

"LET THE WOMEN SPEAK! AND LISTEN"

by Anene Ejikeme



Sustaining their families: these women farmers in Kano, Nigeria, have increased their income by planting high-yield black-eyed peas.

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In 1929 women in southeast Nigeria mounted a war against the forces of British colonial rule. The women targeted all the symbols of the new political order – the offices and homes of colonial officialdom, as well as its representatives. The "disturbances" and the demands made by the women at the Commission of Inquiry set up by the colonial government to investigate surprised the British. The women who testified before the Commission consistently demanded that women be represented in the new institutions which had been set up by the colonial government. More than 50 women lost their lives, but colonial authorities failed to appreciate the extent to which women felt aggrieved by colonial policies which rendered them invisible. Although the women organized and carried out this rebellion, it did not stop colonial authorities and missionaries from continuing to insist that African women were "no better than cattle and sheep" and completely lacking in agency.

"The assumption that African women lack agency continues to be the prevailing view."

Almost eighty years later, the assumption that African women lack agency continues to be the prevailing view about them. This impression is so often at variance with what I see, for example, when I am at home in Nigeria where, every day, I meet women who struggle to feed their families and to send their children to school, daily making decisions that help sustain their families.

The role of "Tradition"

Researchers and development workers appear eager always to point to "Tradition" as the reason for African women's lack of agency. Take, for example, the statement issued by a recent international summit convened to address the economic crisis in Africa.

"In Africa, the gender gap is even wider and the situation is more complex due to the cultural and traditional context which is anchored in beliefs, norms and practices which breed discrimination and feminised poverty. There is growing evidence that the number of women in Africa living in poverty has increased disproportionately to that of men."

This was the conclusion of the 8th Meeting of the African Partnership Forum (APF) in Germany in May 2007. The APF was founded in 2003 as a forum designed "to facilitate Africa's economic growth." The members of the APF are Western donor countries which give more than \$100 million in aid, multilateral institutions such as the UN, World Bank, IMF, WTO, African regional institutions such as ECOWAS, SADC, ADB, as well as the pan-African NEPAD and AU.

There is no doubt that there are many traditions in Africa that hamper women's ability to lead economically prosperous lives, but to point to "Tradition" as the root cause of African women's poverty obscures reality more than it clarifies it. First of all, there is no single "Tradition" which exists all over Africa. Secondly, what is considered "traditional" in African communities is often of relatively recent vintage and was colonially-generated. Foreign aid workers and African men are too eager to point to "Tradition" when excluding women from development projects. For

example, in Kenya, local men – and "development officers" – are often quick to insist that it is "untraditional" for women to own land. The truth is, of course, that individual land ownership is not "traditional" for anyone in Kenya; individual land ownership was usefully introduced by British colonial authorities keen to claim the most fertile lands for Europeans.¹



"Traditionally" men did not own land either: a farming couple on their land in Kenya.

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The idea conveyed when "Tradition" is blamed for African women's economic predicament is that African beliefs and practices constitute part of an ancient, unchanging way of life, not easily amenable to change. The reality too often is that aid and development workers assume that the existence of "Tradition" makes African women incapable of acting as authors of their own lives. Numerous studies now exist which point to the unwillingness or incapacity of development workers to engage African women in dialogue as a fundamental obstacle to the success of many so-called aid programs.²

Fundamental to any task of understanding Africa is the acknowledgment of the continent's diversity. Not even within a single country do sweeping generalizations hold. An absolute priority to ending poverty in Africa is to listen to the experiences and wisdom of poor African women.

As we acknowledge that "Tradition" cannot be the beginning and the end of any analysis of African women's economic realities, we must also acknowledge that the facts of African women's lives do not make for happy reading. The statistics, while

they do not capture the reality of women's lives in all the different contexts in which they live, give an overall picture.



Lower life expectancy for women due to HIV/AIDS: a group of women in Malawi in training to deliver home-based health care for those with HIV/AIDS.

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Of all the continents, Africa has the largest percentage of people living in poverty, with signs that ever larger numbers will be threatened by poverty in the future.

HIV/AIDS, for example, is leaving millions of African children as AIDS orphans. The HIV/AIDS epidemic, which is recognized to be of significant consequence for development, affects women in notably higher numbers than men in some African countries.

In Zimbabwe, Zambia, Kenya and Malawi, this has resulted in a lower life expectancy for women than men, a reversal of what typically

obtains.³ Although African women work longer hours, they own disproportionately less than African men. African women receive only 1 percent of credit facilities extended to agricultural producers. Yet, at least 70 percent of African women are involved in agriculture. A disproportionate percentage of African babies are of low birth weight, a factor closely related to maternal poverty.

