

## WOMEN, DEMOCRACY AND DEVELOPMENT IN AFRICA

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### INTRODUCTION

Central to any conception of democracy are the principles of freedom, equality and social justice. However, democracy, both as a concept and as a social, economic and political system, has, throughout history, been variously defined and interpreted both by theorists and practitioners. Clearly, democracy is one of the most overused and often misused terms.

Historically, as well as in the contemporary era, it has been used to justify revolutions, counter revolutions, as well as a whole array of socio-economic and political organisations of society. The French, American, Russian and Chinese revolutions, for example, were all executed and justified in the name of democracy. In 1917 U.S. President Wilson took his country into the First World War, with the imperative of making "the world safe for democracy".

It was in the ancient Greek city-states that the term "democracy" was first conceptualized, from the Greek word, *demos*, meaning, *people*. These ancient city-states, however, were strange examples of democracy as their version of it only benefited those who had inherited full citizenship, constituting only about 10% of the total population of a city-state. The rest of the people, who included women, children, resident aliens and slaves, were excluded from Greek citizenship. This despite the fact that it was these non-citizen groups who produced all the city wealth, while the citizen "class" simply engaged in leisurely and political activities.

The Greek conception of democracy and their practice of it then, only makes sense if viewed within the context of the slave type of political economy that then characterized those ancient societies. In that regard, the hierarchical division of labour and socio-political organization that existed was deemed to be just (and hence democratic), in as far as each person was seen to be performing the task(s) one was naturally fitted to do. Similarly, equality in this context was interpreted to mean equality for those who were equal, rather than equality for all.<sup>1</sup>

While acknowledging that the primitive structure of Greek democracy has over time been replaced by more "progressive" and "modern" versions of democracy, one is still struck by the gap between theory and praxis, even

among the so called "liberal" (Western) democracies. Indeed, a close look at the historical development of societies clearly indicates that all class societies, dating back to those ancient slave societies, have in one way or other fallen short in their practice of democracy. The class nature of these societies dictates that whatever the democratic arrangements existing at any one time, they serve, first and foremost, the interests of the economically dominant class, which has always been a minority. This defeats the majoritarian principle of democracy. Thus, just as under Greek slave society democracy served the interests of the ruling oligarchy, in modern capitalist societies, democracy is really a bourgeois democracy, serving the interests of the owners of the means of production, the bourgeoisie. Thus, all the rhetoric about constitutional guarantees of freedom for all and equality and social justice before the law becomes highly questionable in the face of what one observes in all capitalist societies today, namely, gross inequalities between the wealthy few and the poor majority, sexual and racial discrimination and unfair division of labour.

The main proposition in this chapter, then, is that democracy in a class society is an ideological weapon that serves the interests of the dominant class; that the dominated classes have, through history, been subjected to varying degrees of exploitation and oppression, depending on such intervening factors as the historical period, sex and cultural identity. It is argued that women, as an intra-class sexual category, have historically suffered and continue to experience the worst forms of oppression and exploitation, despite the central position they occupy in the production process of current and future wealth and labour.

In this connection, the development of democracy (or the lack of it) in post-independence Africa, given its Western capitalist origins, has not manifested itself in a significantly different manner from that of contemporary Western societies. If anything, due to the special problems arising out of Africa's colonization and incorporation into the international capitalist system, even the "standard" of democracy attained in the Western capitalist countries have yet to be realized in Africa.

In line with the above propositions, we examine in this chapter, (i) the historical origins of gender inequalities and consequent loss of freedom and social justice for women, (ii) the forms and manifestations of women's exploitation and oppression in Africa, with a view to demonstrating that, like many other contemporary societies elsewhere in the world, Africa is far from achieving genuine democracy on the continent, and, finally, (iii) some possible strategies for eliminating the existing structures that perpetuate inequalities and injustices.

nature superior to women is not only fallacious but ahistorical, and only serves to justify the existing gender, racial, class and other types of inequalities and injustices that characterize most of the contemporary world, all which are neither inherent nor natural. They are the product of the same history that generated the class structure of societies. It is within this historical framework, that the nature of oppression and exploitation of women should be examined and analyzed.

