

Sixth African Development Forum

Culture and the social construct of gender

Paper presented to the high level session on culture, gender equality, women's empowerment and ending violence against women.

By

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Thank you for providing me the opportunity to share with you some thoughts on culture and the social construct of gender as it relates to the theme of the conference. The background papers for this meeting all acknowledge that progress has been made in all the critical areas identified in the Beijing and Dakar Plans of Action. Sub regional, regional and global frameworks are in place to facilitate the empowerment of women. These policies have been domesticated at national level with institutions and other mechanisms set up to implement programmes. In many countries there has been significant increase in resources allocated to a number of sectors including education, employment, health, HIV and AIDS, economic empowerment and many others. In addition international human rights instruments and standards are in place to protect men, women girls and boys from abuse of their rights. However the reports lists that the major bottlenecks to achieving progress are cultural attitudes and practices, customary laws. These keep women from accessing resources, participating in decision making, exercising their reproductive rights and other rights and subordinated to men.

Why is culture so pervasive when in its definition it is defined as dynamic and adaptable to the changes in the environment? Why has culture not changed in the face of progressive legislation including stiff sentences for criminal offences against women? Why has culture not been affected by the increasing and sometimes overwhelming evidence that women and men can in fact play different roles in both the private and public spheres?

To understand the reasons one has to go back to why gender is an important social concept. Society in its bid to survive strives for predictability and reproduces prototypes of men and women. Women and men learn their behaviour and roles from society, which exposes them to the cultural ideals of masculinity and femininity. This process of socialisation is almost invisible and multidimensional and is hardly affected by programmes seeking gender equality.

Gender is also inscribed on the bodies through harmful traditional practise such as FGM and modern practices such as silicone breast implants and other symbols as seen on television, face

book and the catwalk. These inscriptions reinforce the definition of men and women and the attributes in terms of power, domination, sexuality, attractiveness and subordination. Gendered social arrangements are justified and reinforced by religion, cultural practices, myths and customary law.

Gender allows for ordering people. Society aims to achieve gender order in which individuals see what's expected from their gender and react and act in expected ways. Alternative reactions are seen as rebellious and deviant. Often people preambles reports of such behaviour with "I don't know what has come over him /her"

Gender interactions are transferred from the home into work and other institutions that in turn reinforce behaviour expectations. The expectations are very simple. One gender is normal superior and dominant while the other is subordinate and deviant. One gender is valued and the other is devalued. The valued one has power prestige and access to resources while the devalued one does the domestic work the caring even while they are in full time work elsewhere. There are sanctions for rebellion, which include violence and ostracisation. There are further sanctions for those who do not choose to suffer in silence. The communities isolate victims of gender-based violence who choose to report. Gender inequality has therefore been used to preserve a social order.

Gender is therefore a powerful force that cannot be dismantled by good policies, legislation and money alone. People, even those responsible for gender equality programmes and for enacting legislation for equality easily fall back into gendered attitudes and behaviour once they enter their private sphere. Gendered social arrangements are therefore in most cases invisible and difficult to extract.

How can we break this social construct in order to make the necessary break through in the empowerment of women? The methods for doing this should be multidimensional, overt and covert and multilevel.

Achieving gender equality means that men may have to give up some of their power and prestige and access to resources. This automatically creates resistance among the majority of men. The quest for gender equality therefore requires that the demand side, which are the women, is strong and empowered to demand rights and change in behaviour. It requires deconstruction of culture. We

need to develop tools to change gendered roles and behaviours between men and women. Cultural change should not be a by-product of programmes but should also be programmed as an end in itself. The following are some suggestions on how this could be done.

Among the most important tools for deconstruction of culture is access to and control of knowledge and information. Most of the institutions that generate knowledge and information are still controlled by men. Women are therefore net consumers of knowledge while men are the generators and producers of knowledge. In addition women do not enjoy access to information in the same way as men. Even when they do this information often does not empower them to take action at individual level.

