to safe water, sanitation, or health care. With the highest population growth rate in the developing world (3.1 percent), it is highly vulnerable to the effects of drought and other natural disasters.<sup>1</sup>

The causes behind Africa's lack of development are both numerous and complex; they include the burden of international debt, government mismanagement and corruption, the drastic fall in world commodity prices during the 1980s, and Africa's worsening terms of trade.

While these factors and others have played a significant role, one of the major causes of the failure of both international and indigenous development efforts in Africa to date has been the widespread exclusion of women from these programs and the continued marginalization of the primary role played by women in African economies. One of the principal means of rectifying this overwhelming gender imbalance is the incorporation of women into leadership positions in Africa's governments and civil sectors. An examination of the current process by which many of Africa's one-party states are introducing a system of multi-party pluralism will serve to illuminate the prospects for women's participation. Since 1990, over twenty of sub-Saharan Africa's nearly fifty states have initiated steps toward political pluralism. This wave of democratization is opening up opportunities for women to enter the political arena

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1. All statistics from Donald L. Sparks, "Economic Trends in Sub-Saharan Africa," in *Africa, South of the Sahara* (London: Europa Publications, 1991), 32.

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and participate in the design of development policies and programs. In order for African development to take root, indigenous and international forces must work to assist women to seize these unprecedented opportunities. It is only when women are in positions of power, able to participate in deciding how resources are to be distributed and in the design of national development programs, that Africa's weak economies will take full advantage of women's overwhelming potential contribution.

### The Central Role of Women in Africa's Development

When examining possible strategies for increasing the effectiveness of development efforts in Africa, it becomes very clear that women must play an equal role. "On the average in African societies, women put in 70 percent of all the time expended on food production, 100 percent of the time spent on food processing, 50 percent of that spent on food storage and animal husbandry, 60 percent of all the marketing ... 90 percent of time spent obtaining water supply, and 80 percent of time spent to obtain fuel supply."<sup>2</sup> Women provide the majority of health care and are responsible for a heavy portion of household income.

Numerous studies have shown that providing women with education has an unparalleled positive effect on their income levels and the health and well-being of their children. Further research points to women's poverty as one of the primary causes of high population growth. Still other studies confirm that women are far more likely than men to invest their profits back into the household (to pay school fees for children or increase family food supplies, for example).

Despite the evidence of women's essential roles in Africa's development, the situation of women has been allowed to deteriorate to such an extent that they now comprise an underclass of the poorest of the poor in many African regions. Women now account for two-thirds of the rural poor in many areas, and the growing number of female-headed households are the poorest sector of the entire population. Africa's maternal mortality rate is the world's highest. Less than one-half of all girls are enrolled in primary school — even though providing girls with education has been shown to have a direct positive impact on life expectancy rates, nutrition levels, infant mortality rates, and fertility rates. The World Bank calls this phenomenon "the feminization of poverty" in Africa. Women's vital economic roles have been politically marginalized by governments and overlooked by international development programs. Their productive and social responsibilities have been "depoliticized,"<sup>3</sup> and are often disregarded and neglected by policymakers.

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2. Patricia Stamp, *Technology, Gender, and Power in Africa* (Ottawa: International Development Research Centre, 1989), 47.

3. Kathleen Staudt, "Stratification — Implications for Women's Politics," in Claire Robertson and Irene Berger, eds., *Women and Class in Africa* (NY: Africana Publishing Co., 1986), 207.

### The Need for Women's Political Leadership

Without women participating in their design, development efforts have consistently ignored women's central roles, denied women access to fundamental resources, and have in many instances worked to decrease women's ability to maintain even meager production levels.

A principal reason for this misdirected development lies in the virtual absence of women in decision making roles. Those at the higher levels of political power decide economic priorities and how resources are to be allocated. Without the necessary attention given to women's roles at these higher levels, development efforts will continue to fall desperately short. As noted by Kathleen Staudt,

Whatever the development sector, women are central. Were bureaucracies to integrate women, an overall effect would be that by permitting them to better realize bureaucratic goals, women would empower bureaucrats rather than vice versa. The key, therefore, is the kind of voice women have — collectively and individually — in determining development or program strategies that meet their needs.<sup>4</sup>

Yet women remain outside of African political structures, populating only the lowest levels of government agencies. The history of African state consolidation has meant for women "inadequate female representation, sporadic participation, and blocked channels of access to leadership circles."<sup>5</sup>

### The Process of Marginalization

This has not always been the case in Africa. Before colonization, women's central roles in production were recognized. While men usually controlled the top echelons of political power, women had basic rights, access to resources, and a relatively high degree of autonomy. In several traditional societies, women held important political positions themselves. With the onset of colonization, however, traditional practices and Western systems merged into an entirely new societal structure. This structure worked to the detriment of women — and to Africa's overall chances for development — by marginalizing women's economic roles, restricting their basic rights, denying them essential resources, and stripping them of any previous autonomy and political power.