## THE NATURE OF WOMEN'S OPPRESSION AND EXPLOITATION

Beginning with the slave society, one finds that the economic basis of slavery gave rise to a social superstructure which defended private property and exploitation of all women, both slaves and non-slaves. In other words, despite the fact that the whole society was divided into two distinct classes: masters and slaves, all women, regardless of their class, suffered some kind of exploitation.

First the slave woman suffered the exploitation all slaves suffered. In addition, in her domestic environment, she had already been pushed to a second position behind her husband, in accordance with the patriarchal family set up. Furthermore, under the new division of labour arrangements, the domestic labour of women had ceased to have the importance it held in communal society. It was increasingly becoming relegated to a position of invisible, unproductive labour, as it was oriented toward direct consumption, rather than production. Even the slave men who did not own the means of production or any meaningful property, regarded slave women as their property. In this context, the slave women had often to endure exploitation and oppression in the form of sexual harassment from both the masters and her fellow slavemen. Similarly, while the woman in the slave-owning class suffered comparatively less exploitation than her slave counterpart, she however was also subordinate to her husband, as she also did not own any property. Indeed she was viewed more as a mother to heirs than another human being.

The situation hardly changed in the feudal era which superseded the slave economy. Characterized as it was by lavish and conspicuous consumption among the lords and absolute exploitation of the serfs, the women in this society fared no better. For the serf woman was subjected to long hours of unpaid labour in addition to sexual exploitation by both her fellow serfs and the lords. The woman in the landlord class also continued to experience subordination to her husband, mainly by being treated as a reproduction machine and an item of luxury consumption, deprived of any role in *social production*.

Under <sup>capitalism</sup> capitalism, the exploitation and oppression of women, though less crude and overt, has in many ways been just as severe as that experienced by women living under previous modes of production.

However, compared to the feudal order, capitalism brought with it a technological and scientific revolution which has to some extent enabled women, particularly in Western capitalist countries, to achieve and to exercise fairly effectively such rights as the right to vote and run for public office, the right to own and inherit property, the right to divorce and many others. Modern technology has also, to some extent, simplified the burden and drudgery of domestic tasks for women by making available (to those who can afford), labour and time-saving domestic devices and gadgets (laundry and dish-washing machines, vacuum cleaners, microwave ovens, and so on). In addition, the establishment of such social services as day care centres has reduced the burden of childcare. Capitalism can also be viewed as being more "liberal" than previous modes of production in that it gives "freedom" to the working class (both men and women) to sell or to refuse to sell its labour on the capitalist labour market.

However, a critical look at women's position under capitalism reveals these rights to be more illusory than real. For example, the labour- and time-saving technology such as the one cited above, is beyond the financial reach of the majority of women, particularly those in under-developed capitalist societies. Hence the problem of double workload, and the domestic exploitation of women, is not solved by the availability of these modern technological innovations. Indeed, under capitalism, women's role as domestic labourers increasingly becomes the site of their subordination. In this regard, capitalism even more than previous modes of production finds it necessary to legitimize and institutionalize women's role as unpaid domestic labourers and their subordinate status to men. This legitimization and institutionalization of women's domestic role and status, is vital for capitalism because it is through family structures and domestic labour that workers are reproduced and it is these same structures that reproduce a reserve army of labour that is necessary to ensure a regular supply of cheap labour. In other words, under capitalism, the sexual division of labour assigns to women not only the task of reproducing future labour on a regular basis, but also many of the activities required to reproduce living labour on a day-to-day basis. Even when women are drawn into socialized production outside the home, they are not thereby released from their domestic "duties", nor are they necessarily given shorter working hours in recognition of these duties. Wage discrimination which involves unequal pay for equal work is also often hidden in the segregated labour market which relegates women to lower jobs.

Further still, *End* due to the capitalist need to maintain the domestic role of women, education for females, both formal and informal, has deliberately been structured in a manner that makes its quality and quantity generally inappropriate and/or inadequate to gain access to powerful (in social, economic and political terms) positions in public enterprise. These points

are examined in greater detail in the following analysis of the position of African women in their society<sup>4</sup> and its implications for the development of democracy on the continent.