The mushrooming of FM radio stations often staffed by enthusiasts with no media training has resulted in flooding of information which popularly reinforces gendered roles and traditions and ridicules any groups which seek to question these traditions. In some countries these radio stations have inflamed ethnic hatred and violence against women. This media presents a very important tool for deconstruction cultural prejudices. Immediate steps should be taken to train these media workers and to provide gender sensitization training. It is also important to use these community media as a channel for generating debate within the community on the status of women, gender roles and the need to change. This would create platforms at local level to raise awareness on gender and getting men and women to debate the issues of how culture reinforce gender inequality.

Another key area for deconstruction culture is through education. Commendable efforts have been made in increasing the enrolment of girls in primary and in some cases secondary schools. However development appears to have lost sight of the fact that women make up 62% of the 155 million illiterate adults in Africa. These women therefore have no source of information or experience to contradict the unwritten customary law and traditional practices that confront them everyday. They therefore perpetuate the cycle of socialising their children within the traditions that they know. Departments of non-formal and continuing education in ministries of education are the least resourced and often depend on volunteers to deliver adult literacy.

Women rely more on tradition in their life cycle than men do. Stages of puberty, marriage, childbirth, and child rearing are mired in myths and traditions which leave many women complying to traditional and often subordinating practices. Women's groups and reproductive health practitioners should do more to demystify the lifecycle of women. This can be in the form of producing educational materials that are easily accessible to young girls and women. There are very few books even commercial magazines that provide women and men information on parenting leaving them to rely on old peoples tales.

In addition to tools there are strategies that need to be reinforced to enable the empowerment of women. Economic empowerment is still the single most important intervention for changing the status of women. Reports do say that progress has been made but is evident that poverty is deepening in some countries and communities in Africa. In a state of poverty women cannot afford to take the risks of rattling the cage that is their safety nets. This is why harmful traditional practices such as FGM and early marriages are still prevalent in the poorest communities.

Poverty reduction strategies do not sufficiently include programmes to address the special needs of women. With the financial crisis access credit by women should be monitored and raise flags when the situation deteriorates. As jobs become threatened gender based violence will spiral.

A key tool for economic empowerment for most populations and for women in Africa is access to land. Priority should be given to ensure women gain access to land. Financial packages should be set up to assist women with inputs and extension services, and access to markets. This should be accompanied by massive education and awareness campaigns to change attitudes of both men and women.

Women's empowerment should not be hidden in gender mainstreaming and/or gender equality. In the past few years one hardly hears of women's programmes. It is important to put resources towards programmes that address the special needs of women and to label them as such. That way society will be reminded on the need to achieve gender equality.

A lot has been said about the important role of men and boys in addressing gender inequality. It is important to also target men who are the opinion makers, trendsetters, artists, religious leaders and traditional leaders. Their participation should include concrete commitment to lead in the changing in attitudes and practices. It is important that these does not remain at political level but also extended to the programme level on the ground. Special programmes should target the institutions that influence gender roles, as it is these institutions that can undermine even the best policies. Using a drivers of change approach will help identify those key actors that programmes should invest in and facilitate building coalitions of change within society.

Monitoring the deconstruction of culture will require development of indicators to measure changes and removal of cultural barriers. As we seek to create an enabling environment for development it is important to include cultural indicators in this enabling environment. Progress markers for gender equality should include qualitative measures of changes in attitudes by both, men and women towards women's empowerment particularly at the community level. Unfortunately there has been a reduction in support to grassroots and community based organisations as funding has shifted to advocacy level organisations. Community based associations are the spaces where women were involved in visioning the future and defining strategies to get around customary law restrictions. Community based organisation make women visible leaders in their own communities. They also provide women with leadership and planning capacities, which are building blocks to community leadership. These organisations can also be part of the reconstruction process in post conflict situations. Unfortunately in many of the cases women are treated in the same manners children and are therefore targets for abuse by enemy militias and humanitarian officials.

Gender roles are prescribed by society. As gender roles change due to the empowerment of women there is need to consciously programme these gains into the knowledge systems, education systems and traditional legal systems of society. This process will not happen naturally but require conscious planning. There are many forces within society who are unwilling to change the status quo. Men do not want to loose their power and privileges in an era of scarce resources and many women in Africa are still too poor to risk losing the crumbs that are dropped from the tables.

Thank you