

# **GENDER ROLES AND THE DIVISION OF LABOUR PATTERNS IN AFRICA**

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## **Abstract**

*The differences between women and men are both biologically (sex) and socially (gender) determined. But the concept of gender is not always well understood and so some people use gender as another word for women while others refer to it as a synonym of biological sex. Gender can be described as a social construct of roles and responsibilities assigned to women and men, but influenced by environmental, economic, political, cultural and religious factors, while sex marks the fundamental physical differences between women and men. Gender, thus, denotes the socially defined capacities and attributes assigned to persons based on the alleged sexual characteristics. It is essentially a process through which sex-linked attributes acquire social meanings. This article overviews gender roles in African society with emphasis on its implications on family stability.*

Gender is a concept that refers to a system of roles and relationships between women and men that are determined not by biology but by the social, political and economic contexts. In other words, gender can be described as a process by which individuals who are born into biological categories of male or female become the social categories of women or men through the acquisition of locally defined attributes of masculinity and femininity (Ezeilo, 1999). So one's biological sex is naturally given while his/her gender is socially constructed.

Gender is a set of qualities and behaviours expected from female or male by their society. Therefore a person's gender is affected by social, cultural and environmental expectations. Consequently gender roles are learned and differ from one society to another. Gender roles can be resistant to change; it can change and actually do change. Gender questions as well as analyses why men and women are treated differently in a given society. Unequal power relations determine the particularities of gender attributes in any given society.

It is a fact that women and men have unequal decision-making powers, unequal access to and control over resources and different needs, so women are often subordinate in gender relations.

Concentrating on a family that live and work together as the basic labour unit, sharing both work and the proceeds of their labour, the gender division of labour manifest themselves through the different roles played by men and women. In the traditional African society, the woman's major functions revolve around the family. These include her responsibilities as mother, wife and home administrator. The role of the mother is considered vital as it is through her that the lineage is perpetuated. In her role as wife and home administrator, she undertakes all domestic duties including cooking, feeding the family members and keeping the home tidy. Economically, the African woman contributes to her family's budget. In agriculture she weeds and tends the crops, often growing vegetables and fruits.

Though women are 'homemakers', there are, however, other three roles that they perform. For instance, in low-income households in Africa, women's work includes not only reproductive work – the childbearing and rearing responsibilities, required to guarantee the maintenance and reproduction of labour force – but also productive work, often as secondary income earners. In rural areas this usually takes the form of agricultural work. In urban areas, women frequently work in informal sector enterprises located either in the home or the neighbourhood. Also women undertake community managing work around the provision of items of collective consumption, undertaken in the local community in both urban and rural contexts. The stereotype of the man as the breadwinner – that is, the male as the productive worker – predominates, even when it is not borne out in reality. Invariably when men perceive themselves to have a role within the household it is as the primary income earner. This occurs even where/when male 'unemployment' is high and women's productive work actually provides the primary income. In addition, men do not generally have a clearly defined reproductive role but this does not mean empirically that they do not play with their children or even help their women partners with domestic activities. Men also undertake community activities but in markedly different ways from women, reflecting a further sexual division of labour. While women have a community managing role based on the provision of items of collective consumption, men have a community leadership role, in which they organize at formal political level generally within the framework of national politics. The fact that some tasks are allocated predominantly or exclusively to women; and others to men, are persistent in human society. Thus, the division of labour between men and women vary from one country to another. So as countries undergo their distribution between men and women, two basic premises of gender division of labour result. These include

- a. Those roles that are natural and
- b. Those roles that are different but complimentary and equal

In the traditional sector, the productivity of the sexes was not significantly different as jobs were more complementary than discriminatory.

### **Gender Roles in African Society**

In examining the different roles of women and men in African society, the gender division of labour provides the underlying principle for separating and differentiating the work men and women do. It also provides the rationale for the difference in value placed on their work. Not minding their significant contributions, the status of the African women remains considerably lower than that of her male counterpart. This accounts for the link between the gender division of labour and the subordination of women.