In most pre-colonial African societies, women and men carried out complementary roles in what were largely village-based agrarian economies. In general, men were responsible for livestock and the heavier work such as clearing

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4. Kathleen Staudt, *Women, International Development, and Politics* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990), 7.

5. Naomi Chazan, "Gender Perspectives on African States," in Jane Parpart, and Kathleen Staudt, eds., *Women and the State in Africa* (Boulder: Lynn Rienner, 1989), 189.

land. Women were responsible for planting, weeding, cultivating, and harvesting — duties which allowed them to develop advanced farming skills and a detailed knowledge of crops. While men held the upper hand in most societies, women's economic contribution was respected, and their interests and concerns were addressed by the political leadership.

In both patrilineal and matrilineal societies, women were usually guaranteed land use rights. Women had either formal or informal authority in pre-colonial societies, which they wielded to influence decision making and protect their interests through political channels. Many societies recognized an area of female autonomy — “a sphere of life, usually centered around women's economic lives as farmers or traders — in which they governed themselves collectively, without male interference.”<sup>6</sup> The Nigerian Ibo, for example, had a female *omu* and a male *obi* as pre-colonial ruling monarchs. Each had a cabinet, and each presided over the affairs of their sex.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, prior to colonization, women played important and recognized economic roles, often completely independent of their husbands. They had basic rights to land use, controlled their own labor and profits, and had established avenues to seek redress of grievances. Many even held important political positions. While it would be incorrect to say African women had full equality, they certainly had a far more integral part to play in society than did European women.

With colonization, European officials attempted to fuse African production systems into the international economy. They proceeded on an assumption regarding the existence in Africa of a Western-style nuclear family in which men were the family breadwinners — disregarding the more common structure of an African household in which the wife and husband had distinct responsibilities and kept separate accounts. As such, two important forces came into play: the promotion of wage labor and cash crop production at the virtual expense of food crop production, and the establishment of legal codes and societal norms which firmly placed African men in a dominant position over African women. The debilitating effects of the resulting lopsided economic structure and discriminatory legal system are still very much evident today.

The widespread introduction of cash crop production among African men meant food production was quickly de-emphasized and relegated to “women's work.” Producing food was no longer regarded as a central economic activity but rather a household duty. Across much of Africa, men gained title to land

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6. Judith Van Allen, “*Memsahib, Militante, Femme Libre: Political and Apolitical Styles of Modern African Women*,” in Jane Jaquette, ed., *Women in Politics* (NY: Wiley and Sons, 1974), 305.

7. The *omu*, like the *obi*, had a cabinet which helped her in regulating the market and handling family disputes that were not resolved by the kinship group. “The *omu* and her cabinet represented women in important town deliberations so that women's representation was equal to that of men. The arrangement also assured broad participation of individual women which was facilitated through *ikoporo ani* — a representative body of women from each section of the town or village.” Doris M. Martin and Fatuma Omar Hashi, *Women in Development: The Legal Issues in Sub-Saharan Africa Today*, World Bank Working Paper, Series 4 (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, 1992), 26.

that had once been owned by the lineage or community. This had enormous consequences for African women. They no longer had any guarantees of land use rights and were commonly forced to work long hours on the crops grown by their husbands, the legal owners of the land, on top of now having full responsibility for growing food for family consumption. As such, women's workloads doubled and they lost control over much of their labor time. Meanwhile, men were provided with extension services and had exclusive use of the profits gained from selling the crops their wives helped to grow. Men entered the cash economy, were taught about new seeds and technology, and used their deeds as collateral to gain credit to increase their production. Women were denied such benefits and remained cut off from the emerging modern economy. This trend has continued well into the post-independence era.

