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The political economy of the African crisis: gender impacts and responses

Sub Saharan Africa is the world's most marginal region. Africa has for all practical purposes been dropped from world affairs ... The world's view of Africa is one of perennial famine, recurrent economic crisis, dictatorship, blatant violations of human rights and gross carnage wreaked by merciless warlords. Africa is perceived as a region where the pro-democracy movement sweeping other parts of the world has been aborted and subverted ... the very African leaders who have proclaimed their commitment to its realization have masterminded its subversion ... many northern countries wish Africa would just go away.[1]

To arrest Africa's economic decline, the new consensus prescribes glasnost as well as perestroika. Political democracy and free markets are the twin panaceas ... Realpolitik has doubtless played a part in facilitating the democratic tendency of the new consensus.[2]

By organizing to meet everyday needs, women ... are responding to the fact that they have been excluded

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1 Adebayo Adedeji, ed, *Africa within the World: Beyond Dispossession and Dependence* (London: Zed for Africa Center for Development and Strategic Studies 1993), 3.
2 Richard Sandbrook, *The Politics of Africa's Economic Recovery* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1993), 87.

Several interrelated issues that have emerged in the current revival [of civil society] go beyond the model of the historical origins of civil society in the West and therefore have important lessons to offer established liberal democracies. These include the conception of self-limitation, the idea of civil society as comprised of social movements as well as a set of institutions, the orientation to civil society as a new terrain of democratization, the influence of civil on political and economic society, and finally an understanding that the liberation of civil society is not necessarily identical with the creation of bourgeois society but rather involves a choice between a plurality of types of civil society. All these notions point beyond a restriction of the theory of civil society merely to the constituent phase of new democracies.[48]

It is to this rethinking that African studies should be directing their energies.

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[48] Cohen and Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, 15-16.

not only from formal economies but also from formal politics. They are ultimately redefining politics by seeking tangible solutions to problems caused by the vagaries of the market and the failure, negligence or outright repression of the state.[3]

INTRODUCTION

While recognizing that Africa is by no means homogeneous and the African condition is not uniformly grim, it is fair to say that since the early 1960s when most of Africa became independent, the continent has moved from crisis to crisis, characterized by varying degrees of political instability, economic and social decline in human welfare. Until the mid-1970s, the situation was manageable, and there was some hope that Africa could make the transition from underdevelopment to development. After the mid-1970s, the decline became even more pronounced and by the beginning of the 1980s had developed into a major crisis, the magnitude of which was manifest in debt, food, and energy disasters and prompted the Organization of African Unity (OAU), the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), international financial institutions (IFIS), and policy analysts to make policy interventions prescribing a way out. But some of these prescriptions only made matters worse. The deterioration in the economic and social conditions was such that for Africa the 1980s came to be known as the lost decade.

The structural adjustment programmes (SAPS) prescribed for Africa by the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) came with strict conditions,[4] which had to be met in the face of increasing evidence that they were on balance causing more harm than good to the African political economies and peoples. In particular, the deterioration in the human

3 A.M. Tripp, 'Gender, political participation and the transformation of associational life in Uganda and Tanzania,' *African Studies Review* 37 (April 1994), 128.

4 The SAPS of the Bank and IMF emphasized deregulation of prices of all commodities and services, large-scale privatization of public enterprises, and cutbacks in government expenditure on social services.

condition of the so-called 'vulnerable' groups provoked strong reactions from women and from UNICEF in a pioneering study that criticized SAPs for neglecting the social and human dimension of adjustment and overemphasing macro-economic issues.[5] Not long after, an ECA study reinforced UNICEF's concern and further underscored the need to shift the focus away from 'getting the prices right' to 'getting the people and the politics right.'[6] By the end of the 1980s, the IFIs had conceded the necessity of getting the 'politics right' but not of getting 'the people right' by improving the human dimension of SAPs.[7] Since 1989 IFIs and Western donor institutions have insisted on political liberalization as a condition of foreign aid disbursement to African countries. This new orthodoxy was justified on the grounds that: 'democracy will serve to keep the liberal state honest and attuned to the social interest and economic prosperity. Market forces will stimulate the entrepreneurial drives and productive energies that the dead hand of the monopolistic state has smothered or misdirected. The two goals are seen as indissolubly linked.'[8]

Getting the politics right in the African context has meant, inter alia, that the emphasis on state withdrawal from economic activity has been revised to include accountability and transparency in governance structures and liberalization of politics. By mid-1995, virtually every country on the continent had acknowledged the need for an environment more conducive to the practice of pluralist politics.[9] This has in all cases meant legalizing opposition political parties, conducting multi-party elections, and allowing at least some minimum space for civil society

5 G.A. Cornia et al, eds, *Adjustment with a Human Face* (2 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press for UNICEF 1987).

6 ECA, *African Alternative Framework to Structural Adjustment Programmes for Socio-Economic Recovery and Transformation* (Addis Ababa: ECA 1989).