### **Reproductive Work**

The reproductive role comprises the childbearing/rearing responsibilities and domestic tasks undertaken by women, required to guarantee the maintenance and reproduction of the labour force. It includes not only biological reproduction but also the care and maintenance of the workforce (husband and working children) and the future workforce (infants and school-going children) (Moser, 1993)

Reproductive role is naturally considered women's work simply because women bear children and naturally connect to the reproduction of all human life. There is no reason why this should extend to the nurturing and caring, not only for children but also for adults, if they are sick or aged, through the daily provision of a range of domestic services. While 'biological reproduction' refers rigidly to the bearing of children, the term 'reproduction of labour' extends further. It includes the care, socialization and maintenance of individuals throughout their lives, to ensure the continuation of society to the next generation (Edholm, Harris and Young, 1977).

A crucial issue relating to women's reproductive work concerns the extent to which it is visible and valued. For despite its actual character, because it is seen as 'natural' work it is somehow also not 'real' work and therefore, invisible. This is most graphically illustrated around the issue of rest. When men finish work, be it from the farm, factory or office, and return home, they are tired. They therefore rest, whether this takes the form of sleeping, drinking with other men or watching Television. In contrast to this, domestic labour has no clear demarcations between work and leisure; caring for young children is without beginning or end. So because reproductive work is not 'real' work, women very rarely rest except at night. Consequently in most societies women tend to work longer hours than men. Not only are they the first to get up to prepare the household for the working day, but they are also the last to go to sleep.

Lack of recognition of the economic cost of reproductive work under capitalism has resulted in the separation of paid work, which is allocated an exchange value, from that of unpaid 'domestic' work, which is allocated only a use-value (Conference of Socialist Economist, 1976). Women's allocation of domestic work, particularly child care, remains extraordinarily rigid and persistent even at global level. Why is it that gender divisions of labour around human reproduction are so rigid one may ask. This requires an understanding of the relations under which reproductive work is done.

Marriage-based households are constructed by definition on the basis of gender, with economic relations within such households also structured by gender (Whitehead, 1981). Housework and childcare are the activities most influenced by the relations of marriage. It is this that provides the critical link between productive and reproductive work. As Mackintosh (1981) succinctly argues.

The household has become a kind of mediating institution, mediating, that is, two sets of social relations; that of marriage and filiations, which act to constitute the household and determine the context of much of child-care, and the wider economic relations of society. Women's performance of domestic work, especially the care of children within the home, both expresses their dependence and subordination within marriage (since men actively benefit from this work) and also, weakens their position within the labour market, contributing to their low wages and poor conditions as wage workers (p. 11).

### **Productive Role**

The productive role comprises work done by both men and women for payment in cash or kind. It includes both market production with an exchange value, and subsistence/home production with an actual use-value but also a potential exchange value (Moser, 1993). For women in agricultural production this includes work as independent farmers, peasants' wives and wage workers. Here, productive work is seen as a task or activity which generates an income and therefore, has an exchange value, either actual or potential. It includes work in both the formal and informal sectors as well as in the family enterprises. However, in the latter case it may not be perceived of as work with an exchange value, since work undertaken does not get a wage. But since reproductive work is also productive, it highlights the multiple forms of women's work, thus, its importance in the use-value. However there are patterns of segregation that run through all societies (Africa inclusive) differentiating which work falls to men and which to women. There are arguments on segregation of the labour market in all economies which make women to predominate at the lower-end of the market i.e. sex-segregated based on gender hierarchy into lower-paid and lower-skilled sectors, with few women in managerial positions and mostly in those occupations that are an extension of domestic labour (Moser, 1981). There is also gender division of labour in agricultural production in Africa where women work on subsistence food production

while men produce cash crops. Women also work as ‘peasant wives’ contributing to household production as unremunerated labour in the fields of their family, where they work in planting, hoeing, and weeding, the tasks designated in the gender division of labour as women’s work. Women also work as wage labourers, most frequently seasonally, to supplement the household income. Finally they engage in the commercialization of agricultural products.

