Gender equality and food security: a development myth

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The Beijing declaration of 1995 promised a better world! A world in which women would have equal rights, an equal share in all spheres of society, where women would be empowered and human rights would be women rights! A special platform during the Beijing conference was devoted to 'gender and environment', linking gender inequality to lack of access to resources and food insecurity. About ten years later the Millennium Development Goals refer to the same problematic in the formulation of MDG 3, to 'promote gender equality and empower women', and MDG 1, to 'eradicate extreme poverty and hunger'. And as stated in the third chapter, 'gender equality is a pre-requisite to overcoming hunger, poverty and disease'. The link between gender and environment seems to be crucial in the eradication of poverty. The FAO (Food and Agricultural Organisation of the United Nations) programme 'Gender and Food Security' has taken it as a core assumption.

Nevertheless, the results of these policies have not yet had the desired effect as the conclusions of the *Millennium Development Goals Report 2005* on the eradication of extreme poverty and hunger reveal. In sub-Saharan Africa the number of people living on less than US$1 a day continues to rise, as does the number of people, and children in particular, who are surviving on insufficient food.

During the bi-annual FAO conference held in November 2005, a round table discussion was organised to discuss gender equality and access to factors of production in relation to food security. The assumption behind this choice is that women's roles in food production are indeed crucial to eradicating poverty and hunger in Africa. In this short paper I delve further into how real this relation is and if indeed we may link progress, that is, development, so easily to women and their role in providing food security. Do women want to play this role? What kind of women do the policy makers have in mind when phrasing these objectives and goals of their programmes? We may also question if the future of women is indeed in agriculture and whether confining women

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to food production promotes gender equality.

The debate on the relations between women and their environment that started in the 1980s is at the basis of the formulation of the argument that women play a crucial role in providing food security. It was at this time that the theme 'women and environment' was put on the agenda of international development. Elsewhere we summarised the images of the link between women and the environment that coloured the debate

> '... women tend to be the first and most severe victims of environmental degradation, because of the strict sexual division of labour attributing to women the chores of fetching water and fuel wood, growing food and collecting fodder. Women are considered the main experts and educators as concerns environmental knowledge and skills based on their close interaction with the natural resources. Women then are called day-to-day environmental managers, bare foot ecologists, whose work is done in harmony with nature' (De Bruijn et al., 1997: 3-4).

Based on these images women were depicted as agents of change who, with their different views from the margins, can design other, more ecologically sound, ways of living. In these ideas women's action is put up front. By using resources consciously, women's access rights to resources will automatically improve food production and lead to the eradication of poverty.

Since the Beijing conference of 1995 the discussion has moved more and more to the importance of women's agency, in which the key emphasis is on women's own need for the capacity to affect the condition of their lives, on their rights and possibilities (Loots and Witts 2004), simi-

lar to formulations in recent development-related social science research (Kaag et al. 2004). This later rhetoric does not escape the romanticised images formulated in the 1980s, and subscribes to its depoliticised nature.

This harmonious and romanticised view of the relation between women and the environment may easily overlook the harsh realities in which most women live. In many cases women are working their land, often marginal. By force of circumstance; they have no other choice; the more remunerative forms of employment are reserved for men. If these images of women capable of 'making' their world are not replaced by a more realistic model, development programmes will keep to rhetoric and discourse instead of influencing practice, and the eradication of poverty will take a millennium.

We should also realise that the idea that women are the natural defenders of our environment and that they are the workers of the land neglects the fact that the world is changing and modernising, and with it agricultural production. Rural economies are becoming more market-oriented, cash-crop production is on the increase, and gender roles are also changing following the introduction of new relations of production and power. With these transformations the expectations of women in rural areas change and they define different roles, constantly restructuring their interaction with the environment and with productive resources. Does the 'model' that we take for granted in the gender, environment and food security debate, that is, that women are the main and best producers, still cover the reality of food production today?

The ideal formulated in the debate about gender equality and food security, as stated in the FAO invitation to the round table, is that 'women should have equal access to ownership of productive means including land'. Whether this will indeed lead to food security and greater well-being depends on the cultural, social and political contexts in which African women have to operate – contexts that differ for different women and that change constantly. As in the example given below

these contexts are in many cases characterised by conflict, climate change and changing market conditions.

