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"...Promoting Best Practices in the Management of Public Affairs and Honesty in Private Business Transactions".

Women & Decision-Making: Revisiting Beijing!



By Maggie Oben GNGG's Asian Correspondent



Before Beijing



Queen Elizabeth II
United Kingdom
1952-

Queen Kaiti Te Atairangi
New Zealand
1966

Queen Margarethe II
Denmark
1972

Margaret Thatcher
Great Britain
1976

Queen Beatrix
Holland
1980

Corazon Aquino
Philippines
1986

Benazir Bhutto
Pakistan
1988

After Beijing



Dr. Dame C. Pearllette
Governor of St. Lucia
1997

Mary McAleese
President, Ireland
1997

Vaira Vike-Freiberga
President, Latvia
1999

Helen Clark
PM, New Zealand,
1999

Tarja Halonen
President, Finland
2000

Begum Khaleda
PM, Bangladesh
2001

Ann Green
Chief Islander, Tristan de
Cunha (St. Helena) 2003

Deborah Barnes Jones
Governor, Montserrat
British External Territory
2004

Marie-Noëlle Thémereau
President of Government
Nouvelle Calédonie, 2004

Nassimah Magnolia
President of the General Council
Réunion, 2004



Luisa Diás Diogo
Prime Minister
Mozambique
2004

Gloria Arroyo
Executive President
The Philippines
2001

Angela Merkel
Federal Chancellor
Germany
2005

Michaëlle Jean
Governor General
Canada
2005

Aili Keskitalo
President of the
Sameting/Sámedigi
Norway
2005

Maria da Carmo
Trovada
São Tomé e Príncipe
2005

Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf
Executive President
Liberia
2006

Michelle Bachelet
Executive President
Chile
2006

Portia Simpson-Miller
Prime Minister
Jamaica
2006

Dame Silvia Cartwright
Governor General
New Zealand
2001

Emily de Jongh-Eilhage
Minister-President
Nederlandse Antillen
2006

Ever since the Beijing Conference of September 1995 took place, the awareness of many women has greatly improved. It all started like a joke but before many people could come to terms with it, women all over the world and more especially in Africa became more and more conscious about their environment, their status and even found it a little easier talking about their problems. Of course, the Beijing Conference was a seed which, at that time, though some people were positive about its outcome, many more felt it was a seed planted on barren land. The male dominated and had always dominated almost every aspect of their lives. Some were scared to even say something evil about the husbands, even if it were true. Those who were battered did not complain because their mothers had taught them that the man had the right to

do anything he pleased at anytime. However, things began changing, though a little slowly in contrast to the expectations of the Beijing Conference participants. Non Governmental Organisations, fighting for equal rights between men and women, sprouted faster than mushrooms. Of course, it bore fruits given that many women began engaging in fields where even some men wouldn't dare. Those who were not educated, started attending adult education programs organised by the government, NGOs and other international bodies. Others embarked on businesses to assist the husbands and to give them a sense of responsibility, which for a long time, had been limited to housewifery. Others joined the civil service and before long, held positions of responsibility and had under the supervision, women and men as well. Now-

days, we find women in all works of life, from farming, to the military to diplomacy and so on. The height of women getting more involved in decision making when more women than there has ever been, became head of governments in many countries. Africa registered its first female president in 2006. Other continents in the world, have at least experienced government under a woman. Countries such as St Lucia Island, New Zealand and so on, have had their share of women empowerment a few years after the Beijing Conference. Africa had to wait for 10 years in order to have that privilege. Before the Beijing conference, some women had been heads of governments but the number was very small, almost negligible (4). That number has risen to 2500 which is very encouraging. Of course, this is prove that a woman is as important as a man and should not be relegated or prevented

from holding certain positions simply because they are "too masculine". This also goes to show how much the men have realised that in many cases, if you want something done, give it to a woman. The proverb "behind every successful man is a woman" should become "beside every successful man is a woman" Not that women should put themselves on equal terms as men but that the difference should be almost negligible. The fact that GOD created male and female, suggests that both should work hand in glove to achieve goals to benefit their offspring and mankind. All of the above is just the bright side of things. Like a coin, the impact of the Beijing Conference has its own flaws. Decision making does not start and



A Call To Womanhood!



By Ebai Tonge Brunhilda
Women Empowerment Department

EDITORIAL

Dear Readers,

We dedicate this edition of our Newsletter to the Woman. After the International Women's Day we did infact agree with women around the world that women still have not attained their 'Completion Point' with regards to Decision Making.

However there are hopes in the horizon because in many parts of the world, women are beginning to rise as leaders, sometimes occupying the highest executive positions in their countries.

Governments still have a lot to do by involving women into appointed positions in public affairs to attain the 30% watermark prescribed in Beijing. Political Parties should also give opportunities to women for elective positions during elections.

In this edition, we lay emphasis on the social, economic, political empowerment of the woman through capacity building, the media and the civil society. To play the role that is theirs in society, we maintain that women should know their rights and fight strongly against certain harmful traditional practices like Female Genital Mutilation.

Enjoy your reading!



Mukete Tahle Itoe
Secretary General,
GNGG

Woman don't you know your worth; you are so wonderfully made by Gods Grace, compassionate and greatly endowed with sensitivity. You are the one who cares and bares the child wipe away the tears and comfort in times of trouble.

Despite all the attributes, women have still been the under dog of the society, she is the one with plague insecurity, poverty, marginalisation, domestic violence and the least appreciated by all. How did things get so muddled? Or did you forget who you are or what you where meant to be.

The woman to yester years has lots of sad memories when it comes to her culture where it is looked upon as a piece of article owned by the man, just to be seen to satisfy his sexual appetite, bear children and a willing house keeper, where she has no say in decision-making. SOME WOMEN have defied this rules set by men even though a vast majority are still living in the bondage unable to break through, Due to the injustice they are protesting and this has led to the empowerment which is the long awaited awakening of the woman. The modern woman of today is striving to revoke the post rule of "being seen not heard".

Women are still faced with a lot of challenges, and a reflection of these challenges would be the first steps in the changing of these old habits where the woman is not as



good as the man. The African Woman must recognise the following;

Recognise her enormous potential and use it in human development

Participate in decision making at all level starting from the home

Proper representation in sphere of action

Financial empowerment, one of the bases of true independence

If a woman has to regain confidence in person knowing that she has a God given right to exist, if she wants to contribute to nation

building, if she wants to be the actress not the observer, then this is the time for change for the awakening of real woman as she is meant to be. This does not mean the woman should not respect the man but that they should live in harmony, tolerance, dialogue, cooperation and peaceful coexistence rather than senseless competition and rivalry that inevitably leads to head on collision. Women do not need to be at war with men. The woman needs to be encouraged and supported.

Her greatest challenge is to prove she can do it. It is easy to complain of marginalisation, demand for equal opportunities and equality. These attributes come along with responsibility, thus the woman has to earn the respect.

Although the woman is not the minority group in terms of population statistics, how any women are Presidents, Prime Ministers, Ministers, Governors, Senior Divisional Officers and so on, women representation is appalling but in field like subsistence farming, "buyam-sellam" etc.

Women of all works of life, for long have trod the path of the "not so important" so daughters, sisters and mothers remember you are wonderfully made by |Gods image.

Womanhood is a wonderful calling.

**WAKE UP AND ACT,
ARISE AND SHINE.**

Women & Decision-Making: Revisiting Beijing!

Cont'd from page 1

end in the high places. It begins from the home. The art of carrying out day to day activities to better the lives of our families entails a great sense responsibility. It is one's ability to meet up with smaller tasks that gives room for his/her appointment as a leader of a bigger crowd and a greater challenge. Sadly, many women have failed even in the smallest duties. How many marriages have been broken ever since the Beijing Conference? The cause: "THE BEIJING CONFERENCE".