7 World Bank, *Sub-Saharan Africa: From Crisis to Sustainable Growth* (Washington DC: World Bank 1989).

8 Sandbrook, *Politics of Africa's Economic Recovery*, 87.

9 See, for example, J.E. Nyang'oro and T.M. Shaw, eds, *Beyond Structural Adjustment in Africa: the Political Economy of Sustainable and Democratic Development* (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner, forthcoming).

groups to emerge and operate. But in many cases, political liberalization has not meant the end of authoritarian and repressive single-party state structures or fundamental reform of undemocratic legal frameworks. Furthermore, the combined effects of economic and political liberalization have neither improved Africa's place at the margin of the global economy nor averted the social, economic, and political crises described in the opening quotes. Indeed, most assessments indicate that Africa's political economy and society is likely to worsen before (and if) it gets better.[10]

In the meantime, the human/social condition of economic and political adjustment continues to be neglected by development practitioners whose singular preoccupation is to get economics and politics right. In particular, gender impacts and responses to the on-going crises in Africa and elsewhere in the Third World have received minimal or no attention at the macro level. The responsibility of placing the gender dimension of the crisis on the continental and global development and democratic agendas has been left largely to feminist analysts and activists. Even the 1987 UNICEF study, which placed women among the 'vulnerable' groups affected negatively by SAPs, failed to capture the impact of SAPs on women. Furthermore, those international agencies which have developed programmes to address the negative impact of SAPs on women and children generally tend to treat the symptoms rather than the disease. Their interventions are geared towards 'protecting the vulnerable' rather than challenging the conditions that create a majority of marginalized, impoverished, and disempowered citizens, more than half of whom are women.[11] But adequate documen-

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10 See, for example, T.M. Callaghy and P. Tiffen, *Short-Changed: Africa and World Trade* (London & Boulder CO: Pruto Press & Transnational Institute 1991); Adedeji, ed, *Africa Within the World*; and Sandbrook, *Politics of Africa's Economic Recovery.*

11 Shelley Feldman, 'Crises, poverty, and gender inequality: current themes and issues,' in Lourdes Benería and Shelley Feldman, eds, *Unequal Burden: Economic Crises, Persistent Poverty, and Women's Work* (Boulder CO: Westview 1992), 3.

tation now exists to demonstrate that SAPs have a greater negative impact on women than on men.[12] As Shelley Feldman has noted, women 'have been especially affected by the ... crisis and processes of restructuring because they represent a disproportionate share of the world's poor, are increasingly represented among low wage workers, and are forced to balance wage work with subsistence and domestic production in meeting household needs.' Women also comprise 'a growing proportion of de jure and de facto household heads who have the sole responsibility for meeting household reproduction costs.'[13]

The implementation of SAPs has indeed largely depended on patriarchal social relations at household, community, national, and global levels, which have supported the entire structural adjustment process and at the same time have created and/or strengthened existing patriarchal social relations.

While economic liberalization in general has had a devastating impact on women, it has been argued that the market and state are social institutions that have the capacity to promote women's autonomy and control over resources.[14] But, as Elson cautions, as long as women carry the double burden of unpaid work in the reproduction and maintenance of human resources as well as paid work, they are unable to compete with men in the market on equal terms.[15] As for the self-help groups that women construct as survival strategies, if they are to be transformed into instruments of empowerment, they have to be redirected towards women's strategic gender needs as opposed

12 See, for example, D. Elson, 'From survival strategies to transformation strategies: women's needs and structural adjustment,' and H.I. Safa and P. Antrobus, 'Women and the economic crisis in the Caribbean,' both in Beneria and Feldman, *Unequal Burden*; Maria Nzomo, 'Beyond structural adjustment programmes, gender equity and development in Africa with special reference to Kenya,' in Nyang'oro and Shaw, eds, *Beyond Structural Adjustment*; and P. Sparr, *Mortgaging Women's Lives: Feminist Critiques of Structural Adjustment* (London: Zed 1994).

13 Feldman, 'Crises, poverty, and gender inequality,' 1.

14 A.M.Tripp, 'Gender, political participation,' *African Studies Review* 37 (April 1994), 107-131; 'The impact of crisis and economic reform on women in urban Tanzania,' in Beneria and Feldman, *Unequal Burden*, 159-80.