## AFRICAN WOMEN AND PROPERTY OWNERSHIP

In power terms, those who own and control the means of production can and do exercise control over those who do not. In a predominantly agrarian continent such as Africa, land is the basic means of production. Hence land ownership is used by those who possess it to dominate, exploit and undermine those who do not. In this respect, under contemporary land ownership patterns and customary laws operating in most African countries, women in general do not own land, although they may have usufructory rights over their husband's or father's land. This, in a sense, means that although rural women bear the heaviest burden of sustaining the rural (and urban) economy, they are, for all practical purposes, a highly exploited rural proletariat, stripped of even the right to a wage commensurate with the long and strenuous hours of domestic and agricultural work that they put in. This position of rural African women has grave negative implications for the development of democracy and Africa's political economy generally.

In the first place, despite the existing male-dominated patterns of landownership, the actual managing of the land is often left to the females as more and more men migrate to urban areas in search of other sources of wealth. Under these circumstances, the female heads of household are deprived of the necessary power and autonomy to plan and determine the production process on the land. They can only participate in the physical labour involved in agricultural production, often with meagre resources and limited skills.

Thus even if the female household heads wanted to borrow money to develop "their" land from a lending institution, they would be unlikely to succeed as most banks would demand collateral in the form of property. Similarly, due to the general assumption that households are headed by males, many rural households which are *de facto* female-headed are ignored and discriminated against when it comes to the provision of government extension services and credit facilities. This position was revealed by a study conducted in rural western Kenya.<sup>5</sup> It found that women farm managers experienced a persistent and pervasive bias in the delivery of government agricultural services to which they were entitled. This bias, it was observed, tended to increase in intensity as the value of the service required increased. In its concluding remarks the study warned that if the existing discriminatory patterns were not altered, the prospects for women's productivity and for increasing agricultural productivity in general appeared limited.<sup>6</sup>

Jennie Dey arrives at a similar conclusion in her study<sup>7</sup> of the lack of involvement of Gambian women in the rice development projects of that country:

“Agricultural development projects usually channel inputs to male household heads on the assumption that they control the land, labour, crops and finances. Failure to involve women in rice development schemes has not only increased their economic dependence on men but is also a major reason for deficiencies and low national rice production.”<sup>8</sup>

This particular system of land ownership not only has negative implications for rural economic development, but also enhances women's dependence and loss of autonomy. This trend is hardly conducive to the promotion of the freedom and equality of the genders. Pat Caplan in her study of the position of women in rural Tanzania concludes:

“Because many policies are based on the assumption that productive and consumption units are households headed by males, . . . there is the possibility that women will be redefined as dependants and thus lose much of their autonomy.”<sup>9</sup>

Indeed, among some African communities, the position of women on land has been shown to be deteriorating. In a study conducted among the rural Luo community of Kenya, Achola Pala<sup>10</sup> observed with concern that under the post-colonial individualized land tenure system, women's usufructory rights on the land were diminishing, particularly for childless or widowed women with only daughters.

The fact that women do not own landed property also means that they cannot acquire, as easily as men, businesses and real estate forms of property. Again the major constraint is the collateral required. In Kenya, for example, both public and private lending agencies such as DFCK (Development Finance Corporation of Kenya) and ICDC (Industrial and Commercial Development Corporation), look into such factors as land title deeds, liquidity and social status of the applicant. Consequently, many women do not qualify as applicants in their own right, as they have no land title deeds and very few possess jobs that give them the kind of liquidity and social status required.

It would then seem from the above that women's continued inequality, dependence and powerlessness, derives in large part from their propertylessness. Despite their central role in the production and sustenance of Africa's rural economy, they are held hostage by a reactionary patriarchal land tenure system that obstructs them from participating and contributing more effectively in productive activities and their countries' economic development. If therefore it is accepted that women in Africa need to be full participants in Africa's development, then a democratic environment should be created whereby women's participation will not only be in the arena of physical labour but also in that of decision-making and planning.

This in turn means that the existing social, economic and political structures which discriminate against women must be changed in a manner that enhances the equal treatment of the sexes in terms of access to opportunities, services and control of the economy.

This change is necessary because development can only occur in an atmosphere where the majority of the people exercise freedom and control over their destinies. As President Nyerere once put it:

“both political and economic power has to be held by the people . . . if development is to be in the people’s interests. People are the best creators and defenders of their human rights — including the right to eat. Freedom is essential to development and not just a product of it.”<sup>11</sup>

“Freedom” in this context, must mean much more than freedom to work. It must include freedom for all to acquire and control property. Freedom can also be enhanced through formal education and productive employment. But in these two spheres as well, inequalities persist.