At the same time as women's traditional productive roles were being dangerously marginalized, the establishment of customary law led to tight restrictions on their movements and their rights. Customary law — "a blend of tradition and wishful thinking"<sup>8</sup> — was an attempt by colonial rulers to set up a strict system of control which Africans themselves would find legitimate. In their efforts to adapt indigenous customs and authority structures into a Western-style legal code, colonial officials effectively bulldozed through tradition and eradicated most rights previously held by African women. "The dynamic tension between formal patrilineal domination and both formal and informal female power [was] snapped, and patrilineal domination ... united with Victorian and Christian notions of male superiority."<sup>9</sup>

Colonial rulers appointed male African chiefs to oversee the implementation of customary law, many of whom exaggerated their traditional power and jurisdiction in order to gain entry into European officialdom. Women lost all vestiges of formal political power. In Kenya and Nigeria for example, male elders received salaries as chiefs and subchiefs in the colonial administration, while women elders were ignored.<sup>10</sup>

The British established customary or "African" courts, staffed by men holding jurisdiction over areas of dispute — such as marriage, inheritance, and land rights — previously handled between and among families. "Quarrels were now transformed into legal cases,"<sup>11</sup> and women were left without traditional means of defense, such as kinship authority structures and matrilineal rights.

As more and more men migrated to cities in search of wage labor, women soon followed. This threatened the position of African men in three ways. First, the position of traditional elders was being undercut as their authority over the community weakened. Second, a husband's hold on his village land was put in jeopardy if his wife abandoned it as well. Third, the men already living in urban

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8. Margaret Jean Hay and Marcia Wright, eds., *African Women and the Law: Historical Perspectives* (Boston: Boston University Press, 1982), xiv.

9. *Stamp, Technology, Gender and Power*, 81.

10. *Ibid.*

11. Kathleen Staudt, "The State and Gender in Colonial Africa," in Sue Ellen Charlton, Jane Everett, and Kathleen Staudt, eds., *Women, the State, and Development* (Albany: State University of NY Press, 1989), 78.

areas did not want to compete with women for paid employment. Colonial officials consequently supported the calls of African men to restrict women's movements and buttress the authority of men over women. In Northern Rhodesia, a law was passed requiring women to have a valid marriage certificate and written permission from the chief in order to travel outside of rural areas. A similar requirement came into existence in Kenya with the 1948 Lost Women Ordinance. In Uganda, city women were forcibly returned to villages if they did not have a permit. In Ghana in 1929, under the Free Women's Marriage Proclamation, women traders were jailed until men came to claim them.

Everywhere laws were passed to counteract women's efforts to enter into the modern cash-based economy. As recounted by Jane Parpart,

Houses owned by prostitutes in Nairobi were condemned and razed. Beer production, usually controlled by women, was taken over by the state. Hostile legislation constrained market women's economic opportunities. In Zambia, African leaders supported colonial reinterpretation of customary law which made adultery a criminal offense and enforced harsh fines to stop it, thus limiting women's freedom to change partners. The Urban African Courts, established in 1938, gave rural judges the power to strengthen customary control over urban marriages and, consequently, to regulate "proud and cheeky" urban women. In Tanzania, women in polygamous marriages were denied legal married status and consequently the rights accorded a wife, especially those concerned with divorce and inheritance. Yet customary law permitted men to marry multiple wives.<sup>12</sup>

Beyond denying women land rights, restricting their movements, and curtailing their access to wage labor and income-generating opportunities, customary law also regarded women as minors under the guardianship of fathers or husbands. New marriage laws limited their freedom. Most colonial administrations established a dual legal code whereby Africans could marry under customary or civilian law, the latter based on the monogamous, European system. The dual legal code is still in existence in many parts of Africa today. It is usually left to the male "head of the household" to choose under which system he and his future wife will marry.

Under colonial rule, women were denied access not only to traditional resources such as land, but also to the new resources of wage labor and education. Colonial officials promoted education for boys in order to teach them the colonial language and acquire the skills necessary to fill low-level administrative jobs. Girls' education — if it existed at all — focused on child care, home economics, and other domestic topics, what some analysts call "education for dependency."<sup>13</sup> In 1927, the first secondary school for girls opened in Lagos,

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12. Jane Parpart, "Women and the State in Africa," Working Paper #117, Dalhousie University, Department of History (Halifax, Canada, 1986), 5.

13. Bolanle Awe and Ezumah N. Nkoli, "Women in West Africa: A Nigerian Case Study," in Rita S.

Nigeria, with a curriculum based on music, sewing, and other domestic sciences. By 1942, only 1,500 of 11,500 pupils enrolled in secondary school throughout British West Africa were girls.<sup>14</sup>

Under colonialism, "diffused political functions were centralized into more modern political institutions, under the control of colonial administrators and African men. Mission education and European language soon came to be the requisite for prestige and for political and economic power, and girls were, and are, sent to school much less often than boys."<sup>15</sup>

Denied education, shunted out of the formal economy, and subjugated under their husbands, the situation of women by the end of the colonial era had declined considerably. Western and traditional patriarchal ideologies had merged into a new system that oppressed women and kept them largely removed from political discourse. While many women played central roles in independence struggles, rallying women to support African political parties and organizing civil unrest, they were absent from the ranks of the newly independent governments. This lack of female representation would have damaging effects on national development efforts.

