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Being Women and Men in Africa Today: Approaching Gender Roles in Changing African Societies

The debate on the issue of gender is always tense and critical in Africa. Most of the time men reject any debate on it and adopt a defensive stance, as they think it is a means for women to attack and overtake them—so gender relates to power-seeking and the need for societal control.

Further, they do not want to lose their long-established historical privilege of being the ‘chief’ of the family and the ‘commander’ of women. They use for their defence the Biblical texts alleging that God has created woman inferior to man and placed her beside him as servant; that God has appointed man as the chief.

Other men suspect the gender issue is a means for Western society to re-colonize Africa by infusing there the Western way of life. And so for this category of men, gender is an instrumental tool aimed at destroying African cultures. Some go so far as to relate gender to homosexuality.

Anyway, this is what I have become used to listening during numerous workshops I have been attending where the issue is broached. By so doing, they allegedly brandish African traditions, which have definitely instituted man as superior and protector of woman and organized the different roles in the society.

The first rationale for rejecting gender discussion relates to *power*. This is true. Gender effectively deals with the question of power in the society. It engages the whole societal body, questioning how power is shared, the leadership, and the different roles of societal components. More precisely, it encompasses how women and men are organized and how they interact in society, including the family, the Church, politics, the economy, and so on.

But the false element in this rationale is the allegation that women contest power with men in order to edge them out. This is false, because gender deals with power insofar as the quest for justice in societal structure is concerned.

So talking about gender in Africa means seeking to know if the social structure we have built gives possibilities for women and men to enjoy and live their potential entirely, to express the best of themselves with regard to the talents each one is gifted with—and if this is not the case, we must change it.

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This perspective entails the assumption that the roles in society, the leadership and the different societal functions and responsibilities, are not given by nature but by the social system, which can change in space and time.

Being women and men does not refer too much to biological nature; it is more of a 'social construct.'¹ It is more a 'subjective' matter and not an 'objective' one. We mean by subjective matter the fact that being women and men in society depends on our feelings, our minds, and our beliefs and values; and all these are shaped by a type of education and training—formal and informal, familial and social, and to the greatest extent, religious.

And this education affects the way we act and think, the way we read, interpret and understand even the Bible—and also the way we envision God. Therefore, it can be submitted to critique and modification, depending on our will, on the level of evolution of our minds, and our intelligence.

The second defensive rationale is to consider gender as a Western matter and an attempt to *westernize* Africa. It is true that the concept of gender was developed early in the Western societies. But that is only because the first battle for the liberation of women began there. So the gender approach is only a step in the evolution of this process. It is rooted in the previous feminist struggle.

But gender is not just a Western matter. It is a global issue, engaging the whole humanity. It can vary depending on political, cultural, economic and religious contexts. It is still being constructed, and it challenges every society and culture. Even Western societies are still challenged by it.

In this paper, we will attempt to explore a new model of relationship between women and men in Africa today, taking into consideration the global societal changes that we are facing now within the context of globalization, with its political, cultural, economic and technological impact.

We will highlight the crises of our society as signs for an urgent need to review and renew our social structures, the different ways of being women and men in the family, community, Church and society as a whole.

We will be touching issues such as sexuality, HIV/AIDS, leadership, economic justice and injustice. Finally, we will plead for a reconciled and harmonized relationship between women and men in society.

I. Ongoing Changes and New Social Patterns in Africa

For more than a decade now, African societies, as all humanity, are undergoing profound changes. Now, every change is a striking process, for it confronts two contradictory forces: the conservative, stuck on an ancient system; and the progressive, attempting to draw the whole society towards a new age; therefore, it is always a situation of crisis.

So, describing African societies as 'societies in crisis' means considering these societies as being engaged in a global process of change. This change comes from inside the society by the emerging new generations, and from outside by the confluence of diverse foreign socio-cultural, ideological and religious movements, quickened by today's open and globalized world.

So when we talk about the crisis, we do not refer to a fixed state but to a transitional step. That means a society in crisis is a society in transition. How does this change affect

1 I DUBE Musa (ed.), *HIV/AIDS and Curriculum, Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in Theological Programmes*. Genève, 2003.

the social pattern? That is what we are going to see in this chapter. We will then highlight the impact of the change in politics, economy, culture and social organization.

1. Political and Economic Transition

Since 1990 Africa has followed the global movement known as the 'East Wind,' characterized by the falling apart of the Berlin wall and the splitting up of the Eastern Bloc, represented by the former communist Soviet Union, with emerging claims for freedom and democracy.

From that moment on, most of the African countries began to undergo the difficult and remarkable process of the democratization of their institutions. New political parties were authorized to exist and could compete with the ruling monopolistic one in democratic polls.

