

# WOMEN AND DEMOCRATIZATION STRUGGLES IN AFRICA

What relevance to postmodernist discourse?\*

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## INTRODUCTION

We want a world where basic needs become basic rights and where poverty and all forms of violence are eliminated. Each person will have the opportunity to develop her or his full potential and creativity, and women's values of nurturance and solidarity will characterize human relationships. In such a world women's reproductive roles will be redefined: child care will be shared by men, women and society as a whole – We want a world where all institutions are open to participatory democratic processes, where women share in determining priorities and decisions.

(Sen and Grown 1987: 80–1)

The vision for Third World women so well captured by DAWN in the mid-1980s, is one that many African peoples, especially women, clearly identify with in the 1990s. Following three decades of postcolonial autocracy and poverty, both internal and external pressures have finally led to the crumbling of the single-party regimes and the emergence of multiparty politics. For some countries, the long road towards democratization of politics and society has just begun. For others, civil strife and incumbent government resistance still make the situation uncertain. Nevertheless, the general mood among African citizenry is one of determination to replace dictatorial regimes with popularly and democratically elected governments. Popular struggles for democratization and development are everywhere the theme of conferences, seminars, workshops and even street demonstrations.

In Kenya, the repeal in December 1991 of Section 2A of the Kenyan

\* Editors: Nzomo bases her critique on a rather narrow interpretation of postmodernist thought. Some of her points, such as the issue of unity in diversity, are now being voiced by postmodern authors (see Introduction/Conclusion and chapter 10).

constitution that paved the way for the return to multiparty politics opened the gates for popular participation in what is now viewed as the democratization process. Numerous interest and pressure groups have emerged, all demanding to have their interests and concerns included in the new democratic agenda.

Women more than any other interest group have come out very strongly demanding that their voices be heard: that their gender-based interests be included and mainstreamed in the new democratic agenda and that they participate on equal footing with men in the democratization process. Women activists and scholars have therefore embarked on a massive campaign of political mobilization, conscientization and sensitization of other women (and men) on the linkage between gender equity, democracy and development. In other words, the struggle against gender subordination is being linked with struggles against oppression based on national, class and other identities.

The experience in Kenya shows that African women, regardless of their class or ethnic background, do not need much convincing about their subordinate status and the need to seize the opportunity presented by multiparty democracy to change that status. The issues and demands that pervade the democratization discourse that is currently in motion among Kenyan women include the following:

- 1 That the universally accepted democratic ideals of democracy be adhered to in practice, especially in regard to equality of women and men;
- 2 that women be equal and effective participants with men at all levels of decision-making. The major issue therefore is to lobby, mobilize and strategize for the election and appointment of gender-sensitive women in large enough numbers in all policy-making and implementing bodies;
- 3 that laws and practices that discriminate and oppress women be changed, as they deny women their basic human rights on matters affecting, *inter alia*, family life, property ownership, employment terms and conditions and all forms of violence against women; and
- 4 that development strategies be fundamentally restructured to redress the existing feminization of poverty and the unfair division of labor that places increasingly heavier burdens of production and reproduction of society on women.

### **POSTMODERN DISCOURSE AND THE ASPIRATIONS OF AFRICAN WOMEN**

Where does postmodernist discourse fit into these aspirations and hopes of African women in Kenya? Does it have any relevance? From my

position as an activist involved in the Kenyan women's and democratization movements, the relevance of any theoretical approach or perspective first and foremost hinges upon its practical utility in providing viable guidelines in the search for answers to practical problems of human existence and development. The concepts, ideas and arguments advanced must then have practical applicability to *actual* rather than *abstract* situations.

Although many of the arguments raised by the postmodernist approach may be relevant to the experiences of women in Western industrialized societies, I am of the view that they do not offer immediate practical utility for women in Africa at the present time, as they struggle for the enhancement of their status in the changed context of a post-Cold War environment and economic hardships. However, the postmodernist critique of modernization theories and subsequent development theories that have dominated development planning and analyses for Africa, is to a large extent relevant to the analysis of the situation of African women, as it highlights the contribution of these theories to the increased marginalization of women in the development processes.