### Post-Independence Challenges

The new independent governments were staffed largely with those privileged Africans who had the benefit of higher education or had experience in the colonial administrations. Very few women were therefore qualified. When governments and international aid organizations turned their attention to development efforts, these were by and large focused on male commercial, or cash-crop, farmers. Due to economic constraints, discriminatory laws, and a pervading male bias, women were often denied the benefits of these programs. This hindered development in two important ways. By not allowing women access to the resources necessary to become commercial farmers, African economies ignored the potential economic contribution of half of their populations. Second, by limiting women's choices as well as their opportunities to increase their incomes, African governments denied women the power to make improvements in sectors over which they were now responsible, such as food production and the provision of health care. As a result, national food supplies and nutrition levels were jeopardized.

Malawi promoted the establishment of large cash-crop estates. In order to subsidize seeds, fertilizers, and credit to these estate farmers, the government taxed all agricultural goods produced domestically. Subsistence farmers — seventy percent of whom are women — were hit hardest by this policy, as they were forced to pay the tax without receiving any of the benefit. As a result, food

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Gallin and Anne Ferguson, eds., *The Women and International Development Annual* Vol. 2. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1991), 180.

14. Van Allen, "Political and Apolitical Styles," 306.

15. Cheryl Johnson, "Class and Gender: Yoruba Women in the Colonial Period," in Claire Robertson and Irene Berger, eds., *Women and Class in Africa*, 241.

production stagnated and Malawi experienced reductions in overall economic growth.<sup>16</sup>

When the Ghanaian government introduced incentives for the production of cocoa as an export crop, male farmers abandoned their traditional responsibilities of clearing land on their family's plots. Women, left with full responsibility for the household food supply, thereby had less land to cultivate. They shifted from growing yams to growing a less labor-intensive but less nutritious crop.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, in Nigeria, when men were given incentives to grow cash crops, husbands demanded their wives spend more time assisting them. The result was a 17 percent increase in women's workloads and an overall decline in food production.<sup>18</sup> In one region of Zaire, when women were forced to work the cash crops of their husbands, women had even less time to devote to food crops and, as a result, nutrition levels fell.<sup>19</sup> Even though women account for the majority of Gambian rice farmers, a Gambian program designed to increase rice production failed to involve women, a fact which was cited as one of the major reasons for the country's low rice production levels.<sup>20</sup>

Legal and societal constraints often work against women's efforts to increase production. Women comprise eighty-five percent of the agricultural force in Lesotho. At any given time, at least forty percent of the male workforce is employed in South Africa. Yet wives are legally barred from applying for credit in their own name. They are also not allowed to enter into contracts, and are therefore not permitted to hire needed farm labor and equipment.<sup>21</sup>

Women in Zambia were not guaranteed equal access to land until passage of the 1975 Land Act — eleven years after independence. By that time they already comprised the majority of poor subsistence farmers. According to the new law, official councils were invested with the power to distribute land. These councils were made up of men, despite the fact that women accounted for the majority of Zambia's farmers. So while women now had the right to own land, the councils often required a husband's permission before any actions could be taken. Many husbands were reluctant to acquiesce, fearing the loss of their wives' free labor in the cultivation of their own cash crops.<sup>22</sup>

In Burkina Faso, women were given full political recognition in 1986, and were thus allowed to buy and own property outright. However, most women farmers are denied access to loans available through the Ministry of Agriculture because their farms are considered too small.<sup>23</sup> In Kenya, women were granted

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16. Jodi Jacobson, *Gender Bias: Roadblock to Sustainable Development* (Washington, D.C.: Worldwatch Institute, 1992), 25-6.

17. *Ibid.*, 28.

18. *Ibid.*, 28-9.

19. Mayra Buvenic and Nancy Yudelman, *Women, Poverty, and Progress in the Third World* (NY: Foreign Policy Association, 1989), 26.

20. Maria Nzomo, "Women, Democracy, and Development in Africa," in Walter Ouma Oyugi, ed., *Democratic Theory and Practice in Africa* (Portsmouth, N.H.: Heinemann, 1988), 145.

