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AFRICAN WOMEN AND DEVELOPMENT: GENDER
IN THE LAGOS PLAN OF ACTION

by

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Abstract: The Lagos Plan of Action is the first document by African leaders that recognizes the centrality of women to the development process. It raises important questions about the status of women and calls for real change. Gains are being made, but the problems facing women will not disappear with good intentions or even specific projects. Sexual equality challenges one of the most fundamental aspects of human society--the sexual division of labor. To encourage change, development plans must acknowledge the link between women's problems and society. While the Plan goes further than any previous African document towards recognizing this fact, it still under-estimates the difficulties facing advocates of sexual equality in Africa and elsewhere.

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It was pointed out that actions taken during the first half of the Women's Decade were not enough, in spite of efforts which have been made in Africa...The steps to be taken to solve the problems of African women should not be marginal and separate from the question of over-all development...The strategies related to women adopted at national, subregional and continental levels should spread as widely as possible.

Organization of African Unity, Lagos Plan of Action, 111

Introduction

In 1985, the U.N. Decade for Women comes to an end. During that ten year period, development planners and government officials have begun to recognize the centrality of women to development, particularly in food production. Offices in charge of women and development have mushroomed and programs have multiplied. Some of the most pioneering development plans for women have come from African leaders, especially the recent Lagos Plan of Action. Unfortunately, progress is slower in reality than on paper, and women in Africa (and elsewhere) continue to be second-class citizens. To understand the Plan's limitations as a change-agent for African women and development in Africa, this paper examines the roots of sexual inequality in Africa and the reasons for its persistence. While discouraging--change will obviously be slow at best--the paper raises questions and suggests policies that could overcome some of the barriers to sexual equality in Africa and elsewhere.

Women in the Third World

African women work hard. They work in the fields, in the markets, at home, and elsewhere. They produce and prepare most of the food consumed in the rural areas.¹ In the urban centers, women dominate the informal sector, producing and selling goods and services. They organize informal networks to provide emotional and economic support, and despite little official encouragement, survive remarkably well.² Some women are professionals, working in hospitals, schools, and other institutions. A few even hold positions of authority in government and business.³

The hard work and achievements of African women must, however, be placed in the broader context of world gender relations. Women everywhere suffer in comparison to men. A report prepared for the 1980 World Conference for the U.N. Decade on Women concluded that "While women represent 50% of the world adult population and one third of the official labor force, they perform nearly two-thirds of all working hours, receive one-tenth of the world's income and own less than one-hundredth of the world's real estate."⁴

Women in the Third World are particularly disadvantaged. They are overworked and undereducated. Female literacy rates are half that of men.⁵ Third World women work sixteen hours to every man's eight,⁶ and yet account for less than one-fifth of the employees in industrial occupations. Those in wage labor usually work at low-wage, unskilled jobs. In the rural areas, many women struggle to grow food with little help from either men or modern technology.⁷

Africa, with its disproportionate number of the world's least developed countries, has a correspondingly high percentage of poor, malnourished, and overworked women. The wives and daughters of the elite prosper, but most African women have benefited even less than men from the scientific and technological changes introduced on the continent. Trapped by the double burden of domestic and productive labor, rural women continue to grow food with out-moded methods on scarce and decreasingly fertile land. Rural households headed by women (from 30% to 60% in many African countries) experience the most crushing poverty.⁸ In the cities, few women have jobs in the wage sector, and those who do are largely poorly-paid, part-time laborers with minimal job security.⁹ Some women have prospered in trade, especially in West Africa, but the majority struggle to support themselves and their dependents. Assistance from husbands is uncertain and participation in modern trade is held down by low literacy levels and the general tendency to give priority to men in recruitment to and employment in modern sector.¹⁰

The Underdevelopment of African Women

How did African women become so disadvantaged? In the early post-independence period, most development specialists blamed Africa's underdevelopment on the continued existence of "primitive, pre-modern" traditions. They assumed that modernization would eventually triumph, bringing material and psychological well-being for all. As both rural and urban poverty persisted, especially among women, development planners blamed women for clinging to unproductive traditional behavior. Women were seen as an impediment to modernization, an obstacle to be ignored or circumvented by those seeking progress for the continent.¹¹

In recent years, this view has come under attack. Scholars have discovered that African women frequently had higher status and more economic autonomy in precolonial Africa than they have today. In Zambia, for example, Maud Shimwaayi Muntemba discovered that, "During the precolonial period, female participation and productivity in agriculture were higher than that of men. The means of production, land tenure, and the social structure allowed women some measure of economic independence."¹² In most parts of Africa, women had greater access to land, more control over their produce, more political authority and greater protection in family disputes than they do now.¹³ The decline in the status of African women has been most dramatic in the colonial and post-colonial periods. We need to ask the question why.