But before discussing these two arguments further, it is important to point out that my analysis is based on the following (rather simplified) interpretation of the postmodernist perspective:

- 1 There is no such thing as a universal reality or explanation of societal problems. We must therefore abandon the search for universals and adopt a more pragmatic, *ad hoc*, contextualized and historically specific analysis. We must acknowledge difference while avoiding universalizing essentialism.
- 2 Even concepts such as *knowledge*, *justice* and *beauty* do not have a universally acceptable criteria or meaning.
- 3 Postmodernism therefore emphasizes analysis that focuses on the individual "self" and *difference*, i.e. separateness rather than unitary themes of *solidarity*, *coherence*, etc.
- 4 Postmodernism rejects the universal applicability of modernist theoretical approaches such as Marxism and liberalism, arguing that they are associated with the political and conceptual baggage of their era.
- 5 Postmodernism also questions the modernist view that *modernization* and *progress* are obtainable goals (Nicholson 1990).

Given these postulates, this chapter will illustrate why the postmodernist approach is not in harmony with the democratic ideals and strategies guiding women in their pursuit of gender-sensitive democratization in Kenya. It will also examine the relevance of postmodernist critiques of modernization theory.

## THE CONCEPT OF DEMOCRACY

Within the postmodernist approach, the concept of *democracy*, and the principles that hinge upon it, namely *social justice*, *freedom* and *equality*, cannot be treated as universal *ideals* or principles, but should instead be defined and applied only in the specific historic and social context in which the concept is being used. In other words, if for example, the Kenyan society wants to pursue democracy, then that democracy should be a Kenyan homegrown version of democracy, which does not attempt to derive its legitimacy or knowledge from a universal definition of democracy. Thus, from a postmodernist perspective, knowledge about how to create and sustain a democratic society should not be guided by existing knowledge on strategies and methods, but rather derived from Kenya's own experiences and local circumstances.

This is where the question of the relevance of postmodernist thinking becomes an issue in the African context. For while acknowledging that there are historical and socio-cultural differences that distinguish Kenyan society, it is difficult to justify a dismissal of the basic principles of democracy as irrelevant to Kenya, simply because they were developed in ancient Greece by political philosophers who knew nothing about Kenya. From past (failed) experiences with imported democracy during African decolonization, one recognizes the need to adapt democratic principles developed elsewhere to the specificities of the Kenyan situation. However, taking postmodern thought to its extremes would involve rejecting the outlines of democratic thinking and practice as they have been developed in other parts of the world. That is clearly counter-productive and naive, because it would require the democratization movement in Kenya, with its limited resources, to reinvent (rather than simply critique) established thinking about democratic practice and strategies of democratization.

For women particularly, their case for gender-sensitive democratization depends to a large extent upon their ability to convince male-dominated society that women's demands are well within the basic ideals of democracy and that these principles find support in the constitutions of democracies all over the world, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948), the Covenant on Human Rights (1976) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (1979). These are for the most part universally accepted legal standards of equality for women and men, which women in Kenya cherish as they struggle for equitable and effective participation and elimination of all forms of discrimination against them in the current democratization process. To remove the possibility for appealing to universal ideals would seriously diminish the strategies available to women for improving their position in society.

Postmodernist thought, as I understand it, does not have much to offer to the feminist movement now sweeping through Kenyan society. Women of Kenya feel particularly empowered to struggle for their basic human rights as women because they are keenly aware that the principles on which their struggles are based have universal backing and support. They are encouraged by the knowledge that their government has ratified the key international human rights conventions and hence can be called upon to honor its declared commitments. They are also encouraged by the solidarity that they believe they can expect to receive from the international community and other women around the world who also are experiencing various forms of gender-based discrimination. The postmodernist critique in this respect is not only irrelevant, but also if imposed on the current struggles for gender based democratization by African women, it could demoralize the emerging feminist movement and weaken the struggle rather than strengthen it. The danger, in other words, might be that this postmodernist critique will be used to undermine the Kenyan women's and democratization movements.