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Ending Poverty?

How to end poverty in Africa? This question has become a staple of discussion for commentators from pop stars to world-renowned economists. For decades, the image of Africa in the world has been as the poor neighbor, always receiving charity yet remaining forever destitute and helpless. Despite numerous pop concerts, organizations with a plethora of acronyms, roundtables, meetings and conferences, poverty in Africa remains.

The most ambitious poverty-eradication effort to date is the Millennium Development Project, which was ratified by all the UN member nations as well as major donor and aid institutions in September 2000. Its goal is to eradicate poverty all over the world, especially in Africa. The Millennium Development Goals (MDG) explicitly recognize the centrality of women's economic empowerment to any serious poverty reduction program: the third of the eight goals is "to promote gender equality and empower women."

While it is clear that Africa will not meet *any* of Millennium Development Goals by the 2015



'To promote gender equality and empower women': UN Deputy General-Secretary Asha-Rose Migiro briefs reporters re new Africa Steering Group for the MDGs (Sept. 2007).

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deadline,⁴ it is important that the MDG acknowledge that development cannot take place in a vacuum. In 2005, five years after the MDG were passed and ten years before their due date, the UN issued a major report assessing achievements so far and delineating what needs to be done. According to the UN 2005 MDG Report, in 1990 44.6 percent of Africans were living on less than a dollar a day; by 2001 the percentage of Africans living on less than a dollar a day had actually increased to 46.4 percent, a goal even further removed from the Millennium Development Goal of about 25 percent by 2015 (MDG 2005 Report). Since 1990, millions more people are chronically hungry in sub-Saharan Africa, where half the children under the age of five are malnourished. (MDG Report 2005)

Despite these disheartening statistics, aid is certainly not the panacea. In the first place, "aid assistance" and "development programs" have typically discriminated against women. In the second place, attempts to incorporate women into development programs may be tempted to "bring women up to men's standards." The economic situation of African men is no model! But the strongest argument against aid is the fact that 30 years of ODA have produced little beyond huge amounts of crushing debt. In 2000, African external debt accounted for over 51 percent of GDP; by 2003 it had fallen to 49 percent of GDP. Such global figures obscure the particularly harsh reality for individual countries: for Malawi external debt was almost 200 percent of its GDP in 2006; for Sao Tome & Principe it was 350 percent!⁵

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Fortunately, in 2006 debt was about 25 percent of GDP for Africa as a whole. There are other signs for cautious optimism. For example, several African countries have reported economic growth rate of 5 percent or more for the last two years.⁶

A stronger economy is the only path poor countries have to get out of poverty. In 1980 Africa contributed 5 percent to global trade. By 1995 the figure was 2.2 percent. In the 1990s Africa was attracting 3 percent FDI. Compare this with 20 percent for Latin America and 50 percent for East Asia.⁷ On practically every indicator used to measure poverty, and in contrast to Africa's continued weak position, Latin America and East Asia have made positive gains, and this is no doubt a direct result of the positive gains in their position in the global marketplace.

Rather than idealistic slogans about making poverty history, we need to attend more closely to practical ways to increase Africa's share of the world market. Here, the role of African governments is paramount. Clearly, investors will invest only in places where profit seems likely and stability can be guaranteed. For too long, African regimes have failed to provide a climate attractive to investors.

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Kavira Nuaesi, now 26, was forced into a militia in the eastern DR Congo at age 13. 'It is not a Christian life there,' she says.

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Related to economic development must be the question of arms sales. Africa is awash in arms, from small ones to massive missiles. Armed conflict makes agriculture impossible and does not allow for the kind of stability that investors want. The number of Africans affected by armed conflicts is staggering. Between 1994 and 2003 more than 9 million Africans, mostly women and children, perished as a result of armed conflict. That's the entire population of Sweden. Much more than the population of Switzerland. No region in the world comes close to such statistics. In Southern Asia, the region next in terms of casualties from armed conflict, the figure was under 2 million. War produces not only casualties in terms of deaths, but also refugees and other displaced peoples. It will come as no surprise that Africa far exceeds any other region

in the world in its refugee and displaced populations. People cannot farm or run factories if they are dodging bullets or coerced to fight wars. Governments cannot invest in infrastructure if they use their country's wealth to buy military equipment.

It is almost impossible to imagine a world in which the arms producing nations of the world agreed not to sell to impoverished countries. Impossible to imagine, but what a world of difference it would make!