For some women, it meant the outright and utter disrespect of their husbands, the neglect of their children and you name the rest. This is especially worse on the 8th of March every blessed year. Every woman on the planet awaits this day "WOMEN'S DAY", to commemorate and remember the aim of the Beijing conference, while reminding their male counterparts that they can do more than just cooking, bearing kids and cleaning. Some men give their women the privilege of going out with friends and staying a little later than usual after the March Pass. Some even cook for the family on that day, a way of saying he respects his wife and still loves her.

"Some men give their women the privilege of going out with friends and staying a little later than usual after the March Pass. Some even cook for the family on that day, a way of saying they respect their wives and still love them."

Other men however would not even allow their women to view or participate in the March pass, thoughtless of going out for a nice time with friends. Some men still want their women to work even harder on that day than usual for some reasons like the desire to make the wife understand that her place is in the kitchen. Others may do that because they gave the opportunity to their partners and

at the end of the day, these women folk misbehaved. Talking about misbehaving, some women can really misbehave all in the name of woman empowerment, emancipation and the likes. I'll let you, dear reader, use your imagination to reflect on how much some of our womenfolk go beyond bounds. This recklessness completely falls short of the aim of the Beijing Conference. It makes the men unsure and skeptical about giving leadership positions to women, even if they deserved it. It does not help out much and as a result, instead of gaining respect and going ahead, we are looked upon as noise makers, busy bodies and frauds that are out for the sake of money.

In this regard, I say women have come a long way since 1995 and many decisions these days are either powered or backed by women. It would be only fair to say women have greatly improved since 1995. It could be a lot better if we, women learnt to respect ourselves and trust fellow women who have the charisma and ability to manage leadership roles. Let's keep aside women feelings, jealousy and learn to reason for the betterment of our community, both immediate and far off.



Women & Decision Making A Decade After Beijing



By Gwanpua Andin Joy
GNGG's USA Correspondent

Decision-making is one of the numerous challenges faced by women in Africa. While the majority of this group struggles with socio-economic, cultural, and political freedom which entails among others, the rights to work and education, those already arrived at the managerial levels have had to battle with inferiority, domination, harassment, discrimination, and inequalities in income distribution, promotion, and power.

By addressing and redressing the barriers that women face in being appointed to decision-making posts, African governments would also be taking steps to meet the third Millennium Development Goal (MDG): **to promote gender equality and empower women**. A total of eight MDGs were agreed on by global leaders during the Millennium Summit held in New York six year ago.

Thus, on February 16th, the United Nations announced the appointment of a new High-Level Panel on UN System-Wide coherence in areas of development, humanitarian assistance and environment to help manage and coordinate the United Nations operational activities so that they can make an even more effective contribution to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. But, with the whole world to choose from, three out of the 15 members appointed were women. This announcement comes twenty-seven years after the passage of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), now ratified by 180 governments; 13 years after the International Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, when it was opined that "Women's Rights are Human Rights"; 11 years after the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, twice now reaffirmed at five-year intervals; one month after the inauguration of the first-ever woman to be elected President in Africa (Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf of Liberia); and recently, the 50th anniversary session of the Commission on the Status of Women ; and in the very year when the new President of Chile , Michelle Bachelet, broke all known precedents to inaugurate a cabinet of exact gender equality. Yet, this multilateral system disgorges a high-level panel of 15 people to look at the re-design of all those areas of the United Nations system which so significantly address the lives of women, and but three members of the panel are women.



President Michelle Bachelet of Chile inaugurated a Cabinet of exact Gender Equality

No wonder NGO representatives such as Sophia Abdi Noor from Kenya saw all these international treaties stressing women's participation in decision making as nothing more than "instruments that stay on the paper and in the board rooms". She stressed that because of limited representation of women at policy-making levels, issues unique to women would not reach the decision-making level because there is no one there to understand and listen to such issues. When there are no policies that accommodate woman's role in society, when their government sees women as second class citizens, and discriminates against their rights as a woman, to whom should they turn to? Indeed, "women are part of democratic society, and democracy speaks to leadership by all people, and for all people, so if 50% of the people are not represented by being involved in leadership and decision-making, then clearly, one cannot speak of democracy". (Ingrid Charles Gumbs, Director of Gender Affairs for the Caribbean State of St. Kitts)

During the just-ended 50th session of the UN Commission on the Status of Women that lasted for two weeks in Geneva, it was observed that a vast majority of the world's women remain absent from all levels of government, and that women today comprised an average of 16.4 % of legislators in the upper and lower houses of parliaments But looking at the gender and development objectives speculated during the last World Conference on Women in Beijing, in which Heads of states agreed that women must

account for a critical mass of at least 30% of parliamentarians, the recent increase of women in parliament to 50% in only 20 countries is very unimpressive. Indeed, IPU's secretary general, Anders B. Johnson, is certain that at this rate of female participation, the 30% quota will not be met until 2025, and it will take at least one or two generations before anything like parity in decision making can be reached the world over.

Nevertheless, developing countries, particularly those emerging from conflicts like Rwanda, Burundi, Iraq, and Liberia, are doing a better job at integrating women in politics than most longstanding, established western democracies, according to the Geneva-based Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU), an organization of parliaments that works for Peace and cooperation among peoples, and for the firm establishment of representative democracy. IPU's latest list of 187 countries ranked by the national percentage of women in their lower and single house of parliament showed Rwanda leading with 48.8% women in Parliament, a 15% increase since 2003; Iraq ranked no. 16, and Burundi 19.

Incidentally, South Africa has made substantial progress in having women's voices heard in the media, according to a study released to coincide with International Women's Day on Wednesday March 8. The survey revealed that 26% of the sources currently quoted in the South African media are women, up from 17 percent a decade ago. Also, the government has shown its commitment to

the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) Declaration on Gender and Development through the appointment of a female vice president, and a 40 % representation of women in government; in Parliament women representation has increased from 10% in 2000 to 16% in the 2005 general elections, and in the public service, the 32% target of women in high-level positions by 2002 was achieved.

In Kenya, aspiring women decision makers are battling with tradition and beliefs about a women's place being in the kitchen, and the oppression that characterizes cultural practices such as inheritance rights and female genital mutilation; they are determined to contest in the legislative elections despite these cultural stereotyping of women and the almost nonexistent support from the government concerning women issues.

And in Uganda, Ms Alice Alaso, the Soroti Woman MP thinks it is a positive step that more women were becoming competitive in the race to join the House and that she would consider running in any of the four direct constituencies that constitute Soroti in 2011. This comes seven years after the National Resistance Council, Legal Notice No. 1 was amended, which saw the establishment of positions for women representatives from all the 39 districts at the time, and two years after President Yoweri Museveni followed it up by naming Dr Specioza Wandira Kazibwe to the Vice Presidency, the country's first woman to occupy the post. Recent statistics tell the story: There will be 15 directly elected women legislators in the next parliament, up from 11 in the previous one; in fact, in the February 23 parliamentary polls, 24 women contested for the 214 direct constituency seats of which only five lost, which accounts for an impressive 62 percent success rate.

But does the idea that more women are becoming more interested in contesting for direct constituencies make the concept of affirmative action less critical? Some critics have argued that while the numbers are impressive, most women who come to represent direct constituencies are not articulate on women's issues or any other. This is a salient factor to be analyzed on the topic of women and their fight for political freedom and equality.

BRIEF HISTORY OF THE INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S DAY

It is believed that the International Day of the Woman was first proclaimed at an International Conference of Women held in Helsinki-Finland in 1910, that "henceforth March 8 be proclaimed international women's day to commemorate an 1857 march and demonstration in New York city by woman garment and textile workers".

This day is also celebrated in Cameroon even though it is not a national holiday, since children still go to school and male civil servants go to work. This day is celebrated as a national holiday in other countries including USSR, and The People's Republic of China. In these countries, flowers are offered to women workers and mothers.