21. Martin and Hashi, *Women in Development*, 15.

22. Jacobson, *Gender Bias*, 26-7.

23. Colleen Lowe Morna, et al., "Women Farmers Emerge From the Shadows," *African Farmer*, No. 3, (April 1990): 23-8.



the right to own land in 1970. According to the law, every woman has the right to protect her property "except against her husband." Husbands are thus legally permitted to decide what to grow and how to use the profits.<sup>24</sup> Kenyan women have not been granted full equality under the law despite over twenty years of efforts by women's groups.

Access to credit is of central importance to Africa's farmers. Women are consistently denied this resource, despite research showing that they are the better credit risks. The result has been a decline in food production and an increase in women's poverty. In Ghana, only 6.7 percent of female rice farmers have access to agricultural loans, compared to 26.7 percent of male rice farmers. While 69 percent of full-time farmers in Malawi are women, only 25 percent of those receiving credit from national agricultural credit clubs are women.<sup>25</sup>

Extension services are another key input to agricultural development. But the majority of Africa's extension agents are men, who, dictated by societal norms and their training in cash crop production, direct their services to male farmers. The supply of female extension agents, knowledgeable in the crops grown by women, are rare. By 1981, women accounted for only three percent of extension agents in Africa — most were receiving less pay than their male counterparts.

The lack of attention to women's role in development is not limited merely to agricultural production schemes. As noted earlier, African women are responsible for food processing. Agricultural research has focused largely on improving crop yields, "ignoring the development of processing technologies that would increase both the productivity of women farmers and the demand for, and price of, the crop."<sup>26</sup> Technological improvements have similarly overlooked women, with the introduction of ploughs, tractors, and other technologies designed for men. In fact, numerous development schemes have not met their targets because new tractors so improved the efficiency of men's land clearing activities, women were unable to keep up with the increased demand for weeding and harvesting. Export promotion and diversification, encouraged by international lending agencies, center around "men's" crops, while "women's crops" are ignored. Chad, for example, is attempting to step up exports of onions and cotton — grown by men — but not peanuts, which are grown by women.<sup>27</sup>

Development schemes such as these are designed without consideration of their impact on women, who are Africa's primary providers of food and health care. Without attention to improving women's ability to increase their incomes and provide for their families, the continent's development will be stymied. As Jodi Jacobson has noted,

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24. Martin and Hashi, *Legal Issues*, 11.

25. David Penna et al., "A Woman's Right to Political Participation in Africa," *Africa Today* Vol. 37, No. 1, (1990): 49-64.

26. Buve'nic and Yudelman, *Women, Poverty and Progress*, 30.

27. Carol Adoum, Abt Associates, interview with author, December 3, 1992.

"If women in subsistence economies are the major suppliers of food, fuel, and water for their families, and yet their access to productive resources is declining, then more people will suffer from hunger, malnutrition, illness, and loss of productivity."<sup>28</sup>

The effects of these misdirected development efforts have combined with other factors to take their toll. Although Africa was self-sufficient in 1970, by the mid-1980s the continent had "lost the ability to feed itself," importing 10.2 million metric tons of cereals.<sup>29</sup> In 1992, the head of the U.N. International Fund for Agricultural Development estimated that by increasing the productivity of rural women in Africa by a mere 15 percent the continent's food deficit would be "wiped out."

According to one analyst, "as long as women are excluded from state benefits, African states themselves are bound to be frail and inefficient."<sup>30</sup> What is needed is for women to be an active part of the policy making and design process. Women need to be consulted before development programs are allowed to further marginalize their productive roles. Laws barring women from access to resources must be repealed.<sup>31</sup> The male bias of both governments and international donors must be broken through. For this to happen, women must be heard and represented at policy making levels.

### Obstacles to Women's Political Participation

The political structure of the majority of African states has impeded the inclusion of women. The prevailing context of one-party, authoritarian, and military regimes has engendered a high-degree of cronyism and the use of old-boy networks in the allocation of political power. While male nationalist leaders were ushered into power with the support of their followers, these regimes looked to the support of ethnic leaders, fellow members of the African elite, military leaders, and external state powers to maintain their legitimacy. However, women were excluded from these networks.

By the mid-1980s, women accounted for only 6 percent of Africa's national legislative members. One-half of all states had no women in the cabinet.<sup>32</sup> In 1985, states which had never seen a female minister or director of a government-run company included Botswana, Cameroon, Kenya, Malawi, Rwanda, Somalia, Uganda, and Zambia.<sup>33</sup> By the end of the 1980s, women accounted for 2.5

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28. Jacobson, *Gender Bias*, 47.