Scholars now recognize that colonialism actually reduced the status of African women, that African women experienced a substantial loss in both their economic and political status during the colonial period. The principle reason for this decline lies in the interaction between African patriarchy and colonial policy. Colonial policies were created and carried out by men who had internalized western gender stereotypes. They assumed African women, like women in Europe, belonged in the domestic domain; economic and political matters were the business of men. African women farmers were dismissed as mere subsistence food producers.¹⁴ When colonial officials wanted to encourage African cash crop production, they turned to men, offering them technical training and assistance. Women were ignored. In the 1920s, Kenyan officials even predicted that males with oxen would eventually replace all female farm labor.¹⁵ When land rights were reorganized, the "legitimate" heads of households, namely men, received the land titles. Women's institutions and women's rights began to disappear, while African patriarchal institutions and rights flourished. African men, who benefited from these changes, did little to oppose them.¹⁶

Women suffered most in the countryside. In areas dominated by the migrant labor system, colonial employers refused to accommodate women and children at the workplace, and so they were left to fend for themselves in the reserves. Women struggled to produce food on infertile overcrowded land with inadequate help. Wage remittances were small and irregular. Conditions for women were not much better in cash cropping areas. Women often produced cash crops without reaping the profits, while, of course, continuing to grow food and perform domestic duties for the family. Marjorie Mbilinyi reports that in Tanzania, "rich peasant wives...often lived like poor women, not sharing in the wealth they created."¹⁷ In Zambia, Muntemba discovered that men "uniformly and consistently returned only a small proportion of agricultural income to their wives, in amounts varying between one-tenth and one-quarter of the total income." Some women turned to gathering for survival; food production decreased and hunger became more common.¹⁸

While traditional structures protected most women from absolute starvation in the rural areas, rural life was far from easy. Pushed by patriarchal authority and the drudgery of rural life, and pulled by rumored economic and social opportunities in the towns, many enterprising women voted with their feet and moved to the urban areas. Despite frequent hostility from government officials and chiefs, African women managed to get to town and once there support themselves. Of course, some of the women found men to support them, but this was always uncertain--divorce and desertion were common.¹⁹ Women recognized the need for economic independence and fought for it. Educational barriers limited their opportunities for white collar jobs, and all but the most unskilled and irregular wage labor remained a male preserve. Women were shunted into the informal sector where they sold goods and services, including their bodies. Some became wealthy, especially the market women in West Africa, but the majority worked long hours just to make ends meet. The few success stories should not lead us to underestimate the problems facing the majority of

African women in colonial towns. Limited access to education and wage employment hindered female advancement and led to increasing divergence between the status and future possibilities of men and women in colonial society.²⁰

When colonial development planners introduced some training for African women in the 1950s, it focused on domestic science. Mission and government educators supported this specialization because it reinforced "proper" feminine roles, namely being good wives and mothers. Home care and mothering thus became one of the few legitimate female occupations, locking women ever more tightly to the domestic sphere. The preoccupation with domestic science also legitimized the male monopoly over education in the technical and liberal arts and, consequently, wage labor. Female education in colonial Africa thus constructed new sexist ideologies that matched skills and knowledge to the sexual division of labor being developed in the labor market.²¹

Women in Post-colonial Africa

With independence, African women hoped for a better life. They had fought for independence and expected some rewards. Instead, for the most part, conditions for women have remained the same or worsened. Despite extravagant rhetoric supporting sexual equality, African political and economic institutions continue to be dominated by men. Modern political roles are supposed to be "sex-blind," but in reality, women rarely hold important political positions. On the village and community level, traditional women's organizations are being revitalized and new associations are emerging, but the national political level remains almost exclusively single-sex. Political ideology and structure do not alter this picture; countries as different as Tanzania and Nigeria have male-dominated political elites.²²

