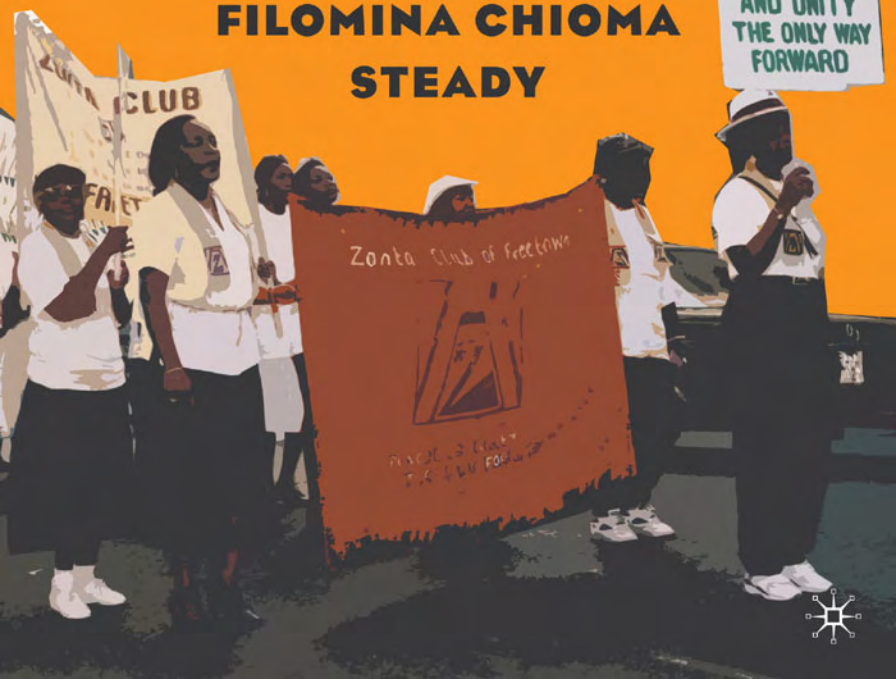


WOMEN AND COLLECTIVE ACTION IN AFRICA

**FILOMINA CHIOMA
STEADY**

PEACE LOVE
AND UNITY
THE ONLY WAY
FORWARD



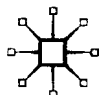
WOMEN AND COLLECTIVE ACTION IN AFRICA

DEVELOPMENT, DEMOCRATIZATION, AND
EMPOWERMENT, WITH SPECIAL FOCUS ON
SIERRA LEONE

BY

FILOMINA CHIOMA STEADY

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WOMEN AND COLLECTIVE ACTION IN AFRICA

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First published in 2006 by

PALGRAVE MACMILLAN™

175 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10010 and

Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire, England RG21 6XS

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ISBN 1-4039-7082-3

ISBN 1-4039-7083-1 (pbk.)

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Steady, Filomina Chioma.

Women and collective action in Africa : development, democratization, and empowerment / by Filomina Steady.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-4039-7082-3—ISBN 1-4039-7083-1 (pbk.)

1. Women—Africa—Societies and clubs. 2. Non-governmental organizations—Africa. 3. Women in development—Africa. 4. Feminism—Africa. I. Title.

HQ2017.S74 2005

305.42'096—dc22

2005045946

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Design by Newgen Imaging Systems (P) Ltd., Chennai, India.

First edition: January 2006

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Printed in the United States of America.

*Dedicated
to the
Women of Sierra Leone
and to
Maduka Jr.*

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PREFACE

This book is aimed at a wide audience and will be particularly useful for students and academics in Women's studies, African studies, Diaspora Studies, International Relations, and the social sciences in general. It is roughly divided into four main sections. The first section establishes the problem and conceptual framework. The next section is an in-depth study of women's associations in Freetown, Sierra Leone, based primarily on fieldwork. The third section draws comparative insights from four other countries, representing the four subregions of Africa. These are Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Algeria. A fourth section shows how these themes are amplified and replicated by women's collective action at the regional or pan-African level and also at the international level.

The research is based on extensive fieldwork in Freetown, Sierra Leone, that was conducted at various intervals for several years. Participant observation, in-depth interviews and life histories were the main methods used to study 80 women's associations. The last fieldwork in 2002 included administering open-ended questionnaires to a sample of focus groups of associations. The objective was to assess the impact of the rebel war on these selected associations. While many were not functioning fully during the war, they have been very active in the postwar period. Fieldwork was supplemented by library and archival research, which included study of government documents, United Nations documents, and publications by Non-governmental Organizations. Interviews were also conducted outside of Sierra Leone in South Africa and during United Nations meetings in New York.

For national and pan-African comparisons, reliance was placed on studies conducted primarily, but not exclusively, by women from these countries and sub regions. They were supplemented by library research and by telephone or direct interviews with members of these associations between 1995 and 2002. Research was also conducted within the United Nations system as well as in the archives and libraries of national and pan-African associations.

The book represents the first comprehensive study of women's associations in Sierra Leone. Despite the ten-year rebel war, much of the history of this country has been peaceful. It is one of the most picturesque countries in Africa and has some of the most beautiful beaches in the world. Sierra Leonean women have played and continue to play an important role in their country's development, and many have achieved prominence both at home and abroad. We shall meet some of them in this book.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

It has taken many years to bring this book to fruition. I wish to thank the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research for their sponsorship of the preliminary research that made this book possible. I also wish to thank the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD), the Social Science Research Council, and Wellesley College for awards that allowed me to conduct additional field research. I am grateful to my students for their insights and enthusiastic contributions to class discussions. My gratitude also goes to the women's associations studied both directly and indirectly, over a number of years, for their support and hospitality and for generously sharing their knowledge, wisdom, and advice.

As an African woman, I am honored for having had the opportunity to work at the international level, notably at the United Nations. I was able to make a contribution to the development of four international Plans of Action and to the implementation of the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*. These have been accomplished in my positions as a Director of the United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women and as Special Advisor on Women, Environment and Development to the United Nations. I have also been an active member of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as a founding member of the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) and as President of the Women's World Summit Foundation, an international NGO based in Geneva, Switzerland. Finally, I would like to thank my husband, Henry, and my children, Maduka, Azania, and also Chinaka for their devotion and support.

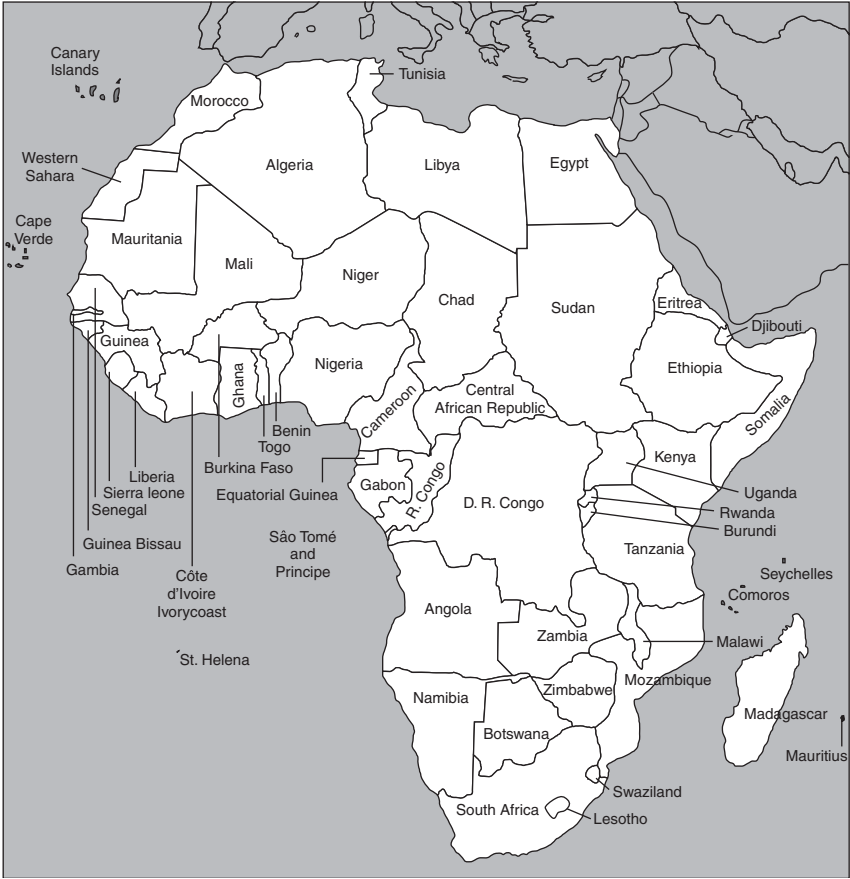
I would like to thank Christopher Geene, Azania Steady, Obai Kabia, the United Nations and the Sierra Leone Information Services for use of the photographs reproduced in this book.

ACRONYMS

AAWORD	Association of African Women for Research and Development
ADB	African Development Bank
AFWE	African Federation of Women Entrepreneurs
ANC	African National Congress (South Africa)
AU	African Union
AWLI	African Women Leadership Institute
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women
CMS	Church Missionary Society
CREDIF	Center for Research Documentation and Information on Women
CSO	Civil Society Organization
DAWN	Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era
ECA	Economic Commission for Africa
FAS	<i>Femmes Africa Solidarité</i>
FAWE	Forum for African Women Educationalists
FDI	Foreign Direct Investment
FEMNET	African Women's Development and Communication Network
FEMSA	Female Education in Mathematics and Science in Africa Association
FERFAP	<i>Fédération de Réseau des Femmes Africaines pour la Paix</i>
FOMWAN	Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria
FOWODE	Forum for Women in Democracy
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GERDDES	The Study and Research Group on Democracy and Economic and Social Development in Africa
HIPC	Highly Indebted Poor Countries Initiative
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IPAM	Institute for Public Administration and Management
LAWYERS	Legal Access through Women Yearning for Equality, Rights and Social Justice
MARWOPNET	Mano River Women's Peace Network
MYWO	<i>Maendeleo Ya Wanawake</i> Organization
NCW	National Commission for Women (Nigeria)

XIV / ACRONYMS

NCWK	National Council of Women of Kenya
NCWS	National Council of Women's Societies (Nigeria)
NEPAD	New Partnership for African Development
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
NPRC	National Provisional Ruling Council (Sierra Leone)
PAC	Pan-African Congress of Azania
PAWLO	Pan-African Women's Liberation Organization
PRP	People's Redemption Party (Nigeria)
RUF	Revolutionary United Front (Sierra Leone)
SAP	Structural Adjustment Program
SLADEA	Sierra Leone Adult Development Educational Association
SLANGO	Sierra Leone Association of Non-Governmental Organizations
SLAUW	Sierra Leone Association of University Women
SLPP	Sierra Leone People's Party
UNAMSIL	United Nations Peacekeeping Mission in Sierra Leone
UNDAF	United Nations New Agenda for Development in the 1990s
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNIFEM	United Nations Development Fund for Women
UNTW	National Union of Tunisian Women
WBI	Women's Budget Initiative (South Africa)
WDF	Women's Development Foundation
WILDAF	Women in Law and Development in Africa
WOMEN	Women Organized for a Morally Enlightened Nation



Map of Africa.



Map of Sierra Leone.

CHAPTER ONE

THE CHALLENGE AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Introduction

The main purpose of this study is to understand the dynamic tension between women's collective attempts to promote development and democratization and their resistance to underdevelopment and authoritarianism. It is argued that the outcome of this tension, *the nexus of action and reaction*, is what characterizes women's associations or movements and shapes their agenda, strategies, and quest for empowerment.

As this study will show, women's collective action is rooted in three main factors. The first is the indigenous mechanisms of female mobilization and cooperation; the second is the historical experiences of colonization, and the third is the present reality of corporate globalization.

Many African countries face economic challenges, stemming primarily from an international economic system that has always undermined African economies, environments, and people. Corporate globalization, the debt burden, and Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) continue to increase underdevelopment, poverty, and armed conflicts, in keeping with the legacy of colonialism.¹

To some extent, women's associations devote much of their time to confronting and trying to solve economic and political challenges. They tend to give priority to social and human-centered goals rather than to narrow feminist preoccupations about gender equality alone. A large part of their effort is not spent on agitating for women's rights or in challenging men. More importantly, they seek to counter exploitative development policies and authoritarian regimes through a number of strategies that include advocating for more democratic institutions and policies; challenging underdevelopment; facilitating access to resources; providing mutual aid in times of hardship; and promoting formal and nonformal education.

In addition, many of these associations have taken a leading role in advocating for peace. An important aspect of female collective action, stemming from indigenous forms of mobilization, is the desire to preserve elements in the culture that safeguard human security. In this regard, these associations tend to advance a type of feminism that is humanistic in orientation and transformative in intention.

The greater part of the study was conducted through fieldwork, and field research projects in Freetown, Sierra Leone over several years and involved 80 associations.

Comparative insights from other countries in Africa as well as at the regional or pan-African level are also included. Despite the diversity of African societies, cultures, and women, there are common themes in their histories, institutions, cultural norms, and values, including the experiences of colonization and corporate globalization that warrant comparative treatment.

The Challenge

Studies of women's associations and movements expressed through collective action challenge our assumptions and explanations. The dominant theoretical expectations and paradigmatic formulations in feminist discourse are derived primarily from Euro-centric experiences that do not necessarily conform to the realities of women in other parts of the world.

In the first place, most feminist movements seek to promote gender equality in a manner that does not necessarily lead to profound social transformations of systems of inequality and entrenched hierarchies. In this trajectory, women can replace men in economic and political positions without necessarily transforming structural inequalities embedded in society.

This line of reasoning is based primarily on approaches that rely on dichotomous models and polarizations to explain gender differences. Simone de Beauvoir, in her classic study, *The Second Sex*, was one of the first cultural critics to point out how dichotomous gender formations worked to women's disadvantage. Later, this problem was given anthropological attention in the anthology, *Women, Culture and Society*.²

In this anthology, concerns about sexual asymmetry led to theories about the public/private dichotomy. This attributed the valued public sphere to men and the devalued private sphere to women. Such rigid categorizations do not hold true for all societies and have been contested for failing to show the linkage, overlap, and articulation between these spheres and the potential for social transformation.

For example, African women have historically operated in the public sphere as rulers and political officials, even in patriarchal societies. In addition, women's associations operate in the "public" sphere when they challenge the state, formulate policies, demand change, and lobby for greater female representation in decision-making positions.³

As will be discussed later, the unsuitability of some of these paradigms to the African reality has become significant in the politics of representation and domination and in the power struggle within feminist scholarship. Instead of dichotomous models, some African women scholars have chosen to use explanatory models that are more flexible, complementary, overlapping, complex, transformative, and African-centered.⁴

In the second place, skepticism about theory and theorizing makes it impossible to find a single explanation that would not be misleading. It is more appropriate to settle for multiple explanations to better explain the divergent manifestations of female mobilization, agenda setting, boundary crossing, alliance building, and empowerment. Morgan's insistence that "Sisterhood is Global" remains an idealistic vision, blurred by the divergent views of women from different social locations and by local versions of feminism. It is now clear from the academic literature and from international meetings, that deep class, racial, and other social divisions defy universal generalizations about women, gender, and feminism.⁵

In the third place, it is essential to understand the local and cultural context that promotes and sustains collective action. In this regard, indigenous associations, which have existed for centuries, can yield important insights about the gendered nature of women's collective action. For this reason, significant attention is given to "traditional" secret societies and mutual-aid associations in this study.

These associations evolved out of the gender division of labor and the autonomous functioning of "male" and "female" economic and social spheres of activity and influence. They have served as useful mechanisms for mobilization, and continue to act as important power bases for women. In the "modern" context they have also functioned as cultural brokers mediating the process of change between indigenous cultures and Western culture, while at the same time expressing resistance to Western domination.

Finally, external influences and macro-historical factors, with both positive and negative consequences, have left their mark on African societies. The negative factors include the legacy of colonial rule whose leit motif was authoritarianism, brutality, and structural racism. In modern times, colonialism continues through corporate globalization, a factor that reinforces Africa's underdevelopment and one that can fuel wars. Positive external influences include the promotion of a global consensus for democratic values. Another is the opposition to the injustices of the global political economy by transnational grassroots movements, many of which include African women.

Some of the experiences of African women's associations have influenced the international agenda of equality, development, peace, and human rights. They have contributed to the international women's movement by expanding the scope of development and decolonization, and by promoting democratic values that go beyond gender equality. This was particularly evident in their struggle against Apartheid and other forms of racism.

Many of the associations studied have been influenced by the four United Nations World Conferences on Women, starting in 1975, the United Nations Decade for Women and, the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) by the international women's movement. However, international alliances can be a mixed blessing. On the one hand, they can expand the sphere of women's activities and increase networking across national lines. On the other hand, the international agenda can distract from local priorities and exigencies. Even more significant is the fact that the international community has been remiss in solving global economic problems. It has failed to adequately address the negative effect of international economic policies on countries of the Global South, especially African countries.

Many of these policies promote and sustain underdevelopment, social and gender hierarchies, and poverty as a result of their exploitative, undemocratic, and authoritarian practices. They also contribute to political instability and armed conflicts through the sale of arms and drugs to African countries. Wars in Africa are the often ignored but important dimensions of global capital accumulation.⁶

Review of Relevant Concepts and Theories

Theorizing about women's movements is a challenging endeavor as a review of the literature reveals complexities and contradictions. Nonetheless, studies of women's

movements and associations in the Global South have been increasing steadily.⁷ In general, they have been concerned with exploring a number of theoretical and explanatory possibilities, but more often with filling the gaps in empirical research.

From the 1970s onward, feminist scholars have emphasized the need to revise and deconstruct the fabricated model of society that reinforced gender polarities, allocated gendered social spaces, and determined gendered destinies. Such intellectual challenges inspired feminist historians to try to write women back into history. Feminist anthropologists gave structural interpretations of gendered sociocultural processes.

Feminist economists focused on studying the household, the gender division of labor, and social reproduction as important aspects of production. Feminist scholars of the Marxist and socialist persuasion have been more inclined to view women's collective action as primarily a function of the general struggle against class oppression. A few scholars have successfully tackled the problem of development and democratization.⁸

Although women's social location in institutions and social networks may vary, this study shows that women can try to determine to some extent whether they are among those that have power and decision-making authority through social engineering and collective action. A review of the various positions and insights into women's collective action can be discussed under the following headings: definition, nature, and origin; collective identities; institutional manifestations and functional roles, and relevance of women's collective action for the social movement theory.

Definition, Nature, and Origin

The sheer numbers, diversity, and proliferation of women's associations make a universal definition of the gendered nature of collective action challenging. This is because women belong to associations whose membership is not exclusively female, and some women's associations have men as members. In addition, these associations share similarities with men's associations in terms of institutional structure and organizational procedures.

However, women's associations tend to display a greater concern about development issues, the welfare of the country, and peace. They are also more inclined to build on primarily group ties of kinship, community, and shared values and display a certain degree of informality in their meetings.

In *Women United, Women Divided*, Caplan and Budjra question the universal application of female solidarity and argue that the origins and objectives of female solidarity are not fixed and can change from one context to another.⁹ No single explanation can be given to their origin in Africa. They can be viewed as extensions of the gender division of labor; rights of passage institutions; compensatory mechanisms for the power differentials between men and women; movements for female liberation and as groups promoting political, economic, or religious interests.

While most researchers have stressed their positive aspects, others have emphasized their limitations and weaknesses.¹⁰ For example, Maendaleo Ya Wanawake, the largest women's association in Kenya, earned the reputation of being an adjunct to politically dominant organizations that promote the agenda of the male-dominated political parties.¹¹ Some associations have been dismissed as possessions of first ladies who maintain a virtual monopoly on women's organizational activities.¹² Others have

been criticized for not being feminist enough and for failing to advance feminist issues.¹³ Aubrey states:

There are some instances in which women have resisted openly patriarchal control, yet in most instances women have existed, albeit quietly, on the fringes of the political domain rather than challenge men and the state.¹⁴

Because of the economic challenges faced by women, one can see how they might define their feminism in more development-oriented and human-centered terms. In so doing one can argue that they are opposing “absolute patriarchy,” the kind that is a feature of the colonial heritage and corporate globalization. It can filter down to the national and local levels, influencing and defining institutions in more powerful ways. “Limited patriarchy,” on the other hand, is a second line of defense. It is more characteristic of national and local systems that are themselves subordinate and dependent on the superstructure of a global political economy. In “absolute patriarchy,” both African men and women are subordinated and oppressed by a global economic system that is anchored in the colonial and similar legacies. Women’s struggles for emancipation thus have to be defined in broader terms.¹⁵

Women’s collective action is a phenomenon of the present global economic realities. Groups have emerged from the current momentum for democratization and development, as members of civil society and as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Although strictly speaking, not all women’s associations are NGOs, almost all of them, rightly or wrongly, now bear that identification. The term NGOs, or increasingly CSOs meaning “Civil Society Organizations,” arose out of the need to distinguish between the intergovernmental process of the United Nations and that of groups outside of the governmental structure.

NGOs or CSOs have been effective pressure groups and lobbyists at international deliberations of governments and have helped to make the international agenda more democratic. As a rule, these groups are not popular with many governments and have had to fight for effective representation in the decision-making process of the United Nations. Although they represent various positions, they have become an important feature of the new politics of international partnership.¹⁶

In the broadest sense, women’s associations can be defined as formal interest groups, where membership is primarily voluntary rather than obligatory. They range from local and service-oriented grouping to large and mass-based coalitions dealing with national issues of development, democratization, peace, the environment, and so forth.¹⁷ In the study conducted in Freetown, women’s associations are classified primarily according to their functions, which correspond to their political, economic, educational, religious, and “traditional” roles.

Collective Identities

One underlying assumption about female mobilization is that gender asymmetry and gender hierarchies inevitably lead to collective female identities. The anthology, *Transforming Female Identities: Women’s Organizational Forms in West Africa*, expresses this line of reasoning. Women’s associations are viewed as platforms and

spaces for the transformation of female identities. According to Rosander:

There are important spatial, social, political, economic and religious aspects of women's lives, which may be seen as female ways of coping with the daily constraints with which women live.¹⁸

Support for this view can be found among cultural feminists, such as Dworkin and Daly. In writing primarily of women in the United States, they assert that there is an ideology of female nature and female essence that has positive qualities, applicable to all women. They advocate a cultural feminist movement that equates women's liberation with the development of a female counter culture.¹⁹

Other feminist scholars have argued to the contrary. Post-structuralists and post-modernists have challenged these positions as essentialists and dismiss attempts at universal explanations.²⁰ Following this position, a review of women's movements in the Global South argues for more emphasis on the local and the particular than on the application of universal theories.²¹

While this approach can provide some explanation, it tends to minimize historical and economic factors that can also influence the patterns, trends, and agenda of female mobilization. The history of African women shows many examples of female activism that resulted from challenges to the "universal" and hegemonic pressures of colonialism and underdevelopment. As a result, explanations cannot be limited to the local level alone. To ignore the profound and life-altering historical and ideological legacy of colonialism and corporate globalization would obscure the importance of these associations and their struggles for development and democratization. Essentialism is part and parcel of the global political economy and speaks to the continuing need for essentialist approaches.

Molyneux's distinction between practical and strategic interests, while useful, would also present some problems of application. She argues that women's interests as a group tend to be practical, involving struggle to fulfill their roles as wives and mothers and are inductively derived. Strategic gender interests, on the other hand, seek to change the rules under which women live. These are pursued later, after practical interests have been taken into account.²²

I propose a third set of interests, namely *sociocentric interests* that could fall between practical and strategic interests. I would argue that women's associations in Africa operate for the most part to advance interests that are related to development and democratization, and oriented toward improving society as a whole. Development issues can thus become feminist issues and can form an integral part of African and other local feminisms.²³

Given the legacy of colonialism and the current destructive trends in corporate globalization, feminist intentions are intricately bound up with the practical exigencies of economic domination. The gendered nature of collective action is complex, fluid, and influenced by historical events, materialist conditions, international forces, and corporate globalization.²⁴

Institutional Manifestations

Some African women scholars have argued that gender systems in Africa have a flexibility that allows for adjustments and modifications of biological systems.²⁵

They present alternative views and epistemological challenges to the dominance of Eurocentric interpretations, especially in relation to the concept and institutional manifestation of “motherhood” “daughterhood,” and “gender.”

In *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, Amadiume shows how women can functionally play male roles and be socially categorized as “male” within the patriarchal lineage structure, depending on the context. Social motherhood also tends to transcend biological categories and can lead to the empowerment of women. Roles of wives and mothers, Eurocentrically characterized as belonging to the “private” sphere and as devalued, can have political significance and serve as mobilizing forces for development.

For example, Amadiume’s study further illustrates how the status of “mother” constructs grouping of wives in Igbo society as opposed to grouping of “daughters” of the lineage. This can lead to jockeying for power between the two groups. Much of this power is derived, not from their affiliation to men, but from women’s own economic roles and contributions to the development of their society.

The type of feminism developed within this institutional context was more empowering to women. According to Amadiume, colonialism undermined women through the introduction of male-dominated political, economic, and religious institutions that devalued the empowering traditional institutions of women. Colonialism enforced strict dichotomous divisions of people into biological categories of “male” and “female” that were unequal, without establishing institutional mechanisms for rectifying and transcending these categories.

Amadiume’s study also argues that, prior to colonial rule, women’s associations among the Igbo represented women’s power bases. They were not compensatory mechanisms for women’s subordinate positions. Women had important economic roles that granted them important entitlements and privileges and conferred power in social, economic, ritual, and political spheres.²⁶ Equally important is the study by Okonjo of women’s inherent constitutional rights for political participation in Igbo society through a dual system of political representation.²⁷

Other studies also show how women can use motherhood in their struggles for equality, especially when it is linked to consumerist and development-oriented issues. This is particularly true of a study of women’s self-help groups in Kenya and of women’s wings of a political party in Sierra Leone. Steady demonstrates how the concept of motherhood was used to mobilize women for political participation and to emphasize the need for development. Motherhood was a collective concept seen as essential for the advancement of both the society and its women.²⁸

In *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Gender Discourses*, Oyewumi argues that the imposition of the socially constructed and unequal Eurocentric concept of “gender” resulted in devaluing Yoruba women. This undermined women’s power bases and important roles in promoting socioeconomic development and political participation through collective action. Awe has also shown how institutions such as the Iyalode guaranteed women’s political representation and participation in decision making among the Yoruba.²⁹ Devaluation of women in both Igbo and Yoruba societies resulted from the heightened nature of the “absolute patriarchy” of British colonial rule.

With regard to democratization, feminist scholars have tried to shift the parameters of the democratic debate away from the individual to the group, so that “gender” can become a focal point of democratic expression. They argue that the liberal tradition

places too much emphasis on the individual, a factor that undermines the political potential of women as a group, that can benefit from identity politics.³⁰

In the process of democratization in South Africa, for example, women were successful in using identity politics to create a powerful lobbying group, the Women's National Commission, which developed a *Women's Charter*. Although not fully implemented, this charter promoted women's rights and equality in politics and decision making and also established institutions that included important development objectives.³¹

Women's Collective Action and Social Movement Theory

The sheer diversity of social movements makes it hazardous to theorize.³² The concept of "civil society" is an important feature of the social movement theory, concerned with the role of groups outside the formal governmental structure. In particular, civil society groups, of which NGOs are a part, are seen as critical in advancing the democratization project.

The debate over essentialism is echoed in social movement theory from two opposing viewpoints. According to one view, women seek to create "autonomous spaces" to comfortably discuss issues relating to sexuality, child rearing, and home life. The other view challenges attempts to fix women into a single category, since women's groups will act together with a "shared purpose," only by means of conscious and careful processes.³³ The associations discussed in this book fall between these two positions, in that they tend to fuse women's interests and development interests into a "shared purpose."

Despite its popularity and its seemingly important role in advancing the democratization process, "civil society" is a highly contested concept. It does not necessarily represent views that are progressive, democratic, or pro-women. In fact, from a feminist point of view, civil society can be quite conservative and undemocratic and can encourage misogynistic tendencies, including the rise of religious fundamentalism.³⁴

In addition, the concept poses specific dilemmas for women, such as when the state exerts control over what is technically the "private" sphere. Alvarez describes this as "the classical social movement dilemma" because what results is that movements composed of women "seek to advance claims, such as women's rights in marriage and the patriarchal family, that are, by definition, outside the legitimate reach of State intervention."³⁵

In addition, the civil society argument does not explain the fact that women have and can mobilize with or without considerations of the state. For example, it has been argued that Algerian women's associations do not fit neatly into the category of "civil society groups."

Lloyd asserts a distinctive location for women's associations in Algeria that is outside the influence of civil society concepts. She refers instead to a complex network of social practices and social relations that constitute the sphere of all popular democratic struggles and the rule of law. She contends that this alternative framework is more attuned to the cultural specificities of Algerian society, rather than to the ethnocentrically and politically driven concept of civil structures, defined by reference to the State.³⁶

Another dilemma is posed by the role of conflict in the debate, as the relationship between civil society and the state is usually characterized by relations of power and conflict. Tarrow defined contentious politics as occurring when ordinary people, often in league with more influential citizens, join forces in confrontation with elites, authorities, and opponents.³⁷

As will be shown later, the confrontations between African women and the state are well known, especially during the colonial period. In the last two decades, confrontations between women's associations and the state have been aimed at resisting economic restructuring and corporate globalization. These widely reported media events have taken the form of anti-Structural Adjustment Riots in Zambia, Senegal, Tanzania, and other countries. In other instances, they have involved protests against complicity of the state with exploitation of oil resources by multinational corporations such as Shell, Chevron, and Texaco in Nigeria.³⁸

Anti-state protests have also been evident in the campaigns for democratization. The targets have been authoritarian regimes, especially those involving the military, as in the case of Sierra Leone. Other relationships with the state have been less confrontational, particularly when the goal is to promote development. In this regard, many of these associations have worked in collaboration with the state.

Most women's associations are not merely reacting to gender-based discrimination, gender hierarchies, and women's secondary positions in society. Instead, they are what I have termed *socio-centric* and have, as their priority, humanistic concerns that affect the whole society. They can best be described as *shadow development agencies*. In other words, they take on civic, political, and economic functions that would ordinarily be performed by governments or other agencies in more affluent societies. It is through these activities that they seek to empower themselves and to develop their own brand of feminism that is humanistic in scope.

It is important to recognize, however, that there are both negative and positive aspects of this type of collaboration. On the negative side, governments can become less accountable for development and leave it all to the women.³⁹ On the positive side women can enhance their potential as important economic and political actors and as contributors to the development of their societies.

The Nexus of Collective Action and Reaction: A Conceptual Model

This book presents two dominant and overlapping themes in seeking to explain the proliferation, functions, and effectiveness of women's associations in Africa. The first can be termed the "development-underdevelopment nexus" and the second the "democratization-authoritarianism nexus." The book argues that, it is in the resulting *nexus of collective action and reaction*, and the dynamic interface of the two themes, that the symbolic and material significance of women's collective action are expressed. This results in a type of empowerment that promotes a socio-centric agenda that aims to advance society and humanity as a whole.

The tensions and contradictions promote a new social consciousness that seeks to both challenge and transform unequal relations of power. These relations are not necessarily determined by gender, but by the position of the majority of African countries within the global economy, which overwhelmingly results in their

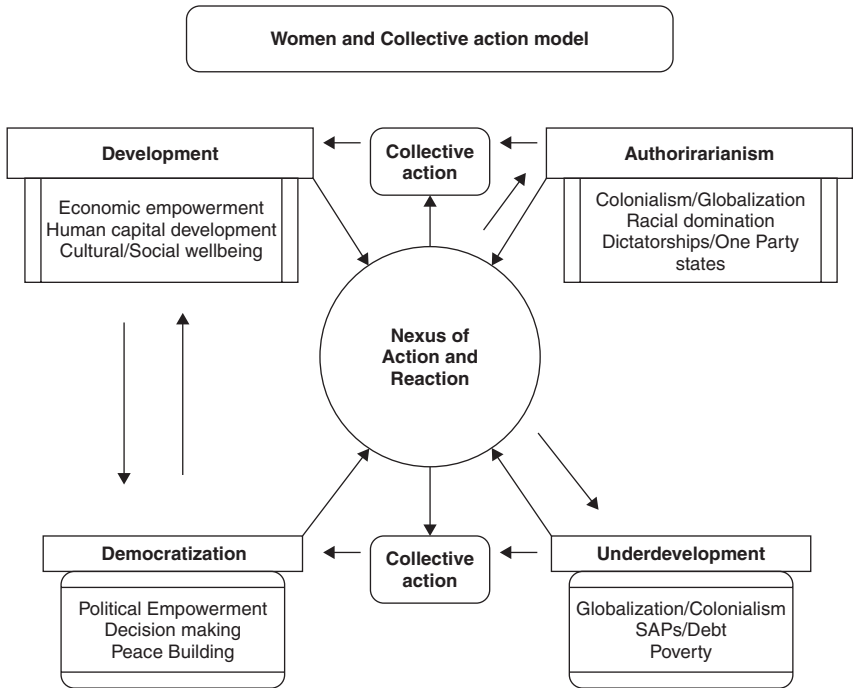


Figure 1.1 Women and collective action model.

underdevelopment. The activities of these associations are simultaneously acting and reacting to these forces, as they try to promote development and democratization (see figure 1.1).

These themes express continuities in the traditions of mobilization, applicable under pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial conditions. They serve as building blocks for developing female identities and for promoting a brand of African feminism that transcends narrow concerns about gender equality. In the face of overwhelming economic challenges and threats to the survival and prosperity of women, men, and children, feminist concerns may assume a lower priority to the exigencies of socioeconomic development, human security, and human well-being.

The Development–Underdevelopment Nexus

The dynamic interaction linking the promotion of development objectives while resisting the pressures of underdevelopment is what defines the first theme of this book. Many African countries face severe economic hardship, unemployment, environmental degradation, and deadly epidemics. Most studies of African economies paint a dismal picture and poverty is expected to rise by nearly 90 million by 2008.⁴⁰ Of the 49 countries listed by the United Nations as Least Developed Countries, 33 are in Africa. Above all, of the 40 million people worldwide, estimated

by UNAIDS to be living with HIV/AIDS, sub-Saharan Africa remains the most affected area representing approximately 8 percent of the population.⁴¹

The new millennium finds many countries in a protracted state of economic crisis, resulting in political and social instability. Africa is among the regions showing the lowest social indicators for women.⁴² Debt servicing burdens, SAPs, the negative impact of globalization and the legacy of colonialism and authoritarian rule, all contribute to the domination and destruction of African economies and to underdevelopment.⁴³

The book focuses on how women deal with problems of underdevelopment through collective action. It also examines the dynamics between the challenges of "development" related to improving the standard of living and well-being of people, and the burden of "underdevelopment," which works against these goals. Resisting underdevelopment requires combating global economic forces that include agricultural subsidies, widespread poverty, and protracted economic recession.

The study argues that collective action is rooted in historical struggles against colonialism, structural racism, and the current destructive trends of globalization that sustain and reinforce underdevelopment. As a result, the struggles for development and democratization have become overwhelming priority objectives. Opposition to patriarchal domination and its cultural manifestations is embedded in these primary objectives.

Development, in this context, refers to sustainable economic growth that results in social and human development, and in the equitable and just distribution of the benefits of development. Ake has argued that development is an integral element in democratization.⁴⁴ For women, development pertains specifically to their economic and political empowerment, the development of their human capital, and their social, cultural, and personal well-being. In this context, development is not the same as modernization, which was pioneered by colonialism and dominated development thinking in the 1960s and 1970s. For the most part, modernization retarded the integration of women in equitable and beneficial development.⁴⁵

From the 1950s onward, the international community has sponsored a number of development decades. This culminated at the turn of the century in the Millennium Declaration of the United Nations that was endorsed by heads of state at the Millennium Summit in the year 2000. United Nations Declarations and Plans of Action have increasingly stressed the important role of "women in development." Since the mid-1980s, "gender in development" has become the preferred term of the United Nations.

Unfortunately, much of the work of the United Nation System on gender equality and the advancement of women offers only bureaucratic solutions that are embedded in poorly resourced national institutions such as women's bureaus. Furthermore, many women NGOs formed in the last two decades tend to operate within a framework in which agenda setting is dictated by the priorities of the international community. These priorities do not include transformation of the unjust and undemocratic international economic system that destroys many of the economies of the Global South and that in turn lead to social and political instability.⁴⁶

Gender mainstreaming is a major tool used by the United Nations, governments, and women's associations to achieve gender equality. An important aspect of gender mainstreaming is gender budgeting, which employs a gender-blind, needs-based approach to study both the quantitative and qualitative aspects of national budgeting.

The aim is to see whether the allocation of resources follows principles of needs and impact assessment.⁴⁷

Women's associations are increasingly tracking and analyzing national budgets. The result of such efforts was reflected in the South African Budget Initiative of 1993. Women's associations have been particularly critical of military expenditures and image-building projects that tend to receive a disproportionate share of the budget in many African countries.

According to Mama, militarism provides a good base through which to examine the dialectics of public and private life.⁴⁸ It can be argued that gender budgeting can help to monitor military expenditures that direct resources away from development and contribute to authoritarianism. It can also reveal the damaging effects of SAPs that impose cutbacks in the social sectors of health and education, both of which are of vital importance to women.

While it has received measured success in promoting gender equality through counting and adjusting budgets, gender mainstreaming *per se* has not led to the advancement of the majority of African women. This is due partly to the fact that it lacks the power to transform the underlying structural impediments in the national and global economy that reinforce gender inequality.

Increasingly, the "poverty eradication" paradigm tends to be giving priority over "gender" concerns in Africa, although the role of women is essential to any effective strategy to combat poverty. This is evident in the emphasis given to poverty by the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) and the African Union (AU), and resonates with the goals of the Millennium Declaration to reduce poverty by half by the year 2015.

Anti-poverty declarations of these types would eventually benefit women, since women are disproportionately affected by poverty. Women increasingly head more households, and the majority of these households are of low income.⁴⁹ Anti-poverty approaches have been strengthened by the human rights paradigm, which now incorporates the right to development as well as gender equality and recognizes that women's rights are human rights.⁵⁰

The international agenda for development, contained in the *Beijing Platform for Action*, has given priority to the reduction of poverty as one of its thirteen areas of concern. Many women's associations in Africa work for the advancement of women in these areas by taking on the challenge of underdevelopment and by fighting poverty. However, some of the problems of underdevelopment are international in scope and will not be solved by United Nations Declarations and Plans of Action alone. By and large, the United Nations has failed to advance fundamental changes in the international economic system, which at present is mainly responsible for accelerating underdevelopment and poverty.

Underdevelopment is understood as a historical and international process of economic exploitation of countries of the Global South.⁵¹ Used synonymously with the term "dependency," it is a condition with antecedents in the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, colonialism, and structural racism that continues to be expressed in corporate globalization.

Corporate globalization is the unfettered flow of transnational capital to accumulate wealth for a few industrialized nations and multinational corporations, by dominating

and destroying the economies of weak nations, particularly those in Africa. It is based on neoliberal policies that promote privatization and so called free trade, but reserves the right to benefit from such processes to rich and powerful corporations.