Women Empowerment Cold War II



By Ebai Tonge Brunhilda
Women Empowerment Department

Women empowerment has now taken a different dimension since the Beijing Conference of 1995.

This Conference was aimed at wiping the idea that a woman's place was in the kitchen. The consequences of this relegation of women by their male counterparts were dumpfounding. The treatment of women, especially in Africa was quite disheartening. They could not say anything in the midst of men and if their husbands died, life would become so unbearable for them because that is what traditional customs demanded. They were battered and no one dared say a thing or even sympathize with them. Sometimes the women themselves contributed in making the lives of other women a dread because it was traditionally right to do so.



Things began taking a different turn since the famous Beijing Conference. Women began to know their rights and how to express them legally. They even discovered potentials, which were hidden in them as a result of former male chauvinism. They became leaders and not only followers. Men began understanding that a woman could be as good or even better than a man if given a chance.

However, this brilliant idea has its own flaws like any other human effort. There arose a conflict, which we may call **The Cold War II**. Some women began doing things not worthy even to be mentioned. Some would cheat on their husbands and call it equality because their men cheat too. Others would simply nag the whole day because they are the sole breadwinner in the house or because they earn more than their

husbands. This is worst with the institution of the **International Women's Day** on March 8 of every year. Some women use it as an excuse not to cook for their men on that day thereby starving them. They would stay out for so long and only return very late in the night. This attitude will eventually lead to a crisis with the woman being battered, at best or driven away from home as a sign of divorce, at worst. The end result is unhappiness and regret.

The only way to solve this problem is by communication, from the men, women and organizations. The main parties concerned have to be taught to treat each other as partners and as one another's keeper. Just like one hand cannot wash itself, so can none live without the other. This is the only way this conference can make a real meaning in the lives of all peoples around the world.

Is Gender Blindness Obscuring Development!

Gender awareness is an instrument for ensuring women's and men's right to participate and benefit from development interventions. It also increases efficiency and sustainability in the development process. Gender blindness, on the other hand, may have a negative, even disastrous impact on development.

But how can gender awareness make difference?

It is quiet simple. The human world consists of two sexes. Women and men share life and all that goes with it. How and why women and men share it varies globally. What are women and men expected to do in a specific society? At home? For income? What are their respective responsibilities? Who has the power? Over what? What different possibilities do they have in life? What is it to be feminine or masculine in a given context?

To be gender aware is to see the systematic differences in what is mean to be a woman or man in a given society and see why such differences exist. Gender awareness is an instrument for analysing the complex division of responsibilities, labour and power between women and men, which a development worker cannot bypass.

Gender is different from sex. Biological sex is static, universal, most clearly connected to the reproductive functions. Gender refers to a more complex identity and role, defined by relationship between women and men and the idea to mean what it is mean to be woman or man. These ideas vary depending on not only in which part of the world women and men live, but also their age, religious beliefs, socio-economic status and so on. Gender relation defines how women and organise their lives: what they do, what their responsibilities are, their possibilities, restrictions and needs. Gender relations are intrinsically linked to power, expressed universally by women having less power and thus fewer possibilities to control and change their lives. Women and men therefore will have different needs in a development process.

The reasons for using gender perspective in development work are firstly that all women and men have the right to be considered in the development process and to benefit according to their gender needs. Government of the world have agreed in international agreements and conventions to apply a gender perspective in their policies and activities (e.g. the Platform for Action from the IV world conference on women in Beijing 1995, EC Resolution on Gender Mainstreaming from 1995).

Secondly, a gender perspective improves efficiency and sustainability in development work. Knowledge of who does what and why is invaluable in planning and implementation. It is also essential in formulating goals and methods. Thirdly, development is about im-

“Each population has its own specific gender relations that must be considered to see what consequences a project could have. Gender blindness can be disastrous for the efficiency and sustainability of a development project.”

proving people's lot, and as such it is a social process. All social relations and process are gender-based; it is a matter of principles to be gender aware before initiating a project in terms of it consequences for women or men.

Gender relations are obviously important in social projects, particularly if the goal is to improve the situation of women. However, it is not confined to projects like these – all development has social impact. Even a purely technical intervention (an infrastructure or environmental project) will have an impact on both sexes. If their relationship is ignored, the development input may not have the expected impact. Gender analysis must be the starting point to identify different needs and approaches to achieving change in the development process.

Think of the forestry project. The aim of the intervention may be to achieve the technical goal of planting a number of trees. Such a goal may seem far from the social relations of the population. Still, the process to reach that goal is purely gendered: do the men or women do the planting? Who plants what kind of tree? What other activities are women and men responsible for? What different sources of income do women and men have? Who owns the land? What do the legal framework allow or forbid? Who has the decision-making power outside? AT home? What do boys and girls do?

The checklist will always vary for different situations. Gender analysis includes a full description of what rules and norms define the everyday lives of men and women, as well as why there are differences.

For instance, the training for the project may be planned for mornings. Men maybe able to attend, whereas the women are busy collecting water, gathering fuel preparing food. If participating in the training is the pre-requisite for job at the nursery, then only men will get the job. The trees might get planted, but the women have been bypassed and have loss their right to participate in the development process. A common argument is that, women, as members of the household, benefit anywhere. However, decision-making in the household varies and the women might not have any say on the disposal and spending of the income. In another context the women might be the ones experienced in the forestry activities and with access to the land. If it is assumed that planting is male business, the training will be directed at the men who may have the capability from it – to implement the activities to ensure sustainability. Result-neither efficiency nor sustainability, and no trees planted either.

Planning with gender perspective prevents this by identifying these issues at the start. Training is planned according to activities of women and men so both groups benefit. Childcare may be set up to lessen the burden of the women. The household dynamics are identified – who decides what to spend on what. By including both women and men more labourers are available for planting and other activities. If the gendered division of income means that women buy food for the family (i.e. the children), and pay for school or their own health care, this might have an added value to the project. With better food, better health and increased self-esteem and status, the women increase their input, which makes for better general development.

Each population has its own specific gender relations that must be considered to see what consequences a project could have. Gender blindness can be disastrous for the efficiency and sustainability of a development project.

Gender awareness and perspective open to change, gender dynamics and power-relations, improves efficiency and sustainability; women and men as their right – can both participate in and benefit from development according to their specific needs.



Good Governance & Women Empowerment



By Stephen Nkem Asek
Political Governance Department

Good governance is the exercise of authority and decision making that takes into consideration certain elements like participation, transparency, accountability, rule of law, democracy, respect for human rights and the involvement of women.

Over 3000 women converged on Dakar, Senegal in 1994 to attend the African Women's Participatory Conference. Cognisance of their responsibility to play an active role in the governance and sustainable growth, the women identified the following priority areas for women empowerment;

- Combating the increasing poverty of African women;
- Improving women access to education and health services with specific focus on reproductive health;
- Addressing women's relationship to the environment;
- Increasing the involvement of women in the peace process;
- Advancing the legal and human rights of women, highlighting specific concerns of the girl child; and mainstreaming gender concerns within economic and development policy making by disaggregating data along gender lines.

The Beijing Conference that followed in 1995 stressed the empowerment of women as one of the central development goals of the 21st century. The two conferences sparked up the emergence of numerous women groups and NGOs in Africa that will link and highlight the importance women empowerment in the promotion of good governance.

Africa cannot hope to see a breakthrough in its political and economic development and renewal while it is still harbouring the notion that the place of a woman is the home. The need to borrow and engage the potential of women in the public and private life is inevitable and urgent.

Historically the image of women has constantly underestimated their contribution to society and has confined their roles to activities that are connected to their reproductive functions.

Generally women are considered to be the weaker sex in need of protection and less capable of managing political and economic affairs. Accordingly, the majority of women encounter various forms of discrimination and exclusion within their society and family.