Women also rarely hold important economic positions in Africa. Very few women manage industries. In 1968, only nine women in Nigeria held managerial positions in the private sector in comparison to 181 men. The percentage of female managers has changed little since then. With the exception of those women in traditionally female-dominated occupations such as nursing or teaching, few African women have entered the professions. In 1966, only 2.9% of all professionals in Nigeria were women.²³ Ten years later those percentages had increased only slightly. In 1976, only 5% of the lawyers, physicians, and engineers in Kenya were women. Men have continued to dominate wage labor as well. In 1979, less than 15% of modern wage workers in Ghana, Kenya and Zambia were women. The percentage in Muslim areas has been even lower.²⁴ And, as in other parts of the world, even when women workers have equivalent education and work experience, they receive consistently lower wages than men.²⁵

In the urban informal sector, some women have fared better, but here again, the majority still eke out a precarious existence. In Yorubaland, for instance, women dominate the open market and many have retail stores, but men own the more capital-intensive shops. In Islamic areas, female economic activities are limited by purdah.²⁶ In central and eastern

Africa, women are increasingly active in trade, but usually on a small scale. Ilsa Schuster discovered that most female traders in Lusaka, Zambia, traded to survive, meaning "for food to fill stomachs, clothes to protect modesty, and, if they are unmarried, [for] a crude form of shelter".²⁷ In Uganda, many urban women perform several jobs in order to survive. While marveling at her informants' determination, Obbo discovered that most urban women in Uganda are poor and disorganized. Some have set up successful cooperatives, which help to some extent but cannot overcome women's limited access to education, credit, and influence.²⁸ Similar situations exist in other parts of Africa. In Zaire, the urban centers are swamped by the growing army of unemployed men. Fierce competition for jobs has driven many women into prostitution, one of the few occupations still dominated by women.²⁹

In the rural areas, women continue to bear the brunt of both subsistence food production and domestic labor. In 1975, a U.N. study estimated that women in Africa supply seventy percent of the work of food production, fifty percent in domestic food storage, one hundred percent in food processing, fifty percent in animal husbandry and sixty percent in marketing.³⁰ Most carry out these duties with outmoded equipment and little help. In Tanzania, for example, a recent study discovered that out of ninety households, ninety percent of the women used hoes for food production, while the same households used ox-drawn plows for cash crop production. Female-headed households continue to be in the poorest sectors of society, and in some areas of Africa as many as thirty to sixty percent of rural households fall into this category.³¹ Women with husbands are not necessarily better off. As in the colonial period, women participate in family cash crop production, but rarely control the profits. This inhibits their capacity to accumulate capital and increases their vulnerability to divorce.³² Female-run cooperatives help but cannot substitute for the lack of training and credit.³³

The reasons for continuing sexual inequality in Africa are complex. Independent African governments were taken over by elite males--men who had been educated in colonial schools and, therefore, exposed to Western gender stereotypes. Most of these men believed women should run the home, not government or business. African leaders glorified women as wives and mothers, not as independent actors. Single women have often been unfairly designated as prostitutes, and legal rights for single women, including widows and divorcees, have generally declined.³⁴ Although there are exceptions, especially in West Africa, most African men have done little to challenge these inequalities. In fact, the evidence suggests widespread support for maintaining patriarchal privileges gained during the colonial period. It is not surprising that, according to Christine Obbo, many African men view economic autonomy for women as a zero-sum situation "in which the women acquired autonomy while the men lost control over women."³⁵ Her work, and that of many others, reveals an ongoing struggle between African men and women, a struggle intensified by the recent economic crisis and the persistence of patriarchal ideology.³⁶

Development agencies from the industrial countries have not worked to improve the situation. Most agencies are dominated by men and have policies and programs that reflect the Western gender stereotypes of their creators. As a result, African government and development agencies have behaved much like officials in the colonial period. Despite the facts that many African households are headed by women and that African women are the major food producers on the continent, agricultural programs have been designed by men for men. Agricultural training and loans are given to men far more often than to women. In Kenya, for example, Kathleen Staudt found that over ninety-eight percent of the agricultural staff in a district of western Kenya were men and that these men favored male farmers. In Shikulu district, which offered few services, the productivity of women farm managers either surpassed or equaled male farmers. Yet in the Shitoli sublocation, which had more agricultural staff members, female productivity declined. Farms with a man present were four times more likely to have a household member trained and fourteen times more likely to have acquired loans, applied for loans, or have detailed awareness of loan application procedures. Subsistence farms with a man present were twice as apt to receive three or more services than similar farms managed by women. Capable women are ignored for non-innovative men. Muntemba reported equivalent findings for Zambia.³⁷ In many parts of Africa, official policy has made it harder for women to buy land, hire labor, and improve farming techniques. Even where women are legally free to do so, limited access to credit and training inhibits women farmers. As a result, female productivity has suffered while work loads have increased. Thus, development agencies have unwittingly contributed to widening the gap between female and male prosperity levels, and, consequently, to increasing female vulnerability and dependence on men. This has not been seen as a problem by most development specialists, who are accustomed to Western models that promote female dependency as an ideal.³⁸

