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WOMEN AND THE STATE IN AFRICA

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Abstract: Throughout history, African women have had a different relationship to the state than have men. While women in certain classes and ethnic groups may have had greater access to the state, in general women have been underrepresented in African state affairs. In precolonial Africa, a few societies awarded women some power, although even this tended to be informal rather than authoritative. But during the colonial period, western gender stereotypes combined with patriarchal traditions to reduce female power and autonomy. Despite women's active and important role in the nationalist struggles, decolonization has been primarily a transfer of power from one group of men to another. Many women have reacted to this inequity by withdrawing from the state. Others have sought solutions such as working through influential men, joining organization, and gaining better education and employment. Increasingly, women from all walks of life are becoming aware of and dissatisfied with sexual injustice in Africa. This renewed activism is all the more important because it is occurring when many African states have been in decline, thus reducing the power of those who benefit from the state, namely men. Women's reproductive and productive labor is ever more important. It is possible, therefore, that women will be able to parlay their pivotal role in the current crisis into a more active part in state affairs.

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WOMEN AND THE STATE IN AFRICA

In recent years, the African state has received considerable attention. Liberal scholars discuss the state, usually in conjunction with modernization theory, as a mechanism for ensuring order and prosperity.¹ In contrast, classical Marxists see the state as an instrument of the ruling class and, therefore, a mechanism for oppressing other classes.² Thinking in more global terms, dependency theorists perceive the state as the means by which capital maintains inequalities between the developed metropole and an underdeveloped periphery. According to Alavi, the need to maintain this global imbalance created the overdeveloped and inefficient post-colonial state so common in modern Africa.³ Neo-Marxists, adopting a more Poulantzian approach to the state, emphasize the state's relative autonomy and its role as mediator between competing class fractions. This has led to a more historic approach and a concern with the state's role as mediator between specific class interests.⁴

None of these approaches, however, examines women's relation to the state. Gender is subsumed within class, ethnic, or religious groups on the assumption that these identities, rather than gender, define access to the state. This paper challenges that assumption and asserts the particularity of women's relation to the state in Africa and elsewhere and, consequently, the need to study gender/state relations, as well as other social divisions, to understand both the nature of the state and women's place in it. We are concerned with women's access to the apparatus of the state, the consequences of their underrepresentation in the state, and the mechanisms women have evolved to cope with their slim hold on the levers of power.

Politics and the State

This paper recognizes that the state is more than just "government," and adopts Alfred Stepan's definition of the state as "the continuous administrative, legal and coercive systems that attempt not only to structure relationships between civil society and public authority in a polity, but also to structure many crucial relationships within civil society as well."⁵ As a result, although concerned with women's access to the formal apparatus of the state, this paper also examines the impact of legal and ideological systems on the status of women and the strategies women have adopted to protect their interests.

Since economic, social and political power are frequently intertwined in Africa, we will refer to economic and social realms when discussing political power. It is important to recognize, however, that political power includes the capacity to force someone to do something, even against his/her wishes. Authority, while related, is not power. Authority is the culturally accepted belief that a person or persons have a legitimate right to wield power. This distinction is important in Africa where women have tended to exert power indirectly rather than directly through positions of authority. Women's indirect power has been achieved through a variety of

activities such as withdrawal, calling upon the supernatural, control over food manipulating men and collective action. Direct authoritative power held through elected or appointed offices, with its concomitant controls over resource allocation, has been less available to women. As a result, although this paper is concerned with female access to authoritative political power, it will of necessity examine indirect power as well.⁶

Women and the State in Precolonial Africa

In precolonial Africa, women experienced a wide range of relations to the state. In some societies, patriarchal, authority severely limited women's political and economic power. Women were protected as long as they paid obedience to patriarchal power. Among the Tswana, for example, women remained legal minors all their lives. Access to land depended on the goodwill of a husband's family. Women were barred from the ward or chiefly court and, thus, rendered politically powerless. Severe beatings by fathers and husbands received no social censure. Although nominally protected by a web of obligations and dependencies, women lived in fear of abandonment and poverty if they opposed male dominance.⁷ Shona women also lacked legal rights, being essentially the wards of whatever male they lived with. "Good" women were deferential and obedient to men.⁸ Islamic societies, though guaranteeing certain inheritance rights for women, constrained female economic and political activities through purdah, or ritual seclusion. Women had to manage property through men. In precolonial Mombasa, for example, women rarely held public positions of authority, and were prohibited from religious offices.⁹

In many precolonial societies, however, women had considerable influence and even authority. In these societies, women usually controlled some economic tasks. In hunting and gathering societies, although men had more authority, women controlled certain important economic tasks and exerted considerable influence over group decisions.¹⁰ In agricultural societies where women controlled certain productive areas such as farming, marketing, or trading, their power and authority seems to have been largely based on this. In matrilineal societies, women often had considerable security of land tenure. Among the Tonga in Southern Zambia, for example, although a woman's wealth was often in her brothers' custody, women had their own fields and granaries, control over grain production, and security of land tenure. This control over land enabled women to command the labor and allegiance of sons and sons-in-law and facilitated access to political power. Some women even became village headwomen.¹¹

Societies that permitted women to accumulate wealth often had political institutions which protected women and enabled them to act as political pressure groups. These groups gave women a sense of solidarity and self-worth and the capacity to protect female interests in the community. Some societies even developed dual-sex systems which gave women a formal role in the political process.¹² In Yorubaland, for example, the Iyalode had jurisdiction over all women and represented women's concerns on the king's council -- an institution otherwise dominated by men.¹³ Among the