Globalization has led to what has been described as a “race to the bottom” for most of the countries of the Global South, particularly those in Africa.⁵² Frequently referred to as “the new market imperialism,” it is aided by the policies and practices of multinational corporations and their gigantic mergers, as well as financial institutions and other institutions, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), the World Bank, and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).⁵³

According to most studies, there has been a decline or only a slight increase in some development indicators in Africa, primarily as a result of poverty (table 1.1). According to the United Nations New Agenda for the Development of Africa in the 1990s (UN-NADAF), economic growth has been declining, from its highest rate of 5.3 percent in 1997 to 2.0 percent in 2000 (figure 1.2). This is below the minimum of 6.0 percent required by the United Nations. The decline is particularly marked in the area of health (table 1.1). In 2002, Africa has the highest rate of adults and children infected with HIV/AIDS (figure 1.3).

The foreign debt for the continent as a whole stood at 298.3 billion U.S. dollars in the year 2000 (figure 1.4). Meanwhile, aid to Africa has been declining steadily,

Table 1.1 African development indicators*

	1990	2000
<i>Economy</i>		
GDP growth averages**	1	3.7
All-Africa exports as % of world total	2.3	1.6
Total debt service service as % of exports of goods and services	20	11
Manufacturing value added as % of GDP	17.4	14.2
Military spending as % of govt expenditure	14.6	9
<i>Population</i>		
Total millions		
All Africa	622	798
Sub-Saharan Africa	508	660
Population growth (annual %)	2.9	2.4
Fertility rate (total births per woman)	6.1	5.2
<i>Health</i>		
Under-5 mortality rate (deaths/1000 live births)	158.5	161.6
Immunization against measles (% of children under 12 months)	64.1	52.8
Life expectancy at birth (years)	52	49
Access to safe drinking water (%)	53	57
Sanitation coverage (%)	54	53
<i>Education</i>		
Net primary school enrolment (%)	56	60
Adult illiteracy (males) (%)	40	30
Adult illiteracy (females) (%)	60	47

Notes: * Figures are for sub-Saharan Africa except where indicated.

** Figures are averages for periods 1990–1995 and 1996–2000.

Source: UN Africa Recovery from UNDP, UNICEF, WHO, World Bank data.

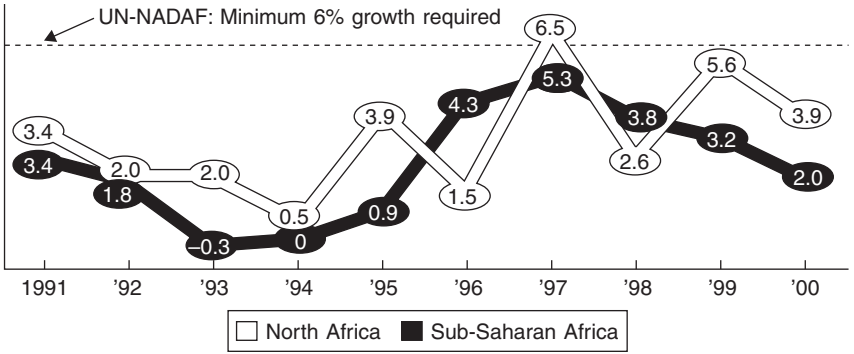


Figure 1.2 Economic growth in Africa UN-NADAF projection and actual.

Source: UN Africa Recovery, from world Bank data.

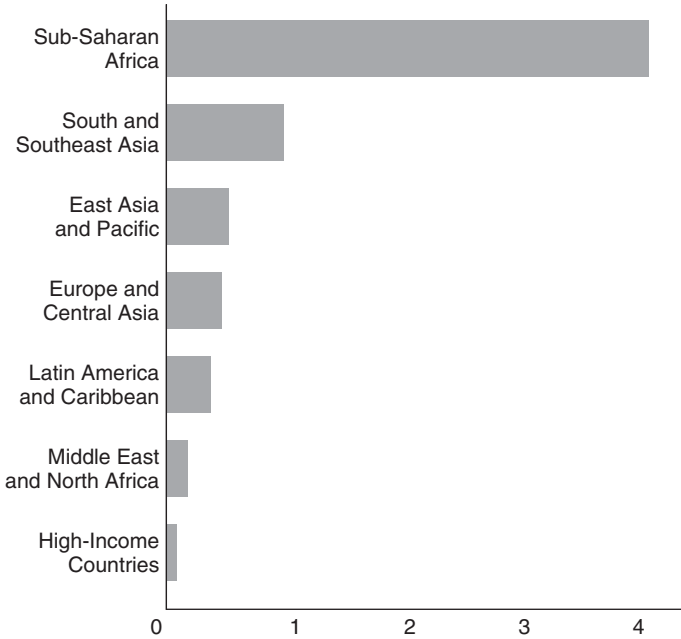


Figure 1.3 Adults and children newly infected with HIV (millions), 2002.

Note: UNAIDS regions differ from world Bank definitions.

Source: UNAIDS 2002.

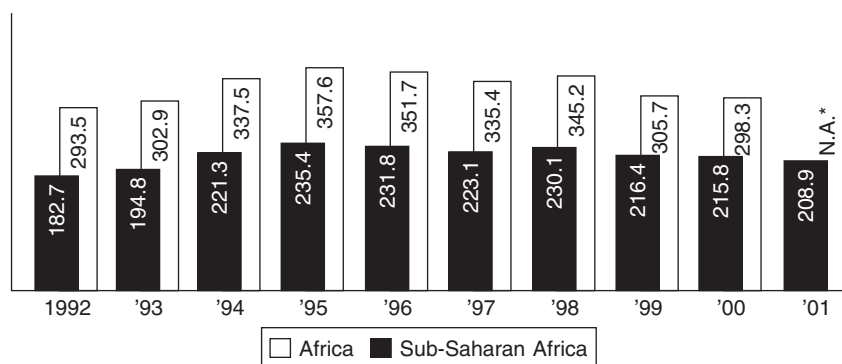


Figure 1.4 Africa's foreign debt (US\$ bn).

Note: * Comparable debt figures for North Africa are not yet available for 2001.

Source: UN Africa Recovery, from World Bank data.

and the official net aid in the same year was 15.7 billion U.S. dollars—less than the annual interest paid for debt servicing to the rich nations (figure 1.5). Similarly, foreign direct investment to Africa fell to 2 percent of world flows between 1989 and 1994 and to 0.6 percent in the year 2000 (figure 1.6).

Underdevelopment has also resulted in environmental degradation, wars, conflicts, and faulty economic policies. From the 1970s onward, dependency theorists and Marxist feminists have presented major challenges to modernization theory, which, while predicting economic growth at the national level, fails to take into account the political economy at the international level.⁵⁴

Underdevelopment is reinforced by corporate globalization and presents obstacles to African women that are formidable, structural, and enduring.⁵⁵ It has compelled women's associations to place as one of their priorities, combating the economic devastation brought about by the global political economy.

The Democratization–Authoritarianism Nexus

The struggle for democratization is linked to the challenge of authoritarianism and is the second theme of priority. The worldwide momentum for democratization, following the “glasnost” era of the Soviet Union, opened spaces for women in politics, albeit with limitations. This political ‘opportunity structure’ has led to the proliferation of women's associations demanding an important role in the process of democratization and in government.⁵⁶ Prior to this period, political rule had assumed an authoritarian character throughout the colonial and postcolonial periods.

Democratization in this study does not only mean elections. It is a process that, in ideal terms, is homegrown and releases the creative potential of all people in the participation and enhancement of the decision-making process. Homegrown democracy has been a goal for many Africans, and some African scholars have stressed the desirability for democracy as an end in itself.⁵⁷ There is now a general consensus that

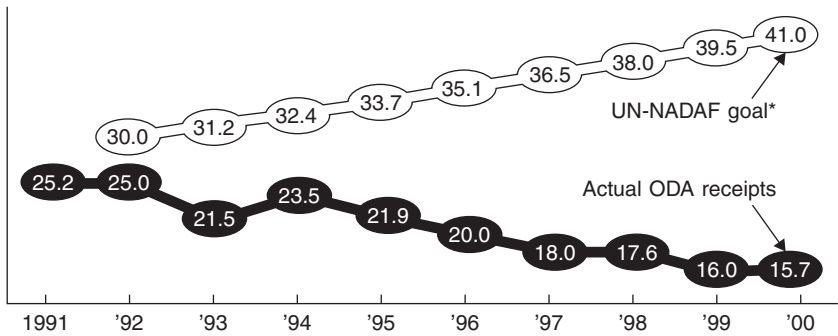


Figure 1.5 Aid to Africa (net official development assistance, \$ bn).

Note: * UN-NADAF projected \$30 bn ODA in 1992, with a 4% increase each year after.

Source: UN Africa Recovery, from OECD data.

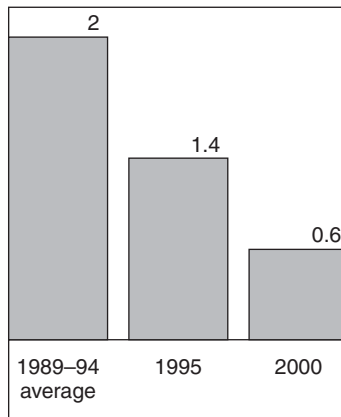


Figure 1.6 Foreign direct investment to Africa as percent of total world flows.

Source: UN Africa Recovery, from Unctad data.

democracy is not reserved for the political and economic elites. It is based on the development and enforcement of fair and equitable laws, and the guaranteeing of equal human rights with justice. It operates at both national and international levels. However, democracy at the national level can be undermined by unjust and undemocratic policies emanating from the global political economy.

Democratization is also understood as promoting a type of development that is sustainable and that ensures an equitable distribution of the benefits of development. One important aspect of democratization is the development of human

resources through education, training, as well as economic and political participation. Democratization is best achieved when based on enlightened leadership, accountability, and responsiveness to the needs, concerns, and aspirations of all the people governed.

Authoritarianism, broadly interpreted, represents political and economic domination stemming both from internal and external forces. It destroys human creativity, imprisons the mind, and usurps the rights of the people. It exploits natural resources for the benefit of the few. It violates the constitution, undermines the legal capacity of people, and silences public opinion and dissent. Popular participation, open consultations, and accountability to the people governed are ignored with impunity.

Women have been active in promoting democratization and a democratic culture, and in challenging authoritarianism. Both these elements have important implications for development. In seeking to build the human capacity and social infrastructure essential for development, women's associations are contributing to participatory politics, conflict prevention, and the promotion of human rights with justice. Fourteen countries in Africa have had women serve as prime minister, deputy president or acting president. These are Liberia, Rwanda, São Tomé and Príncipe, Senegal, Mozambique Central African Republic, Uganda, Burundi, Lesotho, South Africa, Zimbabwe the Gambia, and Guinea Bissau.

The main argument of the book is that although women continue to struggle to advance their status and modify their socially constructed gender roles, problems related to underdevelopment and authoritarianism take priority over narrow feminist goals of gender equality. Unless these problems are resolved, collective action intended to promote primarily feminist goals will likely remain a luxury.

Women's associations operate on a more pragmatic level. Although they tend to be fragmented, their impact is discreet and incremental. The cumulative nature of their activities, nonetheless, can have cascading effects, similar to large social movements. On some occasions they assume the characteristics of militant and sporadic social movements engaged in contestation with the state. As Tarrow points out, even movements that may appear to be apolitical, and focus on their internal lives or those of their members can have political impact. He states:

Organizers use contention to exploit political opportunities, create collective identities, bring people together in organizations, and mobilize them against more powerful opponents.⁵⁸

Women's associations have been, and will continue to be, important agents in African development efforts. In this regard, they are political actors in the broadest sense. They influence development policies and programs through formal and informal processes. They are also active in building a strong civil society culture, and in promoting an agenda for democratically oriented political systems, attitudes, and behaviors. This partly explains why Africa has been considered as the continent with the greatest number of women's associations.⁵⁹

In development circles, these associations are constantly referred to as potential vehicles for change. They have worked with governments, donor agencies, and international organizations in delivering important services. They can also be regarded as

the real “experts” in articulating and defining women’s needs, concerns, and aspirations. They seek to advance social goals through their efforts and a brand of feminism, in which development and democratization are central.

By working within systems that are bureaucratic and closely aligned with institutions of the State, they often run the risk of becoming too close to the government, donor agencies, and international NGOs, and of losing sight of their own priorities.

These are some of the pitfalls of nation building that are different from the nationalism expressed during the colonial era, when men and women were united in the struggle for independence. Nationalism played an important role in defining women’s associations, when they came into conflict with the patriarchal colonial system. Independence movements benefited from the activism and daring demonstrated by women. Among well-documented examples are: the Women’s War of 1929 in Nigeria; the refusal of Senegalese women to feed French soldiers as captured in Ousman Sembene’s *God Bits of Wood*; and the 1951 protest of the Women’s Movement in Sierra Leone against the high cost of living. In East Africa, women were active militants in the Mau Mau movement of Kenya, and in the nationalist and liberation movements in Tanzania, Mozambique, Angola, and Guinea Bissau, where they resisted and fought against colonial rule. In South Africa, women were among the most ardent participants in movements that struggled against Apartheid, such as the African National Congress (ANC) and the Pan African Congress of Azania (PAC). They were also active in trade union movements opposed to Apartheid. In post-independent Africa some women’s associations have continued to challenge the state, and some have criticized the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) for being too closely allied to the neoliberal goals promoting the domination of market forces and dictated by the West.

The African state continues to be defined by the legacy of colonialism and underdevelopment, which is now being vigorously and insidiously propelled by corporate globalization. Globalization aims to create a single integrated market through the unrestricted flow of capital. It also promotes the elimination of trade and other protection of some countries, while reinforcing them in the more affluent countries. It empowers multinational corporations and rich nations by undermining the rights of sovereign states and dominating the economies of weak nations, many of which are in Africa.

Empowerment

Empowerment, broadly defined in this study, is the ability of women to mobilize political, economic, educational, human, social, and cultural resources. The aim is to promote development, democratization, and responsible citizenry. Such empowerment is expressed both inside and outside of formal political processes. It gives priority to challenging the deleterious effects of the global economy on African women. The widespread poverty evident in most countries of the Global South, especially in Africa, is viewed as a crisis of development and a source of disempowerment.

Two associations of the Global South can be cited as pioneers in development of the empowerment approach in response to the crisis of development in the 1970s and 1980s. These are the Association of African Women for Research and Development

(AAWORD) and Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN).⁶⁰ Both challenged the idea of “integrating women in development” that was popular in international circles at that time. They viewed it as based on an exploitative global political economy that resulted in massive impoverishment of the Global South. Instead, they proposed alternatives in which the following criteria were seen as prerequisites.

The first is mobilizing women through grassroots women’s associations that challenge the status quo and demand change and social transformation. The second involves strengthening women’s skills, education, training, and legal capacity. The third seeks to promote women’s rights and entitlement to strategic resources such as land, finance, facilities, and services. Finally several factors were viewed as essential to promoting women’s empowerment, namely the promotion of self-determination, autonomy, options, and self-reliance through women’s associations.

As expressed by AAWORD in 1985 and later by DAWN in 1986, feminism has to take into account race, class, colonial history, and locations in the global economy.

This heterogeneity gives feminism its dynamism and makes it the most potentially powerful challenge to the status quo. It allows the struggle against subordination to be waged in all arenas—from relations in the home to relations between nations—and it necessitates substantial change in cultural, economic and political formations.⁶¹

Another valuable approach to empowerment is the one proposed by Longwe and Clarke in a study of women and leadership in Africa.⁶² Two indices of empowerment are suggested. The first is a Women’s Empowerment Index (WEI) that measures levels of representation in political and managerial positions. The second is a Women’s Self-Reliance Index (WSI) that measures women’s individual capacity to advance in terms of education, training, and access to resources. The authors conclude that there is absolutely no correlation between self-reliance and empowerment. This is borne out by the fact that countries in Africa that show a high representation of women in political positions also have high rates of female illiteracy. This is particularly true of Mozambique, which has 28 percent of women in parliament.⁶³

I propose a third index, namely a “Collective Action Index” that is necessary to bridge the gap between the Empowerment index and the Self-reliance index. Women acting collectively can help to accelerate the transition from self-reliance to empowerment. As will be seen, the agenda and strategies of the women’s associations in this study aim to achieve both self-reliance and empowerment, broadly defined, by promoting development and democratization.

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CHAPTER TWO

THE CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Introduction

The primary context of this study is Freetown, the capital of Sierra Leone. It is selected because of the extensive fieldwork conducted by me on a variety of women's associations over several years. It also has a history of women's collective action that predates the colonial period. Known for its pioneering achievements in education in the nineteenth century, the country earned the title of being "the Athens of Africa" and played a pioneering role in nationalist movements for the decolonization of Africa.

Yet in the 1990s, it shocked the consciousness of the world as a country devastated by a brutal ten-year rebel war. Less known is the fact that fuelling the war were imported weapons and illegal drugs, primarily from the West, used by the rebels to terrorize and wreak havoc on innocent people. Also significant is that the war was fueled by conflicts over diamonds involving Western companies, who benefited most from the pillage and the spoils of war. The rebel war left some areas of the country in ruins and the economy in a state of chaos, a factor that has reinforced the country's underdevelopment and dependency.

Nonetheless, the peace accord signed in 2000 appears to be holding. Some of the leading perpetrators of the war are being tried in a United Nations Special Criminal Court in Freetown, although the rebel leader, Foday Sankoh, is now deceased. The citizens, especially women, have been living in relative calm and look forward to full return to the more peaceful days characteristic of much of the history of the country. They are also hoping for a period of socioeconomic development that appears to have eluded the country since the 1980s.

Sierra Leone is listed among the fifty countries classified by the United Nations as Least Developed Countries (LDCs). The population is projected (for 2000) at 5.4 million with a slightly higher percentage of women, approximately 51 percent (table 2.1). Ironically, despite its poor economic and social indicators (table 2.2), the country is rich in minerals, especially diamonds and other natural resources. It has benefited little from its natural wealth.

The current economic crisis in Sierra Leone stems from both external and internal factors. Since its incorporation into the world economic system, ostensibly through colonial rule in 1808, Sierra Leone's resources have been exploited primarily for export and for the benefit of others residing outside the country. At present, diamond

Table 2.1 Sierra Leone Projected Population

	2000	2005	2010	2015
<i>Population (000)</i>				
Total	5399	6165	7014	7915
Males	2660	3041	3464	3913
Females	2739	3123	3550	4002
Urban	2171	2725	3376	4112
Rural	3228	3440	3637	3802
Percent urban	40.20%	44.20%	48.10%	52.00%
<i>Dependency ratio (/100)</i>				
Total	92.5	91.1	88.3	83.6
Aged 0–14	86.4	85.2	82.5	77.9
Aged 65+	6.1	5.9	5.8	5.7

Source: Sierra Leone in Figures 1998—Central Statistics Office—Sierra Leone Web.

Table 2.2 Wealth, Poverty, and Social Investment

<i>Indicators</i>	1994/1995	1995/1996	1996/1997
Real GDP per capital (PPP\$)	790	717	643
GNP per capital (US\$)	207.7	180	210
<i>Income Share</i>			
Lowest 40% of households	16.2	—	—
Ratio of highest 20% to lowest 30%	3.22	—	—
<i>People in poverty</i>			
Urban (%)	73.75	—	—
Rural (%)	88.3	—	—
Social security benefit expenditures (as % of GDP)	0.05	0.06	0.06
<i>Public expenditure on</i>			
Education (as % of GDP)	2.72	1.7	1.45
Health (as % of GDP)	1.02	0.49	0.52

Source: Sierra Leone in Figures 1998—Central Statistics Office—Sierra Leone Web.

mining is dominated by Canada, Great Britain, and the United States. The real business of making money from diamonds does not take place in Freetown, but in Antwerp, Toronto, New York, Tel Aviv, London, and Beirut.

Rich countries are habitually given high ratings in the *Human Development Report* of the United Nations Development Program. What this report fails to show is the structural linkage between poor countries and rich countries that has led to the continuous underdevelopment and devastation of the former. In the case of Africa, one is reminded of the continuing relevance of Rodney's thesis, which convincingly shows how the exploitation of Africa's rich subsoil and African labor benefited Europe and contributed to European economic power and imperialistic domination of Africa. The



Aerial view of Freetown. Courtesy: Christopher Greene.

title of his book, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, still resonates with the workings of the global political economy, enacted primarily through corporate globalization.¹

The modern state of Sierra Leone officially “started” in 1787 with the establishment of a settlement in Freetown for the repatriation of enslaved people from the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. They came from Britain, the Caribbean, North America, and other parts of West Africa. Those that were freed by British Admiralty Courts en route to trans-Atlantic enslavement, and later settled in Freetown, became known as Liberated Africans. The descendants of the various groups in the settlement were collectively known as Krios. They evolved a culture that is a synthesis of African, European, and New World elements, while at the same time remaining distinctly Sierra Leonean.²

In 1808, the Sierra Leone peninsula in which Freetown is located, as well as a few neighboring islands became a crown colony of Britain. The country’s interior, an area of over 27,000 square miles, came under British rule as a protectorate in 1896. In 1951, both areas comprising roughly 28,000 square miles were incorporated into a unitary state, which prepared the way for party rule and independence in 1961.

Ten years later Sierra Leone declared itself a republic, later became a one-party state and today has returned to a multiparty system with a government elected in February 1996. After a peace treaty in 2001, which signaled the end of the ten-year rebel war, it held its second postwar elections in 2002 under relatively peaceful conditions.

Throughout the 1990s, the country was in the throes of a rebel war, started in part by insurgents from the neighboring civil war in Liberia led by Charles Taylor. Both wars were sustained by support from several affluent countries that sold arms and illegal hallucinatory drugs to the rebels. Due to the severe economic hardship that results from war as well as from Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and mismanagement, the country’s economy has been in a protracted state of crisis.³

In addition, many of the foreign companies operating in the country enjoy elaborate concessions known as “tax holidays” during which the country receives no revenue from their mining operations. The rebel war has also affected the productivity of the mines and increased foreign control through the use of mercenaries to guard the mines. This is bolstered by greater reliance on mining companies from countries like Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States. The country’s resources are therefore controlled by foreign companies and by locally-based Lebanese, Syrian, European, and Asian businesses. Privatization, aggressively promoted by corporate globalization, has increased this control.

The People

It is widely believed that the population of Freetown has quadrupled in the last ten years due to the influx of displaced people and refugees. The growth rate of Freetown due mainly to internal migration and displacement has resulted in high-density living and crowded streets.⁴ English is the official language and Krio the lingua franca spoken widely by all ethnic groups, particularly in urban and commercial areas. Temne and Mende are also widely spoken and facilitate inter-ethnic communication.

All ethnic groups are represented in Freetown, even though each group can be identified with a particular geographical region. Considerable inter-ethnic interaction has occurred over the years as a result of several factors. These include internal

migration; the diffusion of cultural norms from the two major ethnic groups, namely the Mende and the Temne; the cosmopolitan influence of Freetown; the Krio language and urban culture; intermarriage and the spread of Islam and Christianity.

Although migration has altered the historical settlement patterns, the Mendes traditionally inhabit the southern rain forest region along with smaller ethnic groups such as the Sherbro, Krim, Vai, and Gallinas. The Temne are concentrated in the western savannah area along with the Limbas and the Lokko. In the northern and eastern savannah woodland areas are the Susu, Yalunka, Koranko, Kono, and Kissi. The western coastal area, made up of mangrove swamps, rain forests, and grasslands (riverine and upland), is traditionally inhabited by the Sherbro, Krio, and Kroo. Madingo and Fulani groups are found throughout Sierra Leone.⁵

There are, in addition, a number of non-Sierra Leonean settlers, including in particular other Africans as well as Asians, people from the Middle East, especially Lebanese and Syrians and Europeans. North and South Americans and people from the Caribbean are also represented as well as the multinational contingent of peacekeepers from the United Nations Mission in Sierra Leone (UNAMSIL). Over the years, the country has provided asylum to large numbers of refugees from other African countries such as South Africa and Namibia during the Apartheid period, and to Liberian refugees in recent years.

Sierra Leonean women are exceptional in terms of their achievements in a wide variety of fields, and are represented in all professions. They are reputed for their service in executive positions as chiefs and paramount chiefs in the indigenous political systems. In addition, since the 1950s, a few women have been ministers of government and ambassadors, and have occupied high positions in the judiciary as magistrates and judges.

In the field of medicine and education, a number have held leadership positions as Chief Medical Officers and heads of the department of education. Added to this are the women who hold leadership positions as university professors, teachers, nurses, bureaucrats, managers, military officers, architects, and so on.

Despite these achievements, the majority of men and women in Sierra Leone customarily live in rural areas and are engaged in agriculture for their families' subsistence needs, producing mainly rice, cassava, yams, corn, and vegetables. Although women are the greatest contributors to agricultural labor, in terms of time allocation and intensity of work, agricultural activity usually involves the whole household and can include hired help and work groups.

About 40 percent of all agricultural products are marketed and much of the retail trade in food items, particularly the staple rice, is in the hands of women who play a central role in the food system. Women are also involved in other economic activities that advance the socioeconomic development of their communities. A study by Davies and others shows a wide range of occupations in which they have traditionally provided much needed goods and services.⁶

Social Organization

The traditional political system of most of the ethnic groups in Sierra Leone is based on a large number of small chiefdoms and a few paramount chieftaincies. After independence in 1961, provision was made for the representation of chiefs in the



Freetown Cotton Tree—A historical landmark in Sierra Leone. Courtesy: Azania Steady.

national parliament. The country is divided into four administrative areas, namely the Northern Province, the Southern Province, the Eastern Province, and the Western Area to which Freetown belongs.

Land is communally owned in the Provinces and privately owned in the Western Area. The residents of the Western Area are described as “non Native” and therefore ineligible to ownership of land in the Provinces, except on leasehold basis for a maximum period of seventy-one years.⁷ Section 3(1) of the Provinces Land Act states:

No land in the Protectorate shall be occupied by a non-native unless he has first obtained the consent of the tribal authority to his occupation of such land.

A “native” is defined as a citizen of Sierra Leone who is a member of a race, tribe, or community settled in Sierra Leone, other than a race or tribe or community, which is:

- (a) European or Asiatic or American
- (b) Whose principal place of settlement is in the Western Area.

Article 29 of 1972 further defined a non-native as “any person who is not entitled by customary law to the rights in the Provinces.” Legal scholars and students have been debating the human rights implications of these acts, as they discriminate against so-called non-natives and violate the Constitution of Sierra Leone. As stated by Koroma:

An analysis of the constitution will reveal that the provisions of the Provinces Land Act are not only discriminatory (Sections 15 and 27), but also contravene the right to property (Section 1), freedom of movement (Section 3 and 4) and do not reflect the position of the present law under the Constitution.⁸

Strictly speaking, most groups, including the largest groups—the Temnes and the Mendes—who migrated to Sierra Leone in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries are not “native” to Sierra Leone. Only the “Sapes,” the majority of whom lived in Bullom, and smaller groups such as the Baga, Nalou, Gola, Krim, and Kissy that inhabited this area before the sixteenth century can claim to be the real “natives” of Sierra Leone.⁹ This has interesting implications for the relevance of the Provinces Land Act.

Kinship ties form the basis of social organization, the lineage being the most enduring corporate group. Most groups trace their descent through the patrilineal line, with the exception of the Sherbro and the Krio who have a more bilateral form of kinship organization. Despite these rules of descent, matrilineal principles exist alongside patrilineal ones and are not totally subdued. Maternal kinfolk are important in maintaining the various permutations of kinship that are embedded in social relations and mediated by marriage. During important life cycle events, situations of crisis, and the management of pregnancy and childbirth, the maternal kin assumes prominence.

Members of lineages and their descendants form corporate groups for legal, administrative, religious, and economic purposes. However, succession and inheritance are not automatically designated to males. Among the Mendes and Sherbro, for example, women have traditionally held executive positions as chiefs and paramount chiefs. In



Sunset at Sussex Beach—Sierra Leone peninsula. Courtesy: Azania steady.

addition to groups based on kinship ties, secret societies, such as the Poro for men and the Sande or Bondo for women exist among the major groups. Their primary function is to mark the transition from childhood to adulthood, through initiation rituals and to provide collective socialization and education for young adults. They facilitate opportunities to establish lasting bonds and alliances of fraternity and sorority.

The household is usually “non nuclear” for most groups, although a nucleus consisting of a man and his wife or wives (in polygamous households), can be readily identified. The polygamous household as a production unit creates a matri-focal environment whereby a woman, as mother, is central to her own domestic unit, consisting of a mother, her children, and other minors. Senior wives tend to enjoy a high status in polygamous families.¹⁰

The division of labor in “traditional” rural society is predominantly organized according to gender, although age can also be a factor. For example, post-menopausal women tend to assume political functions and young men can assist in women-specific tasks, such as fish processing, as needed. Gender-specific tasks include cattle rearing performed primarily by male members of the Fulani ethnic group. Cloth making involves both genders with weaving being primarily a male task and spinning a female task. Both men and women fish in some ethnic groups, with women generally using hand nets and men weirs, dams, and boats.

Religion is extremely important throughout the country. It is expressed in diverse ways and in Freetown represents a rich multireligious mosaic. In addition to Christianity and Islam, whose architectural styles, reflected in churches and mosques dominate the landscape of the city, a number of African religions also operate fully or in part to provide an African flavor to the two imported religions. The city intricately separates and blends the Eastern, Western, and African religious traditions that have interacted for nearly two centuries. The degree of religious tolerance is impressive and probably unmatched anywhere in the world.

The influence of religion on ideology often has a direct bearing on gender relations, as most religions have a strong patriarchal proclivity that tends to place restrictions on women. Religious affiliation is allied to ethnicity in very broad terms and some religious associations tend to reflect this. These associations are inclined to be conservative and seek to maintain the *status quo*. Nonetheless, they have inspired the formation of secular associations that include mutual-aid associations and economic associations.

In addition, some religious associations have been directly active in promoting development and in political participation. This is partly due to the fact that economic factors, such as unemployment, inflation, and general underdevelopment, impose severe hardship on most groups. Religion has inspired many public demonstrations by women on economic issues both in the past and in more recent times. Associations such as the Sierra Leone Women’s Movement and an association of Methodist Women have protested against the high cost of living and used religious songs to convey the intensity of their grievances.

Women’s Associations in Freetown

This case study of women’s groups in Freetown, illustrates the two dominant themes of this book. It shows how collective action responds to the development–underdevelopment nexus and the democratization–authoritarianism nexus. Economic,

educational, traditional, mutual-aid, and religious associations reflect the former while political, pro-democracy, and peace-building associations reflect the latter. There is a certain degree of overlap of the themes, which results in a dynamic interplay of action and reaction. Associations reflecting the authoritarianism–democratization nexus will be discussed first because of the impact of the recent war.

Due to the precarious nature of Sierra Leone's economy and widespread economic hardship, the concept of women's liberation has emphasized development above everything else. Most women's associations tend to have social and economic development objectives as their central focus. They have also taken advantage of the political spaces opened up by the process of democratization to push their agenda, which often fuses rights to development with women's rights.

Given the present dependency status of Sierra Leone within the world economic system, women's associations in Freetown have functioned more as development agencies within the context of underdevelopment than as associations with the primary purpose of promoting narrow feminist objectives. Stated another way, women's associations give priority to development in a manner that encompasses democratization and gender concerns.

Women's associations range in type, size, and composition and perform a number of functions. Some of them, like secret societies are precolonial, have their roots in rural communities, and are religious in orientation. Others are more urban-based and secular and some were introduced during the colonial era. During the last twenty years, there has been a proliferation of these associations as a result of economic and political factors, the international women's movement and the four United Nations Conferences on Women.

The fact that the membership is female deserves some reflection. Postmodernism increasingly challenges essentialist assumptions that rely heavily on biological criteria, by insisting on recognizing the different social locations of women based on class, ethnicity, national origin, and so on. In-depth studies of women's associations in Freetown reveal that women's associations can be internally differentiated on the basis of class, religious affiliation, occupation, and ethnic origin. So, while biological categories are important in membership, it is only one aspect of mobilization. Other factors pertain to social location, primary group ties, and affiliations with other social groups.

Nonetheless, a certain amount of identity politics based on gender tends to occur during periods of intense political activity. Women are inclined to mobilize across social divisions in challenging military rule and ushering democratically elected governments. Forming federations of women's groups and national women's associations have also been important strategies.

Identity politics is a term credited to The Combahee River Collective, a Black Women's Feminist Group in the United States. According to this group, identity politics occurs when one's identity is taken as a political point of departure, as a motivation for action and as a delineation of one's politics.¹¹ In Sierra Leone, while one's gender identity can be significant in a particular context, multiple identities (that include ethnicity, class, and religious affiliation) can exist within the female identity and become the building blocs for forming multiple and compounded alliances.

Trends in Women's Associations

The division of labor required for performing a variety of economic tasks and other prescribed gender roles is partly responsible for the formation of women's groups. Secret societies such as Sande (Bondo), work groups, and peer groups were common among the various ethnic groups and some of these continue to function. Other types of associations result from migration and urbanization. From the 1930s onward a number of voluntary associations served as adaptive mechanisms for migrants to the city from rural areas. Their functions included mutual aid, support for economic activities, political activism, and recreation.¹²

Long-term residents of Freetown also formed associations. Many of these were linked to religious organizations and some had economic and recreational functions. These included Women's Guilds, Ladies Working Bands, and the Sierra Leone Women's Movement. In addition, Western types of associations such as the Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) and Women's Institutes were introduced during the colonial era.

In the 1950s and 1960s, these associations, particularly the Sierra Leone Women's Movement, were concerned with supporting nationalist movements for independence from colonial rule. In the 1970s, a number of international associations headquartered in Europe or the United States established branches in Sierra Leone, especially in Freetown. One of these was the Zonta International Club, a subsidiary of Zonta International based in the United States. Its overall aims to improve the legal, political, economic, educational, and professional status of women have been successful. It is regarded as having an impressive record in organizational terms and as being one of the first to aspire to high standards of professionalism.¹³

The Sierra Leone Association of University Women (SLAUW) represents a branch of the International Federation of University Women. A number of its members are professional women and hold leadership positions in the society. As a result, it has been effective in networking and advocacy for development, and for the education and professional development of women. It has also played an important role in supporting development projects for women in rural areas and rehabilitation projects for women victims of war.

For the most part, agenda setting was based on local priorities set by the women themselves. However, since the International Women's Year of 1975, the United Nations Decade from 1976 to 1985, and subsequent world conferences on women the agenda and direction of women's associations have become internationalized. Their activities are increasingly being funded by international donors, leading to dependency on external funding and to the priorities and agendas of donors. Given the intergovernmental framework of the United Nations, many of these programs tend to be bureaucratic in nature and function.

In preparation for the Fourth World Conference for Women held in Beijing in 1995, a study profiling Women's associations referred to as Non-Governmental Associations (NGOs) was conducted in 1994.¹⁴ The study supports my findings that there is a tendency for agenda setting to become increasingly dictated by external rather than by internal factors.

The 1980s witnessed the proliferation of women's associations partly as a result of the momentum gained from the United Nations mid-Decade conference in

Copenhagen in 1980. This conference led to the establishment of national machineries or "Women's Bureaus." These represent focal points in governments for policies on equality, development, and peace that would lead to the advancement of women.

The 1980s increased the need for women's contribution to development, as this was a period of economic downturns for many countries of Africa. It has been referred to as "the lost decade of Africa." The neglect of women's roles in the development process was seen as a major factor in the failure of development.¹⁵ Women were under tremendous economic pressures as they witnessed the erosion of household incomes and the urgent need for increasing their contribution to the family budget.

Associations provided opportunities to acquire additional skills, mobilize capital, and gain access to resources such as technology, markets, and information. They also offered material and moral support during times of hardship. In the area of health, one association, the Marie Stopes Society, places emphasis on reproductive health and family planning, along with other family planning associations, such as the Planned Parenthood Association.

The Nairobi World Conference on Women of 1985 stimulated an increase in the number and variety of associations, especially among professional women. These included the Women and National Development Association and the National Organization for Women, which were organized as umbrella associations, reflecting a broad representation of women of Sierra Leone.

The Women's Federation for World Peace and Partners Women's Commission were also formed during this period. Although part of their objectives were to provide a forum for their own interests, especially in promoting adult education, some of their programs were aimed at improving the situation of women in impoverished communities. All of these associations operated at the national level with branches in other parts of the country, enabling them to establish extensive networks. Some of their networking also included partnerships with pan-African and international associations.

The 1990s continued the trend of mobilization and was spurred on by the preparations for the fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. A number of smaller associations were either initiated or reinvented during this period. Many women shunted from one to the other or became members of multiple associations.

Large-scale associations were formed at this time and included the Grassroots Gender and Empowerment Movement founded in 1992 to promote involvement of grassroots women in the process of development. Activities included family life planning and the setting up of credit schemes for women. The Federation of Muslim Women in Sierra Leone formed in 1994 focused on promoting the rights of Muslim women and their participation in development.

In 1993, the then first lady, Mrs. Valentine Strasser, established the Sierra Leone Women in Development Movement (SILWODMO) with projects for credit training of women entrepreneurs. It was officially launched as the umbrella organization of women NGOs and reputedly had a membership of several thousands from all over the country. Other first ladies such as Mrs. Hannah Momoh and Mrs. Patricia Kabbah have been influential in forming associations such as the Sisters Unite Association and in supporting existing ones.

In the case of Nigeria, associations of first ladies have tended to co-opt the agenda of other associations and to align themselves too closely with the state, representing

what some scholars have referred to as “wifeism.” This cannot be said with certainty of Sierra Leone, although first ladies can enhance the profile and resource base of associations with which they are affiliated.¹⁶

Tensions Between International and Local NGOs

International NGOs have been operating in Sierra Leone for several years. They often consist of foreign personnel who dominate the organization and Sierra Leoneans who are hired to carry out their programs without necessarily having decision-making authority or control of the budget. As a result, tensions have always existed between international and local NGOs. Most international NGOs are more highly paid than their local counterparts and live opulent lifestyles, that are often a source of resentment. They are sometimes perceived as displaying racial attitudes and contempt toward the local people, reminiscent of the colonial era.

Local NGOs are increasingly developing international connections that create problems of coordination, agenda setting, and alliance building. As a result of the overlap of many of their activities, they tend to compete with each other for resources and for membership. In addition, external donors, who are often perceived as representing Western interests, increasingly set their agenda. The so-called Western agenda came into conflict with the government’s agenda, whenever it was felt that the NGOs were not promoting the development goals of the country, but were instead, advancing the agenda of international NGOs.

It is difficult to assess the impact of NGOs, due to the general lack of coordination and their tendency to work in an ad hoc manner. Coordination and monitoring, especially of donor aid, have always been a problem. NGOs were also criticized for availing themselves of certain privileges reserved for government officials such as access to duty-free goods.¹⁷

Federations and Associations of National Unity

There is a long history of women’s associations forming alliances in an attempt to develop umbrella associations or federations. Mrs. Hannah Benka-Coker formed the first Federation of Women’s Associations in the late 1940s. It was eclipsed in the 1950s by the Sierra Leone Women’s Movement.