### **Community Managing and Community Politics**

The community managing role comprises activities undertaken primarily by women at the community level, as an extension of reproductive role. This is to ensure the provision and maintenance of scarce resources of collective consumption, such as water, health care, and education. It is voluntary unpaid work, undertaken in ‘free time’. The community politics role, in contrast, comprises activities undertaken by men at the community level organized at the political level. It is usually paid work, either directly or indirectly, through wages or increases in status and power (Moser, 1993). Like reproductive work, community managing is seen as ‘naturally’ women’s work. The importance of giving recognition and visibility to this form of work, as an activity in its own right, is of particular significance in the economic climate where low-income households are increasingly resolving community-level problems through self-help solutions. As the work undertaken at the community level, community management is performed around the allocation, provisioning and managing items of collective consumption. It is important to give recognition and visibility to this form of work because it is of particular significance in the economic climate where low-income households are increasingly resolving community-level problems through self-help solutions. In the gender division of labour, women see the home as their sphere of dominance and so take primary responsibility for the provision of consumption needs within the family. These needs include not only individual consumption needs within the household, but also the consumption needs of a collective nature at the neighbourhood or community level. For women, therefore, the residence includes not only the home but also extends into the neighbourhood and the social relationships which include the household members as well as the neighbours. Consequently mobilization and organization at the community level is a natural extension of women’s domestic work. This phenomenon has been widely noted by others in Asia and Africa (Barret, Dawber, Klugman, Obery, Shinde and Yawitch, 1985; Sharma, Pandey and Nantiyal, 1985; Shiva, 1988; Yoon, 1985; and Omvedt, 1986). Men also work at the community level and the gender division of labour in this level is as important as it is at the household level. Here, the division is between the public world of men and the private world of women. Thus, for women the neighbourhood is an extension of the domestic arena, while for men it is the public world of politics. So while women in their gender-ascribed roles of wives and mothers are involved in community managing, men are involved in community politics. In low-income communities throughout the world there is that trend

for political organizations to be run by men with mainly male members, and for collective consumption groups to be in the hands of women

Where these two activities overlap, especially in societies where men and women can work alongside each other like in the South-East Nigeria, women most frequently make up the rank-and-file voluntary membership. Men tend to be involved in positions of direct authority and often work in a paid capacity. The fact that male leaders are frequently paid for their work is legitimized by the fact that 'a man has to work' while in contrast, women are expected to be selfless and 'pure'. Their participation is justified in their gender-ascribed role of being a good mother, working to improve living conditions for their families (Moser, 1987b). This gender division at the community level between paid men's work and unpaid women's voluntary work has been reinforced by government, international agencies and NGOs. For example, urban basic services programmes, such as those of UNICEF in India are often designed to provide paid employment for men in official positions. Their successful implementation also requires the unpaid work of women in the community. Equally, when rural water-pump maintenance programmes relying on local government employees failed, they were redesigned to use local women to maintain the pumps but in an unpaid capacity.

As long as women mobilize around issues relating directly to social sphere and outside established political organizations they can become very powerful, precisely because they do not challenge the nature of their gender subordination. But when they move into the 'masculine' world of public politics they meet confrontations which are personal with women friends and husbands and also meet political confrontations with politicians. They only avoid conflict by rigidly conforming to their gender-ascribed roles. This may be one important reason why women with their particular responsibilities for social and welfare politics often choose to remain involved in community managing, more so since 'the bedrock of women's consciousness is the need to preserve life' (Kaplan, 1982).

### **Assessment**

The gender division of labour critically defines women's and men's economic opportunities, constraints and incentives. It determines their capacities to allocate labour time for economically productive activities. But the tools of economics have led to incomplete picture of total economic activity. For people who work with pay, economists use the concept 'opportunity cost' to assign to their labours a value equal to the amount those workers presumably would earn if they worked for pay. Thus, national accounts should assign an opportunity cost to women's unpaid labour, especially the portion of their efforts that goes into providing services for their own household. The production should encompass such activities as childcare, meal preparation, cleaning,

crop-storage, care of the sick and more especially as all these lead to the stability of the family.