29. Sparks, *Economic Trends*, 32.

30. Chazan, *Gender Perspectives*, 193.

31. Such laws include: inheritance laws which give a sister only half of what is given a brother, or a wife receiving only a small portion of her husband's estate (the rest going to his family); marriage laws that deny women the right to enter into contracts or have their own bank accounts; laws placing a higher tax burden on married women than on married men; as well as the aforementioned laws which give men authority over their wives' property, among others.

32. Parpart and Staudt, "Women and the State in Africa," introduction, 8.

33. Nzomo, "Women, Democracy, and Development," 150.

percent of government ministers and held 3.6 percent of senior bureaucratic posts.<sup>34</sup>

Most African governments have recently established national structures to address women's issues. In recognition of women's roles in independence struggles, some states have established formal women's wings to the ruling political party.<sup>35</sup> These are largely vehicles through which to garner party support among the female population. Due in part to the international attention to women's issues brought on by the U.N. Decade for Women (1976-1985), many African governments proceeded to set up women's ministries or bureaus. However, they suffer overwhelmingly from a lack of funding, resources, and experienced personnel. Moreover, they have not been given any real power over government policy making, and largely serve to marginalize women's issues in national politics. Overall, "the establishment of women's desks and the appointment of a few women to high-level positions in ministries concerned with family, welfare, and agriculture risk relegating women's concerns to a ghetto of special issues."<sup>36</sup>

National women's associations, such as Kenya's Maendeleo Ya Wanawake, the Gambian Women's Federation, and Tanzania's Umoja Wa Wanawake Wa Tanzania, have a history of being led by female members of Africa's tiny ruling class and working more for class interests than the interests of women generally.<sup>37</sup>

Meanwhile, several factors work to obstruct women's equal participation in politics and the civil sector. The first is women's unequal access to education, which keeps them less qualified for senior positions. Only 13 percent of girls in sub-Saharan Africa enroll in secondary schools.<sup>38</sup> In most areas, boys' schools outnumber girls' schools, and much of the curricula still reflect gender stereotypes. At the university level, male students outnumber female students seven to one.<sup>39</sup>

This unequal access to education is partly responsible for women's lack of representation in the professional sphere. Some thirty-four percent of Africa's women are members of the formal labor force,<sup>40</sup> but women are clustered in low-paying and low-profile professions. This limits their ability to build up the

34. Maureen O'Neil, Address to International Development Conference of the Society for International Development, January 22 - 25, 1991.

35. Zambia, Malawi, Kenya, Mali, Sudan, Gambia, Tanzania, and many other countries have or had women's wings of their ruling parties. Marginalized within the party and led by elite, urban women, these entities have rarely addressed crucial issues facing the vast majority of rural women. They remain limited in scope, focussing on western style "women's issues," such as day care, employment, literacy for girls, and charities.

36. Karen Tranberg Hansen and Leslie Ashbaugh, "Women on the Front Line: Development Issues in Southern Africa," in Gallin and Ferguson, eds., *The Women and International Development Annual*, 226.

37. Janet Bujra, "Class, Gender, and Capitalist Transformation," in Robertson and Berger, *Women and Class in Africa*, 117-40.

38. *Human Development Report* (NY: UNDP, 1992), 178.

39. David Penna, "A Woman's Right," 54.

40. *Human Development Report*, 178.

professional experience and political connections necessary for entry into the higher levels of government.

Discriminatory employment practices further constrain women's opportunities. Women in an overwhelming number of African states still face discrimination in wages, housing and tax benefits, and retirement laws. Legal codes work to maintain women's low economic and social status. With the dual legal systems in place throughout much of Africa, customary law discriminates against wives in inheritance and divorce. This discrimination, along with women's continued inability to gain property rights, permeates a system in which a majority of women are literally threatened with destitution upon a husband's death or abandonment.

The marginalization of women's political representation into party wings and women's bureaus, their lack of education and limited employment opportunities, and their unequal status under the law have all combined to sustain male domination in the structures of African statehood. Women in Africa "lack the political and material autonomy that transforms individuals into full citizens."<sup>41</sup> To the detriment of their economies, the male-dominated one-party states have felt no compelling interest to integrate women into their national economic programs. Strategically, women have withdrawn from politics and the public sphere and have established their own informal networks to get on with the business of survival.