In 1958, the National Federation of Sierra Leone Women’s Organizations was formed in an attempt to unify all women’s associations under one umbrella. Its aims were to help develop the country, to help train women for responsible citizenship, and to advance the status of women. Emphasis was placed on education, training, and literacy, as important requirements for responsible citizenship and for developing the country. According to the preamble of the constitution:

We, the women of Sierra Leone, wishing to contribute to the worthy development of our beloved country, do believe that consultation and joint action on our part, are essential to such a contribution. We therefore come together in a Federation of all women’s associations, committing ourselves to the strengthening of relationships within our community; the development of all people therein and the giving of fuller attention and effort to fostering cooperative effort on behalf of the children and women of our country.¹⁸

Women's wings of ruling political parties have also promoted the idea of an umbrella organization. Some have made claims of representing all the women of Sierra Leone and their associations when their respective parties are in power. Federations that do not wish to become affiliated to any regime and lose their identity and autonomy, however, often contested this trend.

Other attempts to unite all women of the country have included associations that placed priority on development, such as Women and National Development Association (WAND), the National Organization for Women (NOW), and the Women's Commission of the Sierra Leone Adult Education (SLADEA). Some individual women have been outstanding in forming and leading umbrella associations and federations for development and for the advancement of women over the years. Notable among them was Mrs. Constance Cummings-John of the Sierra Leone Women's Movement. Others, such as Mrs. Gracie Williams, former principal of the Annie Walsh Memorial School and former president of the Sierra Leone Association of University Women have evoked the theme of love and unity for national development.¹⁹

Sierra Leone Association of Non-Governmental Organizations

On the eve of the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1994, a workshop was organized to develop a policy framework for better collaboration between NGOs and the government. An NGO document was launched by the government and a new organization, the Sierra Leone Association of Non-Governmental Organizations (SLANGO), was officially formed to coordinate NGOs. The first director was Mrs. Clarice Davies who in an interview expressed the importance of coordination to achieve the maximum effect and help strengthen the capacity of NGOs:

There are so many NGOs with overlapping objectives and activities that it has become necessary to co-ordinate them and to have a central registry. This will help to facilitate their work and help to make them more effective. Some of them do not have the capacity to carry out their activities and we try to help them in this regard and to help with networking and alliance building. So far we are having some positive results.²⁰

New criteria for eligibility, as well as a date for the commencement of registration of all NGOs, were set up. The policy established a rule that reinforced the shared responsibilities between the government and NGOs, and the need for a Memorandum of Understanding to be established with the government. The government in turn agreed to provide funds for capacity building of NGOs to ensure achievement of development objectives. This ushered in a new phase of NGO relationship with the government that called for greater collaboration, coordination, monitoring, and evaluation of NGO impact on development.

National Policy for Women

In 1991, a National Policy for Women was developed and approved by the government to facilitate the integration of women into development. The policy was implemented by the Women's Bureau but is increasingly being incorporated in the mandate of the Ministry for Gender, Social Welfare and Children's Affairs, headed by its minister, Mrs. Shirley Gbujama.

The Women's Bureau, a feature of the UN Decade for Women was established in 1988 under the Ministry of Rural Development, Social Services, and Youth. It once worked closely with the Women and National Development Association in its capacity as an umbrella organization. The objectives of the National Policy are intended to sensitize members of the public on gender issues and their relation to the overall development of the nation.

The policy is also designed to facilitate the appointment of women to executive and decision-making positions in the civil service and in the government. The establishment of crèches and other facilities for working mothers was also promoted. Nonetheless, progress has been slow in implementing this policy and in accelerating women's representation in the formal sector and in managerial, economic, and political decision making. Some of these associations, have served as pressure groups for policy reform leading to the ratification of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.

Some of the recommendations of the *Nairobi Forward-Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women* of 1985 and the Beijing Platform for Action of 1995 were implemented through the efforts of women's associations.

Results of a PostWar Survey on Focus Groups

A targeted study of a sample of thirteen women's associations was conducted in 2002 the postwar period, as part of the long-term overall field research that involved 80 associations. This focus group study showed that development is still high in their priority objectives and in their activities.²¹ All of these associations were founded between 1984 and 2001. There were six of them operating at the national level and seven at the local level. The number of members ranged from 15 to 10,000 and their ages from 28 to 45.

Five associations listed the most popular occupation of their members as teaching, four as trade, one as agriculture, one as health, and two were miscellaneous. With regard to the level of education, nine associations comprised members who had received secondary school education and the others had members with less education. Nine listed Christianity as the most popular religion among members. Three listed Islam, and one had members of both religions.

In terms of their objectives and activities, education occupied the highest rank at 77 percent, followed by economic and social development at 69 percent. Skills training for self-reliance ranked third at 62 percent; networking and advocacy was 46 percent and promoting peace constituted 31 percent of their activities. Other activities included counseling displaced people, networking, and capacity building

In terms of their relationship to the government, 39 percent considered it to be collaborative, 23 percent as cordial, 15 percent had a tentative relationship and 23 percent noted that they had no relationship at all with the government. In response to the question about the major problems facing the country, many listed economic recession, armed conflict, poor infrastructure, and general underdevelopment. Major problems facing women were poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, poor housing, low health status, male dominance, and domestic violence.

The rebel war was singled out as having had a major impact on the associations. Many of them expressed a decline in membership and decreasing donor support. They have also had to increase activities dealing with trauma healing and counseling of female victims of the war. Other activities included rehabilitation and integration, which incorporate providing micro-credit, education, and training.

The general conclusion from this study is that despite the war most associations still seek to promote development goals while resisting underdevelopment. They also seek to promote democratization while challenging authoritarianism. This continues a trend that has been evident since the 1950s.

The overwhelming challenge to the majority of women is underdevelopment. As a result, a large part of their activities consists of seeking to alleviate economic and social hardship for themselves and for their families. Even when these associations are made up of professional women and women in business, who are more advantaged, their agenda often includes programs for less fortunate women, especially women in depressed areas in rural and urban settings.

CHAPTER THREE

COLLECTIVE ACTION FOR POLITICAL EMPOWERMENT

Introduction

Women have a long history of political participation in Sierra Leone. This has been manifested in their roles as chiefs, paramount chiefs, mayors, tribal heads, cabinet ministers, ambassadors, and members of parliament. Female chiefs held, and continue to hold executive positions, especially among the Mende and the Sherbro. Some became legends in their time—like Mammy Yoko for building the Kpa Mende confederacy, consolidating alliances with other chiefdoms and trying to resist being outmaneuvered by the British colonial elite. She also used the power base of secret societies, such as the Sande, discussed later, to consolidate her position.¹

As we shall see, affiliation to a secret society has been a major factor in the mobilization of women in some mutual-aid development associations in Freetown. It has also served as an important symbol of mobilization of women for political participation and for political office. In modern politics, affiliation to a secret society can become important in terms of campaigning for political support. These associations and their spin-off mutual-aid associations are often ushered into the arena of national politics through leadership and direct links with political parties.

Other well-known female chiefs include Mrs. Honoria Bailor Caulker and Madam Ella Koblo Gulama. Madam Ella Koblo Gulama, a college graduate, scored a number of firsts. She was the first woman from the Provinces to obtain a degree from the Teachers Training College; the first superintendent of schools; the first female Paramount Chief in Kaiyamba Chiefdom, Moyamba; the first female legislator and the first female cabinet minister of state in West Africa.²

Elected in 1957, she was a member of the government that ushered the country to independence. As a paramount chief, she was exempted from holding a portfolio and was able to have an impact on the work of other ministries. The participation of traditional rulers in parliamentary deliberations and in the electoral process could be crucial in legislation, in formulating policies, and in getting out the vote in their constituencies.

The Congress of British West Africa, in particular the West African Youth League, founded in 1938 by I.T.A. Wallace-Johnson played a seminal role in the decolonization of Africa. Among the few key female members was Mrs. Constance Cummings-John who became a candidate for parliament and was mayor of Freetown in 1966.

For many years, she led the Women's Movement. Mrs. Cummings-John eventually involved the association in politics, which in the 1950s and 1960s was a slight deviation from the norm for women's associations. In general, women achieved positions in politics primarily as individuals, based on their party affiliation and qualification, and not as a result of pressure from women's associations. This, however, set the stage for women's collective action in politics and in the process of democratization. Other female mayors of Freetown include Dr. June Holst-Roness, a physician, and Ms. Florence Dillsworth, an educator and former principal of the St. Joseph's Convent Secondary School for Girls.³

For the most part, political activities involving women's associations had been confined to women's wings of political parties. Between 1970 and 1971, the period of the government of the All People's Congress (APC), led by Siaka Stevens, women took center stage as pivotal actors in leading the process toward centralization and the establishment of a one-party state.⁴

The most important charismatic leader and influential female politician during this period was Mrs. Nancy Steele, Secretary General of the Women's Congress, the women's wing of the APC.⁵ A trained nurse, Mrs. Steele became politically active while she was a student in England and was among the core leadership of the APC. A major political force in the early 1970s, she introduced the image of female power in politics through her militant, yet maternal approach toward political participation. It was customary for her to invoke the virtues of "motherhood" in demonstrating women's power and capacity for leadership. By linking "motherhood" with militancy, she challenged gender stereotypes about male prowess. She evoked the mysteries of motherhood by infusing it with the ultimate life-giving and life-sustaining force. In one of her political speeches she stated:

We give birth to men, so in a way we own them. If women were leaders they would put an end to all this political instability. Women act more decisively because for them the welfare of the children, and hence the future of the country is paramount⁶

The type of dynamic activism displayed by Congress through the leadership of Nancy Steele gave women a high profile in political mobilization, and female militancy—hitherto, women's wings of political parties had been relatively passive within the parties and were content in being silent followers. Unity was also a popular theme in her speeches since ethnic cleavages were threatening the party. Her vision was for a united country under the leadership of the APC. She was willing to use a militant approach to achieve this. She formed a military section in Congress and led militant protest marches against the opposition.

The APC government was in power until 1992 when the government of President Joseph Momoh, the successor to Siaka Stevens, was overthrown in a military coup. This ushered in the National Provisional Ruling Council (NPRC), led by Captain Valentine Strasser. It lasted until 1996 when it yielded to the pressure, especially from women's groups, to return the country to constitutional government.

The 1996 election was historic since for the first time in the country, a woman, Jeredine Williams, ran for president as leader of the Coalition for Progress Party. Although she did not win, she inspired other women to seek the highest position in

the 2002 presidential and parliamentary elections. In 2002, Zainab Bangura, whose running mate was also a woman, Deborah Salaam, made a bid for the presidency. In addition, one other political organization, the United National People's Party presented a woman, Haja Memuna Conteh, as the presidential running mate of Dr. John Karefa-Smart. None of these women were elected but they hold an important place as pioneers in the political history of Sierra Leone.

Despite the achievements of a few women, the record of female representation in parliament and in ministerial positions has been dismal. Less than 10 percent have been elected to the legislature. The record is slightly better for appointments to positions in the cabinet. In 1986, under the APC, two women were elected. One became Minister of State for Trade and Industry and the other for Communication.

In 1991, two women held ministerial posts and in 1994 there was only one. Four women have been appointed as members of parliament by Presidents of State. In the 1996 elections, three were elected out of sixty-eight members of Parliament and two were appointed as Ministers of State. Mrs. Amy Smythe became the first Minister of Gender and Children's Affairs and Mrs. Shirley Gbujama was appointed as Minister of State for Tourism and Culture. After a parliamentary shuffle in late 1996, Mrs. Gbujama became the Minister for Foreign Affairs.

That same year, Ms. Kafatu Kabba was made Deputy Minister of Works, Energy and Power. Upon the return of the government in 1998, Ms. Shirley Gbujama was moved to the Ministry of Gender, Social Welfare and Children's Affairs, replacing Ms. Amy Smythe. The Deputy Minister for Transport and Communication was Ms. Susan Lahai.

Between 1999 and 2001, Dr. Kadi Sesay became the Minister of Development and Economic Planning with a female Deputy Minister, Ms. Memunatu Koroma.⁷ After the 2002 elections three women were appointed as ministers. Mrs. Shirley Gbujama retained her position as Minister for Gender, Social Welfare and Children's Affairs; Dr. Kadi Sesay became Minister for Trade and Industry and Mrs. Agnes Taylor-Lewis was appointed Minister of Health. In another cabinet reshuffle in 2004, she was replaced by Mrs. Abator Thomas, who was then president of the 50/50 association, an advocacy group for equality of gender representation in government and in parliament.

Modern political systems patterned after the Westminster model remain the preserves of men although a few women have occupied positions as Ministers of State, Members of Parliament as well as Aldermen, Counselors, and Mayors. A few others have held decision-making positions as Judges, including High Court Judges and as Ambassadors, even before the International Women's Movement of the 1970s.

Authoritarianism, War, and Economic Decline

Authoritarianism and political instability bear all the markings of the male-dominated politics of Sierra Leone, starting with colonial rule, through one-party regimes and military juntas. It has culminated in a ten-year rebel war. Added to this fact are the protracted economic difficulties that have been exacerbated by a number of factors, including the loan policies of international financial institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The conditions for loans,

which included Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), have been extremely exploitative as demonstrated by Weeks, and further plunged the country into a deeper economic crisis.⁸

The following is a brief review of the tumultuous events that have come to define Sierra Leone politics since the general elections of 1967. The Sierra Leone People's Party that led the country to independence lost to the APC led by Dr. Siaka Stevens; the army seized power and governed the country through the National Reformation Council. Thirteen months later, in April 1968, this council was overthrown by another military coup and a representative government under Siaka Stevens' APC was restored. The inauguration of a new party in 1970 led to a series of disturbances, which resulted in the declaration of a state of emergency.

In April 1971, Sierra Leone became a Republic with Dr. Siaka Stevens as President. Immediately afterward, there were two assassination attempts on his life. A series of political disturbances preceded the 1973 general elections, and by the time they were held, Sierra Leone was virtually a one-party state. In 1977, student protests led to widespread unrest in the city as the military used force to suppress the peaceful protests. One-party rule under the APC continued for about two decades, and the country saw the presidency pass from Dr. Siaka Stevens to his handpicked successor, General Joseph Saidu Momoh, who had been head of the army.

After a period of seeming political quiet, rebels in the neighboring Liberian war led by Charles Taylor began entering Sierra Leone, joining forces with disaffected groups in Sierra Leone. Shortly afterward, rebel activity against the Sierra Leone government started in 1991. The government tried to suppress the rebels, without much success. During a brief period when the government was in the process of implementing a change to an Executive Presidency with the cabinet chosen solely by the president (from outside the elected Parliament) there was another military coup d'état in 1992. The president fled the country taking refuge in neighboring Guinea.

The young military leaders—mostly in their late 20s and early 30s—ruled the country under NPRC led by Captain Valentine E.M. Strasser from 1992 to 1996. Although, initially, they had support from the people, especially the youth, military rule was considered unconstitutional and the demands for a return to civilian rule grew with each passing year.

The military regime, which was becoming entrenched, was reluctant to give up power and argued that a return to constitutional rule before the attainment of peace would escalate the war. At the same time, there was pressure from civil society, especially women's associations and the international community, to end military rule and return to a democratic system of government. Some civil society groups, however, doubted the wisdom of holding an election during the period of war. The rebels by that time had become constituted as the Revolutionary United Front (RUF) and were gaining ground.

After constitutional talks it was decided to return to civilian rule. In the meantime, a "palace coup" was staged in January 1996 during which the NPRC chairman was ousted and replaced by his deputy who created a new, but short-lived Council and intensified a fruitless call for peace before elections. According to Akhigbe, the British were very much involved in manipulating the process of democratization since the aim was to put the old politicians of the SLPP back in power and hence



Colonel Yvette Gordon, Republic of Sierra Leone Military Forces—Freetown. Courtesy: Sierra Leone Information Services.

“arrogate decision-making power to external forces.”⁹ The 1996 elections did bring the SLPP back to power.

Women, Democratization, and the Quest for Peace

The male-dominated and authoritarian nature of formal political authority has for the most part marginalized women. Armed conflict, instigated by the ten-year war, reinforced this by creating two polarities in the exercise of force. One was the military and the other was the RUF popularly known as “the rebels.” As it was widely believed that some of the military participated in rebel activities, they also became known as “sobels,” a combination of “soldier” and “rebel.” Regardless of their nomenclature, the impact on women was generally negative.

As a result, women formed associations to advance their political participation and strengthen their opposition to war. They also saw conflict prevention and peace building as important prerequisites for ensuring development. They combined their political and peace-building objectives with development goals designed to improve their material conditions, welfare, and opportunities. This was necessary in view of the rapid economic decline and underdevelopment, which were being exacerbated by the war.

Eighty percent of the refugees generated by the war were women and children. In addition, over half of the population had been internally displaced. The majority of Sierra Leonean refugees were in neighboring countries like Guinea, Liberia, the Gambia, and Ghana. Others escaped to the United Kingdom, the United States, and Canada.

Women and young girls were further victimized by the war through abductions and gender-specific violations. These included rape, sexual assault, physical illness, and deaths from pregnancies and violence. Additional suffering included mental anguish, trauma, and rejection by their communities once they had been sexually abused. Furthermore, women bore the burden of the war in multiple ways. The war left many communities without their menfolk, either as a result of involvement in the fighting, migration, or deaths. They left women with the sole responsibility of protecting and providing for their households.

Women mobilized against the war on many occasions through protest demonstrations and lobbying for peaceful solutions to the conflict. Prayer meetings were organized in the belief in the power of divine intervention. Preventing conflict and promoting peace were viewed as essential to achieving socioeconomic development. Women were also instrumental in lobbying for a return to constitutional rule.¹⁰

Women had a stake in constitutional rule, because it advanced the process of democratization. They hoped that this would increase the chances for greater female representation in government, in decision making, and in the peace process. Four major landmark events that contributed to a return to constitutional rule and to democratization were spearheaded by women:

- The role of women’s associations, especially the Women’s Forum;
- The National Commission for Democracy;
- The national conferences on democratization;
- Female activism in the 1996 elections.

The Role of Women's Associations, Especially the Women's Forum

The momentum for democratization and peace was maintained by mobilizing women and lobbying for a return to constitutional rule and greater female representation in government, in decision making and in the peace process. Preventing conflict and promoting peace were viewed as being essential to overall socioeconomic and equitable development. On the eve of the fourth world conference for women held in Beijing, the Sierra Leone Association for University Women (SLAUW) organized women to network, share information, and plan for the conference. The following associations formed the core of what would later be known as The Women's Forum, which played a pivotal role in the return to democratic government and in the peace process.

- Sierra Leone Association of University Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA)
- The Women's Association for National Development (WAND)
- The National Organization for Women (NOW)
- The National Council for Muslim Women
- ZONTA International
- Soroptimist International
- Women's Wing of the Sierra Leone Labor Congress
- The National Displaced Women's Organization.

In all, the Women's Forum is a network of over fifty women's associations. After a number of meetings, discussions, and media events, involving a representative from the United States Information Service, a seminar was organized which culminated in a resolution to take action for peace.

In 1995, The Women's Movement for Peace was formed as a subsidiary of the Women's Forum, to resolve conflicts through peaceful negotiations and to work for peace. This involved consultations with the NPRC that had ousted the APC government in a coup in 1992. The association made good use of the media to widely publicize its activities at home and abroad. It organized the first peace march in January 1995 in Freetown, Bo, Kenema, Makeni, and Kabala, the main cities and towns. The march was a major event in which women from all walks of life joined hands and sang songs in the spirit of solidarity, shouting, "Try peace to end this senseless war." Jusu-Sheriff summarized its impact as follows:

Peace groups, hitherto viewed with suspicion as "fifth columnists" and rebel sympathizers acquired legitimacy through association with women who had mobilized a mass movement and enjoyed the support of the international community. As a result of the women's intervention, a negotiated peace settlement became a respectable option that offered both government and the rebels the opportunity to climb down from entrenched positions without loss of face.¹¹

Another important association at the time was The Women's International League for Peace and Freedom, (WILPF-SL), a subsidiary of an international NGO founded

in 1996 as a result of the rebel war. It aimed to create and build a "better integrated, restructured society in which equity is a driving force."¹² The association recognized the relationship between sustainable peace, economic development, and equity and adopted approaches that would be multidimensional.

It promoted harmonious partnerships and the empowerment of women while ensuring the human rights of both men and women. Individuals and communities were trained to acquire skills in conflict prevention, management, resolution, and negotiation with a view to equipping them with relevant creative tools to handle conflicts. It also advocated against the violation of human rights particularly that of women.

The root causes of rebel activities were identified as social and economic injustice; lack of basic necessities of life and lack of effective mechanisms to address these problems. The association hoped to help alleviate the physical, psychological pain suffered by women as a result of violence, including gender-specific violence, as well as economic hardship and to help them resettle in safe communities.

The Women's Forum viewed the peace process as intrinsically linked to the process of democratization. According to Jusu-Sheriff, the insistence on a return to constitutional rule gave new momentum to an otherwise fledgling peace effort. From the point of view of the women, peace would best be pursued through a return to democratic rule.

Since 1991, the country has been in the throes of war. In addition, a relatively popular military coup in the outset, staged by the NPRC in 1992, was later challenged as unconstitutional. The military junta on the other hand was insisting that, based on the state of the escalating insurgency, peace should be secured before a return to constitutional rule.

During the pro-democracy period, which called for an end to military rule, women associations, especially the Women's Forum, took center stage. Their efforts became intensified after the Fourth World Conference for Women in Beijing in 1995. They were in the forefront of the anti-military campaign; in mobilizing women for participation in voter registration and at the National Conferences held in preparation for the 1996 elections.

The Forum worked on various issues related not only to peace and democracy but also to development, party politics, and human rights. By strengthening women's associations, it hoped to develop a dynamic pressure group at a critical time in the country's history. Women hoped that their role in the democratic process would be strengthened to ensure more equitable and meaningful participation in politics, in promoting development, and in ensuring peace. Issues of interest to women were viewed as part of the national interest, especially since most women's issues were oriented toward economic and social development. Peace was viewed a *sine qua non* for development.

Their solidarity was expressed in the stand against injustice, underrepresentation of women in decision making, poverty, and underdevelopment. The group sent representatives to the Beijing conference to bring to the attention of the world the devastating effects of the war on the people of Sierra Leone. They also articulated their commitment to ending the war and to building a peaceful and democratic society.¹³



Madam Ella Koblo Gulama, Paramount Chief of Kaiyamba Chiefdom. Courtesy: Obai Kabia.

Although the Women's Forum was an umbrella organization, each member group maintained its autonomy and acted like a caucus responsible for promoting and advocating its own agenda. Task forces were set up for issues of national interest that cut across the specific objectives of each association.

Networking was an important strategy in advocating for women's rights and in presenting a united front. According to Aisha Dyfan, public relations officer and spokesperson for the Women's Movement for Peace of the Women's Forum at that time, the emphasis was on networking on issues and consensus building.

Care was taken to ensure that no one person or personality dominated the association or served as a symbol of unity. Rather, the women were bound together by solidarity in the fight against injustice, under-representation of women in decision-making positions, poverty, and underdevelopment. They also advocated for strengthening security and for boosting the anti-war role of the media.

On February 6, 1996, the association held a conference to advance their agenda and to bring public attention to the importance of women's contribution to the peace process and to political affairs. The main objective was to prevent conflict and influence the peace process. This was particularly important since the rebel war led by the RUF had reached alarming proportions in terms of the death toll, cruelty, and suffering of innocent people. Young boys were being recruited as rebels in large numbers and young girls were being abducted to provide domestic and sexual services to the rebels. Hallucinatory drugs were used to render young boys more susceptible to following orders to commit heinous crimes.

The Forum's strategy was to build alliances horizontally through a consultative and democratic process with women's associations and the women's wings of political parties. This served to enhance their base of solidarity and to strengthen their position as a pressure group and a women's movement for peace and development. In addition to their political objectives, which included mainstreaming gender issues in political parties and ensuring representation of women as candidates for parliament in the forthcoming elections, they also advocated for an improvement in development indicators. These included improvements in health, literacy, and female education in quantitative and qualitative terms.

Unfortunately, women became bogged down with concerns about the process of democratization, with its limited goals of elections, than with securing a foothold and power base in the inner circles of the political machinery. According to Aisha Dyfan, one of the problems with the strategy adopted by women was that they were not tactical enough to play the political game. She adds:

While women were busy trying to make the system work to ensure a democratic transformation, they were not strategizing on how to get women into the system and into participating effectively in politics as leaders and decision makers.¹⁴

She feels that women were low on the list of candidates ranked for the election and subsequent positions in the new government. In addition, there was not enough political education, although attempts were made to educate women about the democratic process and elections in public places such as mosques and markets. She also felt that things needed to change so that women could give up the role of

cheerleading and parading support for political parties, and seriously seek political positions themselves. Once in office, they should then try to change the system from within.

Mainstreaming Gender Issues in Political Parties

The Women's Forum played a major role in mainstreaming gender issues into the political platforms of political parties. They invited political parties to meetings and encouraged discussions and debate on the issues of primary importance to them. Women's wings of political parties also joined the Forum. They became very active and forceful; incorporated women's issues in their agenda; and forcefully articulated women's needs, concerns; and aspirations in their speeches and during meetings. The Forum also gave advice to women's wings and urged them to include gender issues in their party's manifestos.

Communiqué, Declaration, and Press Statement

The Women's Forum felt that although it had asked political parties to review their platforms in relation to their integration of women's issues, they had not done so in a satisfactory manner. As a result, they issued a communiqué that consolidated their positions at the preparatory meeting for Beijing held in Dakar in November 1994 and at the Beijing conference itself. The communiqué to the government put forward the following demands, most of which were development-oriented:

- Reducing the illiteracy rate especially of women and the girl child. This should include emphasizing the nonformal educational policy at the community level and access to basic formal education.
- Providing accessible basic health care with an emphasis on health education, nutrition, household food security, and reproductive health.
- Promoting entrepreneurship—business management skills at community level and access to credit and savings programs to give the ordinary woman power to determine her own circumstances and reduce poverty.
- Making a speedy reformation of laws inimical to the interest of women, for example, marriage, property, inheritance, and divorce.

The communiqué continued with a declaration emphasizing women's involvement in peace building, rehabilitation, and political decision making. The need for sustainable solutions to peace and to the building of a democratic culture was central to the declaration.

- We know that the government with the support of the international community is committed to reconstruction and rehabilitation following the war. We emphasize that the succeeding government continue these activities. We call for women's involvement in the decision-making processes at all levels regarding these arrangements.
- Peace continues to be a priority but we emphasize sustainable peace following the end of hostilities. We demand that women constitute 50 percent of any peace delegation to all negotiations for peace.

- We want the political parties to know that democracy does not end with elections but that these processes continue. They must therefore be committed to building a democratic culture within Sierra Leone. The strategy must include equal employment opportunities and equal representation in state boards and commissions.
- All these issues have been deliberated at local, national, and international levels. They have come out in the Sierra Leone National Report to the Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing in September 1995. We call on political parties to familiarize themselves with the Platform for Action as contained in these reports.
- We therefore demand that the government set up a Monitoring and Evaluation Commission to ensure the implementation of equal opportunities issues in order to reduce the gender gap.¹⁵

Realizing the reluctance of the government to hold elections by claiming that peace should be secured before elections, the Women's Forum issued the following press statement on March 11, 1996, requesting the government to ensure the safety of its citizens during the elections.

The Women's Forum, a network of women NGOs and groups has been moved to call on the Head of State, Brigadier-General Julius Maada Bio and the NPRC government to provide the entire citizenry of Sierra Leone with adequate security for the process leading to and during the run-off for the Presidential elections¹⁶

Throughout the pre-election period for the 1996 elections women staged large-scale campaigns and demonstrations against military rule. They also successfully challenged the attempt of the NPRC military government to postpone the elections on account of the continuing rebel war.

In addition to the Women's Forum, other women's associations were also active in promoting democratization and the peace process. Among the more visible ones were The Women Organized for a Morally Enlightened Nation (WOMEN). The group was motivated by the belief that a democratic Sierra Leone will provide equality, opportunity, and access for all citizens, the absence of which has been among the root causes of the national failure to develop.

Based on its conviction that women are the most disadvantaged people, whose resources were underutilized in the country, the association vowed to improve the situation. Its primary objectives included the establishment and maintenance of democracy and a democratic culture in Sierra Leone through education, training, advocacy, and institution building.

Another association Legal Access Through Women Yearning for Equality, Rights and Social Justice (LAWYERS) aimed to empower women and enhance the democratization process through the promotion and protection of the rights of women and the girl-child. Its objectives included offering professional legal advice, counseling, and assistance to women and girls in Sierra Leone with particular regard to the disadvantaged ones. It also sought to render the legal system and justice more accessible to them. It served as a resource center that aimed to conduct research into the law

with particular emphasis on the rights of women and the girl-child and organized workshops and paralegal training for women.

The National Commission for Democracy

Another important development of the process toward democratization was the establishment of the National Commission for Democracy in 1994 by Executive Decree number 15 of the NPRC. The Commission was headed by Dr. Kadi Sesay, former head of the English Department at Fourah Bay College, University of Sierra Leone, who was devoted to gender equality and the advancement of women. Dr. Sesay has also taken her advocacy to the international stage as a frequent speaker on women and peace issues in Sierra Leone.

The Commission's main objective was to promote civic education and patriotism as well as to reduce inequalities and prepare the country for democratic rule through building democratic institutions. It helped to create a climate and momentum for mobilizing civil society groups, especially women. The Commission's plan was "to assess for the information of government, the limitation to the achievement of true democracy arising from the existing inequalities between different strata of the population and make recommendations for redressing these inequalities."¹⁷

Educating the public about the constitution and ensuring legal literacy about their rights under the law were important strategies in the work of the Commission. This resonated well with women who still faced gender-based discrimination in the legal and political systems and in participation in decision making. The work of the Commission is well known and included mobilizing civil society through the media and reaching out to grassroots movements and people from all walks of life. The central focus of its work was to develop and implement a realistic agenda for the democratization process.

It held a Consultative Conference in May 1995 with representatives from a wide variety of grassroots organizations as well as traditional leaders and chiefs. A national pledge of allegiance was launched which developed into a process of citizenry and patriotism that gave visibility to civil society, especially women's groups, and its important role in the democratization process. The country prepared for elections in 1996, under the auspices of the United Nations. It was headed by Dr. James Jonah, the Chairman of the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) and a former under secretary-general of the United Nations.

National Conferences on Democratization

The first national conference held at the Bintumani Hotel in preparation for a return to constitutional rule was held from August 15 to 17, 1995. Of the sixty delegates invited only three were women. This led to a protest by the Women's Forum resulting in an increase in the number of female participants to sixteen. Although representing different groups, they presented a unified position. This included the urgency for peace, ensuring fairness in the electoral process and in women's representation, and containing the army in the electoral process. They also insisted on adhering to the timetable already set for the elections, which were being delayed by the military government.

The second Bintumani conference chaired by Mrs. Shirley Gbujama of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) was held on February 12, 1996 to discuss the status of the peace process and its implications for the elections. The timing of the elections in relation to securing peace was again central. Women were active, once again, at the second Bintumani conference and lobbied delegates for support of their position. The following united position was presented by the women attending the conference:

- Women reaffirmed their wholehearted commitment and support for every genuine effort being made to bring a sustainable peace to Sierra Leone as speedily as possible.
- Women therefore demanded that the elections (an essential and fundamental part of the peace process) go ahead on February 26, 1996 as agreed at the National Consultative Conference by the NPRC government, the Political Parties, Civil Society, and the INEC.

The women's position won the vote at the conference. The elections took place as planned. This was considered a crucial turning point. The Forum had demonstrated its ability to mobilize women through its links to many associations and by its process of consultation and discussion. It established its credibility as an umbrella association of women with ideals and principles that were closely linked to democratization and development objectives. It attributed its success to sound organization, the clarity of their message, and absolute persistence on the right to be heard on all issues.

Female Activism in the 1996 Elections—A Test of Unity

The elections were held on February 26, 1996 in a limited capacity, because of rebel activity in parts of the country. Constitutional rule was reinstated, with Ahmad Tejan Kabbah as president, and a multiparty legislature was sworn in. Though there was some accommodation of the RUF, and a "peace accord" signed in November 1996 in the Ivory Coast, there was no clearly defined role for the RUF leader, Corporal Foday Sankoh, who, many years previously, had been a member of the country's armed forces.

The Women's Forum and civil society groups can take credit for the eventual elections. Women's groups had sponsored and initiated debates about the war, the peace process, and the democratization process, and stressed the importance of the people choosing their leader. Associations such as the Women's Forum and the WOMEN also gained prominence as leaders mobilizing women for participation in democratic politics and for promoting development objectives.

On the day of the elections, women voted in large numbers and defied the military government's threats, chanting "we want to vote." They got out the women's vote and participated in providing logistical support for the electoral offices. They also demanded security before and during the elections, a period, which was marked by sporadic violence, sometimes instigated by the military government.

The election was a welcome relief from one-party rule and military rule after a period of almost twenty years. Repeated threats from the rebels and the reluctance of the military government to proceed with elections did not prevent the outcome.



Dr. June Holst-Rones, former Mayor of Freetown. Courtesy: Sierra Leone Information Services.



Law Courts Building—Freetown. Courtesy: Azania Steady.

Women were credited for the return to constitutional rule by several prominent politicians, including the Head of State, Alhaji Ahmad Tejan Kabbah, in a number of speeches after the elections.

The unity achieved by women during the period of electioneering and democratization faced challenges after the elections. It became publicly known that some members of the Women's Forum objected to the procedure of nomination used to select the Minister of Gender and Children's Affairs, Mrs. Amy Smythe. They allegedly felt that she would not be in a position to represent women of Sierra Leone, not having been initiated into the Sande/Bondo secret society. However, the public statement issued mentioned opposition to the selection process, rather than Mrs. Smythe's cultural affiliations.¹⁸ After much deliberation at high levels, the appointment was confirmed.

Some pro-democracy movements comprising both men and women were established after the elections. One of these was the Campaign for Good Governance (CGG) established in July 1996 after the general elections to promote democratic awareness and popular participation in political affairs. It also had on its agenda the strengthening of democracy both inside and outside the government. It was based on the premise that "civil society had a role to play in ensuring good governance and in building a strong, viable and well-informed civil society to act as a counter-balance to the powers of government."¹⁹ The objectives included strengthening democratic institutions of government by facilitating training of personnel within specific institutions of government.

Activities in this regard have included workshops for cabinet ministers, members of parliament, members of the judiciary, and members of the media. An international experts panel consisting of cabinet ministers, judges, and journalists from South Africa, the United States, and Ghana was also invited to attend.

Gender Bias in the Body Politic

Despite internal differences, women shared a common marginalization in the formal political structures for over three decades. According to Jusu-Sheriff, all the major parties in the conflict ignored their demands for direct consultations and for a place at the peace table. This was because their idealism was threatening to traditional male-dominated politics. They were also blamed for failing to translate their political capital, gained through the peace process, into political gains. In Jusu-Sheriff's view, they tended to surrender to a civilian government that promised to take over responsibility for the peace process, rather than secure a critical mass of political positions for themselves in the new government.²⁰

Though valid to some extent, one cannot but help call into question the reason given for this, as it was not borne out in my interviews with members of the Women's Forum. According to Jusu-Sheriff:

The peace process was a sufficient achievement for many of the women's groups who were not comfortable in the limelight.²¹

The women I interviewed did not think that shyness was a factor. On the contrary, they were highly visible, articulate, and demanding. Many of them gave

another reason for their marginalization in the resulting political structures. It had more to do with their failure to anticipate and plan well for the post-election period. They felt that they should have had a better and more concrete strategy for securing political positions and consolidating their power base after elections. They also felt that by being intensely involved with the process, they lost sight of the content and outcome of the elections. This did not necessarily signify their contentment with invisibility or their satisfaction with being left out of the limelight of formal politics. They were simply out-manuevered by the male-dominated political machinery.

1997 Coup d'Etat and Escalation of the War

The elections did not bring about the stability that some had expected and a few months after the first year of its rule, the government was overthrown by a coup on May 25, 1997. President Tejan Kabbah fled the country to Guinea. The military took over and formed the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) with support from the RUF with whom this faction of the army had become allied.

The rebel war eventually reached Freetown. As Freetown was the national capital and densely populated, the fighting, which eventually ensued, resulted in parts of the city being severely damaged or destroyed and about 2,000 or more people losing their lives. Armed conflicts pitted the AFRC and its allies on the one hand against civil defense forces (Kamajors and others) and ECOMOG forces on the other. ECOMOG comprised mostly of Nigerian soldiers sent as a monitoring group for the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS). Constitutional rule was ultimately restored in 1998, with the return of the president and other ministers from exile. Many parts of the country and the capital were devastated. The rebels still controlled large sections of the country, including the diamond-rich areas at that time.

The government captured several leaders and supporters of the rebels, charged some with treason and put them on trial. A number of them, primarily military officers were found guilty and put to death. The rebel leader Corporal Foday Sankoh was later found guilty of treason and sentenced to death.

While his case was on appeal, rebel protests and anger at his imprisonment took the form of renewed attacks on Freetown and its environs in January 1999. Military engagement with ECOMOG troops resulted in extensive destruction by fire, looting, and bombings. Many private homes and public buildings, including churches, were destroyed. ECOMAG forces restored order by driving the rebels out of Freetown. By 1999, Sierra Leone had 400,000 refugees, the largest number in Africa, the majority being women and children.

The Peace Process Renewed

Both the government and the RUF agreed to negotiations and serious talks about a lasting peace. Foday Sankoh was released to United Nations representatives for consultations in Togo with other RUF leaders. Talks between the government and the RUF began in May and June of 1999 under the auspices of the President of Togo, the ECOWAS chairman at that time.

Three attempts had been made to secure peace namely the Abidjan Accord of November 10, 1996; the Conakry Accord of October 23, 1997 and the Cease-Fire Agreement of April 17, 1999. All of them were broken. In November 2000, the government and the RUF agreed to a cease-fire for thirty days, which was later extended. This was followed by the setting up of a United Nations peacekeeping mission, UNAMSIL, and the disarming of all combatants. A Joint United Nations-Sierra Leone Government Special Court for Sierra Leone was established to try those with the greatest responsibilities for the atrocities committed during the rebel war. Foday Sankoh, the leader of the RUF, who was one of those indicted by the Special Court died while in hospital awaiting trial on July 29, 2003.

One association that played an important role in the peace process in both Sierra Leone and Liberia is the Manor River Women's Peace Network (MARWOPNET). Formed in 2000, with the support of Femmes Africa Solidarité, a pan-African women's association, it was awarded the 2003 United Nations Prize in the field of human rights.

It is made up of networks of women politicians, journalists, lawyers, academics, and representatives from the private sector in the fields of peace, human rights, and development. Its members are from the three Manor River states—Liberia, Sierra Leone, and Guinea and it has played an active role in advocating for peace and in getting women involved in peace talks.

Its founders share the conviction that women can contribute meaningfully to the quest for regional peace and security and that the lasting absence of conflict is a necessary condition for fulfilling the human rights for all. The work of MARWOPNET is wide ranging and includes advocacy and training of women in conflict prevention, conflict resolution, peace building, and techniques of negotiation.²²

Militarism, Peacekeepers, and Gender Vulnerabilities

It is estimated that between 50,000 and 64,000 women were victims of sexual abuse during the war. In addition to being abducted, women and girls were raped and forced into so-called marriage and sexual servitude by rebel forces.²³

The presence of peacekeepers has been a mixed blessing for women because of its gender implications. Women's vulnerabilities to sexual exploitation, violence, and to sex work have reputedly increased as a result of militarism, the war, and the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Sierra Leone: (UNAMSIL). Prostitution has increased due to the large contingent of unattached men that make up the peacekeeping force and the military itself. The main beaches are full of prostitutes and peacekeepers and no longer offer the pleasant family recreational venue for local residents.