15 Elson, 'From survival strategies to transformation strategies,' 37.

to family survival needs. Furthermore, the growth of households headed by women is not necessarily a sign of emancipation from male power, especially where patriarchal traditions are strong and women have few or no independent resources with which to work. In other words, such positions do not confer on women dignity, autonomy, and bargaining power. In a nutshell, Elson suggests that strategies at the level of the household and community are important but not at the expense of national strategies for democratizing the state and international strategies for restructuring the international financial system – both of which are likely to do more to enhance the survival of the poor than any number of self-help schemes.[16]

If Elson's analysis is applied to the responses of African women to the African crisis, one could argue that the majority of African women are too preoccupied with the survival needs of their families – provision of food, health, shelter, and education for their children – to pursue self-empowerment. But in her study of women's associational life in Uganda and Tanzania, Aili Mari Tripp argues that the informal activities of women in both countries are empowering and transforming politics in a non-conventional way. Her argument, cited in part in one of the opening quotes, suggests that small, informal women's associations can form the basis of institutional (democratic) change in Africa where alternative frameworks for empowering the people and shaping democratic change are generally lacking. 'It is thus possible, without romanticising such organisations or exaggerating their transformative capacity, to discern bases for institutional reform that would make political participation more participatory, public spirited and inclusive and make leadership more accountable.'[17]

Sometimes academic discourse creates the impression that something novel is happening in Africa with regard to women's participation in informal (or formal) survival activities. The fact

16 *Ibid*, 46.
17 Tripp, 'Gender, political participation,' 128.

is, from time immemorial, African women, individually and in groups, have engaged in formal and informal activities to meet practical needs and to assure the survival of their families and their communities.[18] Nor is the phenomenon of female heads of households a result of the current crisis. Women have often acted as de facto heads of households, because they are unmarried, divorced, separated, or widowed, or because they have spouses who are mostly absent and make no meaningful contribution to the family unit except as symbolic heads. And African women have participated in armed struggles and in resistance movements against colonial rule and have also responded in a variety of ways to the repressiveness and authoritarianism of the post-colonial male-dominated state.[19]

This being the case, one critical gender issue at this juncture in African history is the strategic role played by women, especially in response to the combined effect of economic and political liberalization in the 1980s and 1990s. Are women still reacting to crisis simply by engaging in more survival activities or have their movements and agendas been redirected to focus on strategic empowerment concerns that can contribute to the transformation not only of women's lives but of society at large?

Recent analyses suggest that several forms of response may be taking place in different African countries, depending on the goals of movements and the issues and situations to which they are responding. Indeed, in almost all African countries, it is not possible to find one cohesive women's movement engaged in the pursuit of one common and singular objective. Some groups organize around family welfare, others around professional advancement, and still others around human rights, political rights, and women's empowerment. Some women may

18 Khasiani and Nijiro, eds, *The Women's Movement in Kenya* (Nairobi: High-Tech Computer Applications Agencies 1993).
19 Nzomo, 'Shaping democratic change: the women's movement and the state in Kenya,' in L.A. Villalon and P.A. Huxtable, eds, *Critical Juncture: the African State between Disintegration and Reconfiguration* (Boulder CO: Lynne Rienner 1995); W.M. Kabira and E.A Nzioki, *Celebrating Women's Resistance* (Nairobi: Africa Women's Perspective 1993); Tripp, 'Gender, political participation.'

belong to all or one or none of these groups, and may, on an ad hoc basis, join or extend support and solidarity to any of these groups when a gender issue arises that requires gender solidarity in lobbying the state, especially on matters of legal reform and affirmative action.

In a general sense, but perhaps not in all cases, the 1980s and 1990s have witnessed a phenomenal mushrooming of women's associations all over the continent in response not just to regional economic, social, and political crises but also to global changes. Following the introduction of SAPs in the 1980s, women have had to multiply their survival activities to make ends meet. In most countries, women's strategic empowerment needs are not in the cards when the major preoccupation is simple survival, of themselves and of their families.

However, the glaring absence before the 1990s of women's movements which directly lobbied the state and sought change to the oppressive status quo needs further explanation than a simple statement that women chose to withdraw because the state had become financially and organizationally too weak to provide the services it once had.[20] Whereas the state's patronage power may have diminished with the shrinking of state financial resources, its coercive powers did not necessarily follow suit. If anything, with the introduction of SAPs, the African state became more oppressive and authoritarian, as it sought to enforce compliance by citizens who were otherwise unwilling to shoulder the burden and suffering brought about by the conditions attached to SAPs.[21] The state sought compliance through the control of civil associations, including women's associations. While such associations could engage in economic and other social welfare activities, African governments discouraged and even criminalized their involvement in political activities. This was generally the situation in much of the continent, until the dawn of political pluralism/liberalization at the end of the 1980s.

20 Tripp, 'Gender, political participation,' 125.
21 Nyang'oro and Shaw, *Beyond Structural Adjustment.*

It was indeed with the return to political pluralism and its attendant political space for civil society activities that more radical and activist women's movements began to emerge and to lobby the state with some confidence on issues of women's political empowerment and human rights and for a gender-sensitive democratic agenda. The distinct feature of the women's movement in 1990s Africa compared to earlier movements is its focus on women's empowerment and its democratization of state-society relations. The new women's movement seeks direct participation in formal processes and structures of decision-making and governance as well as direct lobbying of the state to institute legal reforms and policy restructuring, with a view to removing gender-specific discrimination, upholding women's human rights, and creating an environment conducive to women's participation in public life on an equal basis with men. In other words, African women are attempting to shape the democratic agenda in a gender-empowering way.