Delineating the status of women is a political means of wreaking the accountability and transparency ingredients of good governance. Most men feel they cannot be accountable, talk less of being open to women be it at home, office or other social gatherings because women are still being considered as their subordinates or not equipped with the mental infrastructure to understand.

In Africa many women are ignorant of the existence of laws that recognise their rights, which can be invoked for their protection. Many governments ratify conventions and international legal instruments on woman's rights. However, they deliberately omit to promulgate these conventions and international legal instruments into national law.

Good governance requires that all groups (no matter their sex, tribe, race etc) in society be involved directly or through representatives in decision-making and decision implementation. Governance in most countries cannot flourish because women's legal rights and political participation are being curtailed. Various systems

of customary law, religious ideologies and cultural stereotyping have been used to treat women as minors in the law and household, with few women able to inherit property in their own names or have equal access to political offices and positions. Socialization and educational processes reinforce this situation; women are raised to believe they are inferior to men.

Governance is inclusion and not exclusion. The fact that most governments are unenthusiastic in treating this aspect shows that they are inclined in taking decisions that benefit just a particular group but not the economic and political development of the people ... men and women alike... whose destinies lie in their hands. Situating such behaviour within the context of good governance, it becomes justifiable to assert that most governments are not in keeping with the participatory ingredient of good governance, which guarantees women empowerment.

In Ghana attempts to admit a Queen Mother into the House of Chiefs have been repulsed by powerful chiefs and their allies. Traditional women leaders have not been given the same recognition as male chiefs who have been co-opted into new positions of power in their societies.

The recommendation adopted in Beijing seeks a commitment from governments to establish a system under which men and women are represented equally in governmental bodies and committees as well as in public authorities and judicial systems. In **Cameroon**, thankfully, there are many women in the judiciary as magistrates. But women occupy only 18 out of 180 seats in the National Assembly. Worse still, women occupy 6 of 61 Cabinet posts. There's no female Divisional Officer, Senior Divisional Officer or Governor. They occupy a few of the higher offices within the major political parties.

A case is seen in the legislature of Senegal. From 1957 to 1998, **Senegal** had eight, five-year parliaments. The first had no woman at all, the second had one, the third had two and the fourth, four. For the sixth set of elections, the size of the legislature was increased to 100 of whom eight were female members.

Women see their under representation as the result of bad governance which continues to curtail and restrict women's legal right to political participation and demand for transparency and accountability from their leaders. Just as women are raised rarely involved in the decision making process, so are they ignored in the implementation process and follow up of their leaders.

Women believe their under representation will be worse without a thorough mechanism put in place to check the exercise of good governance which emphasises on women empowerment. The unfortunate situation of women in modern times is unacceptable because women should be present where political decisions are taken and should be accorded their full demographic weight. Besides they are more accountable which gives them the unique advantage of being good managers. Men and women are defined biologically as human beings and as such have rights that are protected by national and international laws.

If women don't fight against the problem of their marginalization or do not fight for openness, transparency, accountability, popular participation and respect for human rights in the socio, economic and political life, there will be no change with regards to their empowerment.

The fundamental contributions of women in their households, food production systems and national economies have to be acknowledged. This will be due, in no small part to women's own ener-

getic efforts to organise, articulate their concerns and make their voices heard at both grassroots and national levels, more women's organisations have to be formed to take advantage of new political openings and assert their leadership roles.

Women in particular have to demonstrate firm determination to become involved in the process of change. Women have to be omnipresent in the domestic spheres and seen in many fronts in society. Such as solidarity associations, economic interest groups and women's right associations. Women no longer should restrict themselves to social activities, which keep them in the place as good wives and mothers. They should also want to enjoy a higher profile in politics. Because of their numerical strength, women stand better chances of voting for female candidates during electoral processes and so can increase the percentage of women in elective posts of responsibility.

Good governance makes provisions for an independent woman who is finding time to bring up children, have a career, campaign and take an interest in the wider issues of women concerns. Women have to wave to and fro their campaigns on all fronts; equality of rights in terms of access to employment, better working conditions, social protection and faire distribution of power.

Gone forever is the era of the submissive woman with no mission in life other than to take care of her home. **"Africa is overflowing with women leaders"** notes Ms Soukeya Ndiaye Ba, President of Women Development Enterprise in Africa, a Dakar based NGO, **"they lack only the training and the means to bloom"**. This highlights the next big step needed for advancing the capacities and skills and expanding the opportunities for women to fully develop their governance capacities.

Woman in the informal sector in **Zimbabwe** have created jobs estimated at an average rate of 25000 to 35000 a year. They have created associations to protect their interests and mobilised traditional savings and credits schemes to offer sources of capital to women. In Nairobi, Kisangani and Accra, rich women traders have used profits to build houses to rent out; a few have crossed over into the formal sector, in importing, manufacturing and commerce. For food security and economic boom to be present in Africa and Cameroon in particular and considering also that women are the backbone of Africa's economy and accounts for up to 70% of food production, the situation of women producers both in the rural and urban areas have to be improved and protected.

In order for women to reach the same high position as men in various fields, more focused education and sensitisation are needed. Considering the role of the media in shaping opinion of people, it is advised that women be subjects of most programmes and documentaries proposed by the media because it could lead to a more positive portrayal of women, their activities and capabilities.

Dr. Eka Williams of Nigeria once remarked that to enable women to protect themselves there are three issues at stake: improving their social and economic status; providing a method over which they have sufficient control and getting more men to respond to women issues and needs. This we believe shall be incorporated in the women development policy of every nation that supports women in governance.

Women & Economic Empowerment



By Elsie Fordam
Economic Governance Department

From the early 1970s, women's movement in a number of countries identified credit as a major constraint on women's ability to earn an income and become increasingly interested in the degree to which poverty-focussed credit programmes and credit cooperatives were actually being used by women. Since then, many women's organisations worldwide have included credit and savings, both as a way of increasing women's incomes and to bring women together to address wider gender issues. As a result, the 1980s saw the emergence of poverty-targeted micro-finance institutions which saw themselves as empowerment oriented. In the 1990s, a combination of evidence of high repayment rates and the rising influence of gender lobbies within donor agencies and Non governmental Organisations led to increasing emphasis on targeting women in micro-finance programmes, and also with the intention to promote gender policies.

The access to micro-finance services (credit, savings, insurance and pensions) is still highly unequal between men and women. Considerable advances were made in the 1990s in the design of NGO-managed programmes and poverty-targeted banks to increase women's access to small loans and saving facilities. This extremely attractive vision of increasing numbers of expanding micro-finance programmes not only give many women access to micro-finance services, but also initiate a "virtuous upward spiral" of empowerment. This optimism about the implicit empowerment potential of credit and savings pervades most donor statements on micro-finance. Donors and NGOs tend to expand



their micro-finance activities generally rather than support more explicitly empowerment-focussed interventions for women. At the same time, micro-finance is being promoted as a key poverty alleviation strategy to enable poor women and men to cope with the adverse economic and social impacts of structural adjustment policies and globalisation. This has raised questions on how far micro-finance benefits women.

Women's access to credit and savings give them a greater economic role in decision-making through their decisions about savings and credit. When women control decisions regarding credit and savings, they will optimise their own and the household's welfare. The investment in women's economic activities will improve employment opportunities for women. Financial sustainability and feminist empowerment emphasizes women's own income generating activities. In poverty alleviation, the emphasis is more on increasing incomes at the household level and the

use of loans for consumption.

Also, access to savings and credit facilities and women's decision about what is being done with savings and credit strengthens women's say in economic decision of the households. This enables women increase expenditure on the well-being of themselves and their children. Women's control over decision-making is also seen as benefiting men through preventing leakage of household income to unproductive and harmful activities. Other welfare interventions are advocated in addition to micro-finance, nutrition, health and literacy campaigns to further decrease vulnerability and improve women's skills.