Other forms of sexual relations between local women and peacekeeping forces range from casual sex to more stable relationships of cohabitation that have resulted in the birth of children. Peacekeepers represent a source of income in a country ravaged by war and grave economic problems but this has been a mixed blessing for women. It has been reported that some of these relationships have resulted in violence against women and the spread of the HIV virus.

The military in general, and peacekeeping forces in particular, are reputed to be groups at high risk for HIV/AIDS. The problem posed by peacekeepers in the spread

of HIV/AIDS has been the focus of discussion at the United Nations and is the subject of a Security Council resolution.

According to health workers interviewed in Sierra Leone between 2000 and 2002, the incidence of HIV/AIDS has been increasing since the presence of ECOMOG forces and UNAMSIL. This is confirmed by estimates of the United Nations and other sources.²⁴ A number of programs have been set up to deal with the threat of HIV/AIDS. These include the Sierra Leone HIV/AIDS Rapid Response Project (SHARP).

The experience of Sierra Leone shows that gender vulnerabilities are intensified in times of militarism and war. Women and girls are affected by war in a manner that demoralizes them, puts them at risk physically, and destabilizes the social fabric.

End of the War, the 50/50 Group and the 2002 Election

In January 2002, the president announced that the war was finally over and presidential and parliamentary elections were held on May 14, 2002. A total of ten parties contested the elections. Women's Associations, including the Women's Forum, mobilized for the elections and welcomed the re-opening of the political space and the declaration of an end to the war.

One association, the 50/50 Group, stood out for making the boldest demands yet for gender equality in government and for maintaining a high public profile. It aimed to have equal representation of men and women at every level of decision making. Its activities included recruiting, training, and supporting women seeking elected office in order to remove some of the barriers women face. The association realizes that women have to have substantial resources if they are going to achieve the objectives of gaining political office. As stated by Dr. Nemaia Eshun-Badan, a leader of the group and an education and training consultant, in a fund-raising letter:

More than half of our capable trained aspirants will lose the opportunity to stand in the election because they are unable to raise sufficient funds to pay their party and the National Election Commission candidate fees. We stand to lose all the ground we have gained if we don't raise money to be distributed among our women candidates.

The association is seeking to transform politics by having a fresh parliament of new ideas and approaches to peace and progress. It hopes to work for a parliament that is full of integrity and genuine multi-partisan cooperation and where women are present and fully represented in force. The association also aims to influence leaders of political parties and the President by having their endorsement. The letter also states that:

In addition to training the women, we have asked for, and received, commitments from political party leaders to include women in prominent positions on their candidate lists. We have asked for and received an endorsement of our work by his Excellency, the President of the Republic, Alhaji Ahmad Tejan Kabbah.

The 2002 elections were peaceful and the ruling party, the SLPP, won by a landslide with the President being returned to power for a second term. Three women were

appointed as ministers (health, trade and industry, and gender, children and social welfare) and one was appointed as deputy minister.

For the second time in Sierra Leone's history, the presidential candidates included a woman, Zainab Bangura, chair and leader of the Movement for Progress Party (MOP) whose running mate was also a woman, Deborah Salaam. The party issued one of the most comprehensive populist manifestos. The manifesto opens with the following words:

In this document we offer a vision for the future of our country. This vision is not the property of our movement: it is the birthright of all Sierra Leoneans, if they should use their freedom and our precious democracy to choose it. We as a movement offer only our commitment, our humility and willingness to learn and improve, and our profound determination to conduct ourselves with courage, generosity and integrity in public office.

We have watched our country, our families, our children, ourselves, suffer from the inhumanity of war, a war that has stolen something from all of us. We know that this war was ours, that it was a war which all of us bear some responsibility for and we have resolved to learn its lessons and rebuild our country, by constructing strong, loyal, transparent and patriotic institutions, promoting prosperity for all our citizens, building a just and moral society and cooperating with the community of nations. If we succeed in these things, we shall not only ensure that the horrors of war never ravage our beautiful country again, but that for the first time in our history, all of our people shall have the opportunity to live a life of real freedom.²⁵

The Impact of Women on Democratization and the Peace Process

The role of women's collective action was pivotal and historic in the return of Sierra Leone to constitutional rule. It marked a critical point in the struggle against authoritarian rule and the quest for democratization. However, it did not significantly change the authoritarian nature of government nor did it alter the reality of politics as a male preserve. Women were the major force willing to confront a military government for a return to civilian rule, but they did not make significant gains in terms of being elected and appointed to political office.

During my research, I encountered people with skeptical views that included the suggestion that women were used to advance the agenda of male-dominated political parties. This is true but only in part. It is not fully substantiated by my interviews or the stated objectives of women's associations. They advocated intensely for women's involvement at high levels of political participation, in political office at the level of decision making. This is particularly true of the 50/50 Group.

Another source of criticism included the view that women lacked an ideological guiding framework, which blunted their effectiveness.²⁶ In my view, the Women's Forum did have an ideological framework in their commitment to democratization, peace, development, and the advancement of women. What they lacked was a strategic plan of action to implement their vision and ideological position. Problems of

resource constraints also contributed to derailing prompt and effective action toward a realistic and meaningful process of democratization.

Despite the disappointments in failing to gain more political positions, women had moved the process of democratization and development for the whole society in a forward direction. By acting collectively, they were able to advance a vision with concrete suggestions some of their efforts are commendable and could lead to a people-oriented and democratically peaceful, stable, and economically viable society that included and transcended gender equality.

CHAPTER FOUR

COLLECTIVE ACTION FOR ECONOMIC EMPOWERMENT

Economic Profile of Women in Freetown

Freetown's female population is diverse, in terms of economic activity, geographic background, ethnic affiliation, and so on. The majority operates primarily in the informal sector and faces economic difficulties due to high rates of unemployment, inflation, Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), and increasing poverty. Many women in the informal sector also have to face the vulnerabilities of this sector to recessions and economic downturn.

In the absence of adequate surveys on women's economic activities and of detailed up-to-date statistics, an attempt will be made to further construct an economic profile of women in Freetown based on the available data and on interviews and observations derived from fieldwork.

According to figures available from two household surveys and the latest census published, the largest percentage of working women in the formal sector is in sales, representing 49 percent. Women in the service sector constitute 16 percent followed by 14 percent in clerical and related work.¹

Women have a long-standing tradition of trading in Sierra Leone.² A number of those in Freetown also own shops, stores, and bars retailing imported goods, food items, clothing, and beverages. A few conduct private sales to friends and relatives from their homes usually of imported ready-made clothes, hats, and shoes. It is also quite common to see small food stalls in front of private homes with family members taking turns as vendors. Small restaurants and cooking facilities can be found everywhere, including private homes.

Most of the trading activities of the majority of women can be described as subsistence trading. The surplus generated is minimal and is used primarily for purchasing food and for the basic consumption needs of the household. Based on my interviews, many of these women barely break even and some operate at a loss. Processed food items such as cooking oil and major staples like rice usually generate more profit, which can be used for more expensive items such as clothing and school fees.

A number of services are provided in the informal sector, such as hairdressing, child-care, home nursing, domestic work, prostitution, and so on. Unlike most regions of the world, the majority of domestic workers in Freetown are men, not women.

Women are also involved in entrepreneurial small-scale cottage industries in textiles and garment manufacture, particularly tie dye, soap making, oil extraction, basket making, and so on. Most of the enterprises of women are home based and somewhat "invisible." Men in manufacturing, on the other hand, are more visible and can often be seen at work in the many roadside industries all over Freetown, making furniture, building materials, garments, and the like.

Industrialization has proceeded at a slow pace and takes place on a small scale. The few industries that exist are capital-intensive and foreign owned, employing only a handful of local citizens, primarily men. One exception is the labor-intensive fisheries industry involving food processing and packing, which employs more women than men.

In the formal labor market, women constitute the majority of elementary school teachers and are predominant in sales and secretarial work. There is also a good representation of women in the professions of teaching, nursing, the civil service, the police force, the military, and the legal profession. A number of women have held top managerial positions as chief medical officers, ranking officers in the army, and permanent secretaries or directors-general in the ministries of government. A few women have also served as cabinet ministers and ambassadors.

According to the United Nations, women's economic activity rate is increasing all over the world. The figures for Sierra Leone show a rate of 44 percent for 1995/1997, which is up from 42 percent in 1990.³ The percentage of women in administrative posts or positions as managers was 8 percent, and for sub-Saharan Africa as a whole, it was 14 percent in 1997. In the professional, technical, and related fields, it was 30 percent.⁴

Management and Decision-Making Positions

A study of women in management and decision-making positions in Freetown found that, despite the slow progress, some highly qualified women have achieved a high degree of prominence in top positions in the academic and professional fields.⁵ At least 50 percent were involved in some form of decision-making activity, although there was little evidence of goal setting or career planning in their work experiences.

The majority of women interviewed for this study did not perceive barriers to their professional advancement. Seventy-two percent stated that there were no barriers and 78 percent felt the promotion criteria were fair. Only 28 percent felt that there were barriers, which they identified as a male-influenced culture and the institutional environment. The following were viewed as obstacles to career advancement: gender-based discrimination, sexual harassment, conflicts with domestic responsibilities, low pay, poor communication, and interpersonal relations. Despite these problems, only 32 percent of the women said they preferred a male to a female supervisor and 29 percent had no preference for either gender.⁶

According to the study, most women had difficulty reporting gender-based offences and seeking redress although they were aware about the necessary action to be taken. They expressed the need for more progress in the following areas: building gender awareness, constructive dialogue, more flexible working conditions and provisions, clearly defined roles and job descriptions as well as strict regulations and disciplinary action for insubordination.

With regard to manufacturing, no women were found in top executive positions although they made up 25 percent of the senior staff. The insurance industry had the highest number of women, followed by NGOs, professionals, and the hotel industry. In the administrative section of the Civil Service, which is the largest employer in the formal sector, women held 15 percent of the top management and senior staff positions. In terms of political office, the election and nomination of women to political positions have been minimal in all political regimes.

About 75 percent of the women surveyed tended to have a long record of service or more than seven years with the same institution. Sixty-one percent were married and 50 percent had professional degrees, of which 14 percent were Masters degrees. In addition, the study also sought to identify strengths and gender-related problems of the woman manager. Conflicting information was given regarding the negative aspects of gender relations and the dynamics in the work place. Equally unresolved was the information on the degree of conflict between women's roles in the workplace and in the home.⁷

Women constitute more than 50 percent of the population and are poorly represented in the formal sectors of the economy especially in executive, managerial, and decision-making positions. As a result, an attempt was made to find out the degree of their participation and the gender-related problems serving as obstacles to their advancement.

One important finding was that women lacked a critical mass of role models in managerial and decision-making positions. The study concluded that more women should be included in top management positions, so that they could also serve as role models to help break down restraining cultural and traditional gender-based beliefs and practices.

Women's Economic Associations

The development–underdevelopment nexus is best exemplified by women's economic associations. While seeking to promote development through their economic activities, they are also resisting underdevelopment through boycotts and protests against economic exploitation by foreign enterprises and institutions.

The tradition of mobilizing for economic reasons has been in existence for a long time. In most rural areas, it was customary for women to organize into work groups and collectives as an important feature of production and socioeconomic development. This followed the customary lines of the division of labor by gender. In addition, women traders, especially in urban areas like Freetown, have traditionally established associations to facilitate their commercial activities.

These included mobilizing capital, securing markets, defending their interests, and withstanding economic pressures from middlemen and large foreign-dominated commercial enterprises. Some of the most important economic associations among women are the Women's Movement, rotating credit associations, cooperatives, professional associations, and guilds.

The Women's Movement

The historical impact of the Women's Movement has a unique historical position Sierra Leone. It provided a model for female economic activism that is still relevant

today. In February 2004, some women from religious associations attempted to demonstrate peacefully against the high cost of living, but were not issued permits and were prevented from doing so by the police. According to one report, this planned protest was not instigated by the opposition parties, but by the anger of the women, who felt that the government had let them down.⁸

The Sierra Leone Women's Movement was the first association to mobilize women against foreign economic exploitation on an unprecedented scale. As a result of the alarming rising cost of food, caused by the involvement of Lebanese traders in wholesale food distribution, a group of ten thousand women staged a massive demonstration of protest in Freetown in 1951. Dressed in colorful African clothes, they marched in procession, singing songs and hymns and carrying banners protesting the high cost of living to the secretariat building, the country's administrative headquarters at that time. The women were also protesting the proposed increase in market dues.⁹

We are hungry
 We are tired of buying head ties for four
 shillings
 We need milk for our babies
 Governor, give us farmers banks
 Peg Prices
 Governor, do please subsidize rice
 Cost of living is too much for us
 Government action please
 Big firms, hands off our staple food.¹⁰

They were led by Mrs. Mabel Dove Danquah who had worked with women's movements in Ghana and Mrs. Hannah Benka-Coker who founded the first federation of women's associations in Sierra Leone. The women handed over a petition requesting that women be given a monopoly to trade in palm oil and rice. Since the end of the Second World War, these commodities had been taken over by Lebanese traders who were demanding exorbitant prices. European firms had large trading establishments linking the economy of Sierra Leone to the global trading system.

As a sequel to the demonstration of female solidarity, the women not only secured the monopoly of buying directly from the governmental agricultural station at Newton, but also formed the Sierra Leone Women's Movement, a strong association comprised of women from all occupational groups. They included dressmakers, petty traders, businesswomen, teachers, nurses, and so on, who came together primarily to forestall the rise in the cost of living.

In 1952, branches were established in the Provinces and this brought together thousands of women into a network of trade linking all the important centers of the country. The leaders enlightened farmers about the importance of controlling prices. As a result, members were able to purchase food commodities at reduced wholesale prices, directly from the producers in the Provinces, and to retail them at fairer prices in Freetown, thus bringing down the cost of living.

Some of the members who went to the Provinces, made contacts with women traders and bought goods at cheaper prices so that they in turn could retail them

reasonably cheaply. The net result was lower prices all round. Branches were set up in key towns in the Provinces such as Kenema, Makeni, and Bo.

The involvement of women living in the Provinces in the movement was due primarily to the efforts and influence of Mrs. Constance Cummings-John, a charismatic leader, who was the organizing secretary of the movement for many years. She was remarkable at mobilizing women and embodied the spirit of collaboration and alliance building necessary to keep a large-scale movement going. She was able to gain support from the leaders of the Sande/Bondo societies who commanded the loyalties of the vast majority of the women in the Provinces.¹¹

The movement is reputed to have made tremendous profits for its members and for itself. A few of the members participated in foreign trade, exporting bananas to the Gambia. In 1953, the movement acquired its own headquarters building at Charlotte Street. The Women's Movement song reinforced their commitment to help promote socioeconomic development and unity.

We work to make Sierra Leone noble and great,
A country where God has command,
An end shall be put to division and hate,
New unity sweeps through the land.
No more shall a section all selfishness reign,
No more shall the jobless seek labor in vain,
We'll work as a team with one goal,
Our country, with God in control.

We work for our country to be healthy and strong,
New fitness of body and soul,
To raise up a force to which all can belong,
With each giving all for a whole.
So forward to action, no coward delay,
Our leader unseen preparing the way
We work with a team with one goal,
A new world with God in control.¹²

After 1953, the association was able to concentrate on other activities. These included literacy classes for illiterate members and a printing press that published a women's newspaper titled *Ten Daily News*. Fund-raising became a regular activity and special community projects involving the promotion of public health and sanitation were established.

In 1954, two specialized groups were created within the movement. One was the Friendly Society of the Sierra Leone Women's Movement whose main function was to promote charity work for the welfare for the less fortunate members. The Society also provided artificial limbs to disabled people and donated medical supplies and money to children's clinics and to the maternity hospital. Funds were also raised for scholarships from the government and other sources to promote the education of girls.

The second specialized group to be formed within the movement was the Freetown Women's Traders Co-operative Society. It provided training in bookkeeping and commerce to members and was responsible for running the cafeterias set up at the headquarters.

In 1955, there were major strikes and riots all over the country by trade unions and the Youth League, a worker-oriented political organization with a nationalist agenda for an end to colonial rule. Some members of the movement, including Mrs. Cummings-John were also active in the struggle for independence from British colonialism.

The association also forged alliances with women's groups in other parts of Africa and internationally. It became affiliated to the Women's International Democratic Federation based in the Soviet Union and the International Alliance of Women, based in England.¹³

In 1966, an award-giving ceremony was held to recognize the contributions of women. It coincided with a major seminar on women, attended by the Prime Minister, other Ministers of State, dignitaries from the diplomatic community, and religious leaders. "The Women's Movement Honors" were bestowed on women for their various roles as businesswomen, career women, community leaders, and housewives. The following is a transcript of one of the certificates issued:

The National Council of Sierra Leone Women of the Sierra Leone's Women's Movement offers this certificate of good citizenship on behalf of the women of Sierra Leone. The Sierra Leone Women's Movement hereby confers on Dora Wright the honor of the Rank of Ladyship for long and faithful service in the field of small industries in Sierra Leone. (Signed: Constance Cummings-John, J.P. President. Clarice P. Norman, J.P. Secretary, April 5, 1966)

Political Role

As its status became elevated, the association took on a political role and became involved in the national movement for independence from colonial rule. A few of the leaders, including Mrs. Constance Cummings-John became active members of the Sierra Leone's People's Party (SLPP). The party later formed the first government after independence in 1961.

Mrs. Cummings-John won a seat in Parliament, but lost it after a successful election petition. She eventually became Mayor of Freetown in 1966. When the SLPP lost the 1967 elections, she went into exile in England along with some other SLPP leaders. Since then the activities of the association have declined substantially. Mrs. Cummings-John later returned to Sierra Leone and traveled to England frequently where she died in 2001.¹⁴

Over the years, the association has continued many of its functions, albeit in a limited capacity and with a lower profile. The nursery school and cafeteria are still in operation. The trading network among women continues to operate as an informal network. Its role in mobilizing women at the grass-roots level for economic reasons was a significant development that inspired subsequent women's associations and promoted a high level of political consciousness among women.

The award-giving ceremony to celebrate women's achievements gave women high visibility and led to programs and activities that contributed to social and economic development. The Women's Movement was also the first association to advocate for greater participation of women in national politics and public life. In many ways it was the first truly African feminist association in Freetown, for it combined the historical struggle against colonialism with the quest for socioeconomic development, independence from colonial rule, and the advancement of women.

Other associations have followed the leadership of the Sierra Leone Women's Movement and have sought to protect women's economic interests. They have functioned as economic pressure groups against foreign encroachment in women's commercial activities. Problems of foreign economic domination are chronic and pertain expressly to the Lebanese and Syrian traders who not only dominate the wholesale trade, but have also been steadily moving in the professions. Some have tried to build good public relations by making periodic donations to charity and to educational institutions, but this has not diminished the general feeling of resentment against them.

Lebanese and Syrian speculators are heavily involved in the mining and trading of diamonds, the country's chief natural resource. The general view is that these groups have consistently exploited the resources of the country at the expense of the people. They are often blamed for charging high prices, maintaining trading monopolies on some goods, hoarding large sums of money, channeling profits outside the country to develop their own countries, and engaging in ruthless and corrupt business deals. During the ten-year war and even before, Lebanese traders were among the most targeted by the rebels, and were often admonished for having exploited the country and drained it of its wealth.

The Lebanese and Syrians have become entrenched as a formidable economic ruling class in Sierra Leone and are often perceived as being linked to the political elite through ties of economic alliance, bribery, and corruption. Women's associations mobilized against the economic exploitation from these groups, serving as pressure groups and raising consciousness among women about the destructive effects of foreign economic exploitation. They take collective action to resist such domination that results in underdevelopment, and to develop constructive women-centered alternatives, following the model of the Women's Movement.

The Gara Thrift and Credit Society and Similar Associations

Following the initiative of the Sierra Leone Women's Movement, a number of women's associations have been formed to protest foreign involvement in trading activities, particularly where these affected women's economic activities adversely. The Gara Thrift and Credit Society was formed to protest the high cost of materials used in the production of gara (tie-dyed fabrics) goods and the involvement of foreign men in trading activities traditionally carried out by women.

These protests were directed not only against the Lebanese, but also against the Marakas (from Guinea) and the Yoruba from Nigeria. The Lebanese retailed the materials needed for gara production at very high prices and the Marakas and Yorubas produced gara fabric, an activity traditionally carried out by local women.

Gara is a specially dyed fabric, similar to tie dye, which has become a popular national fabric. The main items required are imported and are consequently expensive. The traditional dyes, like indigo and cola nuts, are less costly but have certain limitations in terms of their availability in large quantities and the fabric would require careful maintenance. The imported dyes have a number of advantages, including wider variety of colors and better retention of the colors.

The original importing company priced these products reasonably. This changed when the Lebanese took over and inflated the price. Women gara manufacturers were

outraged. The Lebanese merchants were viewed as saboteurs. As one woman from the Gara Thrift and Credit Society put it:

The Lebanese take all the money out of the country and send it to their own country. Most of their children go to school in Lebanon and only come to Sierra Leone on vacation.

Women claim that other countries such as Nigeria, Guinea, and Ghana have taken strong measures to protect their people's interests against Lebanese traders and feel that the Sierra Leone authorities should act in a similar manner.

Another association, the Gara Women's Association lobbied to prevent foreign companies, particularly Lebanese merchants from setting up gara production in Freetown. A delegation was sent to the Minister of Trade and Industry to protest the setting up of these industries that would seriously undercut a vital female industry.

Although the Sierra Leone government took steps to expel the Marakas from time to time, it has not made a definitive move toward seriously controlling the exploitative activities of the Lebanese, nor has any effective assistance been given to women in terms of keeping down production costs. The Sierra Leone Co-operative Department offers loans and limited training but no major help has been provided in terms of reducing the cost of production.

The problem of immigrant traders in competition with women is not limited to Sierra Leone but became a feature of female economic exploitation elsewhere. The following is a resolution adopted by the Economic Commission for Africa as early as 1963:

Access to the market place should be opened to the women of all African countries and where certain market places are monopolized by men, mostly foreigners, governments and local authorities should not hesitate to break this *de facto* monopoly by means of legal and fiscal measures in favor of indigenous women.

In spite of growing regional and national awareness and action, the problem has worsened due to the general impoverishment of African countries as a whole. It has been aggravated by the competitively driven ideology of privatization and liberalization of trade, which are features of corporate globalization. Most enterprises now face the fierce competition of cheaper goods and foodstuffs being imported from Europe, North America, and Asia. Trade liberalization is driving many small enterprises out of business. These are posing serious barriers to economic development in Sierra Leone. It is no surprise then that resisting the forces of globalization which are resulting in underdevelopment, has been high on the agenda of women's economic associations.

Rotating Credit Associations—Indigenous Mechanisms for Micro-Credit

The rotating credit association is an indigenous mechanism that women use for savings and to buttress their financial vulnerabilities. It operates on the principle of contributions by a group at regular intervals to a collective fund, and withdrawals by individuals in rotation. It is an adaptable institution for mobilizing capital and has wide geographical distribution, particularly in West Africa.¹⁵ It is known in Sierra Leone as Osusu.

Access to credit is a major constraint for women who are self-employed, especially in the informal sector. Credit institutions set up during the colonial period functioned primarily for the benefit of European companies and firms. Although a few African men who were qualified for loans were granted credit, women were subject to gender-biased restrictions endemic in European banking practices. Some of these practices are still continued by a number of European banks that still operate in the country.

Some progress has been made in terms of providing alternatives through micro-credit alternatives, similar to the Grameen Bank model, but these are few. Requirements for collateral and male guarantors still exist in some financial institutions. The requirement for collateral such as a house is particularly difficult for most Sierra Leoneans, both male and female.

Rotating credit associations such as Osusu are the only alternative for most women. The Osusu appeal is both economic and social and rooted in traditional forms of mobilization of capital. On the basis of economic rationality, Osusos provide an opportunity for raising capital without too much red tape. Some Osusos operate a separate emergency fund which allows members to make loans in an emergency. In Freetown, the Osusu is particularly popular among market women and petty traders.

Most Osusu clubs are also social institutions. Meetings have a recreational aspect, a relaxed atmosphere, and a sense of common obligation as members collectively pool resources at regular intervals for each other's benefit. Members often share one or more of the following characteristics: relationship through kinship and friendship ties, working in the same establishment, and living in the same neighborhood. This tends to enhance the relationship of mutual trust and to serve as a deterrent against fraud or default in payment. There is also an inherent social obligation that adds to its continuing appeal. Osusos can only work if all its members cooperate. Geertz's well-known analysis of rotating credit associations reveals the complexity of these associations when viewed from a cross-cultural perspective. He states that:

In Africa, the tendency is towards the development of more complex leadership patterns and more differentiated internal organization and consequently towards increasing administrative costs.¹⁶

This is particularly true in situations where associations are organized on a large scale. Most of the Osusu associations in Freetown which serve women are small, and do not constitute an elaborate and complex administration even though they adhere to the basic Osusu principle of regularity in contribution, withdrawal, and rotation.

Most Osusos are not readily apparent since meetings are held in private homes. They usually take place toward the end of the month to coincide with "pay day" and the period when business activities are brisk. The size can range from six members to fifty with the smaller ones operating with little or no formality.

There is greater formality in the larger Osusus, which also tend to have a permanent leader. Meetings last longer because of their recreational aspects but the session devoted to business is usually quite brief. The leader is responsible for conducting the meetings and for recording the transactions to ensure that the proper contributions

and allocations are made. At the appointed time and day of each week or month, members meet to “throw in” their subscriptions. The person scheduled to “draw” is given the money collected by the leader. She checks it, signs for it, or has her verbal acceptance recorded and the meeting is over within a short period.

No specific name is attached to an Osusu as a rule and members simply refer to their Osusu as “mi Osusus” or “we Osusus” (my Osusu, our Osusu). It is difficult to estimate the number of Osusus in Freetown but three types can be identified: The formal ones such as the Osusu Club, with membership of 12 or more, the collector type, and the targeted type. Informal ones usually have less than 12 members and are generally made up of kinfolk, friends, and workmates.

Formal Osusus tend to be more structured, have stricter rules, and more elaborate bookkeeping methods. Due to limitation of space, only the Osusu club will be discussed at length as most of the others follow a similar pattern. Significant variations are presented by the collector Osusu and the targeted Osusu, which will also be discussed as variants of the basic Osusu.

The Osusu Club

The Osusu Club, used as a case study, is located in the East end of Freetown. It began with a membership of 17 and grew to 52. It is well organized, successful, and is made up of people who live in the same neighborhood around the Kissy Road and Fourah Bay Road where a major market, the Bombay Street Market, is located.

Some of the members are wage earners but most are traders. Although it is a women’s association, three of the members are men: a bank clerk, a third grade clerk in the civil service, and a hospital nurse. The leader is a successful female trader in both wholesale and retail marketing of staple foodstuffs—rice and palm oil—and various household goods. Most of the members retail a range of commodities that include fabrics, groceries, household utensils, and goods. Six of the women are dressmakers and another combines a clerical job with the sale of prepared food, known locally as “cookery.”

As the majority of members are in commerce, the money is usually used as capital to expand their business. Two market women who now rent stalls hope to establish proper shops instead of stalls. Three current shop owners used their money for renovations and investments to enable them to market a new commodity. One dressmaker purchased an electric sewing machine. Another woman who sold vegetables embarked on a new and more profitable trade in rice and palm oil. The money was used to make her first wholesale purchase. Some of the members use their capital to purchase expensive household items for their families such as refrigerators, stereos, and television sets and for expenses incurred in the celebration of life cycle events. About one third indicated that their intention was to use the money for the education of their children.

The Osusu club is not the only means of savings used by these women. Twelve of them had personal bank accounts in addition to the Osusu, because of the desire to earn interest, which is not possible in the Osusu system.

Collector’s Osusu

A “collector Osusu” is a type of roving bank, a variant of the rotating credit association. In the case studied, the collector, a man, was operating the Osusu primarily for market

women. Some of the earliest collectors in Freetown were from Nigeria, which indicates the possibility of it being imported into Freetown. The relationship is between two people, namely the collector and the client. In this particular case, the collector collects money from 150 subscribers, mostly market women who trade in a variety of goods.

The sum of money paid is not fixed, as each woman pays whatever she can afford. The collector records each subscription daily in a special records book. At the end of the month, a subscriber receives the total sum of her contribution, less one day's subscription, which the collector keeps as his commission.

There were no serious problems reported for this particular association. The collector was reputed to be a man of integrity and deposited the money in a bank everyday. However, problems with similar types of collector's Osusu have existed. One collector reputedly absconded to Nigeria with all of the money collected.

In spite of the potential risks involved in this type of Osusu, a large number of market women still use it for convenience. It also imposes a kind of discipline, which obligates members to save regularly. Many women expressed their belief that this made for good business sense. Some indicated that they would not have such regular savings with a bank or the post office, because of lack of time to make a trip to the bank. Others expressed dislike for the impersonal nature of these financial institutions.

Osusu for Mecca (Targeted Osusu)

Another variant is the targeted Osusu, such as the Osusu for Mecca found among Muslims in the East end of Freetown. It is formally organized and the objective is to pay for a trip to Mecca for five of their fifty members each year. Selections are made on the basis of seniority. It has been difficult to sustain this association because of the economic recession and the rebel war.

Osusu—A Socially Valid Savings Institution

The Osusu continues to be an important institution for savings and credit for a large number of women engaged in commercial activities, especially in the informal sector. It is likely that this institution will continue for many years to come since it provides a safety valve for many groups who are marginalized by the formal financial institutions and banks.

Micro-credit has become an important strategy for integrating women in development in international circles, but it is not widely available and has its own limitations. It is also a mechanism for integrating women into the global marketing system, albeit at a low and often exploitative level. Although some women have benefited from it, they have not been able to move to higher levels of economic activity.

Micro-credit does not adequately serve the African woman entrepreneur, if she is poised to leverage larger resources and move into the level of wholesale commercial activities. At the moment the most practical form of mobilizing capital for the majority of women traders and service providers is the Osusu.

Cooperatives

The Cooperative Department, usually located in the Ministry of Trade and Industry, is responsible for promoting the development of cooperatives. It is headed by the

Registrar of Cooperative Societies, who is assisted by a staff of civil servants and clerical workers. It helps groups to organize cooperative societies; improve the economic and social lives of their members; audit their records; conduct educational and training programs for the staff of cooperative societies and supervise the operations of cooperative societies.

Cooperatives in Freetown offer opportunities for developing economic mechanisms that will promote self-help and collective autonomy. They are often developed along commonalities based on economic activity and community ties. They aim to protect the producer from exploitation by ensuring a fair price for their product and to cut down on production costs. According to one official of the cooperative:

A cooperative offers a practical alternative to the capitalist or profit-motivated system. . . . In a co-operative society, people are the most important asset whereas in private enterprise, money is what comes first. Co-operatives provide protection against monopolies operating at the expense of the public. In any field where a strong co-operative exists, there is less likelihood of exploitation. Through co-operatives, people learn to do things for themselves. They develop the habit of self-help.

The majority of cooperative societies, which number over one thousand, are thrift and credit societies. First established in the 1950s, these societies have savings schemes for members from which they are given loans at very low interest rates, around 2 percent. In 1970, these societies collectively formed the Cooperative Savings and Credit League of Sierra Leone.

Other cooperatives include Marketing Cooperatives, Handicraft Cooperatives, and Fishermen's Cooperatives. The majority of them are based in the rural areas. Cooperatives are run by trustees or committees of management that elect the president, vice-president, treasurer, and secretary.

The Sierra Leone Cooperative Society Movement is organized nationally and internationally through the National Cooperative Congress. The *raison d'être* for a national movement, was presented by one official as follows:

The big merchant houses, traders, and banks on which we depend have companies in Freetown which are well financed. These are owned, for the most part, by foreign companies. As long as we are dependent economically we are not really free. To replace these institutions, we cannot just continue to work at the local level. We must organize on a nation-wide basis because this is what our competitors are doing.

One of the ways in which cooperatives develop a strong economic base is to pool their financial resources within a centralized banking system. To achieve this the National Cooperative Development Bank was established in 1970. It is now a Registered Cooperative Society. Members of cooperative societies are encouraged to make regular savings at the bank through their local societies to be used as share capital. Societies with bank membership have voting rights and earn dividends from the bank. It can also take big loans on behalf of its members for a period of one year.

The Cooperative Department has been actively encouraging the development of cooperatives among women since they often constitute substantial segments of the productive and marketing communities in the country. They have also encouraged

women's associations to form cooperatives within their associations and often attend their meetings to provide advice and disseminate information.

In addition, the department offers advice and professional expertise on accounting and bookkeeping. Women's cooperatives have been able to secure special concessions on wholesale goods purchased from the Produce Marketing Board for retail by their members.

Marketing women's cooperatives are more common than production cooperatives since they seek to safeguard women's interest in trade; raise capital through the establishment of credit facilities; and provide access to markets. In Freetown, the Congo Market Women's Cooperative that has a membership of 42, and the Women's Cooperative of the All Peoples' Congress Association in a membership of 150 have had some success in improving the economic prospects of their members. They have encouraged regular savings by their members and have been able to secure loans from banks.

The Gara Women's Union is an example of a Marketing Cooperative whose aims are to achieve unity among all Gara women and to improve the gara industry. Haja Dean, the President and Founder explained the need to organize women in this way:

Because of the difficult economic situation of women in our country, most women are unemployed and depend on petty trading. This makes it difficult for women. Our profits are very small.

The first step taken to ease the problems of trading was to ensure reliable access to a market already saturated with gara goods. The Gara Union consequently rented a shop and established it as the main retail store for the finished goods. Members were entitled to use this outlet for selling their manufactured gara materials. This helped to solve some of the problems of access to markets for their products. In addition to market access, the association also secured rice quotas for its members from the Produce Marketing Board and utilized the credit facilities it offered for securing loans for investments.

Attempts at forming production cooperatives have not been as successful as marketing cooperatives mainly because women in Freetown are more involved in trade than in agricultural and craft production. Even though the gara industry entails a certain degree of manufacturing, the emphasis of the Gara Women's Union is on marketing. Limited agricultural activity is pursued in the peninsula villages around Freetown. Some of the food grown in these areas is for domestic consumption but the bulk of it is sold for cash. These are mostly vegetables, greens, and fruits.

One production cooperative, the Women's Farmers Cooperative was established in 1971 as a subgroup of the National Congress of Sierra Leone Women to enable a number of women with the tradition of farming to participate in this activity on the outskirts of Freetown as well as in the Provinces. Some cooperatives operated by the YWCA in peninsula villages such as Gloucester have been very successful.

There are a few smaller cooperatives run by individual women or by groups of friends, relatives, and neighbors. They are usually not registered with the Cooperative Department and are less formally organized. They tend to proliferate during periods of brisk economic activity but in general have a very short life span, usually about one year or less.

Cooperatives as Mechanisms for Collective Action

Although the idea of group cooperation and collaborative work can be regarded as indigenous, the model of cooperatives is relatively new and perceived by some women as alien. A number of women expressed their preference for the more traditional credit and savings institutions such as the Osusus. As one member of a cooperative remarked:

At least I know that in my Osusu my turn would come every twelve months because there are only twelve of us. I am still not sure what I have benefited from joining the co-operative. You wait for ages to receive something and when you do, it is only a few worthless Leones [local currency] because the interest has to be shared among all the members.

A number of successful businesswomen also expressed cynicism at joining cooperatives. Many of them have been fairly successful and can function on an individual basis. These women tend to invest some of their profits in the business and can secure conventional loans from banks.

One successful businesswoman expressed her views as follows:

I have been in business for a long time and at this stage my business is fully organized and doing well. I have a part-time accountant and an auditor. I also do regular banking with the neighborhood branch of Barclays Bank and can raise a bank loan on the strength of my business and my property. I have therefore not felt the need to join a co-operative but I am interested in the idea and think it is a good thing for women.

Cooperatives offer services to women who have difficulties meeting production costs or accessing markets on their own. These are women who also need the security and support of other women in similar economic conditions and can pool their resources to resist the forces of underdevelopment.

One major problem faced by cooperatives centers on controversies resulting from the fact that one individual, usually the President, is able to obtain loans from the cooperative bank in the name of her cooperative society. Another controversial issue concerns the management and allocation of members' quotas of wholesale purchases, particularly rice from the Produce Marketing Board.

Some women view cooperatives run by individual women with suspicion. There are at least two instances in which major accusations were made of embezzlement. In one of the cases, court prosecution was threatened but never pursued. There was a general feeling among the members that some leaders were apt to misuse cooperative credit facilities. Consequently, by far the most common fear expressed by women traders reluctant to join cooperatives was the possibility of the leader usurping the rights of the cooperative. This could include raising credit and using quotas for their own benefit.

Although cooperatives are not well organized and are relatively new to many women, in some ways they offer a new concept of credit and savings. Women may in time come to appreciate them both for their immediate and long-term benefits. It is also likely that production cooperatives, especially for the gara industry, would be more beneficial in reducing production costs. Some women have seen production

cooperatives work in other areas and often cite the examples of successful craft production cooperatives among Gara women, particularly in neighboring countries like Guinea.

Women cooperatives reveal a process depicted by the constantly changing patterns of association, disassociation, and re-association. The person most likely to be involved in this process is the woman struggling in commerce with very little or no capital. This woman is typical of most women traders in Freetown. The well-established and successful entrepreneur is likely to follow a more independent path.

Sierra Leone is a developing country with major financial problems of underdevelopment. As a result, most women face economic difficulties and have few options besides trying to eke out a living in the informal sector. Unable to secure credit from financial institutions and access to markets, a woman would likely join a cooperative. She may become disillusioned and would then cease her membership and try to go it alone. In time she is likely to become frustrated and once again associate with another group, usually a smaller one.

The process is likely to go on as long as she remains in the informal sector. This reflects the unstable nature of the national economy, which presents challenges for women in this sector. It also provides a good example of the process of action and reaction characteristic of the tension between promoting development while resisting underdevelopment.

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CHAPTER FIVE

COLLECTIVE ACTION FOR EDUCATIONAL AND OCCUPATIONAL EMPOWERMENT

Introduction

Historically, formal education and religion were closely linked in Freetown. This was due in part to the role of the Christianized Krios in promoting Western education and to the activities of Christian missionaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Education was an important policy of the Anglican Christian Missionary Society (CMS), which played an important role in the early development of Freetown.

Religion and Western education were important by-products of the period of settlement, and repatriation of freed slaves and “liberated Africans” to Freetown. They were also important in developing an African elite to serve as administrators in the project of colonial penetration of Africa. Ironically, at the same time, this elite was able to use its Western education to challenge colonial rule and organize nationalist movements for independence.

The Church Missionary Society played a seminal role in promoting Western education in Freetown. In time, they were joined by other Christian denominations, as well as the Muslim religion, in establishing schools among all ethnic groups, both within and outside of Freetown. Muslim schools emphasized education in Arabic and in the Islamic religion.

The parochialism of most schools, however, declined as the government increased its management of the educational system. The role of the government in administering and coordinating the educational system, in keeping with standardized requirements for certification, has remained central. This role includes developing an educational policy, of which the Basic Education Reform is apparently the most significant, in terms of promoting human resource development.