## AFRICAN WOMEN: EDUCATION AND EMPLOYMENT

“(Human beings are) often respected because of (their) achievement, . . . Their occupancy of (certain) positions is justified on the basis of possession of relevant knowledge concerning the position and ability to execute what in their judgement rightfully constitutes the duties and responsibilities of the position. Any person, regardless of sex, may, therefore, aspire to any role and status and claim to have earned the right to aspire to it . . . on the grounds that the requirements relevant to the role are appropriately met.”<sup>12</sup>

What position they occupy and what role and status women are accorded in contemporary Africa is to a significant extent determined by the quantity and quality of formal education they have access to. Indeed, that women remain underprivileged and underrepresented in all important authoritative and decision-making positions in the African society is primarily a function of the institutionalized and structural bias in the educational system, which ensures that the amount and type of education made accessible to the majority of them is inappropriate and/or inadequate for participating or occupying hegemonic positions in public life.

Opposing this view, many African leaders and defenders of the male-dominated *status quo* have argued and even produced statistical evidence to demonstrate that female education has been very well taken care of in post-colonial Africa. As evidence, they show the high rates of quantitative increase in female education since the colonial era.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, much as one would want to applaud the African post-colonial leadership for making formal education available to more women than was the case previously, the fact remains that the educational structural bias favouring men against women has not changed significantly. Furthermore, African countries

continue to reward and allocate societal roles in relation to the *type* and *level* of formal education achieved.

In this regard, it is important to note that it is only at the primary school level that some kind of "equality" has almost been achieved in post-colonial education on the continent. The proportion of primary school enrollment in most African countries is almost 50:50 for boys and girls.<sup>14</sup> But the proportion of illiterate female population continues to be much higher than that of men. Thus for example, while in 1980, 72.8% of African women were illiterate, only 48% of African men were.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, the percentage of female school enrollment gets smaller as one goes up the educational ladder, reflecting the high drop-out rate for girls, particularly at the primary school level. Some of the common factors contributing to this include:

- (i) The patrilineal family system, whereby, when confronted with limited opportunities or resources for provision of education, parents generally favour the education of male children. Linked with this is the traditional belief that women's proper place is in the domestic environment and therefore, much formal education is irrelevant for them.
- (ii) Poor performance due to the fact that after school, girls have to help in domestic chores and hence have no time to study and, lastly,
- (iii) Pregnancy due to lack of sexual education or miseducation.

Thus, in Kenya, for example, only 27% of those enrolled in the final two years of secondary education in 1979 were female.<sup>16</sup> Apart from parental and societal bias in favour of male education, a similar inclination by the government has been observed in regard to the quality and quantity of education provided, particularly at the secondary school level. Thus, by 1979, there were only 107 government aided girls' schools in Kenya, as opposed to 200 government aided boys' schools.<sup>17</sup> The implications of this educational structure which favours boys has meant that, as government aided schools tend to provide a higher quality education than unaided schools, the secondary school level of education received by most female students tends to be of much lower quality than that received by their male counterparts at the same level. Secondly, educational opportunities for women are much more limited than those of men and, thirdly, since the level and quality of performance in the final examinations determine entrance to higher education institutions, training programmes and job opportunities, women are clearly at a disadvantage in all these respects.

In addition, as our educational institutions still retain to a large extent the sexist curricula inherited from the colonialists, female education is still oriented towards domestic roles and low status professions such as nursing, typing, primary school teaching, and the like, while legal and medical professions, scientific research, management and technical pro-



fessions are still patronized by men. In preparation for these professions, most boys' secondary schools emphasize science and mathematics,<sup>18</sup> while girls' schools continue to lay emphasis on home economics, cookery, needlework and religious studies. Furthermore, despite the fact that most African women end up as agricultural labourers, their school curricula do not include courses in agriculture. It is therefore hardly surprising that the few women who find their way to university are enrolled in the liberal arts subjects and only a handful venture into the more technical, science-oriented fields, such as engineering, medicine and architecture. Recent research has shown, for example, that while there are, on average, seven male students for every female student at a university in Africa, the average number of men for every woman studying engineering is seventy. In the natural sciences the number is ten and in medicine seven for every woman.<sup>19</sup>