Educational opportunities for African women have improved somewhat since independence, but unfortunately they usually reinforce the sexual division of labor established under colonialism. Women are rarely trained to enter the modern wage economy. Female literacy remains low. The higher the level of education, the fewer women students.³⁹ In almost all African countries, the ratio of females to males enrolled in secondary education is less than thirty-five percent; the ratio is less than twenty percent at higher levels.⁴⁰ The training that is available tends to shunt women in traditionally female occupations such as health care (especially nursing), domestic science and primary school teaching.⁴¹ These professions are important, but women will remain ghettoized and powerless if they are denied access to occupations with higher incomes and greater influence in national policy-making.

New Directions: The International Decade for Women

As the goals of Third World development plans failed to be met in the 1970s, development planners, government officials and intellectuals began to recognize the link between these failures, particularly in food production

and population control, and the declining status of women. Development agencies belatedly recognized women as producers as well as reproducers and, consequently, as participants in growth. Planners began to realize that they had ignored key economic actors in the development process. In order to begin redressing this imbalance, the United Nations designated 1975 as International Women's Year (IWY), declared 1975-1985 the International Decade for Women, and approved resolutions and an international treaty outlawing discrimination against women. An international research and training institute (INSTRAW) was established and two international conferences have been held under U.N. auspices: the World Conference of the International Women's Year held at Mexico City in 1975 and the World Conference of the United Nations Decade for Women (the mid-decade conference) held at Copenhagen in 1980. Long lists of specific recommendations were made at each conference, and national governments were exhorted to take up the challenges posed by these recommendations.⁴²

In response, development agencies and government officials set up women's bureaus dedicated to discovering the needs of and implementing programs for Third World women. This concern for women dove-tailed with the development of a "basic needs strategy" against poverty. Supported by the World Bank and other institutions concerned with development, the strategy deplored the failure of the "trickle-down" approach to development and called for direct intervention against poverty. It asserted that all individuals should be assured of the basic requirements of life and of access to essential community services such as safe drinking water, public transport, educational and health facilities, and decent sanitation. Women's centrality in community life gave them an important place in this strategy and made it easy to incorporate women into the basic needs approach.⁴³

African women became a much publicized development issue. Development planners finally recognized women's vital role in food production and began to establish programs to increase female agricultural productivity. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) and the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) set up programs specifically directed at African women or at encouraging female participation in larger projects. The African Training and Research Centre for Women (ATRCW), which is attached to the U.N. Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), was established to facilitate the integration of women into development plans.⁴⁴

While the programs generated by these policies are certainly an improvement over those of the past, most of them have achieved little so far. The 1980 mid-decade conference in Copenhagen, "reported little improvement and even some regression in women's position since 1975."⁴⁵ Despite their good intentions, development efforts have all too often encouraged a dangerous complacency by setting up programs that seem relevant but fail to address fundamental issues inhibiting women's progress. Development plans for Third World women rarely question women's reproductive role. They cling to gender stereotypes and hope that bandages will help solve the problem. Food and information are offered to women to upgrade

family life, not to change the sexual division of labor. The full implications of sexual equality are ignored. For example, the World Bank's recent policy recommendations for Africa, An Agenda for Action, mentions women only a few times and then solely in regard to family responsibilities.⁴⁶

Even programs supposedly designed to encourage income-generating skills often capitalize on women's "traditional" domestic skills, organizing economically marginal handicraft and/or food production that permit women to supplement household budgets while continuing to carry the double burden of reproductive and productive labor. These programs do little to improve female productivity or economic opportunities but are popular because they are technically simple and politically safe. They do not take the skilled staff, capital, and commitment to redistribution necessary for more fundamental change.⁴⁷

The bulletin of the 1980 mid-decade conference reported the least progress in the area of women's authoritative participation in planning and decision-making, even within the U.N. itself. Despite widespread support for legal, economic, and social equality between the sexes, subtle blocking mechanisms continue to maintain political life as "the exclusive domain of men, thereby preventing women's effectiveness in influencing political decisions." Although it recognized the need to integrate women into economic and political life, the bulletin insisted that this could be achieved within existing socio-economic and political systems.⁴⁸

Thus, despite the fanfare surrounding the development decade for women and the dramatic expansion of women's programs, the major development agencies have achieved very little. Efforts to improve women's status without accepting the radical implications of sexual equality, especially the connection between the sexual division of labor and world economic structures, have failed. For really innovative ideas, we must look to leaders with less stake in the present world economic order.