A combination of women's increased economic activity and control over income resulting from access to micro-finance with improved women's skills, mobility, access to knowledge and support networks empowers women socially and politically. Their status within the community is also enhanced. These changes are reinforced by group formation,

leading to wider movements for social and political change.

Some women are able to turn opportunities offered by micro-finance to their advantage and bring about change. In order to transform micro-finance into a genuine gender strategy, women's empowerment needs to be understood as more than a marginal increase in access to income and or consultation in limited areas of household decision making and or occasional meetings with a small group of women. While such advances may be useful first steps in a process, change at both the micro-levels and macro-levels is required. In order to justify their role as a key element of a poverty alleviation agenda, micro-finance interventions also need to be increased and make a quantum leap beyond the limited outreach of those few women who already enjoy more privileged access to resources and skills.

Whatever the degree of social exclusion, gender inequalities at the household and community levels reflect, and are reinforced by macro-economic policies, by legislation and social programmes. These inequalities seriously constrain women's access to markets and their ability to negotiate change. Inequalities also underlie entrenched and all-pervasive institutional gender discrimination. These constraints in turn considerably limit the degree to which women can use access to savings and credit to increase incomes and well-being. Serious limitations also reduce group formation to organise for change. These all-pervasive and mutually reinforcing inequalities considerably limit many women's own perception of "the possible" and hence condition their strategies for change, particularly in the short term.

Women & Computer Literacy

For the past two or three decades, the pace of development around the world has been fast forwarded by the creation of digital technology. This technology has led to the invention of new technologies of information and communication. Today the computer and mobile phones have facilitated services like the internet and wireless satellite communication.

The world has indeed become a global village, but it is sad to observe that women in their large numbers are not benefiting from the opportunities of intellectual, economic and political empowerment offered by computer technology.

If women must take the place that is theirs in decision-making, then computer literacy remains the fastest means of achieving that objective. The doors of employment have been opened to women who have bothered to acquire top skills in computer knowledge. Unfortunately, there are many more women in developing countries who



By David Nkeng
Media Department

do not have access to computer technology. Several nations have embarked on the mass training of women in computer literacy as a solution not only to employment but to safeguarding the woman's right to information and participation in public affairs.

In Cameroon, for example, the Government is patronising a computer literacy program themed Operation 100,000 women by the year

2012 that aims at empowering women with computer skills. Many towns and cities have been touched by this program that is executed by the African Institute of Computer Sciences (IAI), Yaoundé.

The success of this program will see more women participate in economic life of the country.

Media & Women Empowerment



By Ruth Samba
Media Department

Since the women came together in China in the Beijing Conference of 1996, many of them have changed from those stereotyped beliefs. This conference was aimed at changing these beliefs such as the 'woman's place is the kitchen; a woman is not suppose to go to school; a woman should not take major decisions; the woman should not hold positions of hierarchy; and so forth and so on.

After the Beijing Conference, women began to know their existing rights such as the right to equal political participation in public life as stated in article 7 of the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women and equality in education as stated in article 10 of the same convention, and how to express them following the laws that be. They started looking into themselves and discovering hidden talents which they also have. This brought forth the famous saying that 'what a man can do a woman can also do and even better'. This led to the route to Emancipation, to be completely free from male chauvinism and marginalisation and to be given equal rights and opportunities as men

For the women to get such equality, they have to be empowered. There is the need to develop the creativity that they already have and perhaps are not fully utilising.

They have to possess skills and be in places where they feel able to suggest and offer things,



to doing things rather waiting to be told what to do.

Empowerment should also be seen as active participation, involvement, accountability, encouragement,

setting boundaries and expectations, listening to and acknowledging fellow ideas. Simply putting it, empowerment is treating people as adults whatever their role is, no matter where they sit in hierarchy.

This should not be a reason for women to disrespect their husband or male counterparts. Most women have misunderstood the meaning of equality to be disrespectful. That is why it should be very imperative for these women to be guided and reminded everyday of the true meaning of emancipation and empowerment. The most suitable source of communication therefore is the media.

The media plays a great role in the empowerment of the women. Media have tremendous effects and it's sure to make great impacts. As George Ngwa rightly puts it, in order to foster change, communication should result in empowerment, which is the self-actualisation of the potentials of the stakeholders in a given society. These stakeholders are not only men but include women through individual efforts. These women need



information and ideas that would help them define and improve their conditions

and defend their rights, information that would provide the awareness and knowledge to become subjects of their own development and not simply objects of development.

The broadcast medium is applauded for its endless efforts so far in the empowering women through educative programmes. Popularly noted is 'Women and Development' which come up on our national television station. This programme usually has resource persons who are emancipated women to educate their fellow womenfolk on their rights and on where they can go to when such rights are violated. They are also briefed on how they can come together in small groups in their community whereby they could help each other.

This very trend is repeatedly heard over the media in Cameroon and many other African countries. It is a good trend but more still has to be done to fully change the situation of today's women.

In critical media theory, it could be agreed that the solution to the empowerment of the woman does not lie in rejecting existing mass media institutions and creating one's own means of expression. The solution may be found in accepting and appropriating the media scene. Nevertheless

the marginalized need the media to challenge dominant ideologies. The popular media should produce a plurality of understanding by enabling individuals to reinterpret their social experience and question the assumptions and ideas of the dominant culture. Such as those cultures that forbade women from active participation in decision-making.

The new popular media must not only inform but also create a platform for the debate of ideas and issues affecting the women. The contents of the media and the form and organisation of the media itself should encourage dialogue and creativity as well as reaffirm the woman's wisdom and knowledge. The broadcast medium, especially community radio should start talk shows and programmes where views, other than those of influential women are expressed, they should be as local as possible, getting also as resource persons victims of all forms of discrimination.

The freedom to initiate development projects, participate in political, cultural and economic activities, and pursue happiness restores to the women their birthright to contribute ideas and resources to their groups and communities. In strengthening women's development, there is no substitute for the people's media. A communication paradigm, which remains rooted in the local communities, ensures the inclusion of the formerly marginalized.

Empowering the Rural Woman



By Grace Jato
Women Empowerment Department

The rural women make up more than 60 per cent of the population in developing world. They play a pivotal role in food production, food security and rural economies in general. The rural woman is the backbone of the society and yet she is marginalized and neglected. She is denied access to productive resources such as land, credit and technology, remain discriminated in the labour market, are denied control over property and earned income, and are subjected to various forms of abuses and violence, both state perpetrated and patriarchal thinking incited. She continues to be poor, despite the fact that she works harder and longer each day. This has taken a great toll on her health and most especially her reproductive functions. Ill fed and overworked she stands to give birth to malnourished babies who in turn will mother a next generation of sick babies.

Globalisation through various instrumentalities, the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and the World Trade Organisation have exacerbated her already difficult situation. Paying debt services and military spending eat up a chunk of the national budget, fund allocated to basic services such as reproductive health services and productive subsidies, essential in the performance of her roles as producers and reproducers of life are the first to go. Worse whatever resources remains are lost to corruption and plunder of government coffers.

The accession of our countries and the inclusion of agriculture into WTO trade rules leave our agriculture in an unprecedented destruction, resulting in unimaginable misery, poverty and hunger for the rural woman and her family. Millions have been displaced from their lands due to land grabbing and conversion of agricultural lands to other uses. Millions have been driven to bankruptcy as local markets are flooded with cheap and highly subsidized imported agri-

cultural products. The twin WTO policies of market access and elimination of subsidies have substantially weakened the productive capacity of local producers and have greatly threatened our food security.