Women and Economic Development

For Africans, women and men, to become economically more prosperous, African economies have to be radically restructured. Most of the economies in Africa remain monocultures. There can be no prosperity for the majority of its citizens if a country relies on the exportation of low-value raw materials that are sent to other countries where they are processed and then returned to the world market with a much increased price-tag. Exporting copper or coffee will only make a few individuals or a multinational rich; copper and coffee alone will not a country enrich.

Greater diversification of African economies has to incorporate a more inclusive and empowered role for women. Today, individual experts and agencies all claim to acknowledge that African countries can move significant proportions of their populations out of poverty only if women are able to improve their economic lot. "Women in Development", from its start in Western feminist circles, is now a staple concept in all multilateral agencies. Yet the success of Women in Development programs has not been much better than that of development *tout court*. This is because too often a paternalistic approach persists and projects are designed without any consultation with the target women who are seen only as recipients.

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It is critically important not to make assumptions or to behave as if categories from Western societies can be uncritically used to analyze African ones. We have to be vigilant not to be careless in our thinking: too often, for example, education is treated by experts as a fetish. Because people are poor or "uneducated" does not mean they are stupid. The success of the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh provides one example that poor, uneducated women know what they want and will successfully implement it if they have the opportunity (via credit, for example). In my



West African women have long been familiar with microfinance projects: these Senegalese women are distributing loans to microfinance recipients.

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own research on Onitsha, Nigeria, an important center of trade where women controlled the marketplace in the nineteenth century, I found that lack of literacy was no bar to the ability of women to accumulate enormous wealth. Students of West African history are very familiar with self-help microfinance groups organized by women; such groups have a deep history, long predating the current "discovery" of microfinance in the West, due in large part to the award of the 2006 Nobel Peace Prize to Mohamed Yunus, founder of the Grameen Bank.

The kind of aid with which we are most familiar, involving "experts" going from the global north to tell people in the global south what to do, especially in the form of government to government monetary packages, cannot bring poor people permanently out of poverty. On the other hand, assistance which is conceived as a partnership and actually involves the "recipients" in the planning as well as implementation, can succeed. And there are examples of such successes. The Canadian organization, Match International, was founded on just such principles. According to the organization's mission statement, "Match supports initiatives identified by women in the global South, led and implemented by the women, and innovative in their context. This approach is based on Match's belief that women's development must be considered within their own context, and for strategies to succeed, women's views and agendas must be taken into consideration." In Nigeria, the organization Baobab for Women's Human Rights, has achieved notable successes. It is worth noting that, in one campaign, Baobab was forced to expend much energy and resources in asking women's groups in the global north to scale back *their* activities as these were negating their own local initiatives, threatening to derail the goal on which all were agreed. Baobab's activities have focused in the primarily Muslim parts of Nigeria, and under the rubric of "women's human rights" the organization has been able to address a wide range of issues, including women's economic empowerment.

A work that remains - unfortunately - very relevant is Barbara Brown's book *The Domestication of Women* which shows just how expensive can be well-intentioned but ill-conceived projects devised by men and women who "go to help" without ever bothering to listen or even consult with those whose lives are supposed to be impacted by their projects. Her book is a catalogue of failures spearheaded by various branches of the United Nations and other multilateral organizations. One tragicomic scenario involving the building of wells comes readily to mind: exasperated, "aid" workers abandon the building of wells because, despite all their efforts, local men do not maintain the wells as instructed. The fact that it is women who fetch water had

never been taken into consideration by the "aid" workers. The poverty eradication programs which have been shown to produce significant *and* lasting results tend to be smaller in scale and *always* involve the active participation of the so-called "target women". The point is not that large organizations are doomed to failure but that they must learn to listen as well as to acknowledge that poor people are not only students but also can be teachers. Women at the so-called grassroots level must be heard because only they have the intimate knowledge of their lives and needs.

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Conclusion

Who should speak for African women? Too often it is either African men or Western women. We need to hear more from the African women themselves whose lives we all claim we wish to improve. Also, we must incorporate the important critiques by African women scholars of the flawed categories that continue to be used to describe African women's lives and African societies. Scholars such as Felicia Ekejiuba, Achola Pala, Nkiru Nzegwu and Oyeronke Oyewumi have written about how the categories used to describe African women's lives often are derived from very different realities in other parts of the world and end up doing more violence to the women whose lives the activists/scholars claim they seek to ameliorate.

In the context of the discussion here, it is important to note that the UN Commission on the Status of Women has declared its theme for 2008 as "Financing for gender equality and the empowerment of women". In February 2007 the Commission convened an informal expert panel to discuss how to move forward on this agenda. It is disheartening – but, unfortunately, not surprising – that no African women were amongst the list of panelists; indeed the only African – the Minister of Finance for Zambia – was also the only man.

References and links:

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