New Directions: The Lagos Plan of Action

Not surprisingly, some of the most innovative women's policies have been suggested by Third World advocates of the New International Economic Order. In 1976, a group of African women involved with research and development projects met in Lusaka and established guidelines for a new Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD). In 1977, a workshop at Dakar continued the Lusaka discussions, formally established AAWORD, and agreed to set up headquarters wherever the president resides--currently Senegal. The association called for innovative research from an African perspective. Research priorities were identified in the areas of education, health, rural-urban development and the role of women in scientific and technological development. Most importantly, leading African women researchers successfully created an organization committed to women's issues and the place of women in African development.⁴⁹

AAWORD's concerns have been reflected in recent discussions by African leaders and development planners. In 1979, African leaders convened in Monrovia to discuss the future development prospects of the continent. The bleak picture of underdevelopment, and the even bleaker projections for the year 2000, underscored the need to create new strategies to mobilize both men and women towards self-reliant, self-sustaining, African-oriented development. A year later, the leaders of the Organization of African Unity (OAU) met in Lagos to devise a plan of action for the economic development of Africa. The resulting Lagos Plan of Action is unique in its concern to mobilize women in development.

Chapters on education, science and technology, and agriculture single out women as an important target group for new programs. Pointing out the inadequacies of actions taken during the first half of the Women's Decade, Chapter Twelve is entirely devoted to women. It asserts that "the steps to be taken to solve the problems of African women should not be marginal and separate from the question of over-all development"⁵⁰ and calls for widespread adoption of strategies related to women. The chapter advocates greater female participation at higher administrative and policy-making levels, a reduction in the domestic burden of rural women, and more support services for women workers. It affirms women's needs for more and higher education and for training in business, commerce, industry, and handicrafts. Recognizing the crucial role women play in food production, the Plan advocates the dissemination of information, training, and support services for women in the rural areas, with special attention given to the development of women's cooperatives and the training of female extension officers. For urban areas, the Plan recognizes that women need opportunities for fuller participation in wage labor that offers both job security and trade union support. The chapter on women also advocates better health facilities for women and children and more pre-school day-care facilities.

The Plan requests member states to set up women's units in planning ministries which would carry out research and provide data to facilitate the integration of women into development planning. Although the authors of the Plan are optimistic about its ability to improve the status of women, they wisely recognized the difficulties of challenging accepted gender relations and the need both to enforce equality through the law and to make extensive use of discussion forums and other media "to educate public opinion on the value of women as human beings."⁵¹

The Implementation of the Lagos Plan of Action

Have any of these laudable goals been achieved? We are, of course, looking at a very short period of time (3 years), but the gap between rhetoric and reality is still disappointing. The special programs needed to increase educational and occupational opportunities have not been forthcoming. The 1982 OAU Progress Report on the Plan's implementation described a few studies concerned with integrating women into development. A workshop had evaluated radio programs as a development tool. A program

promoted rural industries in order to create jobs for women. Some Zambian women toured Kenya to learn about the Kenyan experience with rural technology. Projects are underway to promote handicraft and small-scale industries and to introduce new farming and marketing techniques to women.⁵² These projects are laudable and needed, but they ignore the central issue--how to increase female access to political and economic power to achieve genuine equality between the sexes.

While recognizing that the Plan is still in its infancy, I believe certain flaws inhibit its ability to improve the status of African women. Some are fairly obvious and manageable. Although the Plan advocates more technical assistance for women farmers, it ignores sexual inequities in land ownership and access to rural credit. Special funds are needed to redress this imbalance, particularly for female heads of households. A similar situation exists in the urban areas where women generally have less capital, credit and education than men. They need training in business skills. Special incentives must be created to encourage families to educate their daughters and to educate them in a variety of skills rather than directing them into "traditionally" feminine fields. Simply calling for sexual equality is insufficient; women need special programs to overcome the legacy of past discrimination.⁵³

The Plan must also consider the thorny problem of payments for family labor. Women often work for the family, but the male head of household usually receives the payments for the family's crop production. This transforms husbands into bosses and wives into servants, creates friction, and undermines cooperation. Non-payment for family labor continues to plague women in all parts of the world, but it must be dealt with before African women will benefit from the Lagos Plan of Action.⁵⁴

This brings us to the central problem, one that has bedeviled efforts to achieve sexual equality in both the industrialized and developing worlds--namely that achieving sexual equality will necessarily alter the sexual division of labor and, thus, the organization of production, reproduction, and control over surplus. Except in rapidly expanding economies, gains for women usually bring losses for men--either at home or at work. Better educated women with more access to economic and political power will compete with men for formerly male-dominated jobs. Some men will have to accept lower paid, traditionally female jobs. Unless economic restructuring can eliminate or upgrade these occupations, a slow process at best, some men will suffer.