Gendered Education

Educational systems have never been perfect as far as gender equality is concerned. It is widely acknowledged in the sociology of education and in women’s studies that educational institutions are among the primary agents of socialization of boys and girls into gender roles. For the most part, these roles reinforce the evaluative norms and values given to gender differences.¹

On the surface, the educational policy of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) was gender neutral. The earliest proposals sent to the British government were for the establishment of educational institutions for “children of both sexes.”² Nonetheless, gender biases soon became evident in the implementation of the policy. The curriculum for girls gave priority to practical subjects such as home economics and needlework, in keeping with their projected future roles as wives and mothers.

In addition to missionary-sponsored schools, private schools for girls were subsequently opened through the individual efforts of women like Miss Phyllis Hazeley, who had been educated in England.³ The curriculum for women was expanded to include reading and arithmetic. Despite these changes, women’s education continued to lag behind that of men in the twentieth century. For example, in the registers for property transactions and marriage contracts, the majority of women made representative marks in the registers in lieu of proper signatures.⁴

Islamic education was available in Arabic but primarily for boys, although separate but limited classes in Arabic were arranged for girls. Islamic education later became intensified by the Ahmaddiya sect, which promoted a dynamic program reflecting a blend of both Arabic and Western education. Unlike earlier male-focused efforts, it targeted both boys and girls for education in both Arabic and English.

Few opportunities existed for women in the first half of the twentieth century for professional work, regardless of religious affiliation. The kinds of remunerative employment open to women, such as dress making, nursing, and commerce did not require formal education. For those in the more affluent socioeconomic groups, girls were sent to expensive finishing schools in England to maintain their high status and to marry well, rather than for professional reasons. According to one elderly informant:

It was considered undignified for an educated woman to work. Her education was intended to make her into a lady and nothing more. Women had to be respectable, behave properly, and speak properly. Those who attended school in England were expected to acquire the social graces of ladies and to set an example for others to follow.

When the Church Missionary Society decided to train Africans as missionaries to remedy the difficulties of recruiting European missionaries, it was men who received this training, not women. The first principal of the Christian Institution, established in 1816, was Adjai Crowther. The Christian Institution became known as Fourah Bay College in 1827, and was later elevated to the status of the University of Sierra Leone.

When secondary school education became fully established, it also revealed a male bias. In 1845, the Church Missionary Society opened a Grammar School in Freetown, to provide secondary education for boys. At this point the educational disadvantages of women became even more marked. As a remedial measure Miss Sophia Hehlen, a German C.M.S. missionary, founded The Female Institution in 1849 to “bridge the gap.” The remedy, however, was only partly successful, as the school’s objectives continued to emphasize the subsidiary role of female education.

Women were educated to become suitable companions for husbands from the Grammar School or the Christian Institution. It was customary at this time for prospective husbands, trained as teachers or missionaries, to request a recommendation for a suitable wife from the principal. In 1865, when its new building was opened,



An association's school marching in a Freetown parade. Courtesy: Sierra Leone Information Services.

the Female Institution bore the name Annie Walsh Memorial School, and had as its first African teacher, Miss Kezia Grant who had been educated in England.

By this time it was more acceptable for the well-to-do Krios to send their daughters to England to receive training in the professions of nursing or teaching as well as in the social graces. The account of another informant of the process of her education best illustrates the long-term effects of this early emphasis on the domestic arts in women's education:

I went to Bethel Infants School, Ebenezer Primary School, and the Annie Walsh Memorial School. I went up to what was then Form II and left at the age of seventeen. Most girls were taught domestic science at school and then went to a seamstress to learn how to sew. The tape measure and scissors were the most important tools for women then. Women were taught canvas work and embroidery. It was also important for young girls to learn how to shop at the market by themselves and to buy sensibly. The market then, was a woman's world. I was married a year after I became apprenticed to a seamstress at the age of eighteen.

The interest in women's education took on renewed significance as opportunities for careers in primary and secondary school teaching became open to women. A teacher-training college was subsequently inaugurated. This new status of women's education helped to open up other career options for their advancement. Mrs. Ingham persuaded the colonial Bishop's Court Fund to give up part of the large Bishop's Court grounds for a cottage hospital where young women could be trained in nursing, which was as yet an unqualified profession in Sierra Leone.⁵

She raised funds for the hospital and in 1872 the Princess Christian Cottage Hospital was opened. The staff consisted of one doctor and three nurses from England. This hospital served the poor in the largely Muslim neighborhood as a mission hospital. It also ran a nurses' training program.

As various missions became established in Freetown other schools were founded for boys as well as for girls. These included the Methodist Boys' High School and its counterpart—the Methodist Girls' High School. The Saint Edwards Boys Secondary School (Roman Catholic) had a female equivalent—Saint Joseph's Convent. The African Methodist Episcopal mission, headed by the Reverend Henry Metcalfe Steady, inaugurated the Girls' Industrial School, as the first vocational school in Freetown.

The influence of female missionaries on the lives of women of Freetown was quite marked. Most of those who went to missionary schools, especially to the Annie Walsh Memorial School, revealed that they emulated their missionary teachers, and a few of them at one time had aspirations of becoming missionaries themselves. This partly explains the popularity of the teaching profession among women, and the philanthropic objectives of several Christian women's associations. The system of "prefects" introduced at the Annie Walsh by Miss Hamlette⁶ encouraged the development of leadership, which was later utilized for organizing women's associations.

Contributions of Individual Women to Female Education

Individual women also made outstanding contributions to the education of girls both in the founding of schools and in their successful operation. Among the most outstanding

was Mrs. Lydia Reuben Johnson, who founded the coeducational Reuben Johnson Memorial School in 1898. Others include Mrs. Rice (nee Dove) and Mrs. Adelaide Caseley-Hayford, who founded the Girls' Vocational School at Gloucester Street.⁷

Mrs. Hannah Benka-Coker became a legend for her outstanding contribution to female education in Sierra Leone, especially in relation to the Freetown Secondary School for Girls. The names of Constance Cummings-John, founder of the Roosevelt School, Lati Hyde-Forster, former principal of the Annie Walsh Memorial School, and Hajah Salimatu Sesay of the Kankalay School, are associated with female education in a most salutary way.

Freetown schools were pioneer schools and attracted a large number of students from West Africa, particularly from Nigeria and Fernando Po from the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth centuries. The Annie Walsh Memorial School has alumnae from several West African countries, some of whom still attend the annual reunion in December.

Despite the achievements of women in the field of education, several obstacles had to be surmounted, due to gender-based discrimination in the formal educational system. As Lati Hyde-Forster, the first Sierra Leonean female college graduate once recalled to me:

I was a real pioneer and it took courage because society then was against women receiving higher education. I will never forget my first year at college. This was in 1934 when I was the only female student. I was 23 years old then. The authorities thought it safer for me to share a table with the theologians. On one occasion during service at the cathedral church, a man remarked that I had gone to College to lead a loose life. This was the kind of attitude I was up against. I did not receive much support from society but my father supported me morally and financially, and encouraged me. He was the greatest influence in my life. He was a minister of religion and a barrister, and always discussed intellectual subjects with me from an early age.

Education and Female Professional Advancement

In the current labor market, formal education is a valued asset that greatly increases one's chances for gainful employment and social mobility. It also promotes a system of meritocracy that has been essential for democratization and development. For women, education enhances the opportunity for achieving economic independence. In a society where highly skilled labor is in short supply, gender-based barriers to social mobility have had to become more constrained. As a result, women who receive advanced education have been able to achieve professional mobility.

It is not unusual for women to hold high-level positions in medicine, education, law, the military, and so forth. For example, the chief medical officer, as well as the chief education officer, and the head of the social welfare services have usually been women. In addition, women have served as cabinet ministers, members of Parliament, high court judges, colonels in the military, architects, engineers, professors, managers, and ambassadors.

Their contributions have also been significant at the level of administration. During the decades of the 1980s and 1990s some of the highest professional posts in

education were held by women. Among these were Oredola Fewry as Permanent Secretary in the ministry of education and Christiana Thorpe as Cabinet Minister of Education. Both were highly regarded for their significant achievements in the field of education.

Educational Challenges for Women

Despite these achievements, the record for the majority of women in Sierra Leone still leaves much to be desired. The illiteracy rate for the population as a whole, based on figures from the *Human Development Report*, can be as high as 80 percent in the rural areas.⁸ As most schools are fee-paying, formal education is expensive. Although educational opportunities increased soon after independence, the government has not been able to provide adequate educational opportunities and facilities for many years. Among the reasons for this failure are the protracted recession and the ten-year rebel war from 1991 to 2001.

Educational deficiencies are a reflection of the pattern of underdevelopment prevalent in many countries of Africa. In addition, policies operating at the international level have resulted in major setbacks to educational opportunities. Among these are Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs), which impose conditionalities that include cutbacks in the social sector, such as health and education. The impact of SAPs on women's education in Africa as a whole has been profound.

According to UNESCO and the United Nations, the gender gap is closing at the primary and secondary school levels in almost all regions of the world, except in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa where it appears to be stalling or widening (table 5.1).⁹ This is despite the relatively high degree of resource allocation to public education by sub-Saharan countries compared to other regions, as percentage of GDP (table 5.2). In Sierra Leone, gender disparities in education are significant at all levels (table 5.3).

This is partly due to economic adjustment or cost shifting for education from governments to families as a result of SAPs. At the same time, SAPs are also imposing retrenchment in the public sector, the largest employer, especially of women.

Table 5.1 Enrolment rates at basic levels of education in developing countries

Region	Net enrollment rate		Share of girls in primary school %	
	Male (%)	Female (%)	1990	1995
Sub-Saharan Africa	65.7	56.1	45.6	45.1
Arab states	78.6	69.7	45.4	43.6
South Asia	75.6	55.8	42.2	42.1
Latin America/Caribbean	91.9	85.7	49.7	48.6
East Asia/Pacific	91.1	82.1	47.6	47.1

Source: UNESCO 1996: Working Documents, Conference on Empowerment of Women through Functional Literacy and the Education of the Girl Child, Kampala, September 8–13, 1996.

Table 5.2 Unit costs of public education at the various levels as a percentage of per capita GNP in selected country groups

<i>Country group</i>	<i>Primary</i>	<i>Secondary</i>	<i>Higher</i>
Sub-Saharan Africa	15	62	800
Francophone	23	86	1000
Anglophone	12	51	600
South East Asia & Pacific	11	20	118
South Asia	8	18	119
Latin America	9	26	88
All developing countries	14	41	370
Industrial countries	22	24	49

Source: Appendix tables, Mingnat and Psacharopoulos (1985). World Bank Policy Study on sub-Saharan Africa, 1988, p. 75.

Table 5.3 Education in Sierra Leone

(A) Projected Enrollment (000)

<i>Years</i>	<i>Primary</i>			<i>Secondary</i>		
	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Male</i>	<i>Female</i>	<i>Total</i>
1992/93	340.7	239.7	580.4	328.1	195.6	523.6
1993/94	350.5	246.6	597.1	340.3	103.1	543.4
1994/95	360.2	253.5	613.7	353.1	210.8	563.9
1995/96	370.6	260.7	631.4	366.4	218.9	585.3
1996/97	381.6	268.5	650.2	380.2	227.3	607.4
1997/98	393.1	276.6	669.7	394.5	236.1	630.6
1998/99	404.8	284.8	689.6	409.4	245.1	654.5
1999/00	418.6	294.5	713.1	424.9	254.5	679.4
2000/01	428.3	301.3	729.6	434.7	260.4	695.1
2001/02	438.2	308.3	746.5	444.7	266.4	695.1
2002/03	448.3	315.4	763.7	455.1	272.6	727.7
2003/04	458.7	322.7	781.4	465.5	278.9	744.3
2004/05	469.3	330.2	799.5	476.2	285.3	761.5

Source: Planning Division, Ministry of Youth, Education and Sports.

(B) Undergraduate courses, University of Sierra Leone*

	<i>1992</i>	<i>1993</i>	<i>1994</i>	<i>1995</i>
<i>New admissions</i>				
Total	438	490	383	398
Males	331	336	300	320
Females	107	124	83	78
<i>Full time students</i>				
Total	1566	1626	1369	1463
Males	1216	1303	1076	1163
Females	350	323	293	293

Note: * Data for Fourah Bay College only.

Source: University of Sierra Leone.

Sierra Leone in Figures 1998—Central Statistics Office—Sierra Leone Web.



An old girls (alumnae) association Thanksgiving Service. Courtesy: Sierra Leone Information Services.

This results in the elimination of incomes and the destruction of the educational and employment prospects of many young people, especially women and girls.

Africa shows a trend in university education for both men and women that is the reverse in many parts of the world. For every 1,000 women, only two will attend university and for every 1,000 men, only four will. Male enrollment is dominant in the fields of science, engineering, and agriculture although there has been a slight improvement for women. As can be expected, women are also under-represented in teaching at the higher levels and at decision-making levels. Only 5 percent of the heads of universities in Africa are women.¹⁰

Among the reasons for the lingering gender gap in education is the fact that the education system introduced during the colonial era was inherently biased in favor of men. Its limited goal was to train a few men for administrative positions in the colonial government and for providing the services necessary to reproduce and maintain the system.

Before the introduction of government subsidies, payment of fees was required, thereby limiting education to those who could afford to pay. Access to education for girls is even more limited based on a number of factors. These include preference for boys' education as a safer investment, the domestic responsibilities of girls, pregnancy, and early marriage. Attrition affects both boys and girls. However, whereas economic reasons are largely responsible for boys dropping out, social, cultural, and biological reasons are additional factors that feature more prominently among the reasons for girls abandoning their education and restricting their prospects for employment.¹¹

In the field of technical education, the enrollment of girls is only 0.5 percent, a factor that results in a low level of female participation in the technical fields. While noting the absence of courses on technical drawing, woodwork, and metal work in girls' schools, interviews with educators suggest that lack of information about these courses is a key factor in explaining low female participation in these areas.

In commercial subjects and Home Economics women are in the majority, while men are highly represented in the scientific and technical fields. This suggests that while women are not barred from enrolling in technical subjects, the pattern of course selection does reflect a strong influence of gender stereotypes in education. This pattern is also evident at the level of higher education where the enrollment of female students in the field of engineering at the University has been much lower than that of male students.

Shortage of educational facilities is a serious constraint to the education of boys as well as girls. The problem is made worse by the heavy concentration of educational facilities in Freetown resulting in large-scale rural to urban migration of young people. Consequently, Freetown schools are overcrowded and chronic shortage of space, facilities, and teachers is the norm. The problem is further exacerbated by the strict educational requirement for entrance to secondary schools. This creates a bottleneck at the entry level of secondary schools and severely restricts educational mobility. As a result, the establishment of additional schools by individual women as well as by women's associations has become necessary.

The Educational Role of Women's Associations

The contribution of women's associations to education particularly to female education, and to human resource development, has been significant at several levels. Some

notable examples will be discussed later. In the meantime, their contributions can be summarized as follows:

In the first place, most women's associations, regardless of their objectives, raise funds and operate a scholarship fund for the education of girls. Second, associations such as the ex-pupils associations support their Alma Maters directly and also provide scholarships to students. Third, guilds and craft associations offer training courses and apprenticeships in addition to promoting universal standards and providing professional support. Fourth, many programs designed to promote adult literacy have been run by women's associations.

Fifth, vocational education has always been given a lower priority compared to education in academic subjects. Women's associations, to a large extent, have helped to fulfill some of the gaps. Sixth, due to women's multiple roles in society, women's associations have made possible, a more holistic approach that include socialization, personal growth, and education for a culture of peace. Finally, the government does not allocate enough resources to education, due to other priorities, such as the military, protracted recession, and SAPs, leaving a gap that is often filled by women's associations.

Vocational Education

The pattern of the system of education followed was the British grammar school model, with strong emphasis on academic subjects primarily for male students. The development of vocational and technical education was largely ignored until after independence. One of the earliest attempts at reforming this model was provided by the first vocational school for girls, the African Methodist Episcopal Girls' Industrial School. It was founded in 1924 by the African Methodist Episcopal (AME), an African-American church, headed in Freetown by the Reverend Henry Metcalfe Steady.

Mrs. Constance Cummings-John became its principal, shortly after her return to Freetown from England in 1937. In her autobiography, she remarked on the financial and other difficulties experienced by the school including the use of outdated equipment, lack of proper instructional material, and few teachers with the proper teaching credentials.

Some of the challenges were met through the support of individuals. One was Mr. Babington Johnson, a local businessman who provided support to the school as landlord, by charging negligible rent. Under the leadership of Mrs. Cummings-John, it expanded its curriculum from home economics and literacy to industrial courses. Students were taught how to make cooking stoves and furniture, and also learnt weaving techniques.

The emphasis was on self-reliance. A number of fund-raising activities were launched with student participation, resulting in the construction of a new domestic science building with modern equipment.¹² In 1952, the Roosevelt Preparatory School for Girls, named after Eleanor Roosevelt, expanded on this pattern of providing vocational education, combined with academic subjects, on a larger scale. It also emphasized technical work, commercial subjects, and adult education. Once again, Mrs. Cummings-John's role was significant, as she was the founder of this school.

The school's motto, "There is dignity in labour" was expressed in the school song and illustrates the priority given to development, self-reliance, and citizenry as follows:

Why do we come to school today?
 To make our lives worth living,
 Why all these books, why all these rules?
 They're just to keep us going.
 To make our nation strong and great,
 To draw out what is best in us,
 To work for God and country.

We see in labour dignity,
 We hold our heads above board,
 We struggle on for unity
 And happiness in this world.
 With hearts and hands and heads at work,
 We pledge ourselves to help our race,
 An endless moving team work.

And when our school days are over,
 We pass the baton over
 To others who will take our place
 With dignity and pleasure
 To those who will continue the race.
 It's ours today, it's theirs to be
 A never-ending teamwork.¹³

The national educational policy was subsequently revised in response to criticism of the grammar school model, which placed too much emphasis on academic subjects. Some schools now include agricultural, technical, and commercial subjects in their curriculum. The Sierra Leone Technical Institute has been playing a leading role in promoting vocational education on a coeducational basis for many years. Two associations have been exemplary in promoting female vocational education, namely the Young Women's Christian Association and the Federation of African Women Educationalists (FAWE).

The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA)

The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA) is a worldwide association. Its aims are "to bring women and girls of different traditions into a world-wide fellowship through which they grow as Christians, participating in the life and worship of their church and expressing their faith by word and deed," while maintaining the structural continuity of these aims.

Over the years, the association has demonstrated great flexibility in its program, enabling it to be responsive to changing social conditions and the needs of the modern woman in each generation. It has become an association whose philosophy and aims are centered on promoting education, particularly vocational education, good citizenship, self-improvement, and the advancement of women.

It seeks to improve the status of women through the elimination of stereotypes and the rejection of rules that lead to gender-based discrimination. These stereotypes

also present obstacles to the formulation of policies for a new role for women through education. Consequently, as much as 80 percent of its funds are channeled into projects designed for promoting education.

A major recipient of funding for education has been its Vocational Institute, which was founded on September 20, 1961. It is located at the headquarters building in Brookfields. In accordance with its constitution, it is governed by a board of directors made up of representatives from the fields of education, industry, commerce, and the government.

The Institute was established as a self-help project by a few members who, as teachers and educators, felt that the need for vocational education in Sierra Leone was not being met. The Institute was funded mainly through donations and fees. Later, small donations were also received from church groups in various countries including Switzerland, Australia, New Zealand, and the United States. The World YWCA also made some financial contributions, as did local businesses and industries.

In 1962, the Swedish politician and Human Rights activist Inga Thorssen visited Sierra Leone and was impressed by the work of the YWCA women. Realizing their financial constraints she made a request for aid from her government in her capacity then as a Member of Parliament. Under the Swedish Aid to Developing Countries Program a grant was made to the Institute. The rest of the money came from local sources, other countries, and the World YWCA.

The Sierra Leone government provided all the technical experts for the building and agreed to pay 95 percent of the teachers' salaries. The International Labor Organization provided a consultant on vocational education and the World YWCA took on the responsibility of training the staff for the Institute.

A modern building that accommodates about 500 students was constructed. In 1971, the total number of students was 570 and staff members numbered 14. By 1974, the number of students increased to 640 and an additional part-time staff increased by four. In 1982, the students numbered 800 and staff members increased by eight. In 1996, the enrollment was estimated at 950 and continued to grow. In the year 2000, full-time enrollment was estimated at 1500.

Although training is given primarily in vocational education, and earlier emphasis has traditionally been on Home Economics, increasing attention is being given to maintaining a high standard in academic subjects as well, particularly English and Arithmetic. Social Studies is also offered in the majority of classes. Girls are generally trained according to their aptitude and interests in one or two of the following subjects: Business Education, sales assistant studies, clothing construction, Home Economics, and arts and crafts.

The first two years are devoted to pre-vocational courses that give a basic general vocational education. Subjects include Home-Making, First Aid, Home Nursing, Arts and Crafts. During the third year, opportunities are provided for exploring training in some specific vocational subjects as well as providing general secondary education. In the fourth and fifth years, students are prepared for national examinations and similar mechanisms of certification.

In addition to these formal classes, special attention is given to extra-curricular activities, which include physical education, music, and discussions on current affairs. Evening classes are offered for working women to upgrade their skills.

Day-release courses are given in business studies, clothing construction, catering, home management, and retail salesmanship.

Other educational activities include the development classes formerly called "Improvement Classes" for girls who have dropped out of school. The objectives are to improve their basic education, teach skills for employment, develop good working habits, improve personal health, and build good moral character.

Financial constraints, poor academic performance, and pregnancy are among the reasons for school dropout which tends to occur in the middle of the student's school career. As a result, sex education was introduced into the curriculum. It is hoped that by attending these classes for two years and receiving a certificate of participation these girls would be able to earn an income or enroll in one of the continuing education programs in the country.

The objective of the YWCA's education program is to develop and train the whole person, not only in terms of acquiring skills, but also in relation to the development of good character and the formation of a positive attitude toward work. Grooming, personal hygiene, poise, posture, and physical education are also essential aspects of the curriculum as is work etiquette and job performance. It is hoped that this would ameliorate the problem of idleness characteristic of girls who drop out of school, as well as unemployed girls.

Due to resource constraints, it has been difficult to maintain such a comprehensive curriculum. A narrower focus has been more appropriate. This consists of nutritional subjects and catering, family life and sex education, needlework and sewing, hair-dressing, and handicrafts. In order to discourage idleness and dissipation of youthful energy, the association has also incorporated recreational activities for the students.

It has also worked with other associations on combating social problems among youth, such as alcohol abuse, drug abuse, and pregnancy. Other educational activities have included residential camps during the long holidays, a "summer school" for children under ten, nursery schools, and several recreational programs designed to meet the needs of various age groups.

Adult literacy is another important activity. This includes nutritional projects to demonstrate the benefits of proper nourishment and hygiene. Most village branches have adult literacy classes and a few operate play centers for preschool children. Some village branches tend to concentrate on developing agricultural and technical skills. Instruction is sometimes provided in post-harvest conservation, food preservation methods, small-scale manufacturing, small business management, and bookkeeping.

In the village of Gloucester, a successful vegetable garden project was in operation during the prewar years in conjunction with the Gloucester Village Development Association.¹⁴ Two-thirds of the food grown is marketed, and association members and their families consume a third of the food. Resource constraints often affect the buying of fertilizers and seeds and hiring of male gardeners for the heavier work of clearing and preparing the beds for planting. As a result, the women had to do most of the work themselves. The village branch has other projects, which include a water project for providing taps for schools and a woodwork project for constructing large tables to be used as stalls in the central market in Freetown.

In order to promote most of its activities, the national YWCA has had to develop a nationwide consciousness. This has often involved the public in some of its projects

through the use of the mass media for the dissemination of information, in the hope that an enlightened public opinion would stimulate voluntary social action on development-related projects. Financial constraints continue to plague the association, made worse by the decade-long war. It is also facing difficulties in recruiting young members. Despite this fact, it forges on and continues to hold an important position among women's associations in Freetown.

Kankalay

Kankalay, meaning "unity," is a Muslim association which started with the objective of providing mutual aid and promoting the ideals of Islam. Although it will be discussed later under mutual-aid associations, its objectives included promoting education. This began in response to the shortage of schools and the growing concern over the high dropout rate of Muslim girls. The Kissy branch embarked on a plan to build an educational institute as a self-help project in order to promote the education of these girls.

Through the lobbying efforts of Muslim women leaders, especially "Hajas," the government, in 1973, donated a piece of land at Kissy to Kankalay for the construction of a secondary school for girls. The cost of the construction of the school was met primarily through fund-raising activities such as luncheon sales, bazaars, and concerts. Contributions were solicited from government ministers, merchants, and private citizens. Fund raising was also extended to Muslim associations overseas, which resulted in a generous donation from Saudi Arabia.

Admission to secondary schools, as a rule, is limited to those who pass the national entrance examinations to secondary schools. Girls from the Kissy area are generally at a disadvantage because of their generally low socioeconomic position that tends to limit their academic performance. Even those who make it through the first hurdle of gaining entrance and do start their studies may not complete their secondary school education because of lack of funds or other reasons.

The Kankalay school is primarily for Muslim girls who have not passed the entrance examinations or who have dropped out of school. The school provides education for about five hundred students in both Arabic and English at the secondary school level. The emphasis is on vocational education, although academic subjects are regularly and extensively taught.

Kankalay leaders believe that the best foundation for the future of children lies in a sound education. This need was considered to be even stronger for Muslim women who by convention and custom had a later start in receiving formal education.

Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE)—Sierra Leone Chapter

One of the most effective associations promoting women's education is FAWE. It is a pan-African association with a chapter in Sierra Leone, established in 1995 and headed by former cabinet minister for education, Christiana Thorpe. Its overall objective is to provide mutual assistance and collaboration in developing national capacity to accelerate the participation of girls and women in education at all levels. This is in support of the universal goal of education for all agreed to by the international

community under the auspices of the United Nations Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (UNESCO).

FAWE also aims to build public awareness through the media about the social and economic advantages of female education. It hopes to support women and girls in acquiring education for socioeconomic, human resource development as well as for personal growth. In this regard, it has played a leadership role in advocating for an end to the destructive effects of the ten-year rebel war and for peace.

Among its priorities is providing rehabilitation for women and girls who have been victims of the war. Its activities also include the establishment of endowment funds and camp schools for children displaced by the war, and management of the FAWE School for Girls, which consists of 350 primary school students, most of whom are displaced girls. It offers training and helps find employment for girls and young women. According to one of the members:

The education we are giving to women and girls will contribute, in no small measure, to the rehabilitation of their minds. We do help out with their fees, uniforms, books, and other useful gifts that go toward improving their standard of life. This puts them in a mood of readiness for their final repatriation to their various homes and communities.¹⁵

Education for a Culture of Peace

FAWE's activities to provide education for a culture of peace through workshops and the media for all levels is a way of ensuring sustainable peace and upholding justice, human rights, and tolerance. This is essential since the devastating effects of war are long lasting and do not cease with the end of hostilities or the signing of peace treaties. Many people are left bereaved, wounded, orphaned, traumatized, or made refugees. FAWE ensures that this type of education includes elements of conflict resolution, reduction of prejudice, re-evaluation of value systems, attitudes, institutional practices, and respect for diversity.

According to the president of FAWE, Christiana Thorpe, the whole population must be involved in moving from a culture of violence to a culture of peace:

Although conflict is gender neutral, the most vulnerable groups in conflict situations are women and children. The women are raped, widowed, displaced, made refugees, while children are maimed, abused, orphaned and unaccompanied. These two groups tend to bear the brunt of the conflicts. During times of armed conflict and the collapse of communities, the role of women is crucial. They often work to preserve social order. Unfortunately, their concerns are hardly ever focused on the post-conflict rehabilitation initiatives.¹⁶

A case study of women's traditional mediation and conflict resolution practices carried out in Sierra Leone in 2000, by FAWE, proved this to be true. It revealed that only 19 percent of women responding felt that women form a part of the structure for mediating settlement of disputes; 81 percent stated that women are excluded from the structures. The study also found a number of obstacles to female participation in mediating the resolution of conflicts, which included, time constraints, gender bias, fear, indifference, and professional and social limitations. The obstacles to women's

participation were explained as being due to women's multiple gender roles, which create pressures and make it impossible for their participation in mediation exercises. The study made the following conclusions:

Women make important, but often unrecognized, contributions as peace educators both in their families and in their societies. Thus in post-conflict rehabilitation efforts, an active and visible policy of mainstreaming a gender perspective into all policies and programs should be promoted so that, before decisions are taken, an analysis is made of the effects on women and men, boys and girls respectively. Women must be part and parcel of the peace building process. They are not only stakeholders, but their nature and disposition generally make them natural peacemakers. They are the mothers of both victims and perpetrators, and in times of crisis they often offer solace. Thus the women's participation in peace building or conflict management is essential, crucial and imperative. But to do so women's capabilities and capacities must be strengthened.¹⁷

Reconciliation is another important objective of FAWE that is built into its educational program. Advocating for forgiveness by both parties is considered necessary, as it is only by forgiving the perpetrators that the victims will be able to start rebuilding their lives and move on. According to FAWE, this is because forgiving is a private and personal affair. It does not need any input from outside. The individual who is hurt needs to unburden himself/herself and be healed of the hurt, so that it does not inhibit their forging ahead or living a meaningful life once more. Thus, one can forgive without reconciling. On the other hand, reconciliation has to be mutual. The victim and the perpetrator decide to forgive each other and continue as friends or good neighbors. So forgiveness is a prerequisite for reconciliation.¹⁸

FAWE insists that education for a culture of peace would also include a review of the value system. The essential elements for peace includes respect for human rights, freedom, and responsibilities; respect for human life and dignity, public and private property; the democratic and religious aspirations of others; acceptance of the need for equity in economic, social, and political development and appreciation of the value of human solidarity, good governance, and justice.

The association insists that the curriculum of both formal and nonformal education programs must comprise these values, so that they are taught to and imbibed by students, from preschool to tertiary levels. According to FAWE, any initiative for education for a culture of peace should ensure the promotion of good governance as a climate for preventing conflict and maintaining peace and the building of strong foundations of democracy, where universal respect for human rights and freedoms would be observed and guaranteed. Also of importance is tolerance. Above all, sustainable and equitable development, which stresses economic, political, social, and cultural development should be emphasized. Concern for the disadvantaged and marginalized who are often among the most affected victims of war and oppression should be central to any strategy for peace.¹⁹

FAWE's relationship with the government has been collaborative, especially in the implementation of policies for the education of girls and women. It regards its role in helping to develop the country as particularly important, especially in the postwar rehabilitation era. It considers its educational role with displaced girls as essential in reducing the number of refugees and displaced people roaming the streets as beggars.

The major problem faced by the association is finance, the shortage of which often prevents it from carrying out many of its activities.

Guilds, Professional Associations, and Alumnae Associations

A number of professional associations have membership of both genders, but there are some that are exclusive to women. Some of these are affiliated to international associations, such as the International Federation of Business and Professional Women, and reflect the philosophy and objectives of these associations as well as their own. The objectives usually include raising professional standards, protecting the economic and general welfare of their members, improving working conditions, and protecting the rights of workers. Associations in this category also include the Sierra Leone Nurses Association, the Sierra Leone Home Economics Association, Zonta International, and the Sierra Leone Association of University Women.

Other activities have included services to the community; fund raising for a particular project or scholarship; running workshops as part of extension programs; setting up nursery schools and vocational institutes; helping rural women with rural projects; participating in literacy campaigns; and helping with the rehabilitation of female victims of war.

In addition, the major secondary schools for girls have active alumnae associations, both at home and abroad, that raise funds for the schools. They are usually referred to as "Old Girls Associations." For Freetown, these include the Annie Walsh Memorial School, the Freetown Secondary School for Girls, the Methodist Girls High School, and the St. Joseph's Convent Secondary School for Girls.

Female Education and Socioeconomic Development

Women's associations serve as indispensable educational institutions and resources promoting female education, which is an essential aspect of socioeconomic development. In so doing, they help to rectify some of the serious deficiencies in the educational system and in the shortage of educational facilities. By providing both formal and nonformal education, they expand educational opportunities in holistic ways to include vocational education, skills training, and personal education and cater for the more varied demands of both the formal and informal labor market. Non-formal education has also been a significant, but often under-reported aspect of women's education in Sierra Leone.

The relationship between formal education and religion is complex, when one considers its possible gender implications. Because of the close relationship between education and religion in Sierra Leone education has tended to reinforce the patriarchal values inherent in most religions. On the other hand, it provided women with an opportunity to acquire knowledge and skills that were essential for participating in the Western-oriented colonial and postcolonial countries. This was evident in the early curriculum, which tended to confine women to domestic-oriented subjects and to reinforce the public/private dichotomy extant in Western-type nuclear family structures that were being reinforced by Christianity.

The last twenty years have witnessed a major paradigm shift in development thinking. The overemphasis on economic growth has given way to a more human-centered approach, encompassing concerns about equity, social development, and ecological sustainability. Quality of life indicators such as life expectancy, literacy, infant mortality, income, political stability, the status of women, and human rights have now assumed center stage. Equally important is the increasing emphasis being given to gender equality and the advancement of women in human resource development.

Human Resource Development

Human resource development is not new to Africa. It was an intrinsic aspect of indigenous African cultures, providing knowledge, skills, a normative design for living, and a supportive social infrastructure. These were necessary to ensure economic production, social reproduction, and human well-being. In the policy realm also, human resource development has been part of the development strategy of all African countries for more than twenty years.

In 1980, the Lagos Plan of Action, a policy document developed for the African region, identified human resource development as a priority for Africa. In this millennium, the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) ranked human resource development highly in its strategy to eradicate poverty and reclaim the policy initiative for African development.

The gender dimension of human resource development gained prominence in the 1985 Arusha Strategies for the Advancement of Women. It stated that "policy makers and planners must recognize that talent is not distributed by sex and that any policy that closes off from development and fails to use the largest part of the national pool of talent is suicidal."²⁰ In 1990, the African Development Bank (ADB), warned against neglecting women's potential:

The continent cannot begin to solve its development problems until policies and mechanisms are established to remove barriers inhibiting the maximization of women's development efforts and the realization by women of adequate returns from their labor.²¹

Most countries in Africa accept, in principle, the idea of universal primary education but are far from implementing it for both women and men. Some like Seychelles, Botswana, and Zimbabwe have gone very far in achieving it. Yet, despite increasing improvements in the enrollment of girls in primary schools, boys continue to fare better at the secondary and tertiary levels. University enrollment for women in Africa stands at 25 percent that of men. Sociocultural constraints (which include domestic responsibilities, early marriage, and preference for boys' education) have resulted in the disinvestments in girls.

Furthermore, policies related to globalization, such as privatization and liberalization, are taking their toll on education in general and on female education in particular. Among the many challenges to female education in Africa are SAPs and the debt burden. SAPs, which mandate the removal of subsidies for education and health, have struck at the heart of the social sector, a vital sector for women.

Scholars have repeatedly pointed to the need to identify and eliminate barriers and bottlenecks that prevent women from equal educational opportunities, especially at the higher level of education and at universities.²² A study by Beoku-Betts concludes that:

Educational institutions are not structured to be gender neutral, but are, in fact, designed to reproduce conventional gender identities of masculinity and femininity.²³

Change in this direction is important because women provide the main building blocks for human resource development, which begins with the physical well-being and security of the human being. There is much truth to the saying that “when you educate a woman, you educate a nation.” It is clear from the foregoing that, in the building of human resources and the human capital of women in Sierra Leone, women’s associations have played and continue to play a pivotal role.

In summary, women’s associations serve as indispensable educational institutions and resources promoting female education, which is an essential aspect of socio-economic development. In so doing, they help to rectify some of the serious deficiencies in the educational system and in the shortage of educational facilities. By providing both formal and nonformal education, they expand educational opportunities in holistic ways to include vocational education, skills training, and personal education.

They also cater to the more varied demands of both the formal and informal labor market. Nonformal education has been a significant but often underreported aspect of women’s education in Sierra Leone and has been promoted primarily by women’s associations.

The relationship between formal education and religion is complex, when one considers the possible gender implications. On the one hand, both Christianity and Islam reinforce patriarchal values. Some of the gender biases were reflected in the curriculum that tended to confine women to domestically oriented subjects, and to reinforce the public/private dichotomy, extant in Western-type nuclear family structures and in the Sharia. On the other hand, both religions incorporate democratic principles and values of equality and justice that, in theory, should promote gender equality.

The role played by traditional women’s associations, especially secret societies, in promoting nonformal education has been exemplary and will be discussed next.

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CHAPTER SIX

“TRADITIONAL” ASSOCIATIONS

Secret Societies

This chapter examines what is being termed “traditional” associations, because historically, they operated in indigenous African cultural contexts, and have their origins in essentially self-contained ethnic communities. The focus is primarily on secret societies which, though operating in Freetown, have their origins and most intensive manifestations outside of Freetown. Secret societies are important because they can serve as mechanisms for the mobilization of women for development and democratization. They also represent female power bases that have come into play in resisting underdevelopment and authoritarianism.

Secret societies are among the best examples of women’s associations serving as cultural mechanisms for socialization, nonformal education, and mutual support. As regulatory religious institutions, they cut across kinship ties. Membership is obligatory and confirmed by an oath of secrecy. They are significant enough to warrant some general background discussion.¹

In the majority of cases, traditional secret societies restrict their membership to one gender but may make exceptions for special honorary and hereditary positions. Among groups with a bilateral kinship system and in secret societies that are more specialized in function, membership can cut across gender lines. For example, the Sherbro, who technically speaking are a bilateral group, have had societies whose membership is made up of both men and women. Examples of these include the Thoma, Tuntu, and Yassi that are also specialized as medical societies. For societies that guard the secrets to traditional medicine, membership is often hereditary or determined by a long period of training rather than on gender.

Another example of a society with both male and female membership is the Humoi society among the Mende. This is a specialized society that regulates sexual relations through a series of taboos and prohibitions, the infringement of which is believed to lead to illness. Among the bilateral Krios based in Freetown, both Christians and Muslims belong to Hunting secret societies imported from the Yoruba of Nigeria. These societies have a predominantly male membership but women are increasingly becoming members.

Other societies that restrict membership to one gender include Masonic Lodges who are imported from Europe and popular among the professional groups in

Freetown, especially the Krios.² Examples of other societies with exclusively male membership tend to have a political thrust and may incorporate highly specialized military functions. Examples of these are the Wunde among the Mende and Temne, which is largely responsible for military affairs, and the Ragbenle, found among the Temne.

Poro and Sande

The oldest and best-known secret societies are the Poro (male) and the Sande/Bondo (female) initiation societies widespread among several ethnic groups in Sierra Leone and Liberia. These are religious associations with important educational and development-oriented functions. They are also regulatory mechanisms of social control and judicial mediation.

These societies are revered because of the "secret" nature of their traditional "lore" that enhances their function of maintaining law and order meting out punishment, and promoting the socioeconomic development of their communities. They are also mystified by patron saints and by the spirits of dead leaders. These spiritual entities are believed to have the power to influence the life of the living and are often personified as masked figures from the supernatural world.

These masked figures appear during ceremonial parades, command great respect and awe, and appear on ritual occasions to reinforce norms and values as well as social cohesion. The corporate identity of the group is regenerated at each initiation ceremony. This facilitates the incorporation of new members as well as the development of group solidarity and continuity.