Ewe of Ghana, an elected Queen Mother had a council of elderly women as advisers and a spokesperson to speak for her -- exactly as the male chief. Thus, although women could only speak to the council of male elders through the Queen Mother and the males kept decisions and initiatives on their hands, women did have a representative who could seek to influence male councils.¹⁴

Some women held high political office, either through heredity or election. These women almost never equaled the authority of male officials, but they wielded considerable power and some authority. The Queen Mother has often been an important position -- witness her role among the Asante, Baganda, and the Zulu, to cite a few examples. These women not only influenced male-dominated councils, they often had important ritual roles, especially those concerned with fertility and social survival. Women chiefs were rare, but did exist. Among the Mende and Serbro of Sierra Leone, women held chiefships on the same basis as men. As we have seen, influential Tonga, women set themselves up as village headwomen. Able women acquired power in a number of African societies. Queen Amina of Hausaland, for example, was a famous ruler and warrior in the 15th or 16th century, and Nzinga of Angola led one of the earliest and most effective resistances against the Portuguese.¹⁵

Women also exerted power through religious roles. Some women were ritual specialists in women's affairs, especially concerning fertility. The omu among the Igbo of Nigeria, for example, used medicines and rituals to ensure the safety and success of the marketplace where women traded. Women were often in charge of puberty rites, marriage ceremonies and other aspects of the life cycle.¹⁶ They acted as mediums and members of spirit possession cults. Some led resistance movements against the early European intruders. Nehanda, a Shona priestess, was hanged for her role in the 1896 uprising in Southern Rhodesia. In Kongo, a priestess of the cult of Marinda, Dona Beatrice, established her own version of Christianity. She led a rebellion that mobilized discontent against the pro-Portuguese Kongo leadership so effectively that the Kongo king had her and her infant son burned to death.¹⁷

Thus, while some societies severely constrained women's political and economic power, many precolonial African societies awarded women clearly defined and accepted political roles which permitted them to wield power despite fairly minimal authority. And in most cases, societies that awarded women political power also permitted them some control over the economy.

Women and the Colonial State

For most African women (with the exception of some urban women), the colonial period was characterized by significant losses in both power and authority. Colonial officials propagated Western gender stereotypes which assigned women to the domestic domain, leaving economic and political matters to men. As a result, although many African men suffered under colonialism, new opportunities eventually appeared for them while women's economic and political rights diminished. Colonial officials ignored female

candidates when looking for possible appointments to chiefships, scholarships, or other benefits. Many female institutions were destroyed, often more out of ignorance than malice. In Igboland, for example, the male Obi became a salaried official while his female counterpart received nothing. Similar reductions in female political power occurred all over Africa during the colonial period.¹⁸

This loss of political power was frequently associated with diminished access to land and labor power. Colonial development policies focussed on men, who were, in the eyes of colonies officials, the farmers and producers of Africa. When land rights were reorganized, "legitimate" heads of households, namely men, usually received the land titles. Marcia Wright carefully documents how women in Mazabuka, Zambia, lost both economic and political power during the colonial period. Similarly, in Western Kenya new property laws reduced women's rights to land. Ester Boserup cites cases in Zimbabwe and South Africa where colonial "reform" resulted in the transfer of women's land to men. Colonial authorities assisted male farmers while dismissing female farmers as mere subsistence food producers. When colonial officials wanted to encourage African cash crop production, they offered male farmers technical training and assistance while ignoring women farmers. As a result, male farmers were more able to accumulate surplus, and thus increasingly dominated the rural areas.¹⁹

Women continued to work on the land, but their control over the products of their labor declined. They 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."²⁰ In Zambia, Shimwaayi 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."²¹ In Southern Zambia, prosperous farmers gained labor power through polygamy, but wives were often treated "less as partners than as farmhands." Wives still clung to marriage because divorce entailed abandoning all marital property.²²

Thus, while traditional structures protected most women from absolute starvation, rural life was increasingly onerous for women during the colonial period. Pushed by patriarchal authoritarianism and rural drudgery 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 opposition from government officials and chiefs, many women managed to get to town and, once there, to support themselves. Of course, some found men to support them, but this was always uncertain -- divorce and desertion were rampant.²³ Most women recognized the need for some economic autonomy. Educational barriers limited opportunities for white-collar jobs, teaching and nursing being the exceptions. All but the most unskilled and irregular wage labor remained a male preserve. Consequently, 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 survive.²⁴

The few success stories should not lead us to underestimate the problems faced by African women in colonial towns, but at the same time, we must acknowledge the degree to which women successfully challenged both African and colonial authority in the towns. Ga women dominated the expanding Ghanaian trading system during the colonial period.²⁵ The Lagos Market Women's Association (LMWA) was established in the 1920s, and it remained an important political and economic force in Nigeria until its leaders shifted their focus to nationalist politics in the late 1940s.²⁶ Prostitution provided another avenue of accumulation. Nairobi prostitutes earned enough money during World War I to purchase urban property. In 1943, women (mostly prostitutes) owned 41% of the houses in the Nairobi suburb of Pumwani. In Mombasa, village women accumulated savings from prostitution which they used to buy property both in Mombasa and their natal villages. Similar patterns existed in Northern Nigeria.²⁷