To further illustrate this point I will examine a key issue which the movement of women in Kenya is now contesting. This is the need for increased and effective participation of women in key political and public decision-making positions (Nzomo 1992). In the short term, women are mobilizing and strategizing to ensure in the near future women will constitute a *critical mass* of at least 30–35 percent of the total civic legislative bodies. One basic strategy to achieve this goal is to sensitize and conscientize women, who are the majority of voters, on the power of the vote and the merits of casting their votes for committed women rather than for men. The other related strategy is for women's political pressure groups to encourage and build confidence in those women with the necessary political will and commitment to contest political office in civic and parliamentary elections. Since the return of multiparty politics, nonpartisan women's pressure groups have been engaged in a process of capacity-building for women voters and women candidates with a view to increase the latter's chances of being elected into political office, and to enhance general civic and gender awareness among women.

Taken to its extreme, the postmodernist approach would be at loggerheads with the approach the Kenyan women are employing in their search for individual and collective empowerment. Postmodernism would argue that it is wrong to assume that women will, for example, vote as a bloc for other women. The assumption of solidarity and unity among women, postmodernism would argue, contains the danger of suppressing voices of those women who may have different views from those spearheading the dominant feminist democratization movement. This is a real danger, but the Kenyan women leading the feminist

movement for democratization would argue that they have no intention of suppressing dissenting voices, whether from women or men. Indeed, as a demonstration of the desire to encourage dialogue and sharing of diverse experiences and to create individual spaces for women's divergent agendas, two national women's conventions were arranged in February 1992 and March 1993, which brought together Kenyan women from the grassroots to the national level in order to deliberate on their shared vision of the women's agenda in the current democratization process. Since the majority of women spoke with one voice at these conventions, this was taken as an indication of *unity in diversity*. In other words, despite their class, ethnic religious and other differences, women agreed to converge around their common subordination as women and to work together for their collective political empowerment. This however does not mean that there are no areas of competition and conflict between women as individuals and within and between groups.

A high premium has been placed on political empowerment as a means to achieving other goals associated with the advancement of the status of women. The argument has been that if women are in key decision-making and policy-making capacities in large enough numbers, they would, for example, exert decisive influence to ensure the removal or repeal of laws that discriminate against women and they would participate in designing development policies that mainstream rather than marginalize and disempower women. While bringing more women into politics would not *ensure* such woman-centered policies, legislatures without women will surely never bring about such changes.

Thus, while postmodernist discourse would emphasize *difference* and *diversity* among women, African feminists are emphasizing *unity in diversity* as a necessary strategy for strengthening the women's movement, their solidarity and their empowerment.

### **GENDER AS A SOCIAL CATEGORY**

Postmodernist discourse quite rightly points out that women are not a homogeneous category, but rather belong to diverse socio-economic groupings based on class, ethnic or racial identities. Gender subordination is therefore not uniformly experienced by all women in the same way and with the same intensity at all times.

As noted earlier, women's struggles for gender-based democratization in Kenya, as elsewhere in Africa, depend to a large extent on group solidarity. Indeed, even before the emergence of the current movement towards democratization, Third World women have had a long history of attempting to empower themselves through women's organizations.

Thus while class and other forms of social identities are important, and can indeed limit the scope of participatory action, it is clear that when African women have broken through their socio-economic distinctions and spoken in unison, they have become a power to reckon with. Recent events in Kenya illustrate this point. In Kenya, women are constantly reminded that, being 52 percent of the population, power lies in numbers. And they have indeed on several occasions demonstrated their commitment to collective action in the current democratization struggles. A good example is the mothers and relatives of political prisoners who went on a prolonged hunger strike for a month in 1992, demanding the release of their sons who were political prisoners (Kiraitu 1992). The strike, led by elderly (one was then 83 years old) illiterate, rural women, received support from all Kenyan women (and some men) regardless of age, ethnic and class identities. The women's demands were based on their role as mothers and relatives of the imprisoned men. The hunger-striking mothers came to represent the vision and a viable strategy in the struggle for democracy in Kenya. Despite police brutality and repression, these women's continued defiance and determination to have their demands met, helped to strengthen the women's movement and its sense of empowerment. The similarities in strategies employed by these Kenyan women and those of the Argentinian mothers of the Plaza de Mayo are striking. Both groups involved ("traditional") images of mothering, i.e. caring for the well-being of the family, to oppose authoritarian regimes.