Both Sande and Poro emphasize male and female socioeconomic spheres of activity and impose regulations to ensure that each is maintained with a certain degree of autonomy. Some of these regulations determine procedures and obligations in the gender division of labor and regulate behavior between men and women. As a result, Sande has functioned as an association that protects and defends women's rights as defined by the traditional lore and custom. For example, Sande leaders can reprimand and impose punishment on men who disrespect use violence against women or mistreat women. As a corollary, Poro leaders can reprimand socially unacceptable behavior by women toward men. An institutional mechanism is thus created which promotes mutual respect, interdependence and complementary rights and obligations in male/female relationships.

Sande/Bondo Female Society

Sande is probably the most widespread women's association in Sierra Leone. Like its male counterpart, the Poro, it embodies a repertoire of cultural norms, indigenous knowledge, beliefs, ethics, arts, and crafts that have ensured the economic, social, cultural, biological survival of generations. Its ritual is a necessary precondition for biological and social transformation from childhood to womanhood and marriage.

Marriage, a supremely important institution is an inevitable stage in the life cycle guaranteeing regeneration and continuity of the group. Although in theory Sande membership is not compulsory, it is, like marriage, desirable and inevitable since it is

promoted as the cornerstone of the ideology of womanhood, fertility, and the survival of the group. As a result it has continued in full force in spite of opposition stemming from its encounter with Christian missionaries and from the pressures from social change and urbanization.

Origin

The origin of Sande is not known for certain, but there are records of associations bearing close similarities to Sande and Poro which existed in the sixteenth century. The name "Sande" was first used in a literary sense by Olfert Dapper, who also suggested a possible Gola origin, because the High Priestess of Sande then resided in Gola territory.

This claim has been substantiated by modern scholars who have noted the fundamentalist tenets of Gola's Sande societies as well as their conservative and parochial proclivities.³ Equally significant are the close cultural ties and linguistic similarities that exist between the Gola of Liberia and the Mende and Gola of Sierra Leone.⁴ Whatever may be the specific origin, it is clear that both Poro and Sande are important and somewhat unique social institutions in this central West African cultural area.

Like Poro, Sande reveals much local variation being organized according to local chapters or lodges, each headed by a Soweï. The Sande initiation camp, known among the Mende as Kpangu, is usually held in a secluded area in the forest, during the dry season from December to April. In the past, the initiate would reside in these camps for a period of one year or longer, but this period has been shortened to an average of four weeks or less. Social change, schooling, and migration have brought new demands on the time available to the young initiates.

Traditionally, the camp would have a sacred grove where departed leaders are buried and where sacrifices and initiations are held. The interaction with the supernatural is a necessary component of the transformation of status from childhood to adulthood. It also facilitates the revelation of the special "secret" knowledge about the society and about the virtues of womanhood that ensure fertility.

The cultural management of sexuality, fertility, pregnancy, and childbirth is the most important function of the Sande and the leader is usually a midwife. Sande, therefore, sustains the most vital elements of the culture that are decidedly female. The traditional midwife or Birth Attendant has a high status in the community.⁵ This is derived from her leadership position in the Sande society and recognition as the authority on fertility, female sexuality, as well as on gynecological ailments, children's diseases, and child care. Sande leaders are knowledgeable about the epidemiology and history and the medicinal resources of their communities.

The Organization of Sande

Sande is organized hierarchically, and on the basis of kinship affiliation and cuts across kinship ties. The highest ranking officers are usually related to high-ranking families in the community. The hierarchical structure serves to enhance its secrecy. At each level of the hierarchy, new and more exclusive secrets are revealed and additional instruction and fees are usually required.⁶

Although Sande does not have a politically explicit function, female chiefs and paramount chiefs are important members and can strengthen their position by tapping

on the power base of Sande. Some chiefs, like Madam Yako, were reputed to have a strong influence in Sande, which enabled them to make alliances through the marriage of Sande women, who are often their relatives or protégés, to prominent chiefs. This often consolidated their position and expanded their influence.⁷

In relations with men, strict sanctions and prohibitions are observed. Men have no access to the secret knowledge and are forbidden to enter the camp while it is in session. In addition, men are forbidden to speak about Sande at the risk of contacting a serious illness.

Among the Mende, Sande leadership is organized into three grades. The highest grade is occupied by the Majo, the supreme head of one or several camps, and the Soweï (plural Soweisia), who usually heads only one camp. In the next grade is the Ligba (plural Ligbanga) responsible for performing the operation of circumcision, for which a fee is paid. Below these are the Klawa officers, who usually act as matrons, responsible for the welfare of the initiates. Among the Temne, the leader is known as Ddigba, which is the term also commonly used in Freetown.

Upon their death, Sande leaders become ancestors and protectors of Sande members and provide a link to the high God Ngewo. As a result their death is observed by elaborate ritual and special taboos. The masks (Soweï) worn during the Sande rituals personify the spirits of the dead leaders and ancestors.

Initiation

A girl is usually initiated at puberty between the ages of 13 and 16 and must be sponsored by an adult member, usually her mother. Initiation marks the biological transmission from childhood to adulthood and the social transformation from girlhood to womanhood. It also confers full membership into the ethnic groups and is closely linked to one's social identity. The dramatic change of status is marked by elaborate rituals and rites of passage that conform to Van Gennep's classical stages of separation, transition, and incorporation.⁸

In between these "secret" stages, which are marked by intense ritual ceremonies, are also the "open" stages during which the initiate can interact with relatives and congregate in more public places. The "open" stages have provided opportunities for innovation and modernization of the Sande society. It was during one such period that the introduction of new courses to the Sande curriculum such as anatomy, physiology, sanitation, first aid, and domestic science was first made.⁹

The first stage of initiation commences soon after admission of the initiate, with clitoridectomy, regarded as necessary for achieving full womanhood and for ensuring fertility as well as sexual gratification. Many initiates are usually already engaged to be married or become engaged soon after initiation.

Other explanations given for this operation emphasize the promotion of modesty in the sexual behavior of women, an important aspect of the social construction of the ideology of womanhood and a system of morality for women. It is also regarded as proof of having endured a physical ordeal as a woman in preparation for the ordeal of childbirth.

Significantly, the operation is a vital aspect of the change of status and is intrinsically linked with identity, solidarity with the group, fertility, and marriage. This explains why many initiated members of Sande vigorously and intensely defend the practice when faced with criticisms from outsiders.

At a second stage of initiation, known as the transitional stage, the initiates are usually allowed to move about and visit their parents escorted by the Ligba. They are allowed to perform light work such as collecting twigs, making fire, sweeping, and so forth. At this stage instruction in childcare, sanitation, arts and crafts, ethics, character development, and respect for elders are usually given. The girls are also taught the songs and dances of the society many of which have deep moral and ethical meaning.

At this stage also, the initiates have an ambiguous status, which makes them vulnerable and are considered to be in potential danger. As a result they require protection. Their bodies are usually smeared with white chalk as a protective cover against evil spirits and they are clad in distinctive attire composed of a short skirt, beads, and a special dress. At the end of the transitional stage there is a purification ritual performed after the wounds have completely healed.

The initiate then undergoes ritual cleansing through ceremonial washing in the river. Symbolically, this removes all vestiges and ambiguities of the old status of childhood and girlhood and marks the beginning of her status as an adult. Regular clothes can now be worn and visits are usually made to the chief of the village and to relatives, accompanied by another adult. At this time also the curriculum is extended to include instruction in basketry, spinning, and the art of healing.¹⁰

The final stage formally marks the complete change of status to womanhood through a coming-out ceremony. A public parade is held at which there is jubilation, dancing, and singing. The new adults are adorned in special clothing and accessories. A masked dancer (Soweï Ndolimo) symbolizing the ancestral spirit of the Sande performs special dances to music provided by the Shegure and drums played by women.¹¹ The girls are finally escorted to their parents' home, where the "new woman" assumes a prominent position of display, amidst much celebration, rejoicing, and admiration by potential suitors.

While recognizing local and regional variations and noting urban changes, a number of studies of Sande have tended to emphasize its conservative elements and to present an idyllic picture of ritual transformation amidst the celebration of cultural values. One exception is a study of the Sande society among the Kpelle ethnic group in neighboring Liberia by Bledsoe.¹² Although negative in tone and simplistic in terms of reducing actions of Kpelle women to greed and the desire to exploit the labor of children, the study examines stratification among the Sande in a new light. It suggests that the monopolization of power by the leaders of the society creates tensions that have been overlooked by other studies.

Poro—the Male Counterpart

A brief discussion of the Poro male society, based on published material, is in order to illustrate the relations between Poro and Sande and elements of their complementarity. Poro exists primarily among the Mende, Temne, Lokko, Kono, and Vai although there has been considerable diffusion to other ethnic groups. It is a decentralized organization made up of local Lodges each with its own leadership.¹³ According to the literature, the core leadership comprises the Sowa, the founder of the Lodge, the Gbeni, the spiritual leader who personifies the guardian spirit of the society, and the Mabole—the matron (a female member) who usually looks after the young initiates.

In some cases, these positions are hereditary based on kinship ties to the founder of the Lodge. Female political leaders in high office can become members. In special cases, membership becomes mandatory for women who have acquired the Poro secret accidentally or by design. These women have restricted social mobility within the ranks of the organization and can never assume leadership roles.

Initiation is a necessary stage for biological and social maturity and is a rite of passage for the transition from childhood to adulthood. It is compulsory for male adolescents and involves circumcision. Poro promotes the ideology of manhood, which encompasses the values of a patriarchal society. The rites are usually held in seclusion and not concurrently with the Sande female initiation sessions. This emphasizes the uniqueness of each gender in their contribution to adult life, marriage, fertility, and ultimately to the functioning and development of society and the continuity of the group.

Formal instruction in politics, law, gymnastics, and oral tradition are combined with the learning of arts and crafts, singing and dancing. Moral and ethical subjects, as well as the values of self-discipline, cooperation, obedience, and respect for elders are all included in the curriculum. These helped to produce a well-rounded and mature personality compatible with the requirements of responsible citizenry. In addition to circumcision, the initiate may also undergo a ceremonial ordeal (similar to hazing in fraternities in the United States) that involves enduring physical suffering with demonstrated acts of courage.

Poro is recognizably a para-political association in its function as the religious arm of the chieftaincy. The core of Poro leadership has executive, administrative, religious, and legal functions; sets the code of conduct and ethics and makes decisions on important economic and political matters.¹⁴

The power of Poro officials is mainly religious since they cannot assume the role of chief. However, their religious sanction is a vital ingredient that determines the efficacy of the secular power of chiefs. The Poro core leadership also arranges treaties and alliances among chiefdoms and ethnic groups.

In this regard, Poro has served to develop a number of confederacies and is often regarded as a direct or indirect player in modern politics. The Kamajors, a citizen's militia group that was influential in the pro-government combat with the rebels during the ten-year war, built their solidarity, in part, on ethnic affiliation and alliances to the Poro society.

Poro influence is widespread throughout Sierra Leone. It is generally believed that many political and economic arrangements and negotiations occurring in the modern context have been influenced to some extent by Poro networks. Poro has also been known to play an economic role in rural communities, regulating economic activities, particularly with regard to the deployment of male labor during busy farming seasons. Initiates are taught economic skills to strengthen their role as producers of food, goods, and services.

Sande and Social Change

Returning to Sande, it is clear that in the context of rapid social change a number of contradictions become apparent. On one level, Sande is a conservative institution

functioning to maintain traditional norms and values and regulating social conduct. On another level, Sande is an institution, which is intrinsically committed to change. It registers the change of status from childhood to adulthood in a profoundly religious and dramatic way. In addition, the symbolic change of location from the village to the forest and back to the village through initiation can be viewed as an aspect of Sande's own transition and inherent flexibility.

Sande's accommodating structure and dynamic constitution have facilitated the introduction of several reform measures in the past and are contributing to changes taking place in more modern times. Before becoming the first Prime Minister of Sierra Leone, the late Sir Milton Margai introduced several modern ideas of childcare, hygiene, sterilization techniques, anatomy, physiology, obstetrics, and home economics into the curriculum of Sande when he was a senior medical officer in the Provinces.

He did this partly to upgrade the standards and ensure safety and partly in recognition of the valuable instructional role of Sande.¹⁵ The association played an important cultural role in the education and socialization of young girls and in promoting values of solidarity, group identity, and cooperation.

The Urbanized Secret

By virtue of their structure and characteristics, secret societies are not easily amenable to research or the application of survey techniques. They operate on an oath of secrecy and possess no written records or documents. Researchers have had to maintain confidentiality as far as individual informants are concerned.

Much of Sande's secret, however, is an open secret. Within Sande itself, conflict and change are best exemplified in an urban context. The context of ritual and its hierarchical structure is diluted when transferred to an urban area. It loses its secrecy and becomes subject to urban norms and greater population density, size, and heterogeneity. In this regard, the secret becomes an "urbanized secret."

Sande was introduced to the neighboring villages around Freetown in the nineteenth century and later to the city.¹⁶ In Freetown, it is commonly known as "Bondo" and the leaders are called "Digbas." As a result of rapid rural to urban migration over the last 80 years, various ethnic groups have been able to establish themselves as stable urban communities in Freetown and to preserve many of their institutions in the city.

Before secret societies become well established in the cities, women migrants would become affiliated with Sande chapters in the neighboring villages. Traditional and cultural associations known as "Dancing Kompins" provided recreational and mutual-aid functions that enabled the new migrant to make initial adjustments to the urban environment.¹⁷

In time, secret societies took over many of the functions of mutual aid "Dancing Kompins." They serve as recreational dancing groups and perform the most important functions of initiation into womanhood. They have also inspired the founding of newer types of mutual-aid societies, which will be discussed later.

Significant differences exist between the secret societies in Freetown and those in the Provinces. The urban associations have assumed a more secular characteristic in the city. They do not have camps with sacred groves in the forest where ancestral leaders are buried.

Ecological and demographic factors have resulted in high-density living and physical proximity making isolation and privacy impossible. The period of seclusion is shorter and the ceremonies more simplified. A Digba could perform ceremonies in an enclosure in the backyard of a small house or *ajoini* (small house in the same yard) where she resides often in multiple-family settings.

Initiates receive their instruction and learn sacred songs within earshot of neighbors and other tenants and dwellers. It is not unusual for small children in the neighborhood, unrelated to the events of Sande, to become conversant with these songs and to chant them freely.

In the urban setting also, the organization of Sande is less hierarchical and amorphous in terms of time and space. There are fewer functions and the Digba is often the only identifiable leader as opposed to hierarchy of leaders in a specific secluded and sacred setting. Initiation ceremonies become temporary "happenings," which are convened for the specific purpose of initiation and then dispersed.

They are small and only take on the characteristics of an association or a society in parades and dances at coming-out (*pul bondo*) ceremonies. A number of informants claimed that with the exception of a few organized Sande societies such as those found among the Mende at Ginger Hall in Kissy, many secret societies in Freetown were not organized.

Membership has also undergone changes. Social pressures promoting initiation still exist in urban areas, but it is less obligatory and there is greater flexibility and an element of choice. Women sponsoring their daughters for membership tend to do so on a voluntary basis, and some young girls have been known to refuse to be initiated.

Most of the urban initiates are exposed to new and different ideas about fertility and womanhood and may become skeptical about the claim that these qualities can only be conferred through Sande. They are also likely to be attending secular schools that expose them to urban and Western values. School attendance has necessitated the shortening of the period of seclusion to coincide with school holidays. It may also have contributed to the reduction of some of the institutional functions of these associations, especially those related to educational activities.

The impact of urbanization is most marked during the coming-out ceremonies, revealing the influence of urban norms, values, and aesthetics. The typical traditional outfit consisted of short skirts, head tie wraps, chest beads, and anklets made of tiny bells and adorned with white chalk marks covering a large portion of the face and parts of the body. The newly initiated would walk through the streets in single file and dance in a restrained manner, accompanied by Shegure music. Usually there were no more than six new initiates and about ten followers.

More recently, the new "graduates" are more likely to be dressed in the latest styles, reflecting a combination of western and African fashions. Cosmetics, perfumes, and Western style jewelry are used profusely and hairstyles are elaborately fashioned. Usually, each set of new graduates endeavors to dress in the latest or most exotic styles. There is a strong competitive element as one graduate tries to outdo the other in terms of adornment. Parades can also become quite elaborate, depending on the social ranking of the graduates. Processions can number as many as 500, comprising initiates, society members, relatives, and friends.

During the school holidays, there is at least one parade a day. The music has also become more varied and is no longer confined to the traditional Shegure. It can include mailo jazz and other bands and the music has also become much louder. The dancing is less restrained and the procession less orderly. After the street parade, the subsequent celebrations at the home of the initiates have also become more elaborate and expensive. Fees for initiation have increased as a result of inflation. In addition, Digbas receive gifts of food, clothing, and livestock from the parents and relatives of the girls.

The "pul bondo" ceremonies have also become highly commercialized as families try to compete with each other at the elaborate celebrations. These ceremonies can be rightfully regarded as manifestations of an embryonic form of class consciousness through the conspicuous consumption by the more affluent families that would not be as marked in the traditional rural setting.

Any visitor to Freetown in the 1980s would have been struck by the frequency of "pul bondo" ceremonies, but they were less frequent in the 1990s and in the new millennium. This is due to several factors, the most important being protracted economic recession and the ten-year rebel war. Another could be related to the criticisms that have been meted against some aspects of Sande, notably female circumcision.

Sande and the Health Care System

The skills and knowledge of the Traditional Birth Attendant continue to be needed by the majority of women in rural communities. The medical profession has long recognized this and initiated a program, in conjunction with the World Health Organization, to utilize and incorporate the traditional midwife into the modern health care system through training and cooperation.

In 1974, a program was inaugurated by the Ministry of Health, under the direction of Dr. Belmont Williams, an obstetrician and gynecologist, who also served as the chief medical officer. The objective was to bring the Traditional Birth Attendants, who deliver 70 percent of the country's babies within the centrally organized health service system. In this program, recognition was given to the valuable skills and experiences of the Traditional Birth Attendant. A systematic attempt was also made to learn about the medicinal and nutritional properties and values of locally-grown medicinal herbs used by these practitioners.¹⁸

Although the medical profession recognizes and incorporates many of the valuable aspects of the Traditional Birth Attendant, not all of their work is valued. Female circumcision performed by Sande is not condoned by them, because of its health consequences and the complications caused during pregnancy and delivery.¹⁹ Some medical practitioners, such as Dr. Koso-Thomas, who conducted a study on female circumcision in Sierra Leone, have become well-known advocates for an end to this practice.²⁰

Female Circumcision: A Global Practice

Though hardly known and acknowledged, female circumcision has been practiced in all regions of the world. In Europe, this operation was performed on women to

control their behavior. It sometimes included the removal of women's ovaries that were viewed as the seat of women's disobedient and disruptive behavior. Sexual surgery was not uncommon in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

According to Barker-Benfield, "clitoridectomy was the first operation performed to check women's disorder."²¹ In the United States, female circumcision was performed by physicians for the same reason and the last operation was conducted in 1925.²² Babies born with ambiguous genitalia, often manifested in both sexual organs being present and a large clitoris, could be subject to having them surgically removed.

In the West also, numerous mutilating surgeries are performed for cosmetic reasons, which often involves the drastic alteration or removal of body parts. Reconstructions to narrow the vaginal canal are also performed to increase the pleasure of men during intercourse. Seldom does one read or hear criticism about these types of surgery for what has been termed "designer vaginas," that cannot be justified on medical grounds. Also rare is information about the complications resulting from these forms of plastic surgery, including death. With few exceptions, criticism of these practices is muted.²³

It is generally believed that Sande officials in Freetown are equally concerned about complications from these operations, but that ending the practice is not an option for them because of cultural and economic reasons. As a result, some are taking greater precautions. On several occasions, I was told by informants that, as a preventive measure, some Digbas and Sande officials in Freetown arrange to have tetanus shots given to initiates. Others keep a good supply of antibiotics, notably penicillin, for use during the operation.

The more serious complications include scarring which can later result in severe lacerations and excessive bleeding during delivery. In addition, the difficulties posed by improper vaginal examination may aggravate cases of cephalo-pelvic disproportion, a major obstetrical problem in Sierra Leone.²⁴

Views about this practice from informants were mixed. According to my younger informants of both genders, a substantial number of young men are increasingly opposed to clitoridectomy and try to influence their girlfriends against it. Some regard it as an anachronistic and archaic practice. Older women, especially grandmothers, are the greatest supporters of the practice. Among the professional groups some men expressed strong opposition, especially when it involves the possibility of their own daughters undergoing this operation.

At one medical association meeting, which I attended in 1996, a male physician stated publicly, that although he belonged to one of the ethnic groups that adhered to this practice, he would never allow his daughters to go through it. Older adolescent schoolgirls have also been known to independently refuse initiation, finding it difficult to justify the physical ordeal. To counteract possible adolescent defiance, some families initiate their daughters at a younger age, when they can offer minimal resistance.

Conflicts produced through social change have also been reflected in Sande. The influence of Christianity, Islam, Western education, political change, and the International Women's Movement have also affected Sande. Christian and Islamic religious leaders tried unsuccessfully to discourage the activities in the past. For example, Christian missionaries from Europe disparagingly referred to the masked figure of

Sande and Poro as "devils" and were strongly opposed to female circumcision and polygamy.

Although Islam's condemnation was less severe, whenever Islam became firmly established such as in the parts of the northern areas, secret societies reputedly tended to decline in influence. However, since Muslims also practice female circumcision and polygamy, Islamic leaders have not openly condemned these practices. In general, female circumcision is practiced by almost all ethnic groups in Freetown, with the exception of the Krios, who do not have a tradition of female secret society initiation.

Social Change, Female Circumcision, and Controversies

Social change, increasing secularization and urbanization, as well as Western education and overseas travel, are already eroding traditional customs and religions in many respects. Sensitive campaigns, as well as the work of the United Nations, particularly the World Health Organization (WHO), have been launched against clitoridectomy. African women themselves, including those who have firsthand experience of this practice, have condemned this practice, both nationally and internationally.

One noteworthy example from Nigeria is Olowe Jo, an anti-female circumcision activist who has appeared at the National Assembly in Nigeria, requesting that this practice be abolished.²⁵ Equally significant is the recommendation of the African Platform for Action for abolishing this practice adopted at the preparatory meeting for the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Dakar in 1994.

For female circumcision to cease completely, it will be necessary to dispel some of the myths and sensationalism surrounding it. While it can be argued that it is an aspect of patriarchal ideology to control and dominate women and their sexuality, it is important to understand its continuing appeal to women who have experienced it. First, it ranks high in the system of merit for women and defines their identity. Second, it is exclusively a female practice conducted by female practitioners and has systems of reward and status acquisition attached to it. Third, it builds female solidarity and provides a power base for women.

In addition, the context in which it is performed in Freetown is linked to the cultural practice of initiation from girlhood to womanhood and has strong incentives for developing female identity and female bonding. A friend of mine, a university graduate, and who still believes in clitoridectomy as part of Sande initiation, expressed to me her fear that her daughter (who was growing up in the United States) would be excommunicated by her ethnic group if she does not undergo initiation and the operation. Ironically, her husband, who is from an ethnic group that also adheres to this practice, was vehemently against his daughter being initiated. In the end, the initiation did not take place as the daughter was also opposed to it.

The solidarity created by bonds of sorority can function in many respects like a support group or a sorority. Women assist each other in child care, trade, and in dealing with situations of crisis. The social significance in the urban area has far-reaching implications than the initial ritual itself, for it provides women with a type of social insurance policy.

Feminist-inspired conferences organized on the subject of female circumcision and mutilation often become highly controversial. In 1996, a Freetown newspaper,

"For Di People," published a series of articles against female circumcision (the term used locally or its linguistic equivalent) that sparked a hostile protest march of thousands of women, determined to defend the practice against the newspaper. The protest was led by Haja Sally Sasso, President of the National Council of Muslim Women, who vowed that attempts to ban the practice would lead to war.

The controversy led to mobilization of the Soweis to protect their rights as leaders of an association perceived as under siege. An association of Soweis was later formed. According to Haja Sasso:

I am only doing this to protect our culture. I do not want to see this ceremony eradicated, because it binds us, we the women, together. We respect each other in this way and we feel free together because of it.²⁶

In a follow-up interview with Haja Sasso, she insisted that the international community and those that follow them were misguided and ignorant about the custom and had no right to interfere with it. She insisted that this was an important sorority that gave women a sense of security and solidarity and helped them to advance their views and wishes. She could not accept the sudden upsurge of campaigns against the practice after several years of no resistance. She was convinced that the "frustrated Western feminists" were behind it. She concluded the interview with the following statement:

Why don't they campaign to end racism and violation of human rights against Black people instead of interfering in our culture?²⁷

Later, a major Sande ceremony, marking the end of war, was held for displaced girls at the refugee camp in Grafton, just outside Freetown, as a special celebration for their imminent return to their homes. Several of the girls were reported to have had medical complications, including death, resulting from the operation. This led to large-scale publicity against the practice. Despite this, support for the custom is still strong in some circles. One of the female leaders of the refugee camps reportedly said:

I have grown to the age of 50 years, and this is the first time anyone has come forward to ask me why we do those ceremonies. It does not matter what other people think because we are happy with our customs. We will carry on with our lives.²⁸

There is no question about the value placed on bonding and identification. At the same time, a measure of ambiguity exists, and becomes apparent as an initiate tries to come to terms with the pain of the operation. The following personal account best illustrates this dilemma as a girl contemplates the meaning of becoming a woman.

What an experience, Mayepe thought. She remembered that all the girls would soon go through the same thing and she prayed for them. No wonder there was so much bonding between women in the village, Mayepe thought, especially during initiation. She now realized that she had become part of the bond, but the most important bond of all was going to be between Mayepe and the other fifteen women. "Mayepe" she heard the soft voice of her mother calling her. She opened her eyes and saw her mother's gentle face full of tears. "Congratulations, my daughter, you are now a Sande Nyahin. You and I can now talk as equals." The passage into womanhood was more painful and less fun

than she had been made to believe. As Mayepe lay bleeding and weak, she began to feel betrayed by everyone she loved. But if it brought her closer to her mother, and other women, who had gone through the same experience, then it was worth it. Suddenly, another surge of pain shocked her body. Then again, she thought, maybe it wasn't.²⁹

Sierra Leonean women, who adhere to this practice, have sometimes been targets of scorn and hostility in the United States. Immigrants in the Washington area have reported that co-workers often bluntly ask them if they had undergone female circumcision. According to D'Alisera, an anthropologist who has conducted fieldwork among Sierra Leonean immigrants in Washington, D.C.:

One woman felt people were looking at her and talking to her as if all she was a big genital that had been mutilated³⁰

As noted earlier, the Bondo society is a religious association with educational functions related to rites of passage, ideologies of fertility, womanhood, and female solidarity. It also represents an important power base for women since it creates female bonds across ethnic and class lines. It has important economic incentives related to preparing a woman for marriage. Financial security, wealth, and privilege can result for female leaders of the association and female chiefs.

It has also served an important function of exclusion and inclusion in modern politics. It grants legitimacy to female political officials who have undergone this experience and can seek to marginalize those that have not. For example, as stated earlier, it was arguably used after the elections of 1996 in a failed attempt to delay the nomination of a Minister for Gender and Youth, who had not undergone initiation. Since initiation was not a requirement of the proposed Minister's own ethnic group, the argument used was that she would be unfamiliar "with our adored customs."³¹

Some female political leaders have adopted a more moderate position. One of them is Zainab Bangura, who later became the head of the National Commission for Democracy and a Presidential candidate in the 2002 elections. She insists that understanding the rituals that surround the practice and trying to modify them would be a better approach. She gives the following reasons for this:

First, the rituals are an important part of a whole set of procedures that educated young girls and passed knowledge of womanhood from one generation to the next. Second, much of this had been eclipsed by the ritual of female circumcision and need to take a more important place again. Third, women should be reassured that something of value will not be taken away from them because of one ritual.

For me, you cannot bring a Western approach, lecturing people about their customs. The more you decide you are going to take something like this on, the more you are going to face resistance. Instead, a dialogue has to be established, and women have to understand that Sierra Leone is part of a global community and should not be left out We could begin by telling women that Bondo has been trivialized by reducing it to a circumcision ceremony. Instead, the institution could be modernized by teaching abstinence or sexual education to young girls.³²

A male anthropologist from Nigeria throws some light on the cultural logic behind female circumcision. This was intended to diffuse what he considers the ignorance

behind the sensationalizing and mercenary proclivities of some Western feminists. While not condoning female circumcision, he offers solutions that are vastly different from the simplistic feminist explanations of male dominance. According to Babatunde:

The logic of the practice is couched in the anthropological term of prestation, a gift that you give under pain of sanction for which you receive a gift in return. The logic of clitoridectomy is that by taking a tiny bit of the sacred instrument of fertility as an offering, the god of fertility will bless you with more children.³³

He proposes an effective strategy for an alternative that will include efforts to improve health care delivery in countries where infant mortality and maternal morbidity are high. This will reduce the value placed on bearing many children to ensure the survival of a few. He noted that in 1980, when Nigeria's earlier investments of oil resources began to pay off in improved health care, the social emphasis on procreation quickly changed.

He claims that this approach will end clitoridectomy faster than the oversensationalizing by Western feminists and authors, such as Alice Walker, who have made huge profits from the erroneous feminist propaganda against female circumcision.³⁴

The Enduring Features of Sande

Sande is an important power base for women. It is also an effective mechanism for lifelong bonding and female solidarity. It utilizes its membership to create important networking opportunities with women who have political access or are in a political position themselves. It can also act as a pressure group with important political functions. For example, its membership can be a critical factor in the selection of female candidates for political office and in deciding the strength of the ballot.

Women who have not been initiated into Sande are usually excluded from some acts of bonding such as eating from the same bowl. They are sometimes disparagingly referred to as "children" by Sande members. In Freetown, tensions between Sande and non-Sande members are particularly marked when issues of female circumcision are discussed. In addition, opposition to Sande drumming on Sunday morning during Christian worship has been a point of contention in forging unity among women.³⁵

There are numerous campaigns against female circumcision, both internationally and locally and it seems clear that female circumcision will soon be a thing of the past. This would be most desirable. Nonetheless, the issue should be viewed in a balanced perspective. As a highly emotional topic it can be blown out of proportion. As a sexually charged issue, it has the potential for controversy since sexuality, including one's own sexuality, is a topic about which very few women are comfortable discussing.

Although there are serious health consequences for some women who undergo this operation, health problems are also caused by many other factors such as underdevelopment, poverty, inadequate living conditions, lack of water supply and sanitation facilities, lack of food, and economic exploitation. Western critiques of female circumcision do not often show the same concern for human devastation, suffering, and

the health consequences of inhumane global economic policies emanating from their countries.

Sande is a valuable institution to its members. Regardless of the controversies surrounding female circumcision, it is closely linked to concepts and ideologies about womanhood, identity, and solidarity. Its members consider it an essential part of the culture. For this reason, it has received the public support and endorsement of leaders of the Sierra Leone People's Party (SLPP) and the Armed Forces Ruling Council (AFRC) regimes. It represents a critical power base for women that can translate into political capital.

Sande is a dynamic institution receptive to change and reform that are often inspired from within the country. It is very likely that these factors will influence the association toward re-evaluating the practice and searching for alternatives that do not have undesirable medical and physiological consequences.

National and international pressures are increasingly brought to bear on this practice. The World Assembly of the World Health Organization passed a resolution calling for an end to the practice. The organization has also implemented a major worldwide campaign aimed at its cessation for health reasons. In June 2003, the European Commission, in conjunction with an association of the Egyptian government and led by the first lady, Mrs. Susan Mubarak, met in Cairo to pass a resolution outlawing female circumcision.

The commercial aspect that Sande has assumed in the city and its relation to the development of urban class-consciousness, tend to emphasize its economic aspects rather than its cultural and educational aspects. These factors, combined with the relative lack of privacy in the urban environment have diluted some of its original functions.

The erosion of traditional sanctions in the urban context has, with few exceptions, transformed Sande from a highly ritualistic and religious traditional institution with educational functions, to a secular social agency performing the functions of initiation into womanhood in a bureaucratic and public fashion. Still, the educational functions could be revived to include new curricula that would expand women's knowledge and further strengthen their power base.

Another significant urban effect is the development of female solidarity across ethnic lines, thereby making Sande an integrative agent for women from various ethnic groups. This aspect is sometimes extended to voluntary associations based on a mutual-aid model, since Sande provides support for women in a difficult urban environment.

As an association dealing with human fertility and motherhood, it has the potential of helping to strengthen health care delivery systems through continuing collaboration with the medical establishment, in conjunction with the World Health Organization. The mutual-aid associations that it has inspired, and which can also promote development and take on a political dimension, will be discussed next.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

MUTUAL-AID ASSOCIATIONS

Introduction

Mutual-aid associations or “friendly societies,” have as their main aim the rendering of material, social, and moral support to members in times of bereavement, emergencies, and destitution. In this regard, they function like social welfare agencies and help to compensate for the limitations and resource constraints of the social welfare department of the government. For example, the expenditure for social security benefits as a percentage of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) for 1996 to 1997 was 0.6 percent.¹ Freetown’s history is characterized by the formation of mutual-aid associations among successive groups of rural to urban migrants and settled populations, regardless of origin.²

Most of the systematic studies of mutual-aid associations, conducted by men, have focused on those formed by male migrants, due in part to the higher degree of male migration versus female migration at the time of the studies.³ In more recent times, women have constituted a significant proportion of migrants, a factor, which has been influential in the formation of mutual-aid associations among women.

In most cases, among the associations formed by women, mutual-aid associations have been inspired by secret society membership and can be regarded as spin-offs from the Sande society. The mutual-aid associations presented here are characterized by their functions. A case study of one of them showed that the Sabanoh Women’s Association, performed the following functions: strengthening the values of secret society affiliation; alleviating tensions between statutory and customary marriage; ensuring the imposition of moral sanctions; promoting multiple mothering; providing recreational functions; and enhancing solidarity and political expression.

Secret Society Affiliation

The influence of Sande in Freetown has made possible the development of newer types of mutual-aid associations among urban female migrants from rural areas. Many of the rules and regulations of Sande are informally applied as well as the sanctions on behavior and on interpersonal relationships, particularly with men.

Some of the members were usually initiated into the same secret society. In addition, some of their ancestors may have come from the same village or shared affinal ties

through marriage. On several levels, primary groups ties would be strongly reflected in membership composition so that the association serves as a substitute kinship group providing mutual-aid and support.

Secret society rituals provide opportunities to strengthen sororal bonds and guarantee a type of social insurance against hardship and destitution. Thus, although these are voluntary associations, prior initiation into Sande can become a de facto requirement for membership.

The President of the Sabanoh Women's Association, explained in an interview that prior initiation in Sande was a requirement. This is because participation at Sande coming-out ceremonies ("pul Bondo") is one of the association's most important social activities. Events such as this involve communal eating rituals that reinforce the Sande experience of sororal bonding. According to her:

We have to eat together from the same dish and society rules forbid eating together in this fashion at such gatherings unless one has been initiated.

All new members have to be approved by the President who is also the founder, and each is given a badge. In addition, a verbal pledge is made to abide by the rules and regulations and to attend its weekly meetings punctually. The meetings are chaired by the President assisted by an executive committee of five persons. Meetings are conducted in the Temne and Krio languages. The President has wide-ranging powers and can replace any member of the executive for incompetence. Rank and file members who fail to abide by the rules and regulations and to comport themselves in a proper manner are expelled.

There is no term limitation to the presidency, so in theory, the office can be held for life. However, elections are held annually for the other offices in the executive committee. Eighty percent of the membership is illiterate, although literacy is a requirement for the offices of treasurer and secretary. The signature or thumbprint of both the President and the Vice-President are needed for withdrawals from the association's bank account. Funds are usually allocated for funerals, medical expenses for grave illnesses, lawsuits, childbirth ceremonies, cost for divorce, "pul bondo" ceremonies of members' daughters, and general hardship.

Similar associations in Freetown have included the Tasutekeh Women's Society and the Kissy Road Women's Union. Most of the members of these associations are women who have lived in Freetown for a period of less than ten years. They often face problems such as unemployment, poor housing, inadequate facilities and services, and lack of access to resources.

For many of these women, these associations serve as coping mechanisms against poverty and hardship. Much of the economic support comes in the form of mobilizing resources through the osusu mechanism. Because many of these associations are involved in subsistence trading, resources are pulled together in special circumstances, such as providing start-up funds for trading.

Economic support can also come in the form of information about market access, buying in bulk, producing collectively, lowering transportation costs, and using discounted wholesale opportunities. In addition, they can provide the rudimentary requirements for participation in an urban environment through socialization to

urban norms. A number of them provide opportunities for the acquisition of basic skills for participating in the informal labor market, such as participating in functional literacy classes and bookkeeping.

Tensions Between Statutory and Customary Marriages

Women, who are married by customary law, or live in a relationship as a concubine, often feel unprotected against destitution due to the difficulties of upholding customary marriage in the city. Being married by customary law or living as a concubine does not offer women legal protection in the city. Joining associations with other women in similar circumstances for the purpose of mutual-aid is viewed as a partial solution to the insecurity of their customary marital status.

Statutory marriage was instituted during the colonial era and reflected Victorian patriarchal traditions and Christian morality with strong biases in favor of men. This is particularly marked in rules of inheritance and in domestic authority. Despite its shortcomings, statutory marriage is regarded as offering some protection and economic support for a wife and her children and is therefore viewed as an important "resource" among women in customary marriages. In an ironic way these women would rather choose dependency in statutory marriage, as a safety valve against the realities of a precarious urban economy, than live the unprotected lives of marriage by customary law.

According to those interviewed, there is a tendency to feel deprived of the securities offered through statutory marriage when in the urban area. In many instances, this is an unrealistic view since statutory marriages are also prone to instability as a result of economic and other stresses in the urban environment. Even though these marriages may not end in divorce, studies have shown that instability has been a feature of both statutory and customary marriages.⁴

In the absence of traditional sanctions supporting customary marriages in the city, women feel the need to support each other in case their male support is suddenly withdrawn or cannot be guaranteed. Many of these women would like to be self-supporting and plan to achieve a measure of economic security through petty trading. Unfortunately, much of this trading is subsistence trading in the informal sector, which is extremely vulnerable to economic downturns.

The much-needed additional security is provided by mutual-aid associations. Although the rules and regulations of most of these associations do not actually make provision for destitution in the event of a marriage breaking up, there is a "general hardship" category, which covers such crises. From interviews with the members, it would appear that this interpretation is used most effectively during situations of a sudden breakdown of marriage or similar bonds.

Some women idealized customary marriage in the traditional rural setting since their marital status was upheld by custom and cultural sanctions. In the urban environment, sudden destitution could be a real threat.

Some scholars have argued that in urban Africa some women have exchanged family and other traditional forms of security for the prospect of personal liberty and the desire to be "free." They further argued that the freedom influenced the formation of mutual-aid associations. This may be true in a few cases but in the mutual-aid

associations studied in Freetown the women got together for the opposite reason. They felt vulnerable *without* the family and other traditional forms of security and as a result experienced severe hardships.

Unless these women can improve their positions through successful trading, employment, adult literacy, or vocational education, they are trapped in a situation which prescribes two sets of norms—one rural and backed by customary law, and the other urban and contractual. As many are caught between the two, the discussions at some of the meetings I attended were often centered on the anxieties and conflicts surrounding customary marriage in an urban environment that give more weight to statutory marriage. As a theoretical reflection, it can be said that the oppression of women by statutory marriage as viewed by Marxist feminists, will likely not gain much popularity among women who view these marriages as sources of economic security.