As colonial penetration of African economies intensified in the late 1930s, however, and the "second colonial occupation" increased the need for a stable disciplined and trained labor force, colonial authorities in the urban areas became more determined to control both the reproduction and production of labor. In collusion with patriarchal African leaders, colonial laws were tightened to increase control over women in both rural and urban areas. Independent African women posed a threat to both African and European men. The regulation of these women was carried out on two fronts. First, laws were set in place which made it more difficult for women to exist independently in the urban areas. Houses owned by prostitutes in Nairobi were condemned and razed. Beer production, usually controlled by women, was taken over by the state. Hostile legislation constrained market women's economic opportunities.²⁸ In Zambia, African leaders supported colonial reinterpretation of customary law which made adultery a criminal offense and enforced harsh fines to stop it, thus limiting women's freedom to change partners. The Urban African Courts, established in 1938, gave rural judges the power to strengthen customary control over urban marriages and, consequently, to regulate "proud and cheeky" urban women.²⁹ In Tanzania, women in polygamous marriages were denied legal married status and consequently the rights accorded a wife, especially those concerned with divorce and inheritance. Yet customary law permitted men to marry multiple wives. Similar cases can be cited from other parts of Africa.³⁰

Second, colonial officials constrained female advancement by limiting access to education and wage employment. Ga women, for example, lost ground as men gained the education necessary for wage employment and capital accumulation.³¹ Throughout the colonial period, African women consistently lagged behind in education and, thus, failed to acquire the skills needed to participate in the modern economy. If they received training, it usually emphasized domestic skills and preparation for being "better wives and mothers." Few women became qualified for wage labor and even fewer for professional positions. Employed women usually performed low paying, unskilled jobs connected to the domestic area. As these regulations took force, the status and potential prosperity of men and women increasingly diverged.³²

Women struck back against this attack on their economic and political prerogatives, but rarely effected long-term change. It is worth noticing, however, that most of the more dramatic female opposition to colonial authority was carried out by women from societies where men's and women's status differentials were not so great that it was unthinkable for women to challenge male authority. Indeed, women often used traditional female methods and organizations to oppose colonial authorities, both black and white. In 1929-1930, for example, the Igbo women used the institution of "sitting on a man" (public humiliation of men by a group of women) to protest taxes. In the famous "Igbo Riots", women burned buildings, broke into jails and released prisoners. Officials called in the military, but the fighting continued, eventually leaving 50 women dead and another 50 wounded.³³ Pare women in Tanzania rioted to protest the levying of a graduated income tax in the 1940s. The women organized a 25 mile march to district headquarters and, once there, stoned colonial officials, demanded settlement of the matter, and created so much trouble that a compromise had to be reached.³⁴ Kikuyu women, who came from a relatively egalitarian society, were instrumental in the 1922 Harry Thuku disturbances.³⁵

Women with an independent economic base were the most successful opponents of colonial sexism. In Western Nigeria, the Lagos Market Women's Association (LMWA) organized the first mass-based women's interest group in the area. Led by the dynamic Madam Alimotu Pelewura, the LMWA controlled the marketing system and carefully monitored both chiefly and colonial policies in order to protect market women's interests. From 1940-1944, the Association openly opposed government price controls, leading eventually to their removal. The Abeokuta Women's Union (AWU) is another example of an influential women's organization. Incorporating a broad spectrum of Abeokuta's female population, from market women to elite members of the Ladies' Club, the AWU could command the support of between 80,000 to 100,000 women. The union set about trying to recoup the steady erosion of female power that had occurred during the colonial period. Indirect rule had raised men to new heights. In 1946, the AWU launched an attack on indirect rule and that British lackey, the Alake of Abeokuta. The AWU organized sit-ins, mass protests, nonpayment of taxes, and even sent its leader, Funmilayo Anikulapo-Kuti, to London to present her case. By 1948, these efforts had succeeded. The Alake resigned, female taxation was suspended, and women were given representation in the interim council set up to replace the government.³⁶ These cases prove that some women successfully mobilized themselves, both in new ways and around traditional institutions, and used their prosperity and influence to counter the colonial threat to their social status.

Nevertheless, even wealthy and/or well-organized women often lost the battle against colonial patriarchy. Despite their property ownership and low public profile, the Malaya prostitutes in Nairobi gradually lost both their property and livelihood through government intervention. Ga women traders were unable to resist government encroachment on their market rights in the 1950s.³⁷ South African women delayed the hated pass-laws for women, but eventually lost out to apartheid.³⁸ Women had few patrons in the male-dominated colonial state, and so even the wealthy could be destroyed if various state interests agreed to their destruction.

For most women, the colonial state was something to avoid or to deal with indirectly, usually through male patrons. Women had little opportunity to participate in the state as civil servants or, later, as representatives. As we have seen, women's organizations pressured government but, for the most part, could effect only limited change. Most women had to work out their salvation on an individual basis. They jockeyed for power within the household, changed marriage partners, moved to the city, entered trade, and fought to improve the lives of their children. Alliances with powerful men and with male-dominated institutions, such as trade unions and separatist churches, provided some support. But for most women, economic and social security had to be continually won, and both male-dominated institutions and the state were uncertain allies.