The economic development of nation is not possible without rural advancement. This in turn is not doable without rural women emancipation. When one talks about a rural woman, one is talking about poverty alleviation. Whatever method is used to measure the extend and depth of poverty, whether is the headcount ratio or the basic needs approach-one finds out that poverty has a woman's face and this woman is rural. Hope must be given to the rural woman. The rural woman must be relegated to the backwaters of the society. She should be educated, equipped with new skills and given productive employment. Most of all their rights should be protected and their health needs fulfilled.

Like in the case of Pakistan, efforts have to be made to address the causes of inequity between men and

women. There is an urgent need to involve men and women to challenge social norms that gives rise to unequal power relations which reduces women choices and opportunities.

Agriculture should be modernised, like what has been done in Senegal were by poor farmers have been given security, essential infrastructure such as rural roads and greater access to credit, water and appropriate technologies. With improved seeds, fertilizers, irrigation and the use of draught animals, the average rural woman can multiply her output.

Equal property and inheritance rights should be reinforced. Building markets that works to the needs of the people will greatly empower the rural woman.

The Civil Society & the Woman's Empowerment



By Emelda Abong
Political Governance Department

One are the days when women were relegated to the background as mere instruments of procreation and second class citizens. The call for women empowerment and actions towards reaching a reality has greatly increased in recent years. The Beijing conference, which aimed at empowering the woman, gave a torch light to women all around the world. They became more aware of their importance and their rights in the society.

This importance has summoned to a declaration of the women's day (8th March) which is observed by many nations. In churches, they are honoured with the mother's day (19th March). The civil stratum of the society is becoming more and more an indispensable factor in accelerating this course

Talking at the 2005 World Summit, world leaders declared that "progress for women is progress for all". This means that a completion point can never be reached unless women are fully empowered. Many women have argued that, though the bible says women should respect their husbands, women also have some worth that is lacking in a man.

God removed man's rib to create a woman but the man was asleep and so failed to hear the secrets that He gave to the woman. Researchers have also proven that women are embedded with qualities that must be exploited if "progress for all" is to be achieved.

These studies reveal that women understand how to make things happen they are adept at juggling many tasks and priorities and often deal with a number of crises simultaneously. They work well in teams and often put the team before their own personal glory; because they tend to build relationships, their leadership style is often motivating and inspirational; they are likely to share information and are willing to coach subordinates and are able to articulate a clear vision. Above all, women are capable of marshalling scant resources to pull their families and their communities through difficult times. Giving them a chance will mean opening the way to a more sustainable development. It would rather be imperative that the society articulate frameworks for the pursuit of this goal. However, women should not misunderstand the concept, empowerment to mean equal right with the man.

EMPOWER; to empower means to strengthen, to give power and authority to act

WOMEN EMPOWERMENT therefore means strengthening women to act.

Like minded civil society organizations in the S. W Province



of Cameroon particularly Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs), grass root Organizations and even the church are glaringly pursuing this goal. It would be worthy to examine their role in empowering the woman

FIDA Cameroon

The International Foundation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) Cameroon is aimed at promoting women's human and civil rights.

It organizes seminars to sensitize women on issues such as HIV/AIDS, marriage inheritance and family planning, domestic violence, financial security etc

It also organizes training workshops, radio programmes, legal aid clinics and paralegal aid posts.

It organizes income generating projects to assist women, give out interest-free micro-credit loans and in some instances provide free financial assistance to those in desperate situations.

So far, FIDA has achieved a lot.

It has publications of educative materials on women inheritance rights and women human rights Has been panelists at the CRTV television Programme "Women and Development".

Among these, they have successfully trained women paralegal from the North West Province (both Muslims and Secular) and more than 10000 women have benefited from its various free offerings.

GNGG

Among the objectives of the Global Network for Good Governance (GNGG) is to encourage and empower women in the management of public affairs. It has been doing this through its many publications like the Good Governance Observer. It has also trained women on effective local governance

HELP OUT

One of its objectives is to assist in the full integration of disadvantaged

groups particularly children, the aged, handicapped and most importantly women who are all victims of human right violation into society. So far, the organization has succeeded in setting up a women corner.

THE CHURCH

These are organized denominations or religious institutions that recognizes, worship and serve a unique supernatural being as their creator and father. Churches have also honoured the potentials of a woman; as such women groups are present in every church. The Presbyterians have the Christian Women Fellowship (CWF), the Catholics have the Christian Women Association (CWA) while others like the Full Gospel and the 7th Day Adventist have their women grouped together under a single name, the women group. These groups are all prominent in seeing that the women are not only empowered spiritually but also to bring to use their full potentials. Top of their priorities include

Strengthening the woman spiritually

They organize crusades, retreat and even weekly or monthly meditation meetings. On these occasions, women are taught how to read and interpret the bible, how to pray and talk in public and how to maintain good moral values with examples from role models in the bible like Deborah, Martha and Dorkas.

They organize workshops that train women on issues like farming, cooking and crop growing thereby empowering them economically.

They also act as advocates to the women folk by speaking on their behalf especially in family disputes.

Through their periodic visits, they also reach out to the needy and the disadvantaged groups in the society. They visit orphanages and handicap centers

Today, many women can

pray and talk in the society, many homes are living in peace and security while the disadvantaged benefit from the goods and services provided, thanks to the church.

Grass root associations are also playing a fundamental role in the economic and financial empowerment of the woman through their njangi and farming activities.

Today, women are becoming more and more empowered, thanks to the civil society. It is bringing out the woman in a woman for better development. In the home, they are better managers, in grass root associations, they are the economic power, in NGOs, they are good mediators and in churches, they are the army of the Lord. Their concerted efforts have successfully contributed in raising people's awareness of issues and changing their attitudes and behaviour regarding women. Women are becoming more conspicuous in the society as they continue to prove their worth every now and then. In October 2003, three African women received awards from US Organizations worth \$600000 for outstanding achievements.

Dr. Nawal M Nour from Sudan received \$500000 under Mac Arthur Foundation Fellows Programme for exceptional creativity. She founded the African Woman's Health Practices Clinic at Boston hospital to address the emotional and medical needs of immigrant who were victims of Female genital mutilation (FGM) in their countries. She developed techniques for the surgical reversal of infibulation, the most severe form of female genital mutilation

A US-based Non Governmental Organization awarded its 2003 African prize for leadership for the sustainable End of Hunger (\$50000 each) to two legal activists fighting for women.

Ms. Meaza Ashenafi established the Ethiopian Women Lawyers Association (EWLA) in 1995. Among its activities, her group combats domestic violence and sexual abuse, promote women 's social and economic rights, provide free legal aids, produces radio broadcasts and carries out programmes related to civil service reform, women's political participation and access to land

Ms. Sara Longwe of Zambia has also pioneered the use of international human rights laws in the fight for women's right in domestic courts in her country. In 1984, she was a founding member of the Zambia Association for Research and Development which was instrumental in pushing the government to ratify the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW).

The Environment & The Woman



By Akana Eric Ajong
Environmental Governance Department

Life and our existence on earth depends largely on the health of the environment. In other words our existence is conditioned by the environment. The earth is a remarkable planet. It's old age and ancient beginnings, the fact that life exists at all, and the huge variety of life forms; all are part of an amazing story. Humanity has become part of this story. At first we were just one kind of animal among many. With time we came to consider our selves something apart from the rest of nature. We behave as if we have conquered nature, and forget we are a part of it. Much of this so call 'conquest' has produced bad results; polluted skies and waters, land stripped bare of trees, dwindling animal populations, and millions of people living in poverty. We need to learn from our mistakes, acquire a greater sense of responsibility towards our surroundings [environment] and our fellow human beings, and begin to repair the damage.