### Transformation to Multi-Party Democracy

The transformation to multi-party democracy currently underway in a number of African states holds unprecedented opportunities for women's entry into government policy-making bodies. No longer assured of re-election, the rulers of formerly one-party states now face open opposition,<sup>42</sup> and all candidates are dependent on winning support from ordinary citizens. For the first time in history, issues of legitimacy and accountability are being addressed by many of Africa's ruling elites. As such, women — who make up a slight majority of voters in many of these states — are being recognized by some political parties as vital components of their constituency.

This process of transition is still very young and is unfolding amidst tremendous economic pressures. Yet there are initial signs that women are galvanized to seize opportunities offered by this process, despite the overwhelming obstacles they continue to face. Three primary forces are working to encourage women's full participation.

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41. Robert Falton, Jr., "Gender, Class, and State in Africa," in Parpart and Staudt, eds., *Women and the State in Africa*, 49.

42. Examples include Angola, Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cameroon, Cape Verde, Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Ethiopia, Ghana, Kenya, Lesotho, Mali, Mozambique, Namibia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Togo, and Zambia, among others.

First, as mentioned above, political parties must win women's votes in order to gain power. Many are, in fact, fielding female candidates as part of an effort to increase attention to women's concerns.

Second, the past few decades have witnessed an enormous growth in women's associations throughout the continent. These development cooperatives, market networks, credit societies, and income-generating groups — both local and national in scale — have allowed women to join forces outside of the male-dominated political structure to address their own economic and social concerns. Now, these groups in Kenya, Nigeria, Zambia, and elsewhere are serving as vehicles through which women can exert influence on political parties.<sup>43</sup>

Third, the budget tightening policies instituted by many governments under the rubric of structural adjustment programs have in many instances hit women hardest. Due to the steep economic decline experienced by most African countries in the 1980s, governments have been forced to implement policies resulting in sharp increases in prices for basic foodstuffs as well as deep cutbacks in government services such as health care and free schooling. These cost increases have been born largely by women, and more than ever before women are experiencing the direct and dramatic effects of government policies and, as such, can no longer exist "outside" of the state. As a result, government actions have become of increased concern for women, prompting them to become more involved in national politics.

In very preliminary ways, the multi-party process is allowing women in some countries a greater voice in policy-making. There is evidence that newly elected governments are appointing a slightly greater number of women in senior positions. Burundi's new government has two women in the cabinet, a female economic adviser to the president, a female legal adviser to the prime minister, and a woman at a senior level in charge of the country's structural adjustment program. Kenya's new parliament has an unprecedented six women members, and more than 60 women vied for national and local seats in December's election after Kenya's women's organizations banded together and called for more women candidates. Cote d'Ivoire now has three women ministers, including the minister of justice.

After pressure from women's groups, Zambia now has one woman minister. Upon election in 1991, Zambian President Chiluba appointed four women as deputy ministers. Twelve women now hold parliamentary seats, and prelimi-

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43. In Kenya in February 1992, 4,000 women convened for the National Convention of Women, sponsored by six women's organizations. The participants called on political parties to field female candidates and adopt clear policies on women. The National Committee for the Status of Women set up a fund for campaign expenses of women candidates, although fundraising efforts did not meet expectations. In Zambia, the Women's Lobby Group gained prominence when the Carter Center worked closely with them to monitor national elections. They claim that President Chiluba contacted them — rather than *vice versa* — to discuss their demands for women's representation at high government levels. In South Africa, a protest letter signed by twenty-two groups was published in a national newspaper, prompting the ANC to establish a Commission on Women's Emancipation.

nary counts in Zambia's recent local elections show that close to 60 women gained local seats — three times as many women as previously. Upon taking office, Chiluba's government amended one article of Zambia's constitution that blatantly discriminated against women.<sup>44</sup> Action on some 93 laws identified as discriminatory by women's groups is being delayed until an official commission completes its review of Zambia's entire constitution. Zambian women's groups, however, remain frustrated with the present government's lack of women at senior levels and the continued prevalence of male-biased attitudes.