Women in remote rural areas

The majority of the African population live in remote rural areas that are on the periphery of national and global economies, with marginal ecosystems and little physical infrastructure, and often isolated from markets. These areas receive hardly any support for agricultural production. These are the areas where wars are fought, where HIV/AIDS is having a disastrous impact and whose villages the youth are leaving behind as they go to the cities to look for work and a better future. These are the areas where the state is not present as a regulating agent but merely as an exploitative body asking more of the people than it gives, where schools are barely functioning, and where productivity varies according to rainfall and the presence of labour. Social and cultural changes may move at a different pace in these areas, as a consequence of political, social and ecological crises.

In this context, women struggle to feed their children and to live acceptable lives. Most of their time is devoted to working the land, cooking for their children and trying to eke out a living. These are also the women on whose life experiences the statistics of malnutrition, infant and child mortality rates, and food crises are based. They are a clear example of the models of women and the environment at which our policies are oriented.

It seems a sad conclusion to draw but these women have learned to live with endless contingencies. Living with uncertainty is part of the lives of most people in remote rural areas. Cultural rites and social networks are built around these realities. For instance, the mourning of children and attitudes to death are all culturally embedded and relate to an acceptance of the realities of daily life.

An example is a former slave woman I met in Central-Mali, who had lost fourteen children and could not do otherwise than accept and explain her misfortune as the 'will of God' – her children had found a good place in heaven. The death of a young child hurts all women, but if they have no access to a hospital or even to medication, the women have to look elsewhere: the traditional doctor and the community with its rules, norms and values. That is how life goes. These circum-

stances become the norm, and normality is what rules life.

These women accept what life presents with dignity. For each member of a society and culture it is important to keep one's social status and to maintain one's dignity. For example, there are cattle-keeping societies where cattle are very important as a status symbol. Without cattle, the people would be poor and poverty is shameful, so it is better to be hungry and fall ill than sell one's cattle and find oneself in dire poverty. Being poor in economic terms is one thing but losing one's dignity may have much deeper consequences for these women. Dignity is also built up through social relations and being part of social networks. These networks and relations provide social capital that may even ensure survival.

Changing perceptions of the world

Poverty is a relative state of being. It means that the acceptance of poor living conditions is possible when the 'the world' is not known. However, people in remote rural areas are not isolated – they never were – and today's modern world touches everyone everywhere, with ideas from outside influencing people accordingly. Small towns in northern Mali have had access to television for three years; masts were erected in October 2005 in rural areas of central Chad to allow local inhabitants to make calls with cell phones; and travel to the Middle East and to Europe and America has become much easier. Being confronted with the modern world is a reality. And with it, new aspirations are introduced, which in some instances appear in the form of new ideologies.

Take, for example, the refugees in eastern Chad, a region the Chadian government had not invested in for decades and where civil war led to stagnation in agriculture, no new roads or technical innovations, and where food insecurity was the norm. The flood of refugees from Darfur into this region has recently resulted in an influx of international aid, the building of roads and hospitals, and food aid being supplied, all within the space of a year. Confronting this change made their own poverty so clear that people were shocked. 'Are we that poor?', they asked themselves.

Remote rural areas are often subject to conflicts, as in eastern Congo, Chad, Sudan, etc. These wars create stagnation, remoteness and difficult living conditions,

resulting in young people leaving to try their luck elsewhere. Labour migration is not new in these areas but the attraction of the cities is growing, leading to increasing numbers of women ending up in peripheral urban economies.

The remote rural areas are constantly confronted with diseases like malaria and HIV/AIDS, and crises are transforming village life and changing the composition of the household. Female-headed households are no longer exceptional in any rural area in Africa. And recurrent droughts and their related famines force people to leave the rural areas. Men often go to try their luck in town, leaving behind their women and children who have to fend for themselves and desperately try to feed their children.

Finally, many social changes are occurring that are rooted in long-term processes, which coincide with the abrupt changes cited above. In Sahelian countries, Islamisation is a process that is entering into these dynamics and is obviously linked to the changing roles of women and gender equality. These changes influence political, social and cultural relations.

Articulating poverty and gender roles

The models in which women are characterised as the good managers of the environment and ascribing them an active agency in this role deny the reality in which women have nothing to choose. In remote rural areas women accept their roles, be they gender unequal and poverty-stricken. But then to survive women need support in their roles from their own social environment because it is there that they can expect to find the means to survive in difficult circumstances. It is in this context too that they understand their own situation and explain their economy.