These individual and collective protests against colonial domination do demonstrate, however, that African women tried to resist encroachment on their rights, and that female individuals, political institutions and ad hoc groups could mount effective protest against colonial and patriarchal domination. Thus, although women lost authority and power during the colonial period, the loss was neither even nor linear. Despite efforts to contain them, some women achieved economic prosperity and many more won economic autonomy, even if minimal. Women were thus willing, if often unsuccessful, combatants against colonial and patriarchal domination.

Women and the Nationalist Struggles

African women were given the opportunity to prove their mettle as political activists during the nationalist struggles. They responded to the challenge with commitment, enthusiasm, and effective collective action. Women played a prominent role in the early nationalist struggles in West, East and Central Africa. In Zambia, for example, women's branches of the nationalist parties [first the African National Congress (ANC) and later the United National Independence Party (UNIP)] organized rural and urban protests. The UNIP Women's Brigade participated in literacy drives to aid voter registration, and helped organize town funerals, mass demonstrations, rallies and boycotts to prove UNIP's power.³⁹ In Cameroon, women used a traditional practice, Anlu, revamped into a well organized association, to render the paramount chief and his executive council impotent, to unseat the ruling party, the Kamerun National Congress (KNC) in the 1959 election, and to help get the Kamerun National Democratic Party (KNDP) into power.⁴⁰ In Nigeria, market women's support or rejection of political candidates became a key factor in political life. Oyinkan Morenike Abayomi, leader of women's organizations from the 1920s, established the Nigerian Women's Party (NWP) in 1944 to protect women from being cheated by Nigerian men and the government. She believed women, even wealthy women, suffered from lack of representation in government circles, and set about to rectify that. Ultimately the party foundered from competition with the more militant Abeokuta Women's Union and the more radical nationalist movements. But Nigerian women continued to be important members of the new nationalist parties.⁴¹ In Guinea, women helped Sekou Toure gain power by giving money to the nationalist struggle, providing communication links among the leaders, and participating in policy decisions. Guinean women, like many

West African women, supported the nationalist struggle with their economic resources and contacts.⁴²

Women also participated in more violent liberation struggles. In the Portuguese colonies, women fought alongside men while continuing to perform domestic duties. They bore a double burden in order to bring down colonial rule.⁴³ Zimbabwean women also carried arms, and women guerillas had high status during the liberation struggle. By the end of the war, as much as one quarter of the 30,000 Patriotic Front guerillas were women. Leaders from the different factions declared women's liberation an explicit and integral part of the overall revolution.⁴⁴ In South Africa, women of all races have resisted, and continue to resist, apartheid and racial injustice. The Bantu Women's League of the African National Congress (ANC) led the fight against racial injustice in the 1950s. Despite frequent hostility from men both within and without the ANC, women such as Charlotte Maxeke provided remarkable leadership on women's and black peoples' issues. Today, Winnie Mandela provides similar leadership.⁴⁵

Women and the State in Independent Africa

During the liberation struggles, women's participation was welcomed, and women were promised (and expected) economic and political benefits from independence. These promises have, for the most part, not been fulfilled. Some African women are prominent in political affairs, but rarely at the highest levels. Women occupy the lowest rungs of the political ladder; very few determine planning and policy-making. In 1978 a UN questionnaire discovered that the mean rate of political participation by women was 12% at the local level and 6% at the national level. In nonsocialist countries, about 5% or less of available political positions are filled by women.⁴⁶ In Malawi, for example, there are no women in the three central planning agencies or in any of the ministerial planning units. Women are, thus, effectively excluded from the planning and planning-related machinery, although a few women have some input from their positions in traditionally female dominated areas such as home economics, adult literacy, social welfare and health. Representation on lower levels is not much better. Of the 625 wards in Malawi, only 4.8% are filled by women, and although some women are active in village affairs, men dominate decision-making there as well. In Zambia, the Women's Brigade organizers in UNIP have, for the most part, been backstage supporters for male politicians. The few women in high level politics have clustered in traditional female areas such as welfare and health. Ghanaian women, despite active involvement in trade and considerable wealth, have shared only minimally in the independent Ghanaian state.⁴⁷

Despite official support, the participation rate of women in socialist states is not much better. Women in Guinea-Bissau have had to fight two colonialisms: white Portuguese domination and black patriarchy. Although Samora Machel has stated unequivocally that liberation cannot occur without liberation for women, Mozambique's economic and political problems and its patriarchal traditions have undermined his and Frelimo's efforts. Frelimo group leaders are rarely women. Of the 249 delegates elected to Frelimo's

Third Congress in 1977, only 12.2% from the provincial level and 7.5% on the Central Committee were women. Women have been encouraged to join the party, and some improvements have occurred at the local level. But at the national level, where authority and power predominate, women are conspicuous by their absence. There is no ministry for women and the only structure that might evaluate development plans for women, the Organization of Mozambican Women (OMW, founded in 1973) is rarely consulted.⁴⁸ The Organization of Angolan Women (OMA, founded in 1963) is a respected voice in Angola's government deliberations, but a National Congress meeting has recently admitted that despite ostensibly sex-blind policies, "the principle of equality for men and women in society is not sufficient to ensure that women are in fact an active element in their country's development or that they participate equally in decision-making."⁴⁹ Women's demonstrations have been a potent political weapon in Zimbabwe, but one that has won powers for men rather than women. The ministry for women's affairs, created in 1981, has achieved little despite nominal government support. Feminists in government have retreated from challenges to gender ideologies and the sexual division of labor and have turned to more reformist goals. Isolated and out-numbered, "feminist leaders have generally been separated out from broader policymaking bodies, allowing other government branches to ignore the differential impact of their policies on women."⁵⁰

Thus African states are run primarily by men for men. Socialist countries advocate political involvement by women, but fail to achieve it. Liberal capitalist states promise women equality through the vote, but men dominate. Military governments advocate development, but ignore women. Meanwhile, the vast majority of poor rural women have no access to the state; while middle- and upper-class women have greater access, they rarely enter political life. The African state has become a male preserve. We need to ask the question "Why?"