This is aggravated by the fact that many of the husbands are reluctant to enter into statutory marriages. Although destitution, abandonment, separation, and divorce can occur in statutory marriages, from the point of view of these women, statutory marriage still offers them better economic security and legal protection through which they could have some recourse.

Imposition of Moral Sanctions

In the absence of effective traditional sanctions in the urban environment, guidelines for a code of conduct for women are usually provided by these associations. These rules ensure that the members are modest in their behavior and that married women do not enter into casual relations with other men. Modesty in behavior is a cultural prescription since it is one of the virtues inculcated during initiation by the Sande society. It is therefore an important aspect of the system of female morality.

In the city, some of this morality is threatened by the breakdown of traditional mores. A number of these associations seek to control morality to some extent by imposing strict rules of conduct on their members. The following Rules and Regulations of the Sabanoh Women's Association best illustrate the point:

Any member who tries to bring the club into disgrace through bad suspicions by their husbands, parents and guardians will be expelled from the club. For example, if any member leaves her house to attend a function of the society she must not go to any other place. The President shall not be afraid to expose any such member if she is asked about her whereabouts, or if she notices the member left home for the meeting or function of the society but did not attend.

While modesty in behavior is seen as important for women, the association recognizes its gender implications and considers it of equal importance for men if the integrity of the system of morality for women. As a result, the association may have members who offer informal counseling to couples having marital difficulties, and try to influence men who are negligent in their family responsibilities.

Multiple Mothering

To some extent these associations serve as extended families in the city by offering assistance with childcare, housework, trading activities, and health care. They also provide an informal network for the collective socialization of children. Older

women help with childcare and at the birth of a baby, at least three members will be assigned to assist the new mother. A form of multiple mothering is evident, which is characteristic of the kin-based support group, more prevalent in rural areas.

Since members live in the same neighborhood, collective childcare and multiple mothering are often feasible, expedient, and desirable. This form of mothering allows for the consolidation of various resources and talents. Discipline is a problem for children in their teens and it is not unusual for older women to be asked for disciplinary advice and counseling. Male kinfolk and neighbors can also be called upon for disciplinary responsibilities that extend beyond the kin group. This often benefits other members of the association without male kin who can serve as disciplinarians and role models.

Recreational Activities

A number of mutual-aid societies have functions that provide important recreational avenues for socializing. Although personality conflicts and grievances surface from time to time, the atmosphere at most meetings is one of levity and humor, and the spirit of friendship and conviviality is fostered as a principle. Some fund-raising activities have a social component and are often accompanied by singing and dancing. They are designed to augment subscription by members. Other recreational activities are directly related to Sande ceremonies, which often involve the initiation of children and close relatives of members.

Members usually make special contributions to the new graduates and their families for "pul bondo" ceremonies. As a symbol of the solidarity fostered by Sande, members wear the same dress material, according to a custom known as "ashuobi" during these celebrations.⁵ Feasting, singing, and dancing usually take place in the home of the member whose family or relative is being honored.

It is also customary for other occasions such as marriages, childbirth, and after-death ceremonies and so forth to be celebrated collectively. These activities renew friendships and help cement the bonds of sorority and solidarity, derived from initiation into Sande society.

Promoting Solidarity and Political Expression

The motto one of these associations, the Sabanoh Women's Society ("wan word," i.e., "of one mind") underscores the solidarity and sense of unity fostered by these associations. In addition to the solidarity fostered by Sande membership, most of the members belong to the Temne ethnic group and are Muslims by faith. Many claim to have come originally from the same geographical area.

Most of the women are petty traders and some are involved in the gara-dyeing industry. Only 15 women out of a total of 124 in three mutual-aid societies are wage earners. Of these, ten are sales workers, one is a hairdresser, another a clerk, and three are maids.

Women of similar backgrounds, socioeconomic status, and common experiences can be said to share primary group identification in the city. The common experience of secret society initiation already constitutes a group with strong unifying bonds. Mutual-aid societies such as the Sabanoh Women's Society, merely formalize these bonds and provide opportunities for the further expression of solidarity. In this regard, they are already mobilized to take advantage of political opportunities and to lobby directly or indirectly, for issues of interest to them.



Children playing at Lumley Beach. Courtesy: Azania Steady.

The solidarity developed in Sande and fostered through these secular associations has found political expression on a number of occasions. It has been particularly instrumental in political participation at the national level. Secret societies traditionally had political functions, especially among the Mende and Sherbro, where female chiefs and paramount chiefs with executive political powers have been commonplace. Many of these chiefs also have leadership roles in Sande.

Secret societies and mutual-aid associations that are already mobilized are important assets to political parties and seek their affiliation. This often takes the form of membership in the Women's Wings of political parties through which they can become active in campaigning for candidates in local and national elections. Although the majority of candidates for political office tend to be men, in the event that there is a woman candidate that can promote their interests, these associations have campaigned for women candidates in local and national elections.

Politics in Freetown often takes on an ethnic dimension and political parties have traditionally developed along the lines of one dominant ethnic group serving as the base. As a result, women's associations that have a strong ethnic base have become important avenues for political expression. But there is a kind of paradox. On the one hand, they tend to reinforce ethnic cleavages by invoking consciousness of ethnic affiliation and common experiences. On the other hand, by linking up with mass political parties, which albeit have strong ethnic flavors, they are contributing to the promotion of a single nationalism and democratization of the political process. This often involves promoting development objectives aimed at improving living standards and improving economic opportunities for women.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

ISLAM AND WOMEN'S ASSOCIATIONS

Introduction

The process of Islamization, which presumably began in sub-Saharan Africa around the eleventh century, became intensified in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Islam was introduced to Freetown primarily through trade and individual contacts, although the Futa Jallon Jihad of 1727 had the most widespread and lasting effect.¹ Records show that an Islamic institution, the Islamic University of Foday Tarawaly, thrived at Gbile around 1870. One of the earliest Muslim communities in Freetown was Foulah Town, founded in 1819 and composed mostly of Madingo and Foulah migrants from further north who practiced a form of orthodox Islam characteristic of the western Sudanese variety.²

The Oku, a predominantly Muslim group of Yoruba origin, formed a distinctive community within the larger group of Liberated Africans. These were people freed in Freetown, en route to being enslaved through the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade process. Many became Christians but some, like the Oku, resisted conversion to Christianity in the nineteenth century and have successfully practiced Islam mainly at Fourah Bay, Foulah Town, and Aberdeen for over two centuries. Their Yoruba connection, coupled with their role as traders resulted in relatively greater economic and individual independence for Oku Women.

In 1932, an attempt was made to unite the various Muslim communities through the creation of the Sierra Leone Congress, which set up Islamic schools and colleges. Most Sierra Leonean Muslims belong to the Sunni sect but in 1939 missionaries from Pakistan introduced the Ahmadiyya sect as a more "progressive" form of Islam and tried to win converts through their greater emphasis on education. Partly in response to this, and as a result of the growing importance of Islam in Freetown, the Muslim Association was founded in 1942 with the main objective of setting up Islamic educational institutions.

Both Western and Islamic education are sought by Muslims as Western education is given a high value as one of the main avenues for social mobility. Muslim women receive formal education in large numbers due primarily to the role of the Ahmadiyya sect.

A large number of middle-class and affluent Sierra Leoneans practice the Islamic religion. At the same time, it also has strong grassroots appeal to low-income groups, marginal groups, and newcomers to the city. Islam appeals to all socioeconomic



Federation of Muslim Women marching for peace on International Women's Day in Freetown. Courtesy: Christopher Greene.

groups. In Freetown, and in Sierra Leone as a whole, it is a religion of social and political significance. The religious leaders who constitute the board of Imams are among the most highly respected and influential leaders of the country. Muslims have held and continue to hold high office in all spheres of society including the mayoralty, cabinet ministers, and so forth. The current Head of State Alhaji Dr. Ahmad Tejan Kabbah is a Muslim.

In the international context, the growing wave of Islamic nationalism has inspired similar sentiments among Muslims in Sierra Leone. Diplomatic relations and communication channels have increased with Muslims in North Africa. Sierra Leone formally became a member of the Islamic Conference in 1982. Such a membership entitles the country to receive development funds from the Arab Fund for Development. Some Muslim organizations, including women's associations, have received financial assistance from Arab countries and maintained links with individuals in these countries. Other activities reinforcing this international link include the popular Pilgrimage to Mecca, the annual observance of Ramadan, and the feast of Eid-ul-Fitri.

Women and Islam

The Islamic tradition in Freetown offers great flexibility and represents the amalgamation of various cultural and religious elements. This characteristic has influenced women's role and status. The perception of Islam as an African religion, or at least as a religion closely related to African belief systems, has also been influential.³

In Sierra Leone as well as in many African countries outside the Mediterranean Islamic cultural area, Islam represents a synthesis of Muslim and African cultural elements—a factor that is important in understanding its specific form, its secular proclivities, and its influence on women in Freetown.

Among the Oku, one of the more established Muslim groups in Freetown, some women who were interviewed regarded the restrictions placed on women by Islam as things of the past. One of them stated:

The role which the average Muslim girl was expected to play in life had to be inferior to that of her menfolk. She was expected to be a good wife and housekeeper and to bring up her children—not to take up a career. She was to be under the direct control of her husband and always submissive to his will. She was never regarded as equal to her husband whether in status or in intellectual ability.

This was confirmed by an Oku scholar, who noted the following:

Only the prosperous Oku gave their daughters equal educational opportunities with their sons. Women received non-formal education for extended periods in institutions such as the Sunna which prepared them for their domestic roles. Instruction in Arabic or opportunities for advanced education were limited.⁴

According to informants, a certain degree of female emancipation was possible through trade, the traditional occupation of Oku women. Girls were taught from a very early age how to trade so that by the time they were married they were experts

and could become economically self-sufficient. This was sometimes necessary because, according to Islamic law, a husband could have up to four wives and may be unable to support all of them. The only other traditional occupation for Oku women was dressmaking, the skills of which were acquired through apprenticeship with relatives. During these periods, the girls were expected to help with household chores.

Within the last three decades, considerable change has taken place in the general position of Muslim women. Both Muslim and Christian girls routinely receive formal Western education and the barrier to education is likely to be economic than religious. There are several Muslim women graduates from universities, in both Sierra Leone and abroad, and Muslim women hold positions in all professions and in political life.

Due to the changes in the position of Oku women, a number of their institutions are being affected. Girls are no longer secluded for long periods during the Sunna ceremony, equivalent to the initiation of Sande. In addition, the long period of seclusion for widows, which could last for two or more months, has been considerably reduced. Similarly, rules pertaining to women's attire, as stipulated by Islamic law, are no longer strictly followed.

As a religion in general, Islam is noted for its strict ritual separation of the sexes, the most extreme being female seclusion in the *Purdah*. Men are more fully involved with the formal aspects of religion and women's religious participation is considered marginal. This gendered dichotomy has been referred to as the "sexual division of religion."⁵

Mernissi is even more explicit about gender inequalities in Islam in her study of Muslim women in Morocco. She states that the UMMA, the community of Muslim believers, is primarily male and that women's position in the UMMA universe is ambiguous:

Allah does not talk to them, we can therefore assume that UMMA is primarily male believers.⁶

In Morocco, the ritual separation of the sexes has resulted in the development of secondary cults and practices that are predominantly female. These include ritual performances for the dead; offerings at the tombs of Saints; non-Islamic cults involving sacrifices to nature spirits and participation in possession cults such as Zar, Bori, and Pepe.

Throughout Muslim Northeast Africa and the Middle East, spirit possession cults (Zar) exist with membership that is predominantly female. These cults have been viewed as important for promoting female solidarity and facilitating women's adaptation and integration into the heterogeneous urban society. One study has shown how dancing groups of Muslim women perform similar functions in urban Kenya.⁷

In Freetown, these cults and ritual groups do not appear to exist among Muslim women in any significant way or in large numbers. Muslim women in Freetown, with the exception of a few orthodox groups, practice a more flexible, secular, and individualistic form of Islam which gives them a certain degree of freedom and independence.

On the whole, they are less subject to the strict interpretation of Islamic doctrines concerning the place of women. This is possible partly because Islamic doctrines have not been rigidly adopted. For many groups in Freetown, conversion to Islam does not require total religious commitment. It also does not preclude continuing beliefs and practices of other religions, including African traditional religions.

In keeping with Islamic tradition, men and women are usually segregated during ritual occasions but women frequently use the Mosque as meeting places for their associations. Among the more orthodox Muslim groups, such as the Fullah and Hausa, women tend to be confined to the home. Their participation in religious rituals in the Mosque is often restricted. The strict observance of seclusion (*Purdah*) is rare, even for these orthodox Muslims.

There are examples of women who grew up in an environment that encouraged female religious education for women and who have become Islamic scholars. These women participate in various religious festivities by leading the singing in Mosques and by taking part in public recitals in Arabic. One such example was an informant, a descendant of a religious leader, who was one of the first Sierra Leonean Muslim leaders to make a pilgrimage to Mecca. According to one informant, Islam is a good religion for women.

For me Islam is the best religion. It respects women. I have never contemplated changing it for another. Today, an increasing number of Muslim women are attending school and several have obtained university degrees. Whereas in the past marriage was seen as the most important goal for a Muslim girl, mothers now desire a good education and a good job for their daughters in addition to marriage.

Women in Freetown are developing their own parallel spheres of influence within the religion through their associations and through participation in the pilgrimage to Mecca—the Hajj. They are reexamining Islam and providing mutual support for each other. By making the pilgrimage, they earn the title of “Haja.” The Hajj provides an avenue for achieving status in the Muslim community, where religion is strictly male dominated.

The Hajj also fulfills a deep spiritual need to be at the most holy place for Muslims and to offer prayers to Allah from the sacred land. As will be seen later, some Hajas hold important pivotal positions in the mobilization of women for mutual support and serve as links between grassroots women and the government.

Hajas automatically receive a high spiritual status and its accompanying respect in the community. They wear a distinctive head-tie and status-conferring dress. This status is even more special since the high cost involved in making the pilgrimage precludes a large number of women of lower income from becoming Hajas.

A number of Muslim women's associations, comprised predominantly of younger Muslim women with advanced education, have been studying the Koran and Sharia with a deconstructionist and revisionist approach. They argue that these religious doctrines guaranteed women's rights and that the erosion of women's rights has been the result of male-biased interpretations of religious texts. These associations act as pressure groups to raise awareness and effect change. They emphasize the need for a reinterpretation of these classical texts to reflect the protection of women's rights that are inherent in them.

Limitations of Islamic Influence on Social Institutions

The influence of Islam on social institutions has not been as extensive as in North Africa and consequently affects the status and position of women less profoundly. In the first place, the various Muslim groups, representing different ethnic groups

and neighborhoods, belong to several Islamic communities known as *Jamaa*. The elders of these communities form a council with legal responsibilities to interpret the *Sharia*, and to a certain extent regulate the lives of the members of the *Jamaa*. Each *Jamaa* can give its own slant to the interpretation of the *Sharia*.

In the second place, whenever strong patriarchal authority is exercised, there is greater likelihood of it being evident in smaller households where males are the sole breadwinners. This factor tends to reinforce patriarchal control. It is also likely to be more a characteristic of orthodox groups in which women tend to be confined to the domestic sphere. Most Muslim women in Freetown are involved in income-generating activities, primarily trade, making them less dependent on men. Given the difficult economic conditions of Freetown, it is highly unlikely that most men can ever be the sole breadwinners of their households. This would tend to decrease their ability to exercise absolute patriarchal dominance. As women traders often say, "It is better to depend on trading than to depend on a man."

Third, another important difference pertains to marriage. The alliance between two families, which African marriage fosters, is likely to be less affected by Islam. As Trimmingham points out, under Islam, marriage is more of a contract between a man and a woman than an alliance between families.⁸ According to informants also, this has had several consequences. One is a lesser degree of family supervision of the married couple and greater individualism for women within the marriage.

Fourth, Islam facilitates the divorce of a man by granting him the right to employ the Islamic rule of repudiation. According to this rule, a man only has to repeat the phrase "I divorce you" three times and the divorce is final. In Freetown, among the non-orthodox groups a woman may also initiate divorce by virtue of the individualistic nature of the marriage contract and the degree of her economic independence. Furthermore, many women still adhere to a tradition of customary African marriage even when they have converted to Islam.

Finally, both Islamic and African marriages (unlike in Christianity) are by custom polygamous. However, this practice is more difficult to maintain in a non-agricultural area such as Freetown and can become quite expensive. It is customary for women in polygamous households to generate their own income and be solely or partly responsible for their children's upkeep and education. Polygamy offers economic security in the urban area only if the husband is prosperous, but in such instances, the independence of women in the household is likely to be curtailed.

As trading is the most widespread economic activity among women in Freetown, Muslim women are mobile and can exercise a certain degree of autonomy and control over their lives. The stereotype of the subordinate and restricted Muslim woman does not apply to the majority of Muslim women in Freetown. This factor, in addition to living in a culturally heterogeneous urban area, encourages the development of a worldview that anticipates and responds to change in gender roles and expectations. In addition, the frequency of intermarriage and informal adoptions across ethnic and religious lines have resulted in less rigid adherence to norms and values restricting and regulating women's lives.

Muslim communities are usually closely knit and the neighborhood mosque provides a central focus. Within domestic and kin groups, women operate essentially in their own sphere, and are dynamic forces behind the social celebrations related to

life cycle events. During major feasts such as Eid-ul-Fitri or during Ramadan, they demonstrate their identification with their communities by dressing alike in ashuobi fashion and celebrating together.

Kinship ties are also kept alive through gifts and frequent visits with kinfolk and exchange of services. From an early age, women develop strong informal female support systems, through primary group ties derived from kinship, common neighborhood activities, and trading.

Ironically, one of the most important factors that contribute to greater freedom for the majority of Muslim women is economic hardship. The underdeveloped urban environment leads to frequent unemployment of men and chronic unemployment of women. Trading in the informal sector is the only option for the large majority of Muslim women. This tends to enhance their freedom, mobility and independence to some extent.

Examples of Muslim Women's Associations

A study of Muslim women's associations is useful in understanding the dynamic interaction between religion, economics, and gender roles. It is a study that can lead to an appreciation of how Muslim women, particularly women of low income, cope with problems of economic survival in Freetown through associations for mutual support. These associations do not fit neatly into the category of associations developed by Muslim women in other areas in response to the "sexual division of religion."

Although the religious base of these associations is necessary for identification and mobilization, they hold a secondary position to more pragmatic and secular functions. Many of them were developed in response to the exigencies of socioeconomic survival in the urban environment. Those that grant material assistance to their members are among the more popular, and usually have strong grass-roots support. This support, on occasion, has been instrumental in mobilizing whole communities for self-help projects. Though Islam has provided the unifying base for rallying support, members are motivated for economic and social reasons rather than for purely religious reasons.

Philanthropic deeds, which include contributions to charity and almsgiving to the poor, are among other significant aspects. Contributions to charity are often solicited by invoking the Islamic spirit of philanthropy. For example, the following plea is frequently made to members at meetings.

We know that a good Muslim should be generous. The spirit of generosity is in keeping with Islamic teachings about giving alms to the poor. So give freely for charity and prove that you are a good Muslim.

The following have been among the most active associations of Muslim women in Freetown:

- The All Muslim Women's Association
- The Amalgamated Muslim Women's Movement
- Tarikful Islam
- The Federation of Muslim Women

- The National Council of Muslim Women
- The Committee of Fulah Town Ladies
- The Young Women's Muslim Association.

Their functions are mainly educational, although almost all of them provide mutual aid to their members. Learning the Koran and about other religious texts is one of their most important functions. They also raise funds for scholarship for Muslim girls. Their secondary function is philanthropic. The All Muslim Women's Association raises funds through luncheon sales and dances, and makes donations to organized charities.

The Young Women's Muslim Association functions primarily as a mutual-aid group, but also serves as a thrift and credit society for raising loans. The Sierra Leone Muslim Women's Federation maintains close contacts with other associations of Muslim women, and serves as an umbrella association that coordinates some of their combined activities.

One of the most important Islamic-based grass-roots women's organizations is Kankalay, located about two miles east of central Freetown in a low income, unplanned peri-urban area which can be classified as a shanty town. Although there are a few professional families of middle income and some modern houses in the area, the majority of houses are in very poor condition and services are inadequate.

Most of the inhabitants are manual workers, laborers, and traders of low income representing first- and second-generation migrants to the city from rural areas. The majority of women subsist in the informal sector as petty traders. Unemployment is rife and life for many of these women is precarious.

Women of this area have had to develop strategies for surviving in the urban environment. One such strategy is mobilizing around Islam. Ethnicity has also been an important factor in mobilization, as has been shown for Muslim women's associations in parts of East Africa.⁹ Since 50 percent of the members of Kankalay are Temne, the meaning of Kankalay "one word" or "unity" may imply mobilization and solidarity along ethnic lines. This, however, could be misleading, for the solidarity in this case is designed to provide protection against urban poverty that affects all ethnic groups.

In Kankalay, men are not viewed as adversaries but as fellow victims of economic hardship. In fact, the association, which has branches in other parts of the country, once had a man as its national president. Women presidents are predominant in the branch organizations but most of the secretaries and treasurers have been men, due to their advantages in education, accounting acumen, and negotiating skills.

As most of the activities of Kankalay are aimed at improving the community through self-help, both men and women view these efforts as beneficial to the community as a whole. In their everyday struggle for survival, cooperative values are stressed. Providing relief in times of need is one of its most attractive features, and is an important mechanism for recruitment of women of low income.

Mutual aid usually entails rendering assistance during illness, occasions such as the birth of a child, and early infant care. The association assumes full responsibility for the funeral expenses of bereaved members. Funerals are treated as emergencies that grant the president the right to call a meeting at very short notice and to request donations for funeral expenses. A delegation is usually selected to represent the

association and to assist with funeral arrangements if necessary. Funerals are also used as occasions to recruit new members and to cement bonds of solidarity.

Owing to their importance as public events, funerals also serve a latent function of mobilizing the whole community. It is not customary for Muslim women to attend funerals. Hence, women would congregate at the home of the bereaved as well as in the surrounding areas for an informal gathering. At this time, the home assumes public significance and the fact that women dominate this space heightens its ideological significance.

The predominance of women in this space, usually considered as the private space, is a recognition of their life-giving and life-sustaining importance, made possible through their roles in social reproduction. The public space of the home where the funeral is being held, also signals the role of women in heralding the deceased to the "new birth" in the world of the ancestors.

Petty trading, the occupation of almost all the Kankalay members, has necessitated the involvement of Kankalay in trading activities and in the incorporation of a savings and credit facility. This had led to the establishment of an *Osusu*—a rotating credit association—within its structure. The principle of the *Osusu* discussed earlier, is that each member contributes the same amount each month and once a month, one member is allowed to make a withdrawal of the total amount.

Kankalay also functions as a cooperative and once operated a retail distribution service. The association would buy foodstuffs, especially rice, at wholesale prices and distribute them to members for retail trading. Rice is a "political" commodity as well as a nutritional staple, and its shortage can precipitate political unrest. Most regimes have capitalized on this by offering rice subsidies to political supporters and their wives. Some regimes have required party membership cards to be shown when purchasing rice.

By belonging to Kankalay, women have on occasion been able to buy rice from the association at the same cost, without having the additional expense of joining a political party and securing a membership card for a fee. A number of Kankalay leaders have been members of the political party in power in their individual capacity. Some have assumed leadership roles in the women's wing of the ruling party, enabling them to maintain links with ruling parties.

Political Links Through Hajas

One effective strategy for survival used by low-income groups in Freetown is to establish links with individuals, who are not only community leaders, but also have access to the government. It is primarily based on a patron/client model but is inspired by a "collective" ethos rather than individual relationships. Some leaders of Kankalay have links with the government that are based on their status as religious leaders such as Hajas who have made the Pilgrimage to Mecca (the Hajj).

Hajas now constitute an important group and have often assumed responsibility for acting as liaison between Muslim women and the government. This has occasionally drawn criticisms of promoting self-interest, political aggrandizement, or patronage, but Hajas usually enjoy a high status in the community. Many Hajas have performed a number of important political functions of benefit to women at the grass

roots level, and have helped women's associations to become effective pressure groups. Hajas are assuming national stature as leaders and may become a force to be reckoned with as they get more involved in national politics. In the 2002 elections, one of them, Haja Memunah Conteh, was the running mate of Dr. John Karefa-Smart, a Presidential candidate.

The pilgrimage to Mecca is real in one sense and symbolic in others. Hajas continue to make political pilgrimages to the President and Cabinet Ministers to request assistance as well as to lobby for the improvement and development of their communities. It was in response to this form of lobbying that the government provided Kankalay with some land for the construction of a secondary school for girls at Kissy.

A shift in emphasis has occurred in Muslim women's associations. Whereas in the past they functioned primarily as religious institutions for religious instruction of women, their emphasis has become more secular and has taken on economic and political functions. The shift can be viewed as a response to the marginalization of low-income groups in Freetown, many of whom belong to the Islamic faith.

In summary, Muslim women have very pragmatic views toward life and socio-economic development. Islam is an important religious resource for facilitating the achievement of some of their development goals. For many, an important motivation in joining these associations is to mobilize resources through group action that offers material support as well as moral, and religious solidarity.

Members of these associations also seek assistance for the education of their children with the hope of future employment. The concept of self-help is strongly developed, as is the realization that linkages to political and religious leaders are vital strategies for the development and advancement of the community. Kankalay is a good example of one association that has brought into being adequate mechanisms for achieving these goals, and serves as an illustration of women supporting and empowering themselves for development and for political alliance-building.

CHAPTER NINE

CHRISTIANITY AND WOMEN'S ASSOCIATIONS

Introduction

Christianity, like Islam, has played an important role in women's mobilization and also in their collective action. Like Islam it also represents a religion that is based on patriarchal values and that is relatively conservative. Women's associations to some extent have served to modify some of the most blatant forms of male domination, but both religions are run by a clergy and decision-making bodies that are predominantly male.

At the same time, Christianity like Islam arguably promotes a moral system that stresses equality and justice; compassion for others; philanthropy and human dignity. All of these values echo sentiments that are in keeping with development and democratization, the primary focus of women's associations.

Christians can be found among all ethnic groups. However, one group, the Krios have practiced Christianity for over three centuries. As a result, the following focuses on women's associations among Krio women. With few exceptions, much has not changed within the last thirty years and many of the features are still relevant today.¹

One important change is the number of women lay preachers and ministers from all ethnic groups that now play active roles as leaders in several churches. Following the pioneering example of Jane Bloomer of the Martha Davis Confidential Association, women like Madam Dumbuya now lead large independent churches. Also of importance is the increase in the number of women's associations affiliated to churches that conduct services in one of the local languages.

As a result of the rebel war, Christian women's associations have increasingly been mixing religion and politics by staging public prayer campaigns and advocating for peace. Many believe that the cumulative prayers of the people of Sierra Leone, especially the women, could be credited with the eventual end of the war and the subsequent process of peace building.

Historically, Christianity was the integrative catalyst for the various groups that settled in Freetown in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This was a result of the repatriation of enslaved people of the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and Liberated Africans to Freetown. The descendants of these various groups became known as Krios. Christian missionaries, particularly of the Anglican Church Missionary

Society, were primarily responsible for proselytizing and maintaining Christianity and Western education among the early groups, especially the Liberated Africans, who later became part of the amalgamated Krio group.

Those among the Krios that came from Britain and Nova Scotia were already practicing Christianity as Wesleyans, Baptists, Catholics, and members of the Countess of Huntingdon Connexion.² In time, other denominations led by evangelical missionaries from the United States were established by various mission groups. Nonetheless, the Protestant influence remained dominant.³

Christianity in Freetown, therefore, has a strong Krio influence, although most ethnic groups, especially the Mende and Sherbro, have long practiced Christianity either in the mainstream churches or in churches that use local languages extensively. The Okus, part of the extended Krio group, are predominantly Muslims and play important roles in advancing Islam in many of the mosques in Freetown and in their community.

Freetown's acceptance of Christianity was not without some important modifications. The local version did not represent a complete break with the church, but developed its own special brand and flavor: Even the so-called Western Services in the Krio churches, the oldest in Freetown, have a distinctive quality of their own, which is not imported from Europe.⁴

Freetown was one of the first communities in tropical Africa to embark on the task of reconciling African life and Christian values, and of infusing a dynamic African element into the religion through prayer meetings and special liturgical experiences. Voluntary associations developed as extra-curricular entities of the church. This promoted the development of new leadership structures, greater individual expression, and greater female participation.

Making Christianity indigenous is credited to the work of some of the earliest African clerics such as "Holy Johnson" who insisted on an African emphasis to Christianity and worked on developing such a church in Freetown. This process, which has been in operation for almost two hundred years, is as old as the very existence of the Krios.

Consequently, for the Krios of Freetown, Christianity is the traditional religion. This partly explains why separatist churches that blend traditional African religions with Christianity have not been a feature of Krio society. This also explains why the majority and the oldest of Christian women's associations in Freetown are comprised of Krio women and serve as an extension of Krio social organization and culture. As a result, this chapter focuses on the influence of these associations on the formation of the ideology of womanhood primarily in Krio society.⁵

Associations developed around churches as an extension of religious fellowship. For women, this was particularly significant as avenues for fellowship with other women. Such associational ties helped to strengthen common beliefs and preserve Christian ideals, especially the ideals of womanhood, monogamous marriage, and motherhood.

These ideals were conservative and not questioned, as marriage and motherhood did not receive the same admonition characteristic of some strands of Western feminism. In fact, many of the women who join organizations like Mothers' Union, and who were interviewed, considered Western feminism as subversive to the family and to Christian values.

Material prosperity was also an ideal supported by the class-conscious nature of Freetown society, by its commercial character, and by the Protestant ethic as understood by Weber.⁶ Prosperity was more of an ideal than a reality, for only a few people of Freetown can be described as prosperous. Although there is an effective middle class, the majority is characteristic of most urban dwellers in Africa, and belongs to the lower middle and lower classes.

The standard of living of the majority of the middle class has been eroding as a result of the protracted economic recession and the ten-year rebel war. Historically speaking, prosperity was short-lived. The following perspicacious analysis of the history of the political economy of West Africa by Amin makes an important point.

The most interesting chapter in the political economy of Sierra Leone cannot, for its part, be separated from the history of Nigeria. It was the trading station at Freetown, where the British navy assembled the freed slaves, which stimulated the formation of the "Krio" bourgeoisie which spread along the whole of the western coast in the nineteenth century and filled the role of a comprador bourgeoisie for British capital. But this class disappeared at the end of the last century, when the British executed their main Krio trading rivals on the pretext that they had taken part in the Temne and Mende revolts.⁷

Today many Krios have a precarious economic existence and few can match the wealth of politicians or Lebanese and European merchants in Freetown. While a number are in the professions, the majority works for wages, or as salaried clerks and artisans.

Krio society is nonetheless marked by class distinctions, which is sometimes reflected in the churches. For example, St. George's Cathedral, the Diocesan seat of the Anglican church, situated in the center of Freetown is the largest and most highly esteemed. It is among the churches that has in its membership some of the most affluent of Freetown's Krio citizens.

Freetown Krio society also exhibits Christian and English characteristics that are apparent in its religious and educational institutions. It must be added, however, that there are also strong retentions of African and Caribbean influences that are even more important.

For example, most rites de passages have strong African elements, as does the complex bilateral kinship structure. Caribbean and African influences are apparent in Krio architecture and music (gumbe), in the traditional dish fufu and female ethnic dress—print en enkintcha, or its forerunner, kabaslot en kotoku. The Krio language, derived largely from English but containing many words from various West African languages and a few words from other European languages, readily represents this cultural blend.⁸

Although the Krios were among the first to practice Christianity in Freetown they only represent one group of Christians. In theory, no church sets out to have a single ethnic composition, but there are churches that carry an ethnic designation and whose services are conducted in the language of the predominant ethnic group.

One reason offered for the establishment of these churches is "the need for the various ethnic groups to worship separately in their own language, so that they may more readily understand the services and offer their worship intelligently."⁹



Mrs. Blanche Benjamin in *print en enkincha* traditional dress. Courtesy: Azania Steady.

Women's associations are increasingly playing an important role in these churches that have increased substantially in Freetown, especially because of internal displacement and refugee flight resulting from the civil wars in both Sierra Leone and Liberia. American churches have been particularly active in promoting services in the local languages. These have included the Assemblies of God, the Evangelical United Brethren, and the Jehovah's Witness. Compared to the well-established Anglican, Methodist, and Catholic churches from Europe, American missions can be regarded as late arrivals.

Over the last two decades, there has been an avalanche of evangelical activities in Freetown, and include several denominations, and tend to attract all ethnic groups. Notable among them are the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (the Mormon Church) primarily from the United States. In addition, the appeal of syncretic churches that are a blend of Christianity and African religions has been increasing and challenging the dominance of earlier syncretic churches such as the Church of the Lord, Aladura (Adejobi), from Nigeria.

Christian Women's Associations

Women's religious associations are widespread among Freetown dwellers, especially Krio women in their middle years. Various styled as bands, committees, groups, guilds, unions, or societies, these associations are autonomous bodies within each church. A few of them, namely the Mothers' Union and the Women's Volunteers (Anglican), as well as the District Women's Work Committee (Methodist) operate at national and local levels. This is also true of the Women's Society for World Service of the Evangelical United Brethren denomination. Each association has its distinctive uniform (usually a white dress, a sash, and a straw hat with the association ribbon) and membership badges.

Despite their autonomous nature, there is a similarity in their functions. These include mobilizing resources, maintaining the ideology of Christian marriage and motherhood, and philanthropy, promoting healing, facilitating the power of prayer; advancing female charisma and religious leadership and promoting unity.

Mobilizing Resources

Most churches derive their revenue from their members' contributions to the weekly collection that is often insufficient. Additional fund-raising is organized by women's associations. This is done through activities such as luncheon sales, bazaars, fetes, and thanksgiving services. The proceeds go toward the general maintenance and renovation of the church, or toward the purchase of some new particular item such as a silver chalice or a stained glass window.

In some cases, associations such as Women's Guilds and Women's Volunteers have been formed for a special fund-raising project—to purchase a pipe organ or to help the church clear some of its debts. Once the equipment has been purchased or the debt cleared, they may cease to function. Some associations are seasonal—for example, Harvest Communities, which are active only during the period of the harvest festival. As a result, there is much proliferation of short-term women's religious associations, which consequently constitute the largest type of women's associations.

A number of religious associations guarantee the general upkeep of the church by setting aside a maintenance fund for minor repairs and renovations. One association, the Ladies Working Band, is found in almost all Anglican churches and functions in a direct caretaking capacity. The members of each Band regularly clean the church premises, and they decorate it on ceremonial occasions. In the Methodist churches, associations with the names Ladies' Guild, Silent Worker, Ladies Union, Ladies Industrial, and Ladies Auxiliary usually perform similar functions. Members of a number of other associations act as "sideswomen" (ushers) during services.

A portion of the funds raised is donated to charitable organizations, in keeping with Christian teachings about philanthropy. In addition, association members visit hospitals, orphanages, and homes for the handicapped at Christmas to sing carols and to present gifts to the inmates. Members of the Dorcas Association formerly made clothes and purchased food items and religious books for others less fortunate than themselves.

Maintaining the Ideology of Womanhood and Christian Marriage

Religion often fashions rules and regulations that guide gender relations. In the case of women's religious associations, the ideology of womanhood is one that includes monogamous Christian marriage. The responsibility for both is placed in the hands of women.

Another feature is the absence of female secret societies such as Sande that perform initiation rites. For Krio men, freemasonry, an exclusively male secret society has been popular as has hunting societies. In contrast to freemasonry, hunting societies have a few adult female members.

In keeping with Christian doctrine and statutory law, Krio marriage is monogamous and a husband is obligated to support his wife and children. This may explain the relative absence of separatist churches among the Krios, as polygamy is permitted in those churches. Monogamy is frequently regarded not as a Christian institution, but as a specifically European one, lacking spiritual sanction. However it has become a feature of Krio society.

The Mothers' Union, an international association, is the prime example of an association preserving what has come to be regarded as Christian marriage and morality. The Mothers' Union of Sierra Leone has remained virtually the same over the years, as its objectives have remained relatively unchanged. It is organized on Diocesan and local levels throughout the country. Each branch, headed by the "enrolling member," is attached to a church; and at the local level each branch functions separately. All branches meet together once a year to mark the opening of the Mothers' Union year.

The aim of the association is the advancement of the Christian religion in terms of strengthening and preserving monogamous marriage and Christian family life. Although it is part of the Anglican Church, membership is open to other women from Christian denominations. Widowed and divorced women are accepted as members to provide them with spiritual support since, according to their philosophy, their civil status does not reflect their inner spirituality. The following are the main objectives

of the association:

- To uphold Christ's teaching on the nature of marriage and to promote its wider understanding.
- To encourage parents to bring up their children in the faith and life of the church.
- To maintain a worldwide fellowship of Christians united in prayer, worship, and service.
- To promote conditions in society favorable to a stable family life and the protection of children.
- To help those whose family life has met with adversity.

It is customary to have sermons and addresses that quote extensively from the Bible, passages that reinforce the home as having a divine origin (Genesis 1:27–28); the importance of creative family relationships (Ephesians 5:21–33); the responsibility of parents to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord, (Ephesians 6:4) and nurture their children, and so forth.¹⁰

For the Mothers' Union, "the home comes before the State, The School and the Church. It is the basic institution of society. The Bible clearly speaks concerning its nature, concerning its purpose and concerning its preservation. A Christian home is a home where Christ is loved and trusted and obeyed sincerely and steadfastly."¹¹

At this annual meeting, members reinforce their commitment to uphold the sanctity of Christian marriage and family life, considered prestigious in Freetown society. It is possible that these women guard not morality but their economic security by acting in some respects like a "women's trade union," preserving not only their marriage but also their livelihood.

Maintaining monogamous marriage as an ideal is important as long as family security and continuity depend on the husband being the breadwinner. These associations then promote their dependent status that would make them opposed to feminist ideas that are critical of the family. From my interviews with members of the Mothers' Union, I did not come across anyone that supported the criticism of the family, usually made by some feminists. For many, a stable family is the foundation of a stable society, and they are sure that their theories about the family are the right ones.

During the pioneer days of settlement in Freetown, individual Krio women had a great deal of economic independence and affluent lifestyles, primarily through success in their trading activities. Some of the best properties in early nineteenth-century Freetown were owned by women.¹² Today, many Krio women own property that they either acquired independently or inherited, and have independent incomes from trade and salaried employment.

However, with the exception of a few highly successful women entrepreneurs, career women, and women from well-to-do families, a married woman's income is generally regarded as supplementary to that of her husband. Many household surveys have noted that while female-headed households are common, most of the responses identify men as heads of households.¹³

What is significant is the fact that women's contribution to the household budget is an important supplement since the cost of urban housing, school fees, and transportation



Maroon Church—A historic landmark in Freetown. Courtesy: Christopher Greene.

impose tremendous strains on the husband's income. A working wife, whether self-employed or salaried, is often regarded as an economic asset. Thus, the majority of married women's earnings are seen essentially as supplementary, and women largely seek economic security in marriage because of greater opportunities for male employment within the modern urban structure. Single women heading families usually do so with some difficulty, even when employed, since salaries are generally quite low and inflation high.