Postmodernism seems to have little relevance here, as it would dismiss or downplay the feminist solidarity that is developing in Kenya, which is challenging and uprooting organization and resistance based on gender-based oppression, as well as on national, class, racial and ethnic identities (see chapter 8 and chapter 9 for a contrasting view).

### THE FEMINIZATION OF POVERTY

I agree with the postmodernist argument that the habit of national/international development planners and aid agencies of lumping all Third World women together as one category, i.e. *poor* and *vulnerable*, is misleading and patronizing. However, it is important here to recognize and adopt the DAWN perspective, which notes that since the poor are the majority in the Third World and since women constitute the majority of the poor, development policy and planning that targets the poor would invariably impact positively on all women and society at large. Thus a development focus on poor women is quite appropriate, as long as it does not fall into the trap of overt patronizing and essentialism (see chapter 2).

In the current struggle for democratization in Africa, poverty among

women is quite rightly being treated as a central concern. The economic crisis of the 1980s and 1990s has thrown even the few middle-class women into the category of the poor. Feminization of poverty has worsened as the implementation of the World Bank's structural adjustment programs have undercut many of the advances made by Third World women in the 1970s and have increasingly thrown women into the ranks of the poor. Moreover, it is important to remember that many women who have acquired middle-class status by marrying wealthy husbands, have no control over such wealth and hence are only well off as long as they remain married. Since they are thus *potentially poor*, they find themselves in a particularly cruel and vulnerable class position.

At the national level Kenya, like other African countries, is poor by any standards and will continue to be so unless and until certain internal and external restructuring is carried out. To that extent then, the concept of mass poverty must be employed to underscore the general situation prevailing in the country, at the national, gender and class levels.

Thus in the struggle for democratization of society, the political economy of female poverty is central to women's struggles. Poverty among women is linked directly to the question of women's economic empowerment, under which the following issues are addressed in the context of democratization:

- 1 property relations between women and men;
- 2 credit facilities, technical inputs and support services for women in production and reproduction; and
- 3 an enabling environment for women's advancement in professions and careers.

These concerns clearly cut across class lines and, consequently, women in Kenya prefer to address them in the more universalizing context of gender subordination and the feminization of poverty, rather than as a class or any other group. In their search for a way out of the feminization of poverty, women in Kenya are now challenging patriarchy and in this context are particularly insistent about the need to fundamentally restructure existing laws, both common and customary, as these laws to a large extent legitimize and reinforce women's economic disempowerment. Kenyan women's groups are also calling for better knowledge of the law, and support for women who are challenging laws and socio-cultural structures and beliefs that subordinate women. In sum, postmodernist thought is not particularly strong in analyzing and recognizing the totalizing effects of global political and economic restructuring on the feminization of poverty in Kenya, much less in suggesting adequate practical strategies to improve the situation of women in Kenya (see chapter 9).

**WOMEN'S MARGINALIZATION IN DEVELOPMENT  
PLANNING AND ANALYSIS**

The postmodernist critique is certainly correct when it points out that modernization theories, as well as dependency and neo-Marxist perspectives, which have guided development planning and scholarly analysis on development since the 1960s, have not treated women as an important issue. It was wrongly assumed that women's status, experiences and problems in the development process were the same as those of men and hence did not require gender-based planning or analysis.