Economic self-sufficiency for women also threatens male control over women and fuels resentment over competition between the sexes. As we have seen, Obbo found that men viewed female economic autonomy as "a zero-sum situation in which the women acquired economic autonomy while the men lost control over women."⁵⁵ This is not unusual. Sexual equality is an explosive concept. It threatens basic assumptions and daily routines, but failure to recognize this leads to empty rhetoric and unwarranted optimism.

The Plan circles the issue, but fails to confront it. While advocating a reduction in the domestic burden of rural women and more support services

for women workers, it never questions the gender stereotypes and sexual division of labor introduced in the colonial period. Women are in charge of bearing and rearing children.⁵⁶ The Plan never mentions birth control, which could help women control the number and spacing of their children. These matters are ignored, and by implication, the sexual division of labor goes unchallenged.

As long as the sexual division of labor remains unchallenged, and women bear the double burden of reproduction and production, biology becomes destiny, and women's participation in development will be limited by family responsibilities. The Plan ignores this problem. It calls for equal access to education, work, and power but fails to see the sexual division of labor as an obstacle to gender equality. And yet, since technical training, scientific work, managerial work, and positions in government usually demand extended planning, long-term commitment, and a readiness to travel, the refusal to alter the sexual division of labor limits women's capacity to participate in the most significant aspects of the Plan--high-level training, industrialization, and regional and continental planning. Women must find someone to take over their domestic responsibilities if they are to participate and, even then, have to organize this help and cope with the inevitable crises that disrupt domestic arrangements. In practice, then, the Plan ignores the fundamental issues inhibiting female participation in decision-making and development planning and, consequently, fails to suggest meaningful ways to alter the present system. As in the past, only elite women have any realistic opportunities for power and even they are constrained by gender stereotypes and the sexual division of labor.

The refusal to challenge gender stereotypes has inevitably funneled Plan projects for women towards activities that combine readily with family responsibilities. Not surprisingly, the Plan's implementation has centered on these types of activities, especially small-scale schemes.⁵⁷ Although it recognizes the potential of such schemes and the need to increase female productivity, the Plan neglects several issues that hinder even these efforts. As mentioned above, more emphasis must be placed on special credit and training facilities for women.

The Plan must also find ways to increase women's control over the means of production and the goods they produce. Women in Africa already work hard for little gain; simply producing more is not necessarily beneficial. If women do not own land and tools and cannot obtain a fair share of the profits from their labor, they gain nothing from increased productivity except more work. Unfortunately, this is all too often the case, and may explain the lack of enthusiasm African women have shown for many handicraft and small-scale agricultural schemes.⁵⁸

Conclusion

Despite its shortcomings, the Plan is still a significant achievement. It is the first document by African leaders recognizing the centrality of women to the development process. It raises important questions about the

status of women and calls for real change. Some of the research institutions and monitoring devices advocated by the Plan have already been established and are assisting development planners. Gains are being made, but we must not let those gains lull us into complacency. The problems facing women will not disappear with good intentions or even with specific projects. True sexual equality undermines one of the most fundamental aspects of human society--the sexual division of labor. To encourage change, development plans must acknowledge the link between women's problems and social structures. While the Plan goes further than any previous African document towards recognizing this, it still underestimates the challenges inherent in achieving sexual equality and seems to believe that women's oppression can be overcome without affecting the status quo.⁵⁹ The Lagos Plan of Action is an important step in the right direction, but it will only reinforce the ghetto status usually given to women's problems if it ignores the dialectical relationship between women and society and the need to fully integrate women's issues into African development plans.

NOTES

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54. In East Africa, a pyrethrum cooperative failed because only men were permitted to join and so the women lost the incentive to produce and started to withdraw their labor. Rogers, The Domestication of Women 181.
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56. The Plan even states that "vocational training institutions should adapt their programmes and schedules to the multiple roles of women as wives, mothers, citizens and workers." The Lagos Plan 114.
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