Multiple newsletters with more and more critical analyses of societal issues were created; the social movement arose and issues such as human rights violations, violence against women and good governance could be addressed publicly. Women's groups and movements emerged and raised their voices progressively in different political fora and decision-making areas of the society.

At the pan-African level new institutions were set up: the *African Union* (AU) is the new instrumental body that will address African issues in the world arena and cope with challenges such as conflict resolution, war prevention and peacekeeping, democracy and good governance, as well as developmental issues facing the continent.

Today we are there, but we cannot yet affirm that all has been achieved. A lot remains to be done. Some parts of the continent are still groaning in civil wars and political conflicts cause sorrows and mourning among populations, mostly women and children. Constitutional 'hijacking,' consisting of some leaders abusing the Constitution in order to stay in power eternally is prevailing in some countries.

At the economic level, Africa has undergone through an economic liberalization with the emergence of the private sector since 1990. Most parts of the economic sector were privatized, as well as the major state companies.

All these changes occurred under the guideline of a framework policy of the *Structural Adjustment Program* (SAP) set up by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the other Breton Woods Institutions.

Economic globalization as a global trend is challenging the economy of the continent, which is still trailing behind as the poorest economy. In response to it, the leaders of Africa set up the *New Partnership for African Development* (NEPAD) as a framework of policies to be implemented in order to help the continent integrate into the world economy and boost its development.

The *Millennial Development Goals* (MDG) launched by the United Nations (UN), with a special focus on Africa, is another instrumental mechanism of the international community to halve the extreme poverty prevailing and assuage the impact of HIV/AIDS and other deadly diseases, to list only two goals.

At the national level instruments do exist. Many governments developed strategic documents for poverty reduction, along with the adoption of the MDG document, in a comprehensive development policy.

But Wahu KAARA, the ecumenical coordinator of the MDG, raised a concern during

the last UN gathering in New York: “Africa no longer wants warm words, but action that will meet and exceed the MDGs by 2015.”¹

Albeit these instruments and mechanisms, the reality on the field is steadily worsening. Poverty is still spreading and threatening people at the community level. Here again, women and young people are suffering the most.

The external debt is ravaging the economy with serious damages to the social sector, especially education and health. Too much is still to be done. Above good and warm words, relevant actions have to be taken at local, national, regional and global level to stem this fundamental menace jeopardizing the future of the continent.

2. New Social and Cultural Trends

The globalization process in which humanity is engaged is reshaping the social arena in Africa today, with the emergence of new social values and cultural trends. We used to talk about globalization only in terms of economic and financial matters, and yet, there is a socio-cultural dimension of it as well.

This change occurs with a lot of tensions, drawing Africans into a crisis of identity. They are facing a change of identity. Identity is embedded in culture. If culture is something changing, identity is changing too.

So in the context of global cultural change that we are facing today, it is quite normal that identity is in crisis, in the way we have defined crisis as a transition state. New patterns are arising much more from the younger generations. One can observe it in their way of acting and thinking, in their ways of dressing, walking, eating, talking, loving and so on.

Family, as the first social institution, is also affected by this change. A sign of it is the fact that many couples get divorced today. The emergent phenomenon of a single-parent family, particularly among young women, is also another sign of the times.

Today many young people, especially young women, no longer accept the prevailing traditional family system. Thus, there is an urgent need to rethink the concept of family and review the roles and function of its different members.

The social transformation in Africa is quickened by the startling evolution in the world of information and communication technologies. The internet, mobile telephones, mass media including global television, radio and newspaper—all these new global communication tools are reshaping minds, transforming social relations and organizations, and developing new attitudes and skills.

Through it a new culture is emerging, the *cyber culture*,² carried by a *cyber generation* in a *cyber society*. In this *cyber society* we have *cyber marriage* and *cyber friendship*, very common today among young people and even among the elders.

It interconnects people irregardless of boundaries, races, cultures, religions, gender, and so on. It unifies people inside a worldwide web. In the cyber society, whoever can express her- or him self in any way she or he wants shows whatever things she or he wants to show.

Cyber society is thus a free and open society which displays and highlights the inner world of humanity, including both whatever can be considered ‘good’ or ‘evil.’ Nothing

¹ ² See AACC Newsletter: *The African Christian Pulse*, 2005/18.

² ³ The concept of cyber culture has been developed by the famous Canadian philosopher Pierre LEVY, who has devoted his professional life in studying the impact of digital revolution on the cultures.

is hidden anymore, everything is disclosed, because everyone knows how to use it. One can find there any type of information, knowledge, friends, partners, goods and commodities. One can sell, buy, advertise, sensitize, mobilize, train and communicate.

The impact of the cyber society in Africa is considerable and significant, especially on the younger generations. The stances toward this new phenomenon vary. There are those who are a bit reactionary to it. This group considers cyber society as a new menace against Africa in terms of cultural deterioration and moral depravation; and charge that it gives too much freedom to young people, who are considered today as disrespectful towards elders and completely disoriented.