The rest of this article looks in more detail at some of the responses to the African crisis by African women's movements, especially during the political liberalization of the 1990s. Illustrative examples are drawn from Zimbabwe, Uganda, Tanzania, and Kenya. The focus is primarily on women's political responses, largely because of the particular importance women's political empowerment has acquired in the 1990s, but also because of its perceived instrumental role in the attainment of social and economic power.

KENYA

Although Kenya has so far been spared the worst forms of political crisis manifested elsewhere in Africa – bloody military coups, civil wars, and genocide – it has endured a highly repressive and autocratic political system which has tended to mask underlying political tensions, including politically instigated ethnic cleansing, assassinations and detentions without trial, worker and student unrest, unbridled corruption, breakdown of the justice

system, deterioration in social services and delivery systems, and so on. Both the former president, Jomo Kenyatta (1963-78), and the current president, Daniel arap Moi, managed to control political dissent and to repress social, economic, and political demands for popular participation until 1990.[22] Women have not only borne the greatest social costs of bad governance; they have largely been excluded from formal politics and centres of decision-making. Against this backdrop, Kenya returned to a multi-party system of governance in December 1991, and the first multi-party elections were held on 29 December 1992.

With its return to multi-partyism, Kenyan for a while relaxed its co-optive and repressive response to civil society groups, including women's groups, thus affording the women's movement and other civil society groups political space for dynamic, active participation in the multi-party democratic struggles of the 1990s. In the process, the women's movement demonstrated its potential as a formidable political force capable of seeking and influencing change to the oppressive state autocracy and patriarchy.

Nineteen ninety-two became the year of Women in Politics in Kenya, the year women found their voices which had been reduced to whispers by three decades of post-colonial state repression and autocracy. It was the year of gender solidarity when women put their differences aside and unified across class, ethnic, religious, rural, and urban divides to draft a common gender agenda for democratic change and female empowerment. It was, most of all, the year that political empowerment was the number one priority for women, notwithstanding the equally great concern for redressing economic and social injustices that underlie female subordination to men.

22 See, for example, J.A. Widner, *The Rise of a Party State in Kenya: From Harambee to Nyayo* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1992); D.E. Apter and C.G. Rosberg, eds, *Political Development and the New Realism in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Charlottesville & London: University Press of Virginia 1994); F.W. Holmquist, F.S. Weaver, M.D. Ford, 'The structural development of Kenya's political economy,' *African Studies Review* 37 (April 1994).

It was argued that if women attained key political decision-making positions in large enough numbers – at least 30 per cent of the total – they could ensure the removal or repeal of laws that discriminate against women at the social and economic levels. They would also participate in designing development policies that would bring women into the mainstream. The movement was responding to and seeking to redress more than three decades of exclusion from formal politics and socio-economic and political discrimination in law and social practice and of state repression and control as well as tokenism and co-optation of women's organizations. But unlike countries such as Tanzania, the proliferation of women's organizations and groups in Kenya cannot be said to be entirely a product of economic and political liberalization.[23] Women's groups began to proliferate in Kenya in the mid-1970s after the declaration of the United Nations Decade for Women (1976-85): there were 4,300 groups in 1976, 16,500 in 1984, and 23,000 by 1988.[24] What is new in Kenya, especially in the 1990s, is the number of feminist lobby groups that emerged – including the National Commission on the Status of Women (NCSW), the League of Kenya Women Voters, the Anti-Rape Organisation, and the short-lived Mothers in Action – and that were much more political in their orientation and more assertive, innovative, and willing to take political risks in the pursuit of the women's agenda. These new organizations provided leadership and greatly facilitated gender activism in the first multi-party election year. At the same time, many existing groups and organizations which had never before articulated a political agenda became extremely vocal and critical of government. They lobbied all political parties vigorously to integrate gender issues within the context of their democratic agendas and programmes.[25]

23 Tripp, 'Gender, political participation.'

24 Nzomo, 'The impact of the women's decade on policies, programs and empowerment of women in Kenya,' *Issue: A Journal of Public Opinion* 17(no 2, 1989), 10.

25 See Nzomo, ed, *Empowering Kenya Women* (Nairobi: School of Journalism 1993); Nzomo and K. Kibwana, eds, *Women's Initiatives in Kenya's Democratization* (Nairobi: Type Design 1993).

The women's agenda in the democratization process was drawn up at a national convention in February 1992 which was attended by over 2,000 women, some as individuals but most representing grassroots women's associations and professional and national organizations. The agenda sought to:

1 create a non-sectarian, non-partisan ideology for women, guided by the motto: Unity in Diversity for Women's Empowerment. This entailed creating a coalition of numerous and diverse women's groups and organizations; crafting a consensus and common approach to issues deemed fundamental to women's human rights and democratic entitlements. The first successful test of unity was the charting of a common women's agenda and thereafter demonstrating gender solidarity in the pursuit of other aspects of the women's agenda.