Barriers to Women in Politics

Women's lackluster political participation in independent Africa is most readily explained by their continued lack of credentials for political and civil service positions, especially formal education and work experience. This is partially a colonial legacy, but has changed depressingly little since independence. The female illiteracy rate is almost twice that of males. In most African countries, the ratio of females to males enrolled in secondary education is less than thirty-five percent, while the ratio is less than twenty percent at higher levels. Furthermore, available education continues to shunt women into traditionally female occupations such as health care (especially nursing), domestic science, and primary school teaching. Even more distressing, primary and middle school education often fails to prepare girls for employment, leaving this population with the highest unemployment rate in Africa. Thus education for women in Africa is all too often both insufficient and dysfunctional.⁵¹

Women are also constrained by their limited economic opportunities. Few hold important economic positions. With the exception of traditionally "female" occupations, few African women are professionals. In the mid 1970s, five percent of the lawyers, physicians and engineers in Kenya were

women; only six percent of Nigerian academic staff were women, and they were primarily in education and the arts. Opportunities for waged labor are few, and even women with equivalent education and work experience receive lower wages and slower advancement than men.⁵² In the urban informal sector, some women have fared better, but, here again, the majority still eke out a precarious existence. In Yorubaland, for example, while women dominate the open market and many have retail stores, men own the more capital-intensive shops. In Islamic areas, purdah further hampers women's economic activities.⁵³ Thus women continue to have less access to higher education, job experience, and capital accumulation than men, all of which limits their capacity to compete for jobs that might lead to positions of authority and power within the state.

But there are other, more subtle, but still important, factors affecting female participation in state affairs. Women are also constrained by a sexual division of labor which burdens them with domestic duties whether employed in wage labor or not. This double burden saps women's energies and limits the amount of time and effort available for political matters. In the rural areas, the sexual division of labor has meant more work and less remuneration for African women. Rural women contribute seventy percent of the labor for food production, and are solely responsible for food processing. Work in cash crop production is performed with no let up in obligations to produce and prepare food, not to mention child care and other domestic duties. Poor urban women usually work in the informal sector, where they can earn a living while also caring for children and the household.⁵⁴ Even those middle class women able to hire household help still have to organize that help and cope with the inevitable crises that disrupt domestic arrangements. Studies of urban working mothers are reporting "fatigue, stress and even anxiety," and high levels of dissatisfaction with child-care arrangements.⁵⁵ Limiting family size is still unpopular, and since birth control is rarely available, family planning is difficult. Political life demands both time and energy. Most women cannot cope with both political and family obligations.

Less obvious, but also important, western gender stereotypes and traditional patriarchal institutions have combined to deprive women of political legitimacy. Even where women are legally equal to men, male predominance continues to be assumed. When women dare challenge this fact, they are sharply rebuked. Witness the recent attack by President Moi of Kenya, who chastized women leaders for "misleading rural women by saying women should be the equal to men." He stated that "to be equal to men was to imply that God had erred after all when he made men the head of the family."⁵⁶ One [Tanzanian] MP even stated that "women were meant to serve men and that they can never be equal to men."⁵⁷ Similar sentiments have been expressed in Zambia, where in 1982, Prime Minister Mundia advised a new bride that "women graduates should regard themselves as housewives and mothers at home and professionals only at places of work . . . The husband is the head of the family."⁵⁸ In Mozambique, Stephanie Urdang reports that:

[women] often have to take a bold leap in the present to assert themselves as militants. Often this has to be done against strong pressure from antagonistic husbands. . . . Some men have even resorted to physical restraint, locking their wives in the house to prevent them from attending meetings, and some women have been beaten or thrown out of their homes by husbands for persisting in their regular attendance.⁵⁹

Although they are rarely official policy, such attitudes pervade the continent, and seriously impede women's capacity to undertake, political work.

Protests from women are smothered in nationalist or socialist rhetoric that denies the legitimacy of female concerns and exhorts women to accept the inevitable connection between social and sexual justice. Yet at the same time, Zimbabwean revolutionaries, who once linked women's oppression with class oppression, now see government's goal as "helping women become better mothers and citizens within the existing family structures." Mozambiquan women are constantly reminded that their liberation depends on involvement in the "main transforming task of society," yet they are advised not to demand changes in the sexual division of labor within the home. And women's bureaus, where they exist, are usually undefunded and underutilized. Linked to the soft underbelly of government, they rarely affect important decisions, and, like the aged and infirm, get the left-overs.⁶⁰

Consequence of Underrepresentation in the State

Having established African women's limited participation in government, we are faced with two questions: how does this affect the status of African women, and what, if any, strategies do women employ to deal with this situation?