Another group of people are more receptive to it, and they find it as a new chance to grab for Africa¹ in this new millennium. We Africans have to study it critically and come up with relevant and progressive orientations for the whole society.

This is also the task of the churches and the ecumenical community in Africa, the theologians, missiologists and Christians at any levels. The technological revolution is inevitable, and its impact on people and culture as well. The only thing to do is to deal proactively and constructively with it.

3. HIV/AIDS and Global Poverty

Too much has been said and written about HIV/AIDS and global poverty; and Africa is today counted as the part of the world where these prevail most desperately. They have scarred the whole social body, and reality is irrevocably marked by these two scourges.

The poverty in Africa is a scandal and a shame for humanity. It is the result of structural discrepancies. Thus poverty is created by an unjust system, both internal and global.

At the global level, a possible list of causes of poverty in Africa might include: the burden of international indebtedness; the unfair trade system which does not allow African products to compete in the Western market due to subsidies those government provide to their producers, mostly in agriculture; the absence of transparency and democracy in the international financial system (decision-making in the IMF and World Bank, especially); and the menace of transnational corporations (TNT) to the national economy.

At the national (internal) level, one counts corruption, wars and conflicts, the lack of good governance, and the structural adjustment policies (SAP) which have considerably damaged the health and education systems.

The impact of poverty on society in Africa is visible and has multiple facets: unemployment of young people, increasing unemployment, the development of slums around the big cities, development of the informal sector, ecological devastation, 'streetism'.²

HIV/AIDS, on the other hand, is ravaging the population. The link with poverty is close and intimate. Poverty nurtures HIV/AIDS and vice versa. The reports and figures show that countries such as South Africa and Botswana have recorded negative population growth due to HIV/AIDS.

In so doing it reduces life expectancy, damages the education system (by killing teachers and lecturers), results in a loss of humanpower and consequently drags down production. It also destroys families and spoils the relations among stakeholders in society.

1 4 BONJAWO Jacques, *Internet: une chance pour l'Afrique*. Paris, 2002.

2 5 By 'streetism,' we mean a comprehensive system describing the phenomenon of people living on the street, including street children, homeless, graduates on the street without jobs, and so on.

Poverty and the HIV/AIDS question our society. They question our social practices, our culture, and our relation to one another, our humanity and our spirituality. They represent a spiritual and ethical challenge for the whole of humanity.

II. Gender Perspectives: For a New Approach to Gender Roles

We have seen how African societies are facing gradual changes affecting the life of the people, the political and socio-cultural institutions such as the state, the communities, the family, and so on.

We saw the context of this change, which is the globalization process; and its major driving force, which is the technological revolution via the development of information technology (IT), linking and connecting humanity in a worldwide web.

We had a look at how this revolution affects our society with the emergence of new social patterns, reconfiguring the political, economic, social and even religious landscape, transforming the minds of people. This context is also characterized by poverty and HIV/AIDS as global phenomena.

Having arrived at this junction, what can we learn from it as far as gender roles are concerned? Gender is related to how women and men share power in the society, how their roles and functions are defined and exerted in politics and the economy.

Being women and men is not primarily biological, but rather cultural and educational. Thus in this transitional context described above, it becomes apparent that there is an urgent need to rethink the relationship between women and men in our society. What does it mean today to be women and men?

1. Deconstruction

“Gender is not natural, is not divine, has to do with relationship between women and men, and can be reconstructed (...) by the society for since it is culturally constructed it can be socially deconstructed.”¹

The first step to move forward in building the new approaches of gender roles is deconstructing what has been constructed so far.

By deconstructing we mean that there is a need to dissect the social system prevailing now and to analyze its functions and dysfunctions, its internal dynamics, to highlight its failures and discrepancies. Deconstructing also means challenging and critically questioning our myths, our social ideologies, which gendered women and men. That is demythologizing and demystifying.

A. The Myth of the Strong Man

A myth is a set of ideas and values that generally describe and explain in a certain way our realm. It also has a foundational and educational function. It plays a crucial role in the foundation of a community and in shaping the mind of its members. Every society has its own myths. To engage in a change in a community, it is recommended to challenge its myths, as well.

Challenging the myth of the ‘strong man’ means attacking all the ideas and social stories that describe and promote the image of man as someone strong, fearless, courageous, invulnerable, a great thinker and intellectually bright. All these are myths; but because

1 6 DUBE Musa (ed.), *HIV/AIDS and Curriculum, Methods of Integrating HIV/AIDS in Theological Programmes*. Genève, 2003. 86.

they are imaginary constructions, which have shaped minds and behaviours, they infuse the educational system in such a way that men are trained like to be like that in society.