African women candidates are by and large running on party platforms that address the needs of the national economy as a whole. Within this context, they are often very aware of women's economic roles and the obstacles facing women. Nigeria's newly elected female senator, Kofoworola Bucknor-Akerele, is now the only woman in the 91-member senate. After her election, Ms. Bucknor-Akerele stated that her main concern is the economy. Her priorities include improvements in food production and crop storage — two areas that traditionally fall under women's responsibility and have too often been neglected. She said she would also work to repeal Nigerian tax and inheritance laws which discriminate against women, and support efforts to teach Nigerian women about their legal rights.<sup>45</sup>

Advances outside of the election process may also improve women's abilities to participate equally in development. In Cote d'Ivoire's multi-party elections in 1990, President Felix Houphouet-Boigny was reelected despite strong opposition from the Front Populaire Ivoirien (FPI). Throughout the campaign, FPI's women's wing sharply criticized the elitist nature of the women's wing of Houphouet-Boigny's party and its ineffectiveness in addressing the concerns of rural women. Amid this criticism, Houphouet-Boigny entirely restructured the women's wing. For the first time, regional delegates (to the women's wing) were elected by popular vote — thus enabling rural women to elect other rural women to represent their interests in the government.

At the same time, the president asked the World Bank's help in revamping the Ministry for the Advancement of Women. Previously marginalized within the government and lacking resources and technical expertise, the ministry was forced to lobby other bureaus for resources and technical assistance to implement the majority of its projects. Staffed by political appointees, the interests of the ruling party played a part in decreasing the effectiveness of its programs.

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44. Article 25 of the constitution previously defined discrimination as "affording different treatment to different persons attributable wholly, or mainly, to their respective descriptions by race, tribe, place of origin, political opinions, color, or creed..." The amendment added the word "sex" to this list.

45. On a related note, in Ghana, independent candidate Hawa Yakubu's constituency recorded the highest voter turnout in the parliamentary elections. Quoted in the February 1993 issue of *West Africa*, Yakubu states: "I believe we'll be effective because fortunately we're women. Personally, I cannot be shut up by anybody, and I believe I have a lot of influence among the opposition parties, as well as the party in government." (pg. 190) When asked what her agenda in parliament will be, she responded: "Women! I'll do anything to protect the interest of women in parliament!"

Now the staff is building its own technical expertise, implementing projects in agricultural extension, fisheries, and other areas for women. The short-term concerns of the party in power have been largely eliminated from the ministry's activities, as the focus has turned to gaining legitimacy among women voters through the success of development programs.

These and other examples throughout Africa point to some slight progress made in addressing discriminatory laws and integrating women into national development efforts, a direct result of the democratization process. However, tremendous challenges still exist. Relegated to the background of political life, African women — especially rural women — must find the self-confidence and support among their own communities to take prominent roles in political transitions. This process could be furthered through educating women about their rights under the law and supporting women's non-governmental organizations. Women who do declare their candidacy often face a pervasive male bias among the electorate and sometimes outright abuse from male opponents. Moreover, the concerns of rural women are not necessarily the same as women who belong to the urban middle class — and efforts must be strengthened to find common ground between these diverse populations of women in order to build strong constituencies. Finally, men — both those in and out of power — must be educated about women's essential roles in both the economic and social spheres.

Support from the international community for efforts promoting women's participation in these political transitions is vital for their success.<sup>46</sup> The greatest need, according to many organizations and women's groups, is the extension of voter education efforts to rural areas. Presented with democracy for the first time, women as well as men need to understand what the process entails as well as their own individual responsibilities in the procedure. Rural women, especially, may need to be assured and convinced of the relevance of this process to their everyday struggles for survival. Many groups are publishing pamphlets and travelling from village to village in order to offer this type of non-partisan education, some with the support of U.S. grants.<sup>47</sup> But more financial resources

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46. On the whole, most internationally-funded programs do not work to promote women candidates *per se*, but strive to strengthen women's groups to allow them to successfully carry out their own projects — whether it be supporting candidates or promoting the rights of women.

47. Other international programs include a grant made by the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to the group, Women in Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF). WILDAF is a regional network, working in 15 African countries to enhance the status of women through legal programs such as legal rights awareness, law reform, and legal aid. As such, it is at the forefront of endeavors to provide legal educations and build grassroots leadership skills among women. WILDAF operates on the premise that unless women in Africa know their legal rights, there cannot be any significant change in their status and level of effective participation in local and national policy decisions. A similar organization, the International Federation of Women's Lawyers (FIDA), operates in several countries providing legal aid, voter education, and other services to women. FIDA received funding from USAID for one of their programs in Lesotho, in which voter education materials were translated into local languages and distributed to village women.

are needed. Support should also be given to election monitoring systems to assess whether women are participating in elections on an equal basis. Women must be assured equal access to voter registration sites and polling stations. And above all, support for increasing education among women is paramount. Given women's crucial role in the development of Africa's economies, the opportunity to have women participate in national policy-making should not be missed.