The most important consequences of underrepresentation for women lie, I believe, in the economic and legal spheres. Although most African countries have awarded women political rights and equal access to education, a gender-biased mixture of colonial and customary law still operates in many countries, especially in matters concerning land, marriage, divorce and inheritance. Given women's lack of involvement in government structures, it is not surprising that state laws reflect male dominance and that male dominated legislatures have been reluctant to undercut patriarchal traditions. Women's groups have lobbied legislatures, but with little success. For example, in 1970, delegates to the Consultation of Women's Rights in Zambia recommended specific legislation to protect women. Yet virtually none of it has been passed.⁶¹ Despite official commitment to a socialist nonsexist society, the Zimbabwean government has refused to change customary land rights in its land resettlement scheme. The Zimbabwean Women's Bureau has protested and women have complained bitterly about the scheme, but to no avail. The state has, so far, done nothing and customary land tenure practices continue to discriminate against women. Polygamy and

lobola (brideprice) are still legal in most African countries. Male-dominated parliaments have refused to attack these institutions. In Zimbabwe, for example, government promises to challenge lobola have evaporated under pressure from male parliamentarians and other leaders.⁶² In Tanzania, the Marriage Act has reconstituted patriarchal relations of marriage as the legitimate form of state marriage.⁶³ While legal protection for women varies from state to state, in general women's rights have remained a low priority item despite considerable lobbying from women's groups. This has been especially true for widows, who remain one of Africa's most vulnerable groups.⁶⁴

Even where laws have been changed, male-dominated states are often unwilling to protect women from sexist traditions. Nigerian widows are still plundered by their deceased husbands' rapacious relatives despite regulations to the contrary.⁶⁵ In divorce cases, even women willing to fight for their children find it difficult to win, particularly if the man is rich and powerful. Such men in Zambia, for example, are able to flout the law, and frequently obtain custody of children beyond infancy despite the mother's protests. Sexual harrassment at work goes unpunished. Women are refused jobs and opportunities because of their sex, but can neither prove nor stop it.⁶⁶ The Angolan Women's Organization cited many cases where women were refused jobs because employers didn't want to pay for maternity leaves.⁶⁷ Tanzanian women workers in the cashew nut industry have struggled in vain to stop the periodic firing of certain categories of women.⁶⁸ Women all over Africa tend to cluster in unskilled vulnerable waged labor such as domestic work and small-scale retailing, where they are unlikely to have the resources or leverage necessary to use the legal protection theoretically available to them.⁶⁹ This, of course, reinforces female vulnerability and powerlessness. Inadequate representation in government and the consequent inability to bring pressure to bear on legislators, make it all the more difficult for women to defend themselves.

Underrepresentation also has important economic consequences for women. Property laws continue to favor men. As we have seen, the Zimbabwe resettlement scheme has perpetuated women's customary lack of land rights.⁷⁰ By allocating land to male family heads, the Land Reform Proclamation in Ethiopia has failed to transform the subordinate status of women. Instead, "land reform has left women dependent on men and under the umbrella of old patriarchal forms." Mozambique's Land Law of 1979 failed to establish, clarify or reinforce women's rights to land.⁷¹ Similar scenarios abound throughout the continent; according to a student of African land law, J.A. Hellen, women's legal position in relation to land is likely to worsen in future, particularly if their important role in agriculture is ignored.⁷² Thus, the state has made it more difficult for women to acquire and profit from land.

Women's underrepresentation in government has also permitted development planners to ignore women's needs and concerns. In an atmosphere in which women's special needs and concerns are rarely discussed and where the few women civil servants and legislators find it difficult to raise women's

issues, gender-biased planning readily becomes the norm.⁷³ Male-dominated African governments have adopted colonial gender biases that relegate women's issues to the private rather than the public sphere. Much of women's productive activity in agriculture and trade is not measured by economic planners because it is "for the family." Access to land, credit, agricultural training and education is offered to families on the assumption that women and men have equal access to family resources. Gender struggles within the household are not government's concern. As a result, government policies provide benefits to male heads of households and development plans continue to benefit men more than women.⁷⁴ Furthermore, gender-biased governments frequently ignore females as economic actors, and fail to provide the economic incentives, such as credit, export-import licenses, and tax rebates so often granted to "well-connected" African businessmen. Even when development plans include women's issues, inadequate representation for women's interests on key decision-making bodies at all levels makes it difficult to change resource allocation patterns.⁷⁵

Women in postindependent African states continue to be prime targets for state abuse. Despite their wealth, Ghanaian market women were scapegoated by Rawling's "reformists," and were attacked as symbols of wealth while much wealthier male businessmen and bureaucrats escaped. Although the market women fought back and won, Claire Robertson in Sharing the Same Bowl documents general economic decline for Ga female traders since independence.⁷⁶ Prostitutes, often one of the more prosperous and independent sectors of the female population, also endure frequent attacks by government officials who dislike their independence and see them as safe targets, easily characterized as evil temptresses bent on destroying society's moral fabric. Single women are also frequently branded as prostitutes, making them more vulnerable to arrest and prosecution. The urban woman remains an easy scapegoat who is highly visible and relatively powerless -- an obvious target for enforcing male-dominance and traditional patriarchal values.⁷⁷