2 transform women (who have always been the majority of voters at national elections) from voting tools for male politicians into an electorate conscious of their power as voters and of the merits of electing committed women candidates rather than gender-insensitive men. To attain this objective, gender sensitization, legal awareness, and voter education programmes were carried out during and after the elections, primarily by the new politically oriented and assertive lobby groups.

3 build the capacity of women candidates across political parties through training on such issues as public speaking, fundraising, electoral laws and procedures, and packaging of campaign issues.

4 utilize strategically available channels, especially electronic and print media, to promote women candidates' positive attributes, disseminate and popularize the women's agenda, and, in so doing, seek public support and action by the state. Public poster campaigns promoted women candidates and influenced public attitudes on the gender dimension of democracy and politics and on women's rights.

5 use multiple strategies to lobby the state for legal and institutional reform, to remove gender discrimination and to

restore rights and freedoms. The strategies included using control of a majority of the votes to bargain with the ruling party and gender-insensitive male politicians to address certain gender concerns and to take appropriate action before the elections. Indeed, by giving major support to the opposition parties, particularly the Democratic party whose manifesto and governance structures in 1992 indicated more commitment to gender equity and power sharing than the other political parties, part of this threat was carried out.

6 use a prolonged hunger strike in early 1992 as a last resort to influence the state to release some 50 political prisoners held indefinitely in Kenyan jails. The strikers' demands were eventually met, but not before the women stripped naked, signifying a curse and an extreme form of defiance of the state's violent attempt to break the strike.

The reaction of women to their exclusion from formal politics was to seek to participate in all stages of the electoral process, including monitoring. Sections of the women's movement monitored the elections not only to follow the progress of women candidates but also in the belief that their participation made a positive difference in ensuring that the democratic principles of freedom and fairness were observed during balloting.

The outcome of the December 1992 election did not result in a critical mass of women elected to decision-making bodies. But there was a significant increase of women members of parliament (from two out of 200 in the previous parliament to six). But through concerted effort in gender, legal, and civic awareness education, as well as capacity-building of women candidates, the women's movement expects a significant increase in female MPs after the next general elections scheduled for 1997.

Although the issue of political empowerment took centre stage in 1992, other issues related to women's empowerment remain important long after the elections. Violence against women as a human rights issue has sustained a united response among women. Although the women's movement has failed to take any concrete action beyond public statements condemning

families. Life for the majority of women in Tanzania, as for their counterparts in other countries of Africa, is a constant struggle for family survival, under conditions of patriarchal gender relations that offload the largest burden of production and reproduction onto women in situations of scarce resources. Thus, women routinely engaged in associational activities geared towards family survival is not new, unique, or necessarily empowering. While it is indeed the case, as Tripp has argued,[27] that there are many local, informal women's groups that do not engage the state but are vital to the welfare of their communities, many of them have not yet moved from preoccupation with practical/welfare needs to strategic needs that are empowering and transformative. Shayo and Koda note, with regard to women's informal associations:

Much as these very useful associations do exist ... most of them have tended to promote welfarism and are hence non-transformative or else pose very little challenge to the status quo. There is for instance no grassroot-oriented initiatives focusing on advocacy and lobbying for political and legal reforms and transformation at local and higher levels. Even during this era of political pluralism and democratic processes in Tanzania, not much effort is being taken to exploit the space provided for more transformative political challenges. Most women therefore are politically conscious but largely inactive.[28]

Certainly the economic crisis brought about by SAPs and their negative impact on women led to an increase in income earning associations for women. Even professional women had to take on additional informal jobs to earn enough to cope with the rising cost of living resulting from austerity measures linked to SAPs. What is not certain, however, is whether these organizations were part of a *conscious and deliberate political* strategy by women to *transform* their everyday life situations and commu-

27 Tripp, 'Gender, political participation.'
28 R. Shayo and B. Koda, 'Women and politics in Tanzania,' paper presented to an Africa Regional Conference on the Empowerment of Women in the Process of Democratization, Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, September 1994, 24.

nities,[29] or simply a survival strategy in the absence of any immediate known alternatives. To be able to engage in a conscious political strategy, a woman must have a minimum level of awareness of her legal and gender rights and her civic duties and rights. For Tanzania, as for most of Africa, retrogressive sociocultural conditioning, illiteracy, and lack of rights awareness among women have been among the major obstacles to empowerment and effective participation in democratic change. One of the most important responses made by the women's movement in Tanzania, Kenya, Uganda, indeed most of Africa in the 1990s, was to establish programmes for training, educating, and raising the consciousness of women and men on legal, gender, and civic rights and obligations. Most of these programmes were set up after the return to political pluralism.