But the today's realms tell and show us its opposite. There are many calamities attacking our world today and rendering men vulnerable (HIV/AIDS, for example). Facing them, men of course also show signs of weakness and fear.

B. Man as Protector and Provider

Men are also promoted as the protectors and providers for their families. They are those protecting the family, the society, and sparing them from threats and external menaces. They are those providing the resources (money) for subsistence.

The economic crisis in Africa today challenges this notion, for we have men losing their jobs and subsequently they cannot afford this responsibility anymore. They are not really what the myth tells us. It is a delusion, and we have to adjust our minds. In the meantime, their function as head of the family is also challenged.

2. Reconstruction

After deconstructing and analyzing the system critically, we need now to reconstruct a new social system giving the findings and results of the previous process. This means building new paradigms for a new society, where women and men will be reconciled.

A. Women and Men in Partnership

The new paradigm we need to develop and nurture regarding the relationship of women and men is the one of partnership. The system of partnership recognizes the worth of each component and wants to build an equal and equitable relationship.

In terms of gender roles, that will mean considering women and men as equal partners in society, acting together, conjugating and uniting their forces and resources to build an equitable society.

B. Collective Intelligence and Collective Leadership

We owe the expression 'collective intelligence' to the Canadian philosopher Pierre LEVY. Collective intelligence defines intelligence and intellectual activity as a collective process. It is not a one-person show. It gives space for and values any ideas and inputs; it makes room for discussion, debate and participation.

Likewise, collective leadership approaches leadership as a collective matter. That means it recognizes each person as a leader, capable of contributing to the development of the whole society.

The values here are inclusiveness, flexibility, openness, dynamism, collaboration, interdependence and consensus. The approach gives worth to group work, and decisions are made by consensus.

We shall never overcome the challenges of our society today if we continue to view leadership as a single thing, if we do not address and approach it collectively, which means mobilizing all the living forces of the community.

Applying that to the relationship of women and men will mean recognizing women and men both as leaders in their different capacities in society—building a social system

where the leadership, including economic, political, religious and spiritual, is no longer the affair of men only.

African societies have failed by degrading the important role and function of female energy in history and in humanity. This energy, this force, has to be re-aroused in our society. It is the task of the new generation.

Suggested Reading

BONJAWO Jacques, *Internet: une chance pour l'Afrique*. Paris, 2002.

DEGLIO-BELLEMARE Mario – GARCÍA Gabriela Miranda (eds), *Talitha Cum! The Grace of Solidarity in a Globalized World*. Genève, 2004.

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WEINREICH Sonja – BENN Christoph, *AIDS: Meeting the Challenges, Data, Facts, Background*. Genève, 2004.

YINDA Helene – KA MANA, *Pour la Nouvelle Theologie des Femmes Africaines*. Douala, 2001.

Bertrand TIETCHEU: Etre Femme et Homme en Afrique aujourd'hui: Nouvelles Approches des Rapports Femmes–Hommes dans les Sociétés Africaines en Mutations

Cette article essaie d'explorer les nouveaux modèles des relations entre les femmes et les hommes en Afrique compte tenu des mutations sociales actuelles dans un contexte de mondialisation avec ses implications politiques, économiques, culturelles et technologiques. Etre femme et homme en société est une construction culturelle et éducationnelle. Il peut donc être déconstruit. Les sociétés africaines sont de nos jours engagées dans des changements radicaux et profonds tant politiques, économiques, sociales que culturelles. Ils questionnent notre humanité, notre façon d'être femme et homme. Le VIH/SIDA, la pauvreté et leur effets, éprouvent notre système traditionnel de socialisation de la femme et de l'homme. Il devient urgent de le repenser et de reconstruire des paradigmes sociaux nouveaux.

Bertrand TIETCHEU: Ser Mujeres y Hombres en África hoy: Los Próximos Papeles del Género en las Sociedades Africanas Cambiantes

Este artículo intenta explorar los nuevos modelos de relación entre las mujeres y hombres en África hoy, teniendo en la cuenta los cambios sociales que estamos enfrentando ahora en el contexto de globalización, con su impacto político, cultural, económico y tecnológico. Ser mujer y hombre en la sociedad es una estructura cultural y educativa. Puede ser destruida y puede reconstruirse con los nuevos modelos sociales y paradigmas. Hoy, las sociedades africanas están llevando a cabo cambios políticos, económicos, sociales y culturales profundos y radicales, desafiando nuestras vidas y nuestra capacidad de ser mujeres. El VIH/SIDA y la pobreza global con todo sus efectos visibles y sutiles están probando nuestro sistema tradicional que ha prevalecido hasta ahora, con respecto a la manera en que se plantea el género de las mujeres y los hombres en la sociedad. Hay una necesidad de repasar y reconstruir críticamente los nuevos paradigmas de sociedad.