Strategies to Control the State

Despite their underrepresentation in the state and their difficulties controlling and benefiting from the state, African women have not simply acquiesced to male-dominated state power. Women have fought back, both individually and collectively. One common solution has been selective withdrawal. Many women have chosen to avoid the increasingly rapacious, badly-run African bureaucracies by withdrawing from politics and concentrating instead on the more immediate issue of survival. Economic concerns predominate. Ghanaian women ignore conventional politics and concentrate on their economic associations. Nigerian market women organize themselves and avoid the government. Many have stopped voting because politics is a man's game. The state is generally seen as an impediment to progress and is treated as a potential threat rather than a source of support. The West African market women organize to protect themselves from the state, not to get closer to it. This they do very well; for example, in 1982 the Accra market women withdrew their services until the state returned

their control over pricing and the market.⁷⁸ But reacting to government differs from attempts to integrate with it. In other parts of Africa, the story is the same. Zambian women seem indifferent to participation in national development plans; they are preoccupied with economic survival instead.⁷⁹ In Kenya, Kathy Staudt discovered that women frequently organized to protect their economic interests, but that these organizations usually operated outside the political system. "This autonomy may be an asset in organizational effectiveness but [is] a drawback in extracting the increasingly valuable resources distributed in the policy arena."⁸⁰ Everywhere in Africa, individual effort and children remain women's most reliable social insurance and, consequently, their most pressing concern.

It is hardly surprising that women are also increasingly active in the illegal magendo (smuggling) economy because it is an arena that deliberately avoids state control. This can be as simple as selling goods without a license. Christine Obbo reported that many women in Kampala survived by illegally selling beer, goods, and even sexual services. Some even entered more lucrative illegal activities, such as gin distilling.⁸¹ Janet MacGaffey has described Zairean women's participation in the flourishing magendo economy.⁸² Prostitution, of course, remains a common means for escaping patriarchal authority and accumulating wealth.⁸³ While data for these activities are difficult to come by, there is no doubt that many women have responded to declining opportunities in the wage economy by moving into the grey area of illegal trade.

The state cannot be entirely avoided, however, and most women employ an age-old strategy to increase their leverage over the state -- aligning with powerful men. This solution is more readily available to elite women, who are often either related to or married to influential men. But even poorer women can gain some entree to state power through association with more powerful male members of their ethnic or regional communities. As Kenneth Little has pointed out, "the acquisition of a well-to-do, much travelled professional husband has become part of the West African woman's "Dream." For the less fortunate, a politically well-connected nonprofessional is an acceptable substitute.⁸⁴ Schuster and Obbo discovered similar attitudes in Zambia and Uganda, though usually tempered with some cynicism.⁸⁵ Although this solution fails to alter fundamental sexual inequities, it remains attractive because it can be pursued in a wide variety of circumstances and avoids the more difficult problem of coordinating collective action against the status quo.

Women and the State: New Directions

While these strategies provide some leverage, African women are demanding more. They are becoming increasingly assertive in relation to the state. International concern about the status of women, spearheaded by the United Nations' Decade for Women 1975-85, and the growing economic crisis in Africa have brought women's issues increasingly to the fore in the last ten years. Conferences, seminars, and research projects have been organized. National programmes have been devised and women's institutes have been set

up.⁸⁶ On the continental level, the OAU's development plan, the Lagos Plan of Action, devotes an entire chapter to women. It recognizes the importance of women in all areas of development and calls for steps to integrate them fully into the development strategies of Africa, including bringing more women directly into positions of authority so that women's views and concerns will be incorporated into development planning.⁸⁷

Have these efforts succeeded at all? Data collection on women has improved and some projects are underway, but progress is slow. The impediments discussed above continue to inhibit sexual equality. At recent regional meetings, African women leaders and some sympathetic men, admitted that advancement has been discouraging and that bold steps must be taken to improve women's status. The Regional Conference on Women and Development held at Arusha, Tanzania, on 8-12 October 1984, called for better data and development plans that recognize women's varied circumstances. Educated middle-class women need a different kind of assistance than do rural women heads of households. Poor urban women require different policies than do subsistence women farmers. Above all, women must participate in drawing up development plans so that they reflect female realities and provide appropriate services.

If this is to happen, African women, like women everywhere, must come to their own rescue. The Lagos Plan of Action, the UN Decade for Women, and other women's development projects can only remove some obstacles. Power is rarely abandoned easily, and few men will readily accept unfavorable (to them) changes in the established power structure and the sexual division of labor. Women have made advances. As the Arusha delegates recognize, "women's visibility to society and their awareness of themselves" has increased.⁸⁸ But women will have to make a conscious effort to mobilize female participation in state affairs, especially high-level planning and policy decision-making, if further advances are to be achieved.

This need is increasingly recognized by women all over the continent. Participants at a recent workshop at Ibadan University's International Institute of Tropical Agriculture, for example, emphasized that programs about women's issues must be "planned by women, organized, interpreted and reported by women on women."⁸⁹ Similar statements are being made more and more frequently at international, continental, and regional meetings, by women's organizations, in markets and at village meetings, especially in the newly socialist countries. At the First Congress of the Organization of Angolan Women held in 1983, the OMA resolved that "Profound changes in social, political, and economic structures are the precondition for achieving equality in every sphere." The OMA called on its members to work for "women's full participation in the country's political economic and social life."⁹⁰ Similar statements have been made by Mozambican, Zimbabwean, and Eritrean women's organizations.⁹¹ But women in more capitalist countries are increasingly outspoken as well. Kenyan women's organizations recently called for sexual equality in all spheres of Kenyan life. In Nigeria, the second annual Women in Nigeria conference in April 1983 committed the organization to "engage in research, policy-making,

dissemination of information, and action aimed at improving the conditions of women."⁹² While none of these resolutions have yet brought much change, and impediments continue to inhibit change in both socialist and nonsocialist countries, the resolve of African women for a fairer deal is definitely growing. And that resolve includes the recognition that women will have to become more active in state affairs.