The situation in Tanzania has changed significantly since the introduction of multi-party democracy in April 1992. With the reappearance and reinvigoration of civil society groups, new forms of women's organizations are emerging as important actors in national politics. Unlike previous associations, these gender associations seek to participate in and transform structures of power and governance and to promote gender-sensitive democratic development and women's human rights. Among strategies employed are conferences, seminars, radio programmes, training for capacity-building, publications, and general political sensitization on such issues as democracy and human and gender rights as well as interpretations of multi-party political reforms (*Mageuzi*).[30]

The Tanzanian Gender Networking Programme (TGNP) was formed in 1992 to promote gender equality and women's leadership through lobby groups which would press for policy changes to eliminate gender-based discrimination in employment, education, and so on. One of TGNP's key objectives is to 'encourage the expansion of space in civil society for groups

29 Tripp, 'Gender, political participation,' 125.
30 Shayo and Koda, 'Women and politics in Tanzania,' 27.

and organizations of all kinds, free of top-down state control;
prioritize networking and solidarity, so as to strengthen coali-
tions among groups and organizations, whereby pressure groups
can lobby for policy reform and action at all levels.'[31]

In May 1995, a broader-based organization, *Baraza Ya Wan-
awake wa Tanzania* (BAWATA) was launched to co-ordinate and
promote women's rights in the context of the new democratic
dispensation.[32] Although it is too early to predict its future accu-
rately, the national mandate and objectives that it has set for
itself would indicate that BAWATA has the potential to bring
some cohesion and vision to the women's movement and to
galvanize Tanzanian women to become influential actors in
advancing their status and democratic development. The polit-
ical space created by pluralism has also invigorated a number
of existing women's organizations formed since the mid-1980s
such as Tanzania Media Women's Association, the Medical Wom-
en's Association of Tanzania, the Tanzanian Women Lawyers
Association, and several university women's research groups
Most are now lobbying for women's empowerment and the inclu-
sion of gender rights in the new democratic programme.

The women's movement in Tanzania remains fragile and
fragmented, more so than in Kenya, reflecting its longer history
of complete demobilization under Julius Nyerere's socialis
regime. Consequently, although Tanzania has seen the growth
of a vibrant women's movement since the early 1990s, it has no
been possible to replicate the level of enthusiasm and politica
dynamism evident in Kenya during the 1992 election yea
When Tanzania went to the polls in October 1995, few wome
had declared their candidacy. This is not surprising in light o
traditional constraints – lack of funds, multiple roles, politic;
inexperience, and negative societal attitudes towards wome
candidates – on women running for political office. Nor ha

31 Tanzania Gender Networking Programme, *Gender Profile in Tanzania* (Dar-es
    Salaam: TGNP 1993), 114.
32 *Daily News* (Dar-es-Salaam), 23 May 1995, 6.

the male-dominated political parties been particularly suppor-
tive of women's candidacies. Furthermore, there appeared to
be no common women's agenda similar to the one prepared by
Kenyan women in 1992. In a paper in which she poses the
rhetorical question: 'Do Women Have an Agenda in the Dem-
ocratic Process?' Ruth Meena suggests that it does not yet exist
and that there are many complex issues that need to be resolved
before women can effectively participate in the political and
democratic process in Tanzania on an equal basis with men.[33]

UGANDA

Within East Africa, Uganda has endured since independence
the worst forms of political crises, at least until President Yoweri
Museveni's National Resistance Movement (NRM) took over the
reins of political power in 1986. Uganda is also the country in
East Africa that has experimented with the widest variety of polit-
ical systems, including monarchy, multi-partyism, single-partyism,
military dictatorship, and the current no-party system. It also
made history during the regime of Idi Amin in the early 1970s
for having the first woman foreign minister, and in 1994 it
became the first country in Africa with a female vice-president.

Before 1986, the women's movement in Uganda operated
under a tighter leash than in neighbouring countries, with near
absolute control by the state. Although the Amin regime estab-
lished a National Council of Women by presidential decree in
1978 to serve as an umbrella organization for all women NGOs,
the groups lacked autonomy. And in the intervening war years,
the movement was subsumed in the political turmoil of that era.
But Milton Obote's second regime (1980-85) played a kind of
'divide and conquer' game with the women's movement. The
state-controlled women's wing of the ruling Uganda People's
Congress was used to manipulate the National Council of

33 R. Meena, 'Do women have an agenda in the democratic process?' paper
presented at a seminar on gender and development, Dar-es-Salaam, TGNP, 27
July 1994.