The development crisis we see in Africa at the beginning of the 1990s is to a large extent a reflection of decades of experimentation with theories and models of development which were manufactured in the North and unsuccessfully tested in Africa and other Third World countries. The trickle-down Rostowian growth model of the late 1950s and 1960s (Rostow 1960), was replaced by the basic human needs approach. Even alternatives to these models, such as the dependency and neo-Marxist models, relied heavily on Western paradigms. By the early 1980s, none of these "scientific" models had borne fruit, as Africa sank deeper into an economic crisis characterized by, among other things, high levels of external indebtedness. The IMF and World Bank then took over control of the direction of development policies of African countries by imposing the infamous structural adjustment policies as a condition for further development assistance.

In all of these changes and policy shifts, African women have never been given adequate attention as the major producers and reproducers of labor and national wealth. For a long time, African women as a subject of research constituted a marginalized discourse largely undertaken by social anthropologists who relegated women to the private domestic spheres of marriage, household production and reproduction. These "scholars" romanticized, underestimated and ignored a wide spectrum of vital roles played by women in the public and private sphere of their societies. Indeed it was not until the pioneering study of Ester Boserup (1970) that the role of women in development received serious attention. Her work highlighted the serious consequences of women's marginalization within development policies, both for women and for economic development.

Some progress has been made since then, as exemplified by the emergence of Women in Development, and later WAD and GAD, as legitimate fields of study. The UN Decade for Women heralded the increased importance accorded to research on gender issues by development planners and international development agencies. But as Parpart has noted, "WID policy remained squarely within the modernization paradigm" so that "while development planners called

for better conditions for women, most development plans ignored the need for fundamental social change in gender relations and the possibility that women might organize to fight for this" (Parpart 1993).

In the meantime, the intellectual divergence of Third World women from those in the North had already become evident by the mid-1970s. This divergence of North-South interests in research on women was first registered in the 1975 Mexico World Conference where women from the developing world took exception and repudiated what they saw as the patronizing attitudes and intellectual imperialism of women from the North (see chapter 3). The same sentiments were echoed the following year by African women researchers at a conference held at Wellesley College in the United States (Papanek 1986; Wellesley Editorial Committee 1977).

The creation in 1977 of the Association of African Women for Research and Development Action (AAWORD) was an expression of African women scholars' desire to articulate the African women's reality from an African perspective capable of yielding action-oriented policy guidelines that would bring about positive changes in the lives of African women and the continent as a whole. AAWORD (1986) then published some research papers outlining the type of methodology that could yield relevant data on and for African women.

The DAWN perspective spelled out in the 1987 study by Gita Sen and Caren Grown is yet another manifestation of Third World women's desire to define and explain their own experiences, their hopes and their aspirations from their own point of view, as subjects rather than objects of study by outsiders (see chapter 2). Postmodernist discourse is quite in harmony here with the vision of African and Third World women generally in that it underscores the fact that development planners need to pay more attention to the concrete realities of Third World women's lives. They need to discover the real as opposed to the assumed goals and aspirations of these women, and to seek out indigenous women's knowledge as a basis for their policy formulation and practice.

To the extent that postmodernist discourse is critical of the modernist underpinnings of many development theories and their failure to adequately address gender issues in Third World development, it does indeed have some relevance to Third World women's experiences and analysis.

## CONCLUSION

From the above analysis of the postmodernist perspective, and notwithstanding the relevance of some of its aspects as highlighted above, what strikes one most is that the perspective seems to question the very

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fundamentals of feminism itself. And yet, the feminist perspective is in my view quite vital if women's movements are to survive and prosper anywhere in the world. The postmodernist critique would indeed dismiss the current strategies and visions of African women whose struggles for gender-sensitive democratization hinge upon universalist feminist ideals. These ideals are manifested in the growing political consciousness among African women, which is leading to a strong sense of self-awareness, self-esteem, female solidarity and the questioning and challenging of gender inequalities in the existing social systems and institutions.

It seems to me then that it is postmodernism that needs to adapt itself to feminism and Third World conditions/knowledge if the former is to acquire significant and practical relevance for women, especially in the African context.