Given the shrinking labour market for liberal arts degree holders in most African countries, if the current educational orientation continues, more women graduates than men are likely in future to be either unemployed or forced to accept lower paying jobs than their fellow male graduates. This is all the more likely given the fact that there is already an existing tendency to discriminate against women in employment. Indeed, it is not uncommon for employers to subject female employees to lower wages than their male counterparts doing the same type and amount of work, by, for example, clothing the same job with different names. Thus, for instance, a woman worker is termed a "clerk" and the male counterpart a "clerical officer" while, in actual fact, the two employees are both clerks.<sup>20</sup>

In any case, as indicated earlier, the majority of African women who gain access to formal education do not manage to go beyond primary school level, and, hence, their chances of getting any wage employment are extremely slim. Many are therefore forced to wind up in unpaid domestic labour as wives and mothers. Eliou has rightly observed that, "The road that leads (girls) to school is in fact only a detour which leads them back to the home."<sup>21</sup> And as Claire Robertson has aptly pointed out, the education received by the majority of African women is not only economically dysfunctional, but does no more than prepare them for subordination:

"If the substantial progress towards universal primary education has become dysfunctional for men, it has become a disaster for women both in terms of reducing labour force participation and increasing subordination to men."<sup>22</sup>

Apart from the bias in the educational structure, parents in many African countries still play a critical role in molding their daughters' attitudes in a manner that leads them to aspire to domestic roles and low status professions. Furthermore, in some African countries, notably Zaire, it has been shown that formal education has not only reinforced the differential treatment of the sexes, but has also facilitated the imposition

and the legitimization of Western sexism regarding women's roles. Thus while President Mobutu Sese Seko of Zaire claims to be a fervent believer in the improvement of the position of the Zairean woman, he at the same time insists that such changes in the female's position as should occur must be within the framework of male dominance, which women should accept without question. In his words:

"This integration of the woman, we want it at all levels . . . we wish to give to the Zairean mother the rights that her capacity of equal partner to man gives her.

But, everything considered, it still remains of course that there will always be a boss in every household. And until it can be proved otherwise, the boss in the home is the wearer of trousers. Our female citizens should also understand this and accept it with a smile and revolutionary submission."<sup>23</sup>

In a nutshell then, one of the major drawbacks to the development of democracy in Africa is the inherited colonial educational system. Apart from its Western orientation, its structure favours men against women. To this extent, it fosters rather than reduces gender inequalities and subordination of women to men. In particular, the inadequacy and/or inappropriateness of the education accessible to the majority of African women hinders their ability to participate on an equal basis with men in public employment, thus reinforcing the already existing discrimination in job placements and remuneration. A similar scenario can be observed in the political sphere.

## AFRICAN WOMEN: POLITICAL PARTICIPATION AND LEADERSHIP

"In a largely patriarchal world . . . brain and brawn are assumed to be bedfellows. Moral and physical courage are often conveniently confused. *The heroic in man is presumed to be a male quality. Great leadership is usually exemplified as a product of tough manly life.* Political leadership as we have in recent decades seen in Mrs. Gandhi, Mrs. Bandaranaike, Eugenia Charles and Mrs. Thatcher is a comparative novelty in modern society. A lot of excited and noisy surprise is made of the fact that the U.S. Vice-Presidential candidate for the Democratic Party (in 1984) . . . (was) a woman almost as if being female is incongruous with the position she (was) contending."<sup>24</sup> (Emphasis added).

As pointed out earlier, those who control the economic domain invariably exercise similar control over the political arena as well. Thus, political leadership and important decision-making in Africa, as elsewhere in the world, continue to be dominated by men. Despite the fact that female political participation at the level of voting is generally much higher than that of men, all available evidence points to extremely low female

participation at the level of holding public and decision-making positions. A 1985 report on women's position in Africa<sup>25</sup> noted, for instance, that in Zambia there has never been women Cabinet Ministers, university professors or directors of big companies, while only four women sit on the twenty-five member central committee of the ruling party two of whom are restricted to women affairs.