Despite growing agreement among African women, class, ethnic, and regional differences still endanger female solidarity and inhibit effective organization. Political divisions along ethnic or regional lines tend to divide women in a similar manner. Class divisions also endanger female solidarity. Even if some women achieve positions of power and authority within the state, there is a real danger that these women will pursue the rights and prerogatives that concern women of their class while ignoring the plight of the vast majority of poor women. This is all the more probable in Africa where the gap between elite and mass living standings is painfully obvious and the fight for resources is a deadly business. This is a danger that cannot be ignored, but at the same time, cannot be avoided, as elite women are strategically the most likely to gain access to state power, and so remain crucial participants in the struggle for sexual equality.

On the other hand, several factors diminish this danger by drawing African women of all classes together. First, as we have seen, the state is not readily accessible to either elite or nonelite women, and women with different backgrounds and education increasingly understand this. Protests against women's exclusion from power are being voiced by both educated women and the female rural and urban poor. Peasant women in Tanzania "speak of their frustration over being excluded from village government," while Tanzanian feminists, such as Marjorie Mbilinyi and Ophelia Mascarenhas, criticize women's underrepresentation at the state level. Arusha delegates are calling for change, but so are the peasant women of Mozambique and Zimbabwe.⁹³ The gap between rhetoric and reality is hitting especially hard in the new socialist countries of Southern Africa, where women expected independence to bring a better nonsexist world. They may be discouraged, but they haven't given up.

Second, divorce and inheritance customs continue to undermine the class position of all but a small number of independently wealthy women. Most women suffer severe economic hardship at divorce or widowhood. The high divorce rate and ever-present possibility of a spouse's death through accident or disease weakens the class position of elite women, and often provide unwanted lessons about sexual inequality. Examples abound, creating anxiety that can lead women to cling to marriage as security but cannot fail to arouse fear and anger about women's vulnerability. It is not surprising that some of Botswana's most ardent advocates for women's rights are divorced female heads of households.⁹⁴ I suspect similar experiences inspire many female activists on the continent.

Third, and most important, over the last fifteen years, declining commodity prices and the rising costs of energy and manufactured goods have

weakened already inefficient and corrupt African, governments. As states have become more corrupt, repressive and inefficient, people have increasingly withdrawn their support. More and more men and women view the African bureaucratic elite with jaundiced eyes. But as state power has declined, women's economic power relative to the state has been growing. Although women who depend on elite men lose from the state's decline, most women do not. Women cannot lose power they never had. Meanwhile, the tasks women perform remain crucial for the survival of functioning subunits within shattered states. Women continue to grow the food, trade the goods, and perform the household tasks needed to keep communities alive. Given this reality, it seems reasonable to suggest that the current decline of the African state may benefit African women. Rebuilding weakened destabilized states may spawn new alliances between the sexes as attempts to rebuild the state of necessity involve those persons who produce the people and, increasingly, the goods needed to build an effective state in Africa, namely African women.

Conclusion

This paper has shown that by and large African women have a different relationship to the state than men, and that despite ethnic, regional, and class differences, women have been consistently underrepresented in African state affairs. This is not to say that women have been treated equally. Ethnic and class differences affect women's access to the state. In precolonial Africa, those societies which gave women more opportunity to control land and labor generally awarded women more power, although even this tended to be informal rather than authoritative. During the colonial period, however, western gender stereotypes combined with patriarchal traditions to facilitate the reduction of female power and autonomy. Although women fought back, and gained economic autonomy in some instances, in general women lost political power during the colonial period. It is no wonder then that despite women's active and important role in the nationalist struggles, decolonization was essentially a transfer of power from one group of men to another. Consequently, African women have been underrepresented in the state, and have reaped few of the benefits which the state provides. Many women have reacted to this inequity by pulling away from the state, concentrating on economic survival instead. For the most part, these women see the state as an obstacle to be avoided rather than as a benefactor to be milked. To that end they have employed a wide variety of strategies to ensure their survival in the face of a hostile male-dominated state.

Withdrawal has not been the only solution however. Increasingly women from different classes, regions and ethnic groups have been speaking out and organizing against sexual injustice in African societies. This groundswell has been spawned by a number of factors: increasing awareness of sexual inequality in Africa, revolutionary rhetoric, education, the rise of western feminism, and the U.N. Decade for Women. Revolutionary rhetoric has given women's rights new legitimacy, as has the U.N. Decade for Women. The much publicized plight of Third World women has heightened dissatisfaction with

women's underdevelopment and has intensified the commitment of African women to better their lives. And increasingly these women recognize that better access to state power is an essential ingredient to any attack on the status quo.

This renewed activism is all the more important because the current decline of many African states has reduced the power of those who benefit from the state -- namely men. The balance of power in shattered economies is shifting to those people who can provide the necessary reproductive and productive labor for survival. Women, who have learned to live without the state, are well placed to lead this effort. Thus, women's disengagement from the state can be a source of strength when the state weakens. It will be interesting to see if women can parlay their pivotal role in the current crisis into a more sexually egalitarian future. Given the widespread determination to do so, one can at least hope for such a possibility. But given the historic tendency for the state to remain a male preserve, gender equality in state power continues to be an elusive goal in Africa, and throughout the world.

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