Women, thus further dividing an already fragmented women's movement.[34]

Significantly, even under Museveni's NRM regime, which claims to be more benevolent and gender-sensitive, the state has engaged in a similar pattern of controlling the women's movement and indeed driving a wedge between women's groups and organizations. The long-standing feud between the Directorate of Women Affairs, controlled by the NRM, and the Ministry of Women and the National Council of Women is a case in point. The Directorate, much like the women's wing in the Obote II government, attempted (apparently without much success) to manipulate the National Council of Women and through it to weaken independent women's NGOs. The Directorate was indeed instrumental in the National Council's name change to the National Association of Women's Organizations of Uganda. Furthermore, as Tripp has noted, the NRM's positive response to pressure from women's groups to establish a gender policy framework and institutional structures to advance the status of women in Uganda can be traced largely to the fact that the state had been significantly weakened both by the years of conflict with Tanzania and by serious economic decline. Thus the state 'was in no position to restrict private social and economic initiatives when it could no longer provide comparable services or ensure economic well-being.'[35] Furthermore, the response of the Ugandan government to the gender question has apparently been inspired not by a burning desire to promote democracy and human rights but by what some observers describe as the paternalism of the Museveni regime towards all Ugandans, from whom the state first and foremost demands obedience in exchange for services.[36]

34 H. Tadria, 'Changes and continuities in the position of women in Uganda' in P. D. Wiebe and C. Dodge, *Beyond Crisis: Development Issues in Uganda* (Kampala: Makerere Institute of Social Research 1987).

35 Tripp, 'Gender, political participation,' 128.

36 R. Kassimir, 'Ambiguous institution: the Catholic church and civil society in Uganda,' in Villalon and Huxtable, eds, *Critical Juncture*.

Despite the establishment of national women's groups, including a Ministry of Women and a political quota system to facilitate women's participation in key leadership positions, all is not well for Ugandan women. They are concerned about the same problems which confront their counterparts in Kenya and Tanzania: discrimination in law, gender violence, feminization of poverty, less than adequate representation in public decision-making bodies despite affirmative action, and low levels of rights awareness among women compounded by negative socio-cultural conditioning.

Thus during the 1993 elections to the constituent assembly, for example, women candidates complained of the extremely low level of gender and civic rights awareness among women voters. Women voters harassed and refused to support women candidates, either because they believed women like themselves would not make good leaders or because of intimidation and threats by male relatives:

women were discriminated against by the electorate on the basis of marital status or nationality of their husbands and also whether they were mothers or not ... a number of women lost because they were born in one place and got married in another ... the groups which expressed reservations and at times antagonism were largely composed of women ... Judging from public reactions it is clear that much as on the whole Ugandans talk as though they are gender-sensitized, many people cannot correctly perceive the rights of women as a fundamental human right.[37]

In response then to the specific problems that faced Uganda in the 1980s and into the 1990s and in a context of economic crisis and a paternalistic political regime that continues to resist pressure for pluralism, new women's associations have mushroomed and joined existing ones at both the local and national

37 C.O. Lubwa, 'Constitutional development: Uganda's case,' paper presented at the Association of African Women for Research and Development, Fourth General Assembly, Johannesburg, September 1994.

levels and are involved in numerous activities ranging from income-generating projects to legal and gender rights awareness programmes. These include the Young Women's Christian Association, the Ugandan Women Credit and Finance Trust, Action for Development, and the Women Lawyers Association. The latter two have spearheaded lobbying efforts for enhanced female representation in public and political decision-making positions. Museveni's Uganda has so far responded and performed relatively better than Kenya and Tanzania, although some women activists in Uganda are not satisfied with the overall quality of female representation.[38] But there are a few women members of parliament, such as Miria Matembe, who most agree adequately represent other women in parliament.

Women activists, who influenced the process and content of the new democratic constitution under preparation in Uganda since the beginning of the 1990s and made it gender sensitive, have also helped to draw up a domestic law bill that would give women more rights in such matters as marriage and divorce, inheritance and property. Indeed pressure from the women's movement contributed to a slight reduction in the minimum credit points required for women's entry into Makerere University in 1991 and ensured the introduction of sex education in the pre-university schools' curriculum.[39]

ZIMBABWE

Zimbabwe, which gained formal independence in 1980, also adopted political pluralism in the early 1990s but for all practical purposes has continued to operate as a single-party political system under the increasingly authoritarian regime of President Robert Mugabe and his ruling Zimbabwe African National Union (ZANU-PF). The state continues to be intolerant of and repressive towards opposition parties and civil associations.[40]

38 Tripp, 'Gender, political participation,' 116.
39 *Ibid.*
40 Sita Ranchod-Nilsson, 'From the margins of the state to the center of the cultural crisis: women and the reconfiguration of the one party state in Zimbabwe,' in Villalon and Huxtable, eds, *Critical Juncture.*

Zimbabwe has not only abandoned its commitment to socialism and the alleviation of social inequalities but has also abandoned its commitment at independence to advance gender rights and the status of women. In the 1990s, Zimbabwe has become increasingly intolerant of and unwilling to concede to women's demands for human rights and power sharing.