In sub-Saharan Africa the major activity of women is agriculture. Women carry out agriculture in order to feed the world, ensure food security and for livelihood. In carrying out the activity the woman unconsciously damages the environment. Her action starts with clearing a piece of land, cutting down trees, burning and tilling of the soil, and harvesting. As a consequence of stubble burning, large amounts of potentially useful or-



ganic matter disappear into the sky in clouds of polluting smoke. Clearing the forest for farmland exposes the topsoil to heavy rains. These heavy

rains wash away the topsoil giving away to soil erosion. Using artificial fertilisers to improve on the soil and increase on the soil and increase production and productivity together with a lack of crop rotation, reduces soil fertility year by year, water is been contaminated. Much of the world fresh water lies in natural reservoirs underground. These are slowly becoming contaminated by dissolved chemicals, which are washed through ground.

Faced with these environmental problems women should observe the following measures:

- Stop stubble burning because burning kills soil nutrients and renders the soil unfertile.
- Practice contours ploughing on more gentle slopes to check erosion.
- Terracing on steep slopes to check soil erosion.
- Practice agro-forestry that is planting trees alongside crops to check soil erosion, nutrient loss and above all above all trees act as a windbreak.
- Carry out a forestation to replace each tree cut. A forestation is indispensable to check ozone layer depletion, check greenhouse effect and soil erosion on very steep slopes.

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Female Genital Mutilation

One of the most harmful traditional practices affecting the health of women and children in the world now is Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), that involves the surgical removal of parts or all of the most sensitive female genital organs. It is an age-old practice that is still present in many communities in the world. These communities perform FGM for several reasons among which are:

- to preserve the woman's virginity before marriage and fidelity thereafter;
- to mark the coming of age of the female child;
- to control sexuality.

The practice varies from area to area. In some communities, FGM is performed on infants as young as a few days old, on children from 7 to 10 years old or on adolescents. Often, women about to marry have to undergo the operation.

FGM is also practised by different communities around the world using different types of surgical forms. The most common are Circumcision, Excision or Clitoridectomy, and Infibulation.

Circumcision

This involves the removal of the prepuce and the tip of the clitoris. This operation is very similar to male circumcision.

Excision or Clitoridectomy

This involves the removal of the clitoris, and often the labia minora. It is the most common operation in most of the communities that still practise FGM.



The instruments used are crude and unsterilised

Infibulation

This is the most severe operation, involving excision plus the removal of the labia majora and the sealing of the two sides, through stitching or natural fusion of scar tissue. What is left is a very smooth surface, and a small opening to permit urination and the passing of menstrual blood. This artificial opening is sometimes no larger than the head of a match.

Like all other harmful traditional practices, FGM is performed by women. In most rural settings throughout Africa, the operation is accompanied with celebrations and often takes place away from the community at a special hidden place.

The operation is carried out by women (excisors) who have acquired their "skills" from their mothers or other female relatives; they are often also the community's traditional birth attendants.

Operation

The conditions under which these operations take place are often unhygienic and the in-



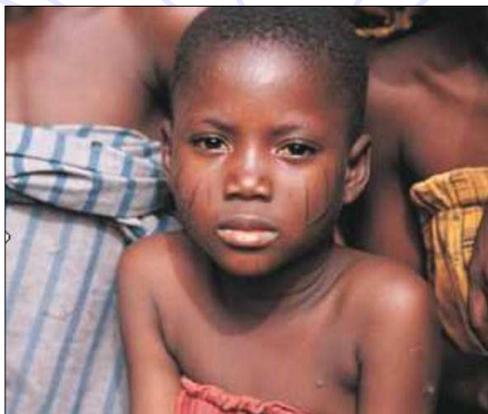
A Proud Excisor shows her unsterilised 'weapon'

struments used are crude and unsterilised. A kitchen knife, a razor-blade, a piece of glass or even a sharp fingernail are the tools of the trade. These instruments are used repeatedly on numerous girls, thus increasing the risk of blood-transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS.

The operation takes between 10 and 20 minutes, depending on its nature; in most cases, anaesthetic is not administered. The child is held down by three or four women while the operation is done. The wound is then treated by applying mixtures of local herbs, earth, cow-dung, ash or butter, depending on the skills of the excisor.

Reasons for the Practice

FGM is a custom or tradition still practised for cultural or religious reasons. The reasons for maintaining the practice include religion, custom, decreasing the sexual desire of women, hygiene, aesthetics, facility of sexual relations, fertility, etc. In general, it can be said that those who preserve the practice are largely women who live in traditional societies in rural areas. Most of these women follow tradition passively. In some societies, in order to be clean for marriage, female circumcision is a precondition. Among the Bambara in Mali, it is believed that, if the clitoris touches the head of a baby being born, the child will die. The clitoris is seen as the male characteristic of the woman; in order to enhance her femin-



Psychologically, most children have recurring nightmares

ity, this male part of her has to be removed. Circumcision is also performed to reduce sexual desire and also to maintain virginity until marriage.

Health and Psychological Complications

In rural areas where untrained traditional birth attendants perform the operations, complications resulting from deep cuts and infected instruments can cause the death of the child.

Haemorrhage can occur during circumcision with the removal of the clitoris; accidental cuts to other organs can also lead to heavy loss of blood.

Acute infections are commonplace when operations of infibulation are carried out in unhygienic surroundings and with unsterilised instruments. The application of traditional medicine can also lead to infection, resulting in tetanus and general septicemia. Chronic infection can also lead to infertility and anaemia.

Haematocolpos, or the inability to pass menstrual blood (because the remaining opening is often too small) can lead to infection of other organs and also infertility. Obstetric complications are the most frequent health problem, resulting from vicious scars in the clitoral zone after excision. These scars open during childbirth and cause the anterior perineum to tear, leading to haemorrhaging that is often difficult to stop.

Psychologically, most children experience recurring nightmares. Girls who have been genitally mutilated have to come to terms with the fact that they are not like their classmates. Mood swings and irritability, a constant state of depression and anxi-



Often, women about to marry have to undergo the operation.

ety have all been noted among infibulated girls.

The practice of FGM violates, among other international human rights laws, the right of the child to the "enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health", as laid down in Article 24 (paras. 1 and 3) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

In Cameroon, FGM is practised in some parts of the East, Far North and South West Provinces. Some villages in Ndiang and Manyu villages have continued with this very harmful customary practice that causes serious health and psychological problems to the woman and the girl child despite pressure from Government and some NGOs to stop.

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Empowering Women With The knowledge of their Rights



By Raymond Wung
Human Rights Department,

The Charter of the United Nations includes among its basic principles the achievement of international cooperation in promoting and encouraging respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion (Art. 1, para. 3).

In 1948, three years after the adoption of the Charter, the General Assembly adopted the **Universal Declaration of Human Rights**, which served as guiding principles on human rights and fundamental freedoms in the constitutions and laws of many of the Member States of the United Nations. The Universal Declaration prohibits all forms of discrimination based on sex and ensures the right to life, liberty and security of person; it recognises equality before the law and equal protection against any discrimination in violation of the Declaration. The **International Bill of Human Rights** strengthens and extends this emphasis on the equal rights of women. The International Bill of Human Rights is a term used to refer collectively to three instruments: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and its two Optional Protocols. Taken together, these instruments form the ethical and legal basis for all of the human rights work of the United Nations and provide the foundation upon which the international system for the protection and promotion of human rights has been developed.

Equality is the cornerstone of every democratic society which aspires to social justice and human rights. In virtually all societies and spheres of activity women are subject to inequalities in Law and in fact. Discrimination against women is widespread. It exists in the family, in the community and in the workplace.

Recent efforts to document the real situation of women worldwide have produced some alarming statistics on the economic and social gaps between women and men. Women are the majority of the world's poor and the number of women living in rural poverty has increased by 50% since 1975. Women are the majority of the world's illiterate; the number rose from 543 million to 597 million between 1970 and 1985. Women in Asia and Africa work 13 hours a week more than men and are mostly unpaid. Worldwide, women hold earn 30 to 40% less than men for doing equal work. Women hold between 10 and 20 percent of managerial and administrative jobs worldwide and less than 20% of jobs in manufacturing. Women make up less than 5% of the world's heads of State. Women's unpaid housework and family labour, if counted as productive output in national accounts, would increase measures of global output by 25 to 30%.