That division that places most men in paid labour and most women in unpaid labour is breaking down. And so the view that employment outside the household is a secondary role for women has often come at odds with the facts, hence women's involvement in the family. The division of labour into paid work dominated by men and unpaid work concentrated in the household sector and dominated by women has never been complete. Though this view has been widespread and more significant, it has been widely held up as social ideal. Thus, the family with bread-winning father and a mother who stays at home to run the household and raise the kids has been seen as 'normal' family setup.

Looking at the present situation, women in their great numbers are involved in wage-earning jobs and so, as they become involved in paid work they have had less time to devote to unpaid labour in the household.

However, one main difficulty in evaluating the overall division of labour between women and men stem from the accounting method used to track economic activity which overlook many of the tasks which women do. When calculating the Gross National Product (GNP) of a country, statisticians decide how they will define what is known as the 'production boundary'. Only those activities they include within the boundary are assigned an economic value and added to the sum of goods produced in the economy. Activities that lie outside the production boundary are left out of the GNP.

A wide variety of activities should therefore be considered in the GNP. Such activities include firewood gathering, hunting, owner-built houses, home-food processing or handicrafts. For instance, in a survey carried out by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) of 70 developing countries, only six countries counted the value of carrying water to its point of use in their GNPs and only two countries assigned any economic value to housewives services (Ogbiibe, 2002). Yet one cannot deny that the provision of water is essential to the welfare, indeed to the survival of a population or that it is a major drain on the time and energy of those who must carry it, where pipe borne water is lacking. Thus, water carrying and the rest of such services, for instance, should not be excluded from national accounting because it is done by women.

Apart from their household chores, African women spend most of their working time in agriculture contributing to food production than has been generally acknowledged. They have been involved in the producing and processing of food or even earning cash, a good part of which is spent feeding, clothing and caring for their

families. In a survey carried out by Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, the result showed that women made up 42 per cent of the agricultural labour force. Their share ranged from 46 per cent in sub – Saharan Africa, 45 per cent in Asia to 40 per cent in the Caribbean and 31 per cent in North Africa and the Middle East. Women are particularly important factors in the food chain, during and after the harvest. They clean, thresh, dry grain and fish, etc. Women also shoulder much of the work involved in keeping small animals, such as poultry, goats, pigs and rabbits. They do the milking and they process and market milk and other animal products locally. In many countries, women are actually taking on a large share of farm work-load as their men migrate to cities and towns to find paid-work. They are doing more of the traditionally male jobs, such as ploughing and preparing the land for cultivation. And when men leave rural areas they also leave their wives to look after their families on their own. The number of households headed by women is increasing everywhere; in sub-Saharan Africa, one in five households is now headed by a woman, according to the report (FAO, n.d).

### **Conclusion**

The tools of economics have led to ‘invisibility’ of women’s economic and non-economic work and to an incomplete picture of total economic activity. This is in part because work that is not remunerated is not considered ‘economic’ and is not ‘valued’ and in part because of the existence of the ‘household’ sector and the ‘informal’ economic framework of national accounts and the calculation of national product. The diversification of women’s activities in the economy and within the household underscores the rationale for recognizing the important linkages and complementarities in the economy and within and between the sectors of the activities. In the absence of a full accounting of economic activity, there is the risk that what is perceived in conventional economic analyses as efficiency improvements may in fact be a shift in costs from the visible (predominantly male) economy to the invisible (predominantly female) economy. Women are almost exclusively responsible for care and reproductive work and unpaid economic activities in the household. Under the current definitions of labour, this daily work of women has been underestimated or excluded from national accounts. Yet these are very necessary works that help to keep the family stable and going. So, agreeing completely with World-watch writer Kathleen Newland ‘the women’s works are serious, both for the individual woman and for society as a whole’ (Ogbuibe, 2002. 4). So the world must learn to value the work women actually do.



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