A similar situation was found to prevail in most other African countries, including Botswana, Cameroon, Djibouti, Malawi, Rwanda, Somalia, Uganda and Kenya. In the latter case, women constituted less than 3% of the Parliament whose term ended in 1983. Out of 28 Cabinet Ministers, there was not a single woman and there has never been one since independence in 1963. Out of about 54 Assistant Ministers there was only one woman among 158 elected members. In addition, out of 26 Permanent Secretaries, there has never been a woman.<sup>26 (a)</sup> Indeed, none of the many government corporations in Kenya had ever been headed by a woman prior to the 1986 presidential appointments.<sup>26 (b)</sup>

Even in the few cases where a few token women have held important leadership positions in post-colonial Africa, their tenure in those positions has tended to be short-lived, depending, as it were, on the whims of the head of state or corporate body that facilitated the appointment. Thus, for instance, the appointment in 1975 of a woman Minister by the then Emperor Bokassa of the Central African Republic was nullified a year later. A similar fate befell Uganda's first woman Foreign Minister and roving ambassador who was appointed to the two posts by the then President of Uganda, Idi Amin, and was dismissed and publicly humiliated shortly thereafter, for alleged promiscuity in her personal life.

One of the arguments often put forward to explain the apparent low participation of women in decision-making positions, particularly in the political arena, is that women are generally apathetic and demonstrate little or no interest in this regard. It is thus argued that they have no one but themselves to blame if they are not adequately represented in public decision-making positions. It is further pointed out that their countries' constitutions guarantee them equality with men. To the extent, therefore, that women are under-represented in public positions under such circumstances of equality, it is argued that this is particularly due to the fact that few of them offer themselves as candidates and, when they do, their credentials may be of a lower quality than those of their male competitors.

Viewed entirely from a theoretical standpoint, the above argument does have some validity. But then we are dealing with practical situations where, for example, constitutional guarantees of equality of all before the law do not count for much. Similarly, public positions are not always occupied by the most qualified persons. This is particularly true of electoral political positions where an individual's economic clout, and hence ability to employ illegal means to manipulate the electoral process to one's advantage,

may be the only "qualifications" the victorious candidates have over the losers. In this respect, most women candidates are likely to be at some disadvantage. Apart from the fact that the female socialization process does not generally prepare them for "cut-throat" politics, they are unlikely to be wealthy in their own right — given the property ownership and employment hindrances noted earlier. Consequently, they may be unable to display the same kind of aggressiveness and patronage as fellow male candidates. It is indeed partly due to financial and socialization constraints, rather than political apathy, that few women present themselves as candidates for electoral positions. Otherwise, if women were that apathetic, how would one account for the fact that many more of them than men turn out to vote?

Another factor that militates against women holding decision-making positions is the images and ideologies society has caricatured about women's roles. As it has been pointed out, each epoch in the history of a class society has based its justification of women's subordination and exploitation on certain superstructural social practices and beliefs. In this respect, the social attitude that regards women as being incapable of effective decision-making and as being the "weaker sex" (both physically and mentally) continues to persist despite the legal equality of the sexes. Indeed, this belief is widely shared by African leaders. A Kenyan minister, for example, in his closing remarks to an International Women's Year Seminar, found it quite appropriate to tell a female audience the following:

"I am forced to believe that the woman is lazy in her mind. She is too lazy to think. You women think and believe that you are inferior to men. This is what it is all about. It is a psychological problem and 99.9% of women suffer from it."<sup>27</sup>

Thus, whereas a man may enter a political or any other public office without much scrutiny as to his physical and intellectual fitness, a woman would first and foremost have to prove to all concerned that she is the exceptional one among her female kind. Furthermore, she is likely to meet with resistance from her husband, family and friends, who may feel that the game of politics too "dirty" and hazardous for a woman. Again, this reflects on the general paternalistic association of women with physical weakness and a moral innocence — traits that quite clearly are not unique to any one gender.