It is only in confrontation with other situations that they develop other wants. Faced with the outside world, they may change their ideas but this is a process with its own time-frame and one that is led by local politics, not by development agendas. Processes of change may move quickly and completely change the environment in which people have to operate. War does not ask for time and the AIDS crisis has no time-frame but overruns communities with devastating consequences. The development of a market economy will also touch the remote rural areas and with the introduction of new markets new

ideologies are being introduced that reframe gender roles. Then the seemingly unproblematic relationship between women and the environment that informs many policy measures may become blurred. Who in the end decides what the future of these women should be and under which conditions?

To return now to the Millennium Development Goals Report (2005) and the discouraging conclusions about developments in Africa. It is difficult to explain social change and what direction should be taken to develop policies that would lead to the eradication of poverty. The model being used so far by important development institutions sees women as the motors of change and as central to food production: 'women should have access to agricultural credit and loans, marketing facilities, appropriate technology and equal treatment in land and agrarian reform as well as in land resettlement schemes'. This may be correct, but the economic and political contexts in which these women have to make a living are constantly changing. Improving their lives cannot be achieved within the schemes already developed in the PRSPs of countries like Chad and Mali, where women as producers of food are not even mentioned.

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Engendering Gender Studies in Africa

A fascinating and stimulating domain of scholarship that has provoked considerable debate in African studies is the question of gender. An oft-heard appeal or observation in African studies and the social sciences in general is the need to integrate gender analysis in contemporary scholarship granting the pervasive sway of gendered identities and subjectivities. Evidently, many scholars, Amina Mama (2001) for instance, are hard put to understand why some postcolonial theorists ignore the relevance of gender for our understanding of issues such as national identity and nationalism. However, many African scholars are equally cautious not to legitimise the use of borrowed concepts, perceived to be hegemonic intellectual tools in explaining African social realities. Gender and feminism rank amongst some of these contentious concepts granting the claim that gender was not an organising principle in many African societies prior to Africa's colonial encounter. But in a postcolonial, indeed globalising context, the relevance of gender in analysing the totality of African subjectivities and varied experiences cannot be overemphasised. This essay, based on an anthology edited by Oyeronke Oyewumi entitled *African Gender Studies: A Reader* (2005), examines the contributions made by both African and Africanist scholars towards the pedagogy of raising analytical consciousness in the area of gender studies.

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This volume provides the African and Africanist reader with informed scholarship on gender studies aimed at correcting 'the longstanding problem of Western dominance in the interpretation of African realities' (p. xiv). The topics covered include feminism, women's agency, human rights, social identities, globalisation, development, the politics of knowledge and representation, and social transformation. At the outset, Oyeronke Oyewumi asserts that the book aspires to deconstruct the predominant notion in the West which equates gender studies with women's studies, granting that 'in many African societies social roles are not necessarily biological roles... ' (p. xiii). However, this claim is belied by the anthology's front cover photo, which pictures a woman, probably an African woman, dressed in African-style with a prominent head scarf. That this volume could be described as one whose predominant subject matter is the African woman is not misleading. The conspicuous absence, indeed dismissive way, with which men and masculinities are omitted gives the volume a minus and in doing so partly contributes to some of the erroneous assumptions of gender studies which the book sets out to challenge. Indeed, as Oyegun (1998) succinctly points out, focussing on women and excluding men from analyses of this nature results in an isolation of women which goes on to retain them in 'victimhood problem mode' (p. 13). The omission of men and masculinities notwithstanding, the book makes a profound contribution to African studies by interrogating the foundational assumptions that underpin prevailing hegemonic intellectual tools utilised by scholars to interpret African realities.

The book consists of twenty-two chapters divided into seven sections. Each section is preceded by an overview of the contributions made in the section. This organisational principle facilitates reading and renders the thematic outline palatable. The first section interrogates the universal claims of gender by demonstrating that gender is not only socially constructed but also that its history, constitution, and expression are rooted in Western culture. Oyewumi provides a cautionary assertion in this regard by stating that 'when scholars say that gender is socially constructed, we have to not only locate what it is that is being constructed but also identify who (singular and plural) is doing the constructing' (p. 116). Her article in this section introduces the concept of 'worldsense' which she contrasts to world view, that is, the West's way of experiencing the cultural world. According to Oyewumi, the West privileges the sense