Women are not only marginalized in political and public decision-making positions but here, too, they bear the burden of SAPs introduced in Zimbabwe in 1990. In a report prepared for the African Women's Platform at the World Conference on Women in Beijing in September 1995, it was noted that SAPs in Zimbabwe 'eroded economic gains through cost recovery measures, women's condition deteriorated because market related policies reduced women's survival opportunities, marginalising them to the informal sector ... the 1990s for Zimbabwean women are characterized as years of stagnation and, in some cases, retrogression.'[41] Indeed, instead of responding to women's needs and rights, the state and the male-dominated society in Zimbabwe have made women objects of attack in a media- and state-orchestrated cultural revival campaign: 'Press campaigns against baby dumping and squatting/prostitution and "evil" women have implications for all women. The scope of the government's anti-woman rhetoric has become very broad placing all women under suspicion.'[42] It would seem that the situation for Zimbabwean women can no longer be described, as it was in the late 1980s, as a 'success story' in southern Africa.[43]

But despite government co-optation of a section of the women's movement under the Women's League, there are other women's groups and organizations in Zimbabwe outside state control that are lobbying for and engaged in efforts to empower

41 African Center for Women, *African Women's Platform for the 4th Women's World Conference: Summaries of Country Reports* (Addis Ababa: ACW October 1994), 91-3.

42 Ranchod-Nilsson, 'From the margins of the state,' 17.

43 P.A. Made and N. Whande, 'Women in southern Africa: a note on the Zimbabwean "success story",' *Issue* 17(summer 1989), 26-8.

women outside the state-controlled arena. Of over 700 NGOs in Zimbabwe, at least 100 have programmes on women's advancement and over 50 have woman-specific programmes. As in Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, and indeed most African countries, women's programmes have shifted from traditional welfare provision to more strategic and empowerment-oriented activities in, for example, legal literacy and gender rights awareness campaigns, civic education, advocacy, networking and counselling services for victims of AIDS and gender violence.

Despite state hostility, the women's movement continues its efforts. In April 1993, a coalition of women's groups forwarded proposals to the government for the reform of laws governing marriage and inheritance which clearly discriminate against women. Although the government rejected the proposals and labelled them 'feminist extremism,' this action by women demonstrated their determination to continue to lobby and struggle for gender rights, despite an undemocratic and gender-insensitive political and social environment. With regard to the current cultural onslaught on women, as in Kenya, Zimbabwe's women's movement could turn certain aspects of the male-dominated cultural revival to their advantage, for example by arguing that since women are effective 'ministers' of culture, health, planning, and so on in their homes, they have the necessary experience and competence to hold key political ministerial, decision-making positions at the national level.[44]

CONCLUSION

The attainment of democracy is a particularly difficult process for countries that are attempting to disentangle themselves from more than thirty years of institutionalized autocracy. Many efforts by civil society groups and pro-democracy movements in general may not appear to be effecting any positive change less than five years after a return to political pluralism in most African countries. Resistance to democratization by regimes of the

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[44] See Nzomo and Kibwana, eds, *Women's Initiatives.*

one-party era, aborted democratic transitions in some, and even increased political and social decay in others may easily lead to the conclusion that the African political, economic, and social situation is beyond repair.

In this article I have attempted to show that the situation is not entirely hopeless. There are countless individuals and groups of African peoples determined to get Africa back on track on the world map and, most of all, to restore dignity and rights to its peoples. Women in their modest way, operating primarily outside the centres of power but pushing hard to get through the door of public decision-making, are determined to make a difference, by first empowering themselves through their organizations and then using their organizational platform to shape democratic development at the household, national, regional, and global levels.

The women's movement in Africa, as discussed in this article, has indeed advanced and broadened during the multi-party era. Women are learning to use the political spaces afforded in the 1990s by the new wave of democratization to lobby for and demand the upholding of their human rights, to remove gender-based oppression, and to restore their autonomy. The unique ability of women to put aside their differences and establish gender solidarity makes them a critical social force in a country like Kenya, where the democratic progress is to a large extent hampered by politics of ethnicity, clanism, and idiosyncratic differences. It is because of their non-sectarianism that women's associations have demonstrated great leadership abilities and in some countries such as Kenya even helped to unite the fragile and fragmented opposition political parties. Women in Africa have also been in the forefront of the campaign for peace and reconciliation, in response to the politically charged atmosphere of African countries experiencing civil strife and ethnic cleansing.

Participation in multi-party politics in the 1990s has also increased women's awareness of the fact that incursions at the formal level of politics do not necessarily guarantee that

women's rights will suddenly acquire priority on a predominantly man-made agenda. Women cannot expect male-dominated party politics to create space for gender issues. Accordingly, in some countries, women have devised strategies that involve initiating alternative political spaces for their issues within their organizations and groups.

These alternative democratic structures led by women may contribute to the improvement of the broader democratic process and to institution-building. Indeed, despite multi-partyism, in many African countries women's struggles are still taking place in undemocratic contexts. It is a situation that affords both opportunities and challenges for the advancement of women's status and for overall democratic development in the 1990s and into the 21st century.