Given the fact that potential female candidates for political office encounter so much resistance and disapproval from the male-dominated society, one would expect the existing women organizations to sponsor and provide full backing to women candidates. But this is not the case. Part of the problem here lies with the structure and goals of these organizations themselves. Kenya, for example, has over 16,000 registered women's groups.<sup>28</sup> All of them are constitutionally non-political bodies and hence cannot legally engage in politics or behave in a manner which could be

deemed to be political. According to Jane Kiano, the ex-chairperson of one of the leading women's organizations in Kenya, Maendeleo ya Wanawake,

"We at Maendeleo would like to actively support all the women candidates we feel deserve to go to parliament. But as Maendeleo, we are *non-political and cannot therefore be involved*. I can only support candidates as an individual and my lone vote cannot do much."<sup>29</sup> (Emphasis added)

Mrs. Kiano was therefore of the view that Kenyan women needed a political pressure group, which would not only educate them on their political rights and responsibilities, but also initiate lobbying for issues that affect women and which male politicians never take seriously. But the ineffectiveness of Maendeleo Ya Wanawake and other women organizations in voicing support for women's rights is not entirely due to their non-political nature. Another problem lies with the organization's leadership, which tends to be divided between, on the one hand, those who have adopted an accommodative relationship with the government and, on the other, those who appear to be dedicated to the struggle for the rights of women.

This division and its implication for the Kenyan women's liberation struggle was clearly revealed in an incident<sup>30</sup> that occurred in September 1984, following a Kenyan women leader's conference, held in August 1984, in preparation for the July 1985 International Conference to end the United Nations Women's Decade. At the end of the former conference, the women representatives presented a memorandum to the Kenyan government, listing a number of social, economic and political reforms that they felt should be effected to allow greater women participation in decision-making and improvement in their quality of life. The list included the following resolutions:

- (i) All unionizable women workers should join trade unions;
- (ii) Women should be involved in decision-making processes;
- (iii) Discriminatory practices against women in employment should be corrected.<sup>31</sup>

As it turned out, the Kenyan government was not amused by this list of demands. Indeed, through the Minister of Culture and Social Services, it issued a warning to Kenyan women, "to avoid making statements and demands that could create problems for them". It also reminded them that "it was not wise to continue talking about (their) rights as indeed all Kenyans have their rights but do not talk about them". Furthermore, according to the Minister, "women had little to complain about as they were adequately represented in various fields in the country".<sup>32</sup>

Apparently, the government's reaction to the women's resolution scared off a section of the women leadership, with the result that the latter completely diassociated itself from resolutions reached at the conference,

arguing that they ridiculed and wrongly accused the Kenyan government of discrimination against women.<sup>33</sup>

Quite clearly, then, Kenyan women seem unable to stick together on issues that directly affect their basic human rights in their own society. It is indeed the conflict within the women's movement that is one of the major obstacles in their struggle for the equality of the sexes. One of the Kenyan women leaders summarized this problem as: "Failure by women to support one another is what denied them chances in decision-making bodies."<sup>34</sup>

Factionalism among women groups derives from the contradictions inherent in a class society. In this context, it has to be remembered that women are not in themselves a class or a monolithic group, as they belong to various social, economic and political backgrounds. There are, for example, vast differences in the aspirations and needs of the urban as opposed to the rural women. Indeed, for the illiterate rural women, the urbanized women leadership is as far removed from them as the national government itself. Given these differences among them, when women attempt to unite around issues that affect them as women, they become easy targets for manipulation and suppression by the dominant economic and political class, which quite understandably, is dedicated to the preservation of the *status quo*.

Another obstacle arises primarily from the high rates of illiteracy and miseducation among the majority of African women. Many years of societal indoctrination and psychological conditioning have led many African women to accept the inferior and subordinate status accorded them, thus inhibiting them from challenging the male-dominated *status quo*. Indeed, some of the African women are aware that they have the same rights and responsibilities as men in society, but they just do not have the courage and self-confidence to exercise these rights. It is this acquiescence, built sometimes on ignorance and sometimes on lack of assertiveness, that to a significant extent helps to perpetuate the paternalistic attitudes African men continue to have towards their fellow women citizens.

Women's exclusion from decision-making positions then is not only a function of the existing social and economic structures that discriminate against them but is also due to the prevailing political structures that manipulate and divide them by co-opting some and terrorizing the rest into silence or submission and which outrightly deny women the right to organize as a political pressure group. This denial is justified in the name of equality of all before the law, regardless of sex, thus making it unnecessary for women to struggle for an equality they already have.