Discrimination against women is perpetuated by the survival of stereotypes and of traditional cultural and religious practices and beliefs detrimental to women. Traditional cultural practices reflect values and beliefs held by members of a community for periods often spanning generations. Every social grouping in the world has specific traditional cultural practices and beliefs, some of which are beneficial to all members, while others are harmful to a specific group, such as women.

HARMFUL TRADITIONAL PRACTICES AFFECTING THE HEALTH OF THE WOMAN AND THE GIRL CHILD

A Female Genital Mutilation

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), or female circumcision as it is sometimes erroneously referred to, involves surgical removal of parts or all of the most sensitive female genital organs. It is an age-old practice that forms an important part of the rites of passage ceremony for some communities, marking the coming of age of the female child. It is believed that, by mutilating the female's genital organs, her sexuality will be controlled; but above all it is to ensure a woman's virginity before marriage and chastity thereafter.

B Son Preference & Implications on the Status of the Girl Child

Many communities show particular preference for the boy child over the girl child. This often mean daughter neglect. This practice denies the girl child good health, education, recreation, economic opportunity and the right to choose a partner.

In areas where overall primary school enrolment is much lower than desired, girls are particularly disadvantaged. Although in many countries school drop-out rates are

steadily falling, they continue to be higher among girls than among boys. The reasons for the high drop-out rate among girls are poverty, early marriage, helping parents with housework and agricultural work, the distance of schools from homes, the high costs of schooling, parents' illiteracy and indifference. Girls begin school very late and withdraw with the onset of puberty. Parents do not see the benefits of girls' education because girls are given away in marriage to serve the husband's family. Sons are given priority in education.

A woman's work never ends, especially in rural areas and in poor urban households.

Evidence indicates, however, that as girls grow older they face discriminatory treatment in gaining access to economic opportunities. Major inequalities persist in unemployment, access to credit, inheritance rights, marriage laws and other socio-economic dispensations. Compared with men, women have fewer opportunities for paid employment and less access to skill training that will make such employment possible. Women are usually restricted to low-paid and casual jobs, or to informal activities.

In some communities, women cannot own land. An increasing number of women in most developing countries are occupied in the informal, invisible sectors where national and labour legislation on maternity benefits, equal wages and crèche facilities does not apply.

C. Early Marriage

This practice of giving away girls for marriage at the age of 11, 12 or 13, after which they must start producing children, is prevalent among certain ethnic groups. The principal reasons for this practice are the girls' virginity and the bride-price. Young girls are less likely to have had sexual contact and thus are believed to be virgins upon marriage; this condition raises the family status as well the dowry to be paid by the husband.

Child marriage robs a girl of her childhood - time necessary to develop physically, emotionally and psychologically. In fact, early marriage inflicts great emotional stress as the young woman is removed from her parents' home to that of her husband and in-laws. Her husband, who will invariably be many years her senior, will have little in common with a young teenager. It is with this strange man that she has to develop an intimate emotional and physical relationship. She is obliged to have intercourse, although physically she might not be fully developed.

In some countries, girls as young as a few months old are promised to male suitors for marriage.

Health complications that result from early marriage include risk of operative delivery, low weight and malnutrition resulting from frequent pregnancies and lactation in the period of life when young mothers are themselves still growing.

E Violence Against Women

Most of the practices reviewed so far constitute acts of violence against women or the girl child by the family and the community, and often condoned by the state. Other forms of violence against women are rape and domestic violence.

This is the practice where a husband, wife or cohabitant subjects the spouse/partner to physical violence. It is common and frequent in the case where husbands batter their wives or concubines or cohabitants. By extension, domestic violence will also include acts that inflict mental or sexual harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion and other deprivations of liberty.

THE CONVENTION ON ELIMINATION OF ALL FORMS OF DISCRIMINATION AGAINST WOMEN (CEDAW)

Although, the International Bill of Human Rights lays down a comprehensive set of rights to which all persons, including women, are entitled, additional means for protecting the human rights of women were seen as necessary because of the mere fact that "humanity" has not been sufficient to guarantee women the protection of their rights. Despite the existence of other instruments, women still do not have equal rights with men. Discrimination against women continues to exist in every society.

The Convention on Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) was then adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979 to reinforce the provisions of existing international instruments designed to combat the continuing discrimination against women. CEDAW defines discrimination to include acts whose consequences—even when not intended—result in unequal treatment.

Under CEDAW, women are guaranteed equality

before the law; the right to choose their residence or domicile; the right to freely choose a spouse and to enter into marriage only with their free and full consent; the same rights and responsibilities during marriage and at its dissolution; the same rights to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of their children; the rights for both spouses in respect of ownership, acquisition, management, administration, enjoyment and disposition of property.

CEDAW calls on States Parties to modify social and cultural patterns that reinforce the inferiority or superiority of either sex, to eliminate stereotyped gender roles, and to promote the notion that child-rearing is a joint responsibility of women and men. It authorises the use of temporary special measures (such as affirmative action) to accelerate gender equality.

While demanding that women be accorded equal rights with men, the Convention goes further by prescribing the measures to be taken to ensure that women everywhere are able to enjoy the rights to which they are entitled. It clearly defines discrimination against women; requires State Parties to establish legal protection of the rights of women on an equal basis with men and take all appropriate measures to eliminate discrimination against women by any person, organisation or enterprise while taking all measures to modify or abolish existing laws, regulations, customs and practices which constitute discrimination against women.

The Convention also calls on State Parties to take all appropriate measures to suppress all forms of traffic in women and exploitation by prostitution of women. In the political and public life, State parties should ensure to women, on equal terms with men, the right to vote in all elections and be elected to public office and to hold other government posts and positions in non-governmental organisations and to be eligible for election to all publicly elected bodies. It also requires that States Parties permit women, like men, to represent their countries internationally.

The Convention recommends that States ensure to women equal rights with men in the field of education and provide same conditions for career and vocational guidance, for access to studies and for the achievement of diplomas in educational establishments of all categories in rural as well as in urban areas. CEDAW demands that States Parties grant women equal rights to acquire, change, or retain their nationality.

Concerning employment and labour rights, the Convention calls on parties to ensure to women the right to work; to the same employment opportunities; to free choice of profession and employment; to equal remuneration, including benefits. It further recommends that women should not be dismissed on grounds of marriage or pregnancy.

State Parties should also ensure that women participate in economic and social life on a basis of equality of men and women the same rights, particularly the right to bank loans, and other forms of financial credit. Particular attention is also paid to the problems faced by the **rural women** and the role they play in the survival of their families. Here, State parties are told to take all appropriate measures to ensure that on the basis of equality of men and women, that they participate in and benefit from rural development.

CEDAW (also known as the Women's Convention) entered into force in 1981 when it received the requisite number of ratifications. As of December 10 2003, 175 countries (including Cameroon)—more than 90% of UN Member States—had ratified CEDAW.

At the **World Conference on Human Rights** in Vienna in 1993, the slogan "**Women's Rights are Human Rights**" was launched. After the **Beijing Conference** (1995), the World witnessed a rise in general call for women empowerment beginning with the respect of their human rights. The **International Women's Day** and **Mothers' Day** are celebrated annually in the world. To these celebrations have been added **The Day of the Rural Woman** and **The Day of the African Woman**.

It is a pleasure to see that after Margaret Thatcher, Indira Gandhi and Benazir Bhutto, the last decade has seen the rise of female Heads of States in the Philippines, Finland, Germany and Chile. Women are more conscious of their rights and mechanisms for protecting them.