The law, particularly constitutional law, is an aspect of the political superstructure that gives legitimizing force to the whole state machinery and consequently to many of the social practices that discriminate against women including marriage, divorce, property ownership, inheritance, education, employment and many others. Conventional law has also

helped to reinforce certain customary beliefs and practices of African societies in regard to women. The belief, for example, that women are inferior to men is reinforced by a law that exists in many African countries and which lumps women together with minors, thereby implying that they are still something less than responsible adults.

In a nutshell then, the laws, in as far as they give legitimacy to the existing political and social practices that discriminate against women, cannot effectively guarantee or defend the rights of female citizens. As one scholar has pointed out: "The laws are based on a formalistic and mechanistic ideology of equality which is oppressive to women by making their functions private . . . . and their movements and solutions non-political."<sup>35</sup>

Thus, although in theory the safeguards of democracy are supposed to be embedded in law, to the extent that the legal system legitimizes inequalities and injustices in gender relationships, the law can hardly be said to be promoting democracy.

## RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Much as Africa is characterized by democratic rhetoric, one is hard put to find democracy in operation here. Instead, one is faced with glaring inequalities, injustices and the absence of freedom. On all the three counts, women have experienced most intensely the effects of the absence of democracy. And yet, it is an indisputable fact that no meaningful development can occur as long as more than half of Africa's population continues to be denied the right to be full and equal participants in that process. The attainment of democracy in regard to the role and status of women in African society should therefore be treated as a necessary step and instrument in the struggle for national and continental development. It is imperative, in the interests of Africa's political and economic future, that women's contribution to the development process be fully recognized and rewarded and a conducive democratic environment be established to allow for greater female participation in public life. Towards this end, the following structural changes are suggested:

Firstly, since the institution of private property is the root cause of all types of exploitation and oppression in a class society, women's emancipation and restoration to their rightful place in society can only be fully realized under conditions where, at the very least, this institution is greatly reformed or, at best, abolished altogether. It is only then that women can become fully integrated in social production and realize their full potential in a democratic atmosphere. In this connection, one of the major changes that should be effected within the institution of private property is the abolition of the individual family as an economic unit. This process of change, which undoubtedly would be long and arduous, would culminate

in freeing more than half of Africa's population (women) from the drudgery of privatized domestic work, thus making them economically independent and more effective participants in national development efforts. The vicious circle, whereby if a woman engages in public activities she cannot perform her household "duties" effectively and vice-versa, will have been removed. Furthermore, democracy, at least on this issue of domesticity, would also have been realized.

Here it is important to point out that, although what is being recommended here is a socialist transformation, it is also being acknowledged that a socialist revolution does not automatically create equality of the genders. Indeed, most of the countries that have undergone socialist revolutions such as the Soviet Union, China, Cuba and others have not yet succeeded in abolishing inequalities within their domestic structures. This in itself is a glaring indication of the incompleteness of these revolutions. In fact, Cuba's Fidel Castro is on record as having openly admitted that the Cuban socialist revolution is not yet complete since "in practice, women's full equality still does not exist", particularly within the domestic arena.<sup>36</sup> Nevertheless, socialist societies have made substantial progress towards the emancipation of women through the removal of class oppression generally as well as through legislation and the establishment of programmes aimed at achieving real equality of the genders, especially within the household, by the time the implementation of the socialist transformation is complete.

In addition to the struggle for the elimination of domestic tyranny, African women need to strive for the total abolition of such reactionary African customs and traditions as betrothal, abduction, dowry, early marriages and domestic male supremacy — all of which keep many African women in a state of subordination and exploitation. These customs and traditions would be replaced by a programme of reintegration of the affected women into public life and social production by uplifting their educational and professional positions, thereby assuring them of a full participation in their country's political and social life. Towards this end, a political environment would also have to be created in which women can freely form political pressure groups and other organizations that would unify their struggle across the class, racial and ethnic divisions that often keep them apart. These organizations would have to be strong and revolutionary enough to resist co-optation and sabotage by reactionary forces.

As the changes suggested here are enormous and difficult and may take a prolonged struggle to achieve fully, it would be necessary to have a committed, dedicated and persevering leadership. In this connection the major part of the struggle would have to be vanguarded by the women themselves. In preparation for this role, African women would need to engage in their own inward battle for psychological liberation from the servile and defeatist mentality that most of them have come to acquire and