The association is very understanding when it comes to women who are divorced. In its view, divorced women should not be abandoned when they need the Church most, since the breakup of their marriage might not be due to their neglect of the family but rather to the recklessness of their husbands or the challenges of life. The Mothers' Union has been filling the need for moral support and advice when marriage and family life seem threatened.

Marriage counseling is also offered by the Mothers' Union Workers and the Enrolling Members. These women are dedicated to the ideals of Christian marriage and family life, and are seen as having invaluable wisdom in helping to resolve marital problems. In addition to holding individual consultations, they frequently address branch meetings on various topics concerning the home and family.

Promoting Healing

Another important function of some types of women's religious associations is comforting the troubled and the sick. The need for this is due in part to underdevelopment and the social malaise of urban life, exacerbated by poor living standards and collective ill health for many. Malaria and other infections and parasitic diseases are prevalent and act synergistically with malnutrition to produce chronic ill health for large sections of the population, particularly children. The trauma of the ten-year war has created many refugees and displaced people who live under difficult conditions in Freetown and in refugee camps and are often in poor health.

Economic hardship and harsh living conditions such as overcrowding, poor housing, poor sanitation, and inadequate municipal services have also contributed to ill health. Stress and chronic anxiety resulting from rapidly changing social and economic conditions aggravate and contribute to hypertension and strokes. Interviews of physicians have revealed high levels of stress-related disease and an increase in the prescription of tension-reducing drugs for women.

Women's religious associations performing the functions of healing have provided the psychological component necessary for mind-body interaction in the healing of the total person. One of the best known was the Martha Davies Benevolent Women's Association, also known as the Jane Bloomer Church. Women with chronic illnesses, and those for whom western and traditional medicine have failed to provide a cure, have turned to divine healing.

Over the years, several charismatic religious leaders, such as Madam Dumbuya who established her own church, have been providing healing services. Part of the appeal of the "Aladura Church" and the "God of Our Light Church" has been due to their healing functions. Newer types of prayer groups similar to the Martha Davies Benevolent Association, and generally called "Struggle" groups, appear from time to

time with healing as their main function. Healing covers physical and mental ills as well as social malaise.

Facilitating the Power of Prayer

A number of women who attend these prayer meetings or consult the leaders also seek solutions to social problems, economic hardship, and internal conflicts. The belief in prayer is very strong and is often reinforced during meetings by the leader as follows:

Does prayer really matter? Is it important to us as individuals? As a family? As a nation? To us as individuals are we too busy that we do not consider it important to set aside specific times to pray? We rush off and leave things undone which need our attention. Is it always easy to say I will do better tomorrow. As Mothers' Union members, we should remember that we are entitled in prayer. To keep Satan out we must be prayer warriors, he trembles when we pray. Our prayers express our love and commitment to Christ. By talking to God we show that we depend on him. Jesus was a great prayer warrior. He prayed without ceasing. We need the supportive power of prayer especially in times of sorrow, sickness, wars, and trauma. We also need to pray however, when we have joy. So let us all share in prayer, upholding one another.¹⁴

Prayer is often regarded as a powerful force in solving problems and assuaging anxieties. The supplications offered by prayer groups can be seen as an extension of this view. Although prayer is important for all religious groups, it seems to have a particular meaning for members of the Mothers' Union even when the activities are of a more secular nature. Prayer provides women with a weapon in the fight against hardship. They believe that their faith and reliance on God gives them the strength to withstand the "trials and tribulations" of life.

Female Charisma and Religious Leadership

One of the obvious changes in the church is the number of women who are lay preachers. Fewer are ordained ministers, but this is a major improvement for the church. Reflecting the strongly patriarchal family law of the Old Testament, Canon Law institutionalized male dominance. Despite recent changes to diversify the clergy, Church leadership is still a male preserve. This legacy is still reflected in the suspicion of the virtually all-male clergy toward female leadership in the church.

An important function of religious associations therefore is to provide avenues for the development of religious leadership among women, who hold no formal position in the clerical hierarchy in Freetown. Many of the devotional and counseling functions of these associations are conducted by women leaders, and provide an avenue for the development of female religious leadership.

There is evidence from historical sources that in the early days of settlement women often had experience in church leadership. According to Fyfe, they preached and testified in the Nova Scotian churches. One woman had her own congregation in her house at Water Street.¹⁵ However, the development of such female leadership was not encouraged by the Church Missionary Society nor by the Methodist missionaries.

Nor did the African clergy that later assumed the leadership of the missions allow the development of female leaders.

Religious leadership tends to command a large measure of automatic respect even outside the church hierarchy, and this accounts for its importance to men and women alike. Association leadership not only makes a woman an exceptionally good Christian but also adds to her status in the community. Moreover, it secures for her the ultimate glory of a grand funeral.

The greatest honor a Christian can receive after death is to be laid out in church and to have a well-attended funeral spilling over into the churchyard and adjacent streets. A cortege of association members in uniform marching at a woman's funeral is testimony to a life well lived as a Christian. Only very active women, usually leaders of religious associations, receive this great honor.

Women's charismatic qualities are nurtured and find expression in leading others in fellowship and devotion. Meetings usually have periods devoted to the reading of passages from the Scriptures, to Bible study, to prayers, and to hymn singing. Most women enjoy the devotional aspect of meetings because of the pleasure they derive from "feeding the soul" through religious songs, studying the Scriptures, and praying.

Some of the associations, such as the Martha Davies Confidential Benevolent Association and Mrs. Pinkney's Spiritualist association—named after their founders—are essentially prayer groups that have become formalized and have remained active after many years. These two groups offer a revival type of worship, faith healing, and extemporaneous prayer—popular kinds of devotional expression among some Freetown women.

Members of prayer groups in Freetown continue to attend their mainstream churches, unlike separatist groups in other parts of Africa where this type of worship results from a complete break that occurred with the mainstream church. In some cases, separatist churches have their own women priests, but in Freetown members of these prayer groups have not severed links with the mainstream. This may be because mainstream Christianity is already a meaningful religion whose values have become internalized to such an extent that they are an integral part of Krio everyday life. Those desiring a less formalized type of worship have tended to become affiliated with one or more of the American-based evangelical churches in Freetown or the charismatic sects.

Promoting Unity

An attempt made at uniting all Christian women by the United Church Women has been successful. It maintains close cooperation with the Sierra Leone United Christian Council, a non-denominational body. This association aims at encouraging women to come together in a spirit of fellowship:

To study, speak, and act on issues in the country and in the world that involve moral, ethical and spiritual principles inherent in the Christian gospel.

This exercise has led to a more critical evaluation of women's position in the church, especially with regard to the question of female religious leadership. As noted

earlier, many religious women's associations tend to be conservative and maintain existing religious norms and institutional procedures.

The development of a non-denominational multi-ethnic women's association such as the United Church Women on a national level might lead to more profound changes in the future. One of these changes is the increasing number of women who are lay preachers and Ministers. Another is the increasing role of women in development-related activities and in peace building through their church-based activities.

For example, in the Diocese of Bo, the second largest city in Sierra Leone, Mothers' Union members are among those who were admitted to the makeshift Médecins Sans Frontières hospitals to treat wounded war victims. The Freetown branch was represented at the inauguration of the Women's Movement for Peace, whose activities included seminars, workshops, and protest marches for peace.

Christian women regard their associations as essential resources to further augment their faith and devotion. Being a good Christian has high value in their system of merit. They do not make a connection with some feminist interpretations of marriage as an institution that oppresses women. They are more concerned about strengthening their families and raising children who will be good Christians and successful citizens through their devotion to God. For them, everything else is secondary.

CHAPTER TEN

COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS AT THE NATIONAL LEVEL

The Development–Underdevelopment Nexus

In this chapter, comparisons will be drawn with other countries in Africa, notably Kenya, Nigeria, South Africa, and Algeria, representing the four subregions. In order to examine the themes explored in this book, heavy reliance is placed on studies conducted primarily by women from these countries.¹ In a few instances, this has been supplemented by interviews. In the next chapter, this insight is applied to associations operating at the regional or pan-African level.

Almost everywhere in Africa, women have had a long tradition of organizing for collective action. Despite many challenges, they have achieved a measure of success. It is clear from the case study of Sierra Leone that women's associations play important roles in promoting socioeconomic development and as such, fill a major gap in the inability of the government to meet the country's development needs. At the same time, they try to resist the negative consequences of underdevelopment, most damaging of which is widespread poverty.

Despite the efforts of many governments, gender disparities continue, particularly in the areas of education and employment and in the low representation of women in decision-making bodies or in institutions. Women are also disproportionately affected by poverty and have a high dependency burden. The numbers of women heading households has been increasing steadily and now stands at 40 percent in some countries like Botswana.

The case study of Sierra Leone shows how women's associations have been effectively promoting development, especially in the areas of education, employment, creation, and resource mobilization, as well as political participation for democratization. It also reveals that these associations work to promote gender equality as part of the overall struggle for development and democratization. This is because development assumes priority in countries that face major economic challenges and the destructive forces of corporate globalization.

Examples from other countries in Africa confirm the development–underdevelopment nexus. The Women's Movement in Kenya, sometimes referred to as “the women's group movement” has a tradition of collective work and self-help for development.² The largest and best known is Maendeleo Ya Wanawake, which is Swahili and means “progress for women.”

Studies have shown that the formation of women's associations in Kenya is improving the situation of land ownership and tenancy in urban areas, where women and children are the majority of slum dwellers. Many of these associations are involved in promoting socioeconomic development through entrepreneurship, community projects, mutual-aid schemes, legal counseling, formal and non-formal education, and self-empowerment programs.

In Nigeria also, women's associations have tried to tackle problems created by economic crises and recession. The National Committee on Women and Development (NCWD) was established in 1982, as a liaison between women NGOs and the government in an effort to promote development and to eliminate gender biases in policies and programs. In 1989, the National Commission for Women drafted a National Policy on women.

Another group, the Women in Nigeria (WIN) association, which has been regarded as being more feminist in orientation and has a membership of both men and women, places greater emphasis on combating discrimination and sexist practices in the family and in the workplace.

In South Africa, women in parliament started the Women's Budget Initiative in March 1996 to promote welfare and the needs of the poorest and most disadvantaged members of society in certain areas, such as education, housing, and social welfare services. Though fairly successful, this initiative has been criticized for functioning well at the national level, but for failing to percolate down to the provincial level.³

Examples from North Africa also show that although many associations are led by women of the middle and upper classes, a large number tend to work on development issues such as education and employment, and to challenge underdevelopment and poverty that affect the lower classes. In Egypt, many have sought to raise awareness about the conditions of working and lower-class women and to promote agendas for social and political reform. These reforms appeal to lower-class women and create links with workers and peasant parties.⁴

The role of international NGOs and donors in development has been controversial. Some of the problems of international donors that surfaced in Sierra Leone are evident in other countries. According to Odoul and Kabira, the donor community in Kenya has not done any better than governments in the development arena, since they also undermined women by stressing welfare-type programs and implementing poorly planned and inadequately funded programs. They also brought the patriarchal biases of the international community to their development programs. In addition, many of the international development programs are dominated by men.⁵

Sub-Saharan Africa is the only region of the world where poverty has been steadily increasing during the last two decades. Many studies and reports, including the *Human Development Report* and *The World's Women* have repeatedly confirmed this continuing deterioration in their development indicators. Moreover, Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) have not achieved the expected macroeconomic stability, but instead have increased underdevelopment, poverty, and the debt burden. In addition, sub-Saharan Africa accounts for only 3 percent of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) and 1 percent of world trade.⁶

Despite its improving economic performance, Kenya is facing severe economic problems, including a national debt and the conditionalities of SAPs. In addition, it is being marginalized by the process of globalization, as liberalization and privatization increase the ownership of vital natural resources by non-Kenyans. Per capita incomes continue to decline and the incidence of poverty is almost 50 percent. Most of the households living in poverty are headed by women.⁷

Although women have been entering wage employment in large numbers, and now stand at 21 percent of the formal labor force, they are concentrated in the lower ranks of agricultural industries and forestry, and in the services. In the informal sector, about 78 percent of the enterprises are owned by men and 22 percent by women.⁸

Gender disparities continue to be manifested in education as in Sierra Leone. Despite basic structural changes in the curriculum and in enrollment of girls, there has been a steady decline in the proportion of women entering universities, leveling off at 27 percent in 1993. In institutions of science and technology, female enrollment ranges from 3 to 6 percent. No improvement has been noted for female participation in male-dominated areas. After more than thirty years of independence, girls continue to be overwhelmingly enrolled in secretarial and nursing courses in post-secondary institutions.⁹

Nigeria is one of the largest countries in Africa with a population estimated as approaching one hundred million. Its women have a strong and impressive record of female resistance through collective action against forces of colonialism, underdevelopment, and authoritarianism. Despite these facts, and its enormous wealth in oil, it has some of the most severe problems of poverty.

In Sierra Leone and elsewhere, gender inequality is reinforced by poverty, and women face several constraints in terms of access to resources, education, training, technology, and so forth. SAPs intensify inflation, high interest rates, and debt servicing burdens. Women are increasingly being involved in export production to increase foreign exchange earnings and debt repayments in conformity with the conditionalities of SAPs.¹⁰ To make matters worse, multinational corporations, especially oil conglomerates have been creating havoc for the economy, the environment, and women.

Nonetheless, Nigerian women have been fighting back and have challenged multinational corporations (such as Chevron Texaco and Shell) for promoting underdevelopment in their country. One poignant example of this comes from the Niger Delta. The people of the Niger Delta are among the poorest in Nigeria, despite living on the land that makes the country the sixth largest oil exporter in the world and the fifth biggest supplier of American oil imports.

The lack of development efforts in the Delta has prompted activists to challenge the oil corporations and to focus their demands for roads, water, electricity, and schools from multinational companies that are extracting and appropriating the wealth of the country. The protest of women has received worldwide media attention. In July 2002, Nigerian women staged a siege of an oil terminal to challenge their exploitative practices as well as their destruction of the environment, and to make demands for economic justice. The women wanted the company to provide jobs and promote development for their community.

According to the press, the unarmed women occupied the terminal, stopping exports and trapping about 700 workers inside.

Other teams of women shut down the docks and the helicopter pads. About 100 police officers and soldiers, armed with assault rifles, were sent into the terminal to protect the facility. They agreed to end their siege after the company offered to hire at least 25 villagers and to build schools and electrical and water systems.¹¹

In the situation of South Africa, underdevelopment has significant racial overtones that worsen the problem of poverty. The most profound division in South Africa remains a racial one maintained by de facto Apartheid. It is expressed in patterns of continuing inequality in housing, employment, and education between Blacks and Whites and the persistence of racial exploitation and oppression. Although gender is relevant and has led to the formation of alliances against Apartheid, women's experiences are shaped by the realities of a racial ideology.¹²

In the 1980s, some women's grassroots associations affiliated to the United Democratic Front, tried to organize around consumerist issues that were negatively affecting their livelihood. Foremost among these organizations were the Federation of Transvaal Women, the United Women's Congress in Western Cape and the National Organization of Women.

Black women in South Africa are still struggling to overcome the legacy of colonialism and Apartheid, both of which have severely destroyed their communities. De facto Apartheid is expressed in residential segregation, in depressed township slums, and in infertile homelands. It is a well-known fact that environmental degradation continues through locating waste dumps on land inhabited by Blacks. Toxic chemicals, including waste products like mercury from multinational corporations based in Europe and the United States are dumped on land inhabited by Blacks.¹³

In the case of South Africa, economic and corporate globalization reinforcing poverty among Blacks, especially among Black women in rural areas. They eke out a living on infertile land of little or no use to the dominant White economy. These *discarded people* are often short of food, clean water, and fuel. Health care, schools, power lines, and other services and facilities are insufficient or absent.

In addition, trade liberalization has resulted in rural women, who constitute the majority, being among the poorest in the country.¹⁴ As Pheko points out, trade liberalization is undermining the efforts of the post-Apartheid government in promoting gender empowerment for women.

Globalization and liberalization are challenging these rights of women all the time. In South Africa, the entry into the global market is making us more conscious, and apt to question whether these liberal trade regimes have not always used women's socio-economic status as a bargaining chip in terms of trade relations.¹⁵

Expansion of the informal sector is a feature of corporate globalization and this trend is evident all over Africa. This is compounded by contraction in the formal public sector and lack of skills for women for jobs in the formal sector. In South Africa, this sector is expanding and shows signs of weakness, instability, and vulnerability to downturns in the economy. Of the 3 million people in this sector, 60 percent

are Black women. In the formal labor market, the majority of Black women are domestics, agricultural workers, and low-level industrial workers.

Several associations, characteristic of the mutual-aid associations in Sierra Leone have also been operating among women in South Africa. They help advance their prospects in trade, provide protection from police harassment and assault, and facilitate access to markets and credit. The Self-Employed Women's Union in South Africa, founded in 1994, is an example of this.

In North Africa also, women have fought against the negative effects of underdevelopment. In Algeria, the history of women's mobilization for political and legal participation dates back to their pivotal role in the war of liberation against the French from 1954 to 1962. Since 1984, the passing of the restrictive Family Code has led them to focus their attention on more domestic matters as they lobby for its abolition. Since the later part of the last century, they have repeatedly challenged the violent attacks on women resulting from a fanatical and misogynistic brand of religious fundamentalism.

Embedded in their activism is recognition of the importance of promoting development for women in the areas of education and employment, and of the need to increase women's political participation, legal capacity, and empowerment. Associations such as S.O.S Women help women and children that have been rendered destitute and homeless as a result of divorce or other misfortune.¹⁶

In Algeria, corporate globalization and the emphasis on liberalization are adding economic pressures through SAPs that result in cutbacks in the social sector, underdevelopment, and dependency. Dependency relations with France have established a pattern of migration, involving men, women, and whole families that has resulted in greater loss of people.¹⁷ Algerian women, including migrant women, are building a network of solidarity and support with international women's groups. Associations such as the Collectif Maghreb Egalité 95 have developed the capacity take on broader international issues.

The Democratization–Authoritarianism Nexus

African women have seized the momentum of the current democratization movement in an attempt to open the engendered political spaces. Yet they face many problems when seeking to promote democratization and challenge authoritarianism. A comparative review reveals similarities as well as differences in their approaches, based on contextual and historical specificities.

The overall goal for democratization tends to resonate with women. These can be discussed under the following headings: authoritarianism, democratization, the role of the state, nationalism and religious fundamentalism.

Authoritarianism is reinforced by corporate globalization, which is undermining the sovereignty of many nation states in Africa and the Global South. It tends to reinforce women's secondary position in society and erode their political participation. There are many examples of women challenging authoritarianism dating from the colonial period. Examples include the famous 1929 women's war in Nigeria, and the participation of women in liberation movements and in the Mau Mau movement of Kenya against the British.¹⁸ Women continued to challenge authoritarian rule in the post-independence regimes of one-party governments and military rule.

With regard to the law, the rights of women have not always been upheld by colonial statutory laws that provided the judicial framework. For example, in Zambia, women have consistently lobbied for the abolition of all gender-based discriminatory laws that date to colonial times.

In Uganda, women's insistence led to the reform of the colonial-inspired constitution and to the establishment of affirmative action, which is still handicapped by the male domination of the political apparatus.¹⁹ In Eritrea also, the quota system has been criticized for not going far enough and does not have women in high-level positions.²⁰

In the South African situation, women have been constantly involved in challenging the authoritarianism of colonialism and Apartheid through numerous women's associations and trade unions. The Rural Women's Movement was a grassroots association whose main objectives included resistance to policies of forced removals, and to the Bantustans that deprived Blacks of South African citizenship during the Apartheid era. These women were mainly poor and depended on irregular remittances from male family members working in the mines as migrant laborers. Migrant workers were regularly treated with cruelty and toiled under oppressive conditions and the constant threat of dismissal and loss of income.

African women were among the most victimized under Apartheid and were relegated to the status of minors by law. As a result, they were among the most active in the resistance to Apartheid, both within and outside of Africa. In the early 1920s, the trade unions were the first organizations to provide women in the laundry, clothing, furniture, and baking industries with leadership roles. In 1913, the African National Congress (ANC), the main opponent to the Apartheid regime and now the ruling party, established the ANC Women's League.

The highly centralized and extremely authoritarian police state of the Apartheid regime, represented the most extreme example of White hegemonic dominance on the African continent. It legally sanctioned the institutionalized oppression of Blacks. Ironically, the Apartheid regime was considered democratic and patterned after Western democratic models of constitutional rule. Because of the legacy of racism and authoritarianism, the need for feminist struggles to consolidate a broad-based women's movement is complicated. This is because of the challenges facing women from diverse racial, class, ethnic, and geographical backgrounds. In my interviews with Black South African women, while conducting research in South Africa in 2001, the struggle against racism was regarded as priority, as many institutionalized forms of de facto Apartheid and economic oppression remain intact.

Although Apartheid has been legally abolished, South Africa remains a country of extreme contradictions. The economy is still dominated by Whites, who are in a position to take advantage of corporate globalization and its emphasis on privatization and liberalization. The vast majority of Blacks continue to live in poverty in the townships and rural areas.

Eighty percent of the land is still owned by Whites who constitute 14 percent of the population. Black women are even further marginalized in terms of their limited access to land and other productive resources, in addition to the structural violence evident in the economic oppression of Blacks. This explains why many Black women tend to reject feminism as a White American import that would dilute the Black liberation struggle.²¹

As many scholars have shown, women in Africa continue to campaign for gender equality within the framework of democratization. In Kenya, in addition to campaigning for a repeal of discriminatory laws, such as section 82 of the Kenyan Constitution women have insisted on other changes. These include demands that the government be more committed to affirmative action; that public officials who make derogatory remarks against women be disciplined; and that women be included in key decision-making positions.

Many of these groups, such as the National Council of Women of Kenya and the League of Women Voters organized voter education throughout the country and widely disseminated a booklet on women and democracy and on women's rights. The momentum for democratization also led to the repeal of section 2A of the Constitution in 1991, thus ending authoritarian one-party rule. It also opened the way for multiparty democracy and restored liberal democratic principles as envisaged in the rule of law. These included broad-based political participation, social justice, and the promotion of a free press.

As one of the largest pressure groups, women were able to take their issues to center stage in new policies, plans, and programs for democratization. Their demands included gender equality at all levels, including the government. In 1992, a National Convention was held in Nairobi that influenced almost all political parties to include women's issues in their constitutions and platforms as was the case of Sierra Leone.

Some political parties are regarded by scholars from Kenya as more gender-sensitive than others and might help to improve the situation in future elections. The Democratic Party is regarded as being more inclusive, by having women represented in all bodies of the party and in taking a strong constitutional stand against gender-based discrimination. Commitment to gender issues is one of the criteria for leadership in the party.

A review of women's political participation in Nigeria also shows that the low participation rate of women in politics has been chronic. In the 1998 Constitutional Assembly, there were 14 women elected or appointed as opposed to 565 men. Women have been active in political parties and campaigns and have lobbied for an end to military rule in Nigeria as well as in Sierra Leone.

As demonstrated in the Sierra Leone case, women insisted on linking democratization to conflict prevention and peace building as important aspects of development. However, women's campaigns for democratization and their participation in political parties do not guarantee them positions in government. The example of the 1991 election in Kenya also bears this out. In Algeria also, despite women's participation in political parties, which was viewed as essential for their cause, the 1992 elections yielded only 1.5 percent of female representation in the national legislative government.²²

Although some progress in democratization is being made, the pace has been slow. In South Africa, implementation of the recommendations of the Commission on Gender Equality has been difficult. This is because the different governmental ministries have different priorities and mandates, and are not often equipped to deal with gender issues. In addition, there is no effective monitoring machinery, and women in parliament who have formed caucuses, often have severe time constraints that prevent them from meeting regularly.

The Role of the State

Since the major agent of development is the state in many countries of the Global South, particularly in Africa, feminist analyses have focused on the role of the state in facilitating or impeding the advancement of women.²³ In most instances, the patriarchal nature of the state has tended to work against women's interests, except to the extent that the state can co-opt women's groups. This has often led to what has been termed bureaucratic feminism, a type of feminism that has official, rather than activist-driven proclivities and that is often promoted by the United Nations process and its "Women's Bureaus."²⁴

According to Odoul and Kabira, affiliation of women's associations with the state in Kenya, led to co-optation and domination by the KANU ruling party. The state undermined women's efforts by manipulating those in leadership positions and interfering with their autonomy and agenda-setting priorities.²⁵ In Kenya and elsewhere, women's bureaus have been criticized for tending to "ghettorize" women's issues.

There has also been a conflict of roles and responsibilities when the Women's Bureau attempts to usurp the position of major women's associations, such as the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK) and the Maendeleo Ya Wanawake (MYWO), which were set up to coordinate the work of women's associations.

At the same time, Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) are also being criticized for failing to set an agenda for women that would empower them, rather than reinforce gender roles. Tensions continue to exist between the Women's Bureau and some of the major women's associations that center the bureaucratization of the women's movement.

In Nigeria too, the state appears to have been influential in the activities of women's associations, especially through first ladies, a phenomenon that has been referred to by Addullah as "wifeism and activism."²⁶ The role of the state in agenda setting has been prominent, especially in the National Council of Women's Societies (NCWS), which mandates that its head should be the First Lady of Nigeria.

Other leadership positions tend to be confined to wives of politicians and bureaucratic and other high-ranking women. This has created many conflicts and contradictions within the group, as well as with other women's associations such as the Women in Development group, which was founded in 1983. The NCWS established a policy based on a vision of economic independence, self-reliance, gender equality, and sustainable development. This has been criticized for being less visible on feminist issues, related to reproductive rights, sexual harassment, and so forth.²⁷

The case of Sierra Leone represents a departure in terms of co-optation by the government in that the Women's Forum's main objective was to challenge the military government and bring about democratic change through the ballot. Women's wings of political parties on the other hand have tended to be more closely affiliated with the State.

The case of Tunisia offers an interesting deviation. Unlike many countries where the state has not taken the initiative to promote gender equality without strong pressures from women's groups, in Tunisia the state has been a leader and major player in the advancement of women. This is because progress has come about as a result of executive edicts rather than through a social movement, or women's pressure groups.

In 1956, President Habib Bourguiba banned polygamy and insisted on the education of girls. In 1987, President Ben Ali continued this trend by expanding women's rights and empowering them politically and socially. He established the Center for Research Documentation and Information on Women (CREDIF), which collects data and conducts studies on a number of issues affecting women's rights for the purpose of formulating policies and implementing programs. It also had a ministry of women's and family affairs, which was established to develop policies that would positively affect women and their families. It works closely with the National Council for Women and the Family.²⁸

The Tunisian case is an interesting study of the advantage of women mobilizing for change versus direct state intervention, which might undermine female activism and reduce the intensity of women's collective action. As a result, Tunisia is often regarded as having a weak women's movement and a weak civil society process. The state tends to discourage women's independent mobilization and to pre-empt their agenda. It has passed several laws that eliminated former restrictions on women.²⁹

This raises the question as to whether female emancipation that is given on a silver platter has the same value as one that results from feminist struggles. This point is underscored by the Tunisian film, "The Season of Men," directed by Monfida Tlathi. The film shows that, despite a political and social revolution, women did not achieve liberation.

One scholar has argued that despite efforts to create institutions that are progressive and that attempt to improve the status of women, the government has tended to hinder the actions of women's associations seeking to promote women's rights. In addition, the government does not fully acknowledge or validate many of these associations, thereby forcing women to function on an individual basis or through unofficial associations, and denying them the power to mobilize and to become effective.³⁰

Nevertheless, the National Union of Tunisian Women (UNTW) has a membership of over 135,000 women, with subregional and local branches and youth groups. It focuses on the promotion of women's social, economic, scientific, and cultural interests as well as increasing women's participation in decision-making and in the government.

The relationship between female parliamentarians and women's associations has often been complex as several studies show. Tamale's study of Uganda indicates that the relationship between female members of parliament and women outside of parliament was tenuous at best. She insists that "women parliamentarians should especially work with women activists in their efforts to equalize outcomes for women and men in all spheres."³¹

In Nigeria also, Amadiume remarks on the strong contrast between indigenous Igbo women's associations that showed a strong commitment to female solidarity and a unity of purpose, and many of the imported modern associations. She claims that "modern Nigerian history is typified by the exploitation of women's organizational ability by male-dominated political parties and female political careerists."³²

In South Africa, on the other hand, a number of women in parliament try to hang on to their leadership of women's associations, albeit with great difficulty. They have had recurring problems due to their affiliation with the State, and run the risk of being

co-opted and of giving priority to agenda-setting by the State. As Zulu puts it:

The task facing women in South Africa today is enormous. Nevertheless, a solid foundation has been established. It remains our task to mobilize more women into a united front, encourage debate on the formation of a women's movement, especially now that the Women's National Coalition has fulfilled its original mandate to draft a charter for women's rights. The majority of the women who were active before the formation of the Women's National Coalition are now all in Parliament, and this has left a gap.

We almost have to start from scratch in making sure that we have other women taking the place of those women who are in Parliament today. Many women, now in Parliament, do not want to let go of their positions that they had when they were outside the government. But it becomes difficult for them to split themselves into two and be able to run organizations outside of Parliament.³³

Controversies involving the State have also revolved around the degree of affiliation of women parliamentarians with political parties. Frene Ginwala, a feminist and speaker of the South African House of Parliament, cautioned against the possible loss of autonomy by being too involved with political parties, and has urged women to build a power base both inside and outside of the ANC, the ruling party.

Women's associations can and do have confrontations with the state. Tarrow defines contentious politics as the type of politics that occurs when ordinary people, often in league with more influential citizens, join forces in confrontation with elites, authorities, and opponents.³⁴ In Africa, there are many examples of women's collective action that would conform to contentious politics, both during the colonial era, and in more recent times.

However, there are also several examples where women are allied to the state through women's wings of political parties. In addition, affiliation of individual women leaders of associations with the government, as in the case of Constance Cummings-John and the Women's Movement in Sierra Leone, has involved women in helping to shape policies.

Nationalism

As seen in Sierra Leone, the West African Youth League and the Sierra Leone Women's Movement played a seminal role in the decolonization movement in Africa. During the nationalist movement prior to independence in Nigeria, market women were mobilized into powerful organizations and this was a leading factor in a political party's ability to control a certain area. Women's associations in Western Nigeria are among the oldest, largest, and most powerfully organized of all women's associations in the country.³⁵

In the postcolonial period, women's associations became involved in nation building and socioeconomic development, but politics remained dominated by men. The marginalization of women in politics was reinforced by a succession of military regimes, which promoted a strong male ethic, punctuated by brief periods of male-dominated civilian regimes that have come to define the State. Ironically, some military regimes in Nigeria have a record of appointing women to high decision-making positions that equals or surpasses the record of civilian governments. On the whole, however,

women are marginalized in political parties and in government regardless of whether it is a military or civilian government. Most women who aspire to political office tend to run as independent candidates.

Women's associations in Kenya also protested against British rule and policies that were destructive to the economy and culture. Among their targets were the imposed local government structures and ordinances, forced labor, hut and poll taxes, forced male migration, and the privatization of land. A series of laws and policies were instituted that led to intense resistance of forced labor on plantation, land theft, and violation of human rights by the colonial state.

Organized protests were held by African men and women, culminating in the Mau Mau guerrilla war of independence in the 1950s. Up to 5 percent of the forest guerrilla fighters of the Mau Mau were women and a larger number helped the war efforts by providing administrative and logistical support.³⁶

The protests against colonial rule strengthened women's movements in other ways. They contributed to a high degree of female militancy. Many women, as well as men, lost their rights to land. Many became heads of households with fewer resources and a heavier workload.

In order to reduce the tensions brought about by the anti-British liberation war of the Mau Mau, wives of colonial officers formed the MYWO in 1952. It later became a major women's association in mobilizing women for nation-building and socio-economic development in the post-independence period. Women's groups became a vital component of the mobilization of the population's potential and strengths for rapid development. About 80 percent of Kenya's cash economy has been attributed to cooperatives and women's groups.

In South Africa, nationalism took the form of the struggle against Apartheid. Women became active members of anti-Apartheid groups, such as the African National Congress, the Pan African Congress of Azania, the Campaign for Defiance Against Unjust Laws, Trade Unions, the Black Consciousness Movement, and so forth.

In addition, they set up their own associations, such as The Black Women's Federation. Their political efforts included not only campaigns against Apartheid, but also against Bantu education which prepared Africans for low level jobs. They also lobbied against the pass laws and forced removals. African women were actively involved in the Cato Manor uprisings, the Crossroads protests, the Soweto uprisings, and numerous other protests and campaigns. They were among the victims of the Sharpeville Massacre of 1960.

That same year, liberation movements such as the ANC and the PAC were banned, a move that severely restricted the political activities of African women.³⁷ In 1990, the Apartheid regime lifted the ban on liberation movements and entered an era of negotiations aimed at dismantling the Apartheid system.

This presented an opportunity for the opening up of new political spaces and building awareness, not only about national liberation, but also about gender issues. This momentum inspired what has been described as "a burgeoning women's movement" through which women insisted on putting gender issues on the national agenda for the new South Africa.

The Apartheid system had reinforced patriarchal values held by all groups in many respects. In his address to parliament in 1994, the year that marks the end of

de jure Apartheid, President Nelson Mandela recognized this and made the following statement:

The objectives of the Reconstruction and Development Program will not have been realized unless we see in visible and practical terms, that the condition of women has radically changed for the better and that they have been empowered to intervene in all aspects of life as equal members of our society.

In 1994, the Women's National Coalition, which is made up of ninety different women's associations, adopted the Women's Charter for Effective Equality. This attempt at unity was unreal, since Apartheid had divided women according to racial groups for over two generations. This called into question the very notion of "sisterhood." The experience of most African women with White women has been as exploited domestic servants.

The attempt at alliance building should not be interpreted as an example of female solidarity, or as an attempt at universalizing the feminist struggle. Rather, it was part of a process of mobilization against Apartheid, within an international climate that promoted a feminist agenda. It fuelled consciousness about feminist issues, which the emerging South Africa could not afford to ignore. The adoption of feminist issues at this opportune time was politically strategic, since the aim of the new South Africa was to eliminate racial discrimination. The institutional racism imposed by Apartheid was anchored on a patriarchal ideology supporting White supremacy.

The achievement of the Women's National Coalition was nonetheless spectacular in terms of lobbying and campaigning for female representation in government. The Women's League of the ANC was also influential in mobilizing women from other organizations to ensure a new constitutional order that would meet women's demands. Although much more needs to be done to achieve full equality, there have been some achievements. The first Speaker of the House of Representatives was a woman, Dr. Frena Ginwala.

The progress has continued and South Africa today is one of the most advanced countries in terms of female representation in high levels of government and in parliament. It was included among the 16 countries that have more than 25 percent of women in government in 1999. The percentage of women in parliament was 30 percent and the trend has continued.³⁸ South Africa became the fourteenth country in Africa to have women serve in the position of head of state, acting head of state, or deputy heads of state, through the appointment of a woman, Phumzile Mlambo-Ngouka, as Deputy President.

In the new South Africa, women are guaranteed equality under the law and have seized the opportunity in the democratization process to ensure full citizenship and a political process in which women are represented at all levels of political decision-making. In addition, institutions have been established to implement and monitor gender equality.

These include the Commission on Gender Equality, a focal point for women that is located in the office of the President of the country. The country has also enacted legal reforms to prevent discrimination in employment, provide maternity and other benefits, and protect women from domestic violence.

Despite these developments, implementation has been difficult, due to resource constraints and the lack of mechanisms to effectively monitor the gains made by women. At the local level, there is a quota of 50 percent representation by women designated by the ANC. However, this does not guarantee effective policies and programs for the advancement and empowerment of women. In addition, the establishment of the Office of the Status of Women is likely to be faced with problems of implementation or lead to the de facto ghettoization of women's issues in only one ministry.

In North Africa also, women advanced the nationalist cause and challenged colonial rule, the best known of which was the involvement of women in the Algerian war of liberation against France from 1954 to 1962. Almost 11,000 women took part in the war as combatants. The war was an opportunity for women to participate in a movement that has been described by Lazreg as a rational response to an otherwise irrational historical situation.³⁹

The struggle for national liberation, however, does not always guarantee women equality in the aftermath of the struggle. After the war, women were relegated to the background as traditional patriarchal attitudes re-emerged after the war. Nationalism did not always protect women. Despite their war efforts and the establishment of the Union of Algerian Women in 1963, the restrictive Family Code was passed in 1984.

Many scholars have observed that the Family Code contradicts both the national laws, which guaranteed equality to women, and the traditional laws, which ensured their protection. Instead, the Family Code established patriarchal dominance of men over women that included legalizing polygamy and establishing gender-based discrimination in matters relating to divorce, inheritance, matrimonial guardianship, and fundamental freedom. Since its enactment, many women's associations, political parties, human rights lawyers, and activists have been campaigning for its abolition.⁴⁰

The National Women's Coordination serving as an umbrella association has as its priority, the abolition of the Family Code. Other objectives include promoting the equal rights of women in education, employment, and political participation.

Religious Fundamentalism and Democratization

In northern Nigeria, where Muslims are predominant, women received the franchise only in 1978. Yet, in many ways, Islam provided opportunities for female political participation at an unprecedented scale. One party, the People's Redemption Party (PRP) appealed to the masses and women and stressed social justice, liberation, and human dignity, based on the principles of the Koran.

The party attracted a category of women comprising prostitutes and concubines known as "Karuwai" and was able to win the 1979 elections for Kano State, thereby setting in motion, women's political participation in the North. In the 1983 elections, it was the only party to name a woman as a presidential running mate.

Its radical platform raised awareness about the need for gender equality and the advancement of women. Its aims included programs for introducing legislation to abolish child marriage; to give protection to all women married under all laws; and to ensure that all female children have equal rights and opportunity in educational institutions.⁴¹

The Federation of Muslim Women's Associations in Nigeria (FOMWAN), founded in 1985, is an independent forum, from which Muslim women could examine gender issues relating to religion and women's roles in society in general. It emphasizes education and skills acquisition and conducts classes in adult literacy and primary education with an Islamic bias. It also runs nursing schools and centers for vocational education. It has pioneered a pedagogical approach and a methodology called "each one, teach one," which has been effective in building women's skills.⁴²

Religion has also played an important role in mobilizing women in North Africa. In general terms, these associations tend to have a strong feminist agenda aimed primarily at laws deriving from the interpretations of the Sharia and the Koran.

These laws have strong patriarchal proclivities, particularly in relation to family law and inheritance.

Although women's associations have tended to be class based, certain issues of common interest to women, such as campaigns against discriminatory family laws and the "family code" have mobilized all classes of women. Women have also taken collective action against religious fundamentalism.

Algerian women are among the best known for challenging religious fundamentalism that threatens to deprive them of their rights. They continue to fight a moral war against Islamic fundamentalism that targets women and advances a strict patriarchal order that is restrictive to women. A number of women have been subject to violent attacks and murders at the hands of religious fundamentalists.

As a result, "women have been forced into the forefront of fighting violence because many have been victims, either as specific targets or as a result of the killing of members of their family."⁴³ Some associations have been formed specifically to resist acts of violence and to help the victims. These include the Association of Solidarity and Support to Families and Victims of Terrorism.

Nationalist struggles and resistance to fundamentalism have usually been regarded as bearing some similarities, in that both are based on ideological beliefs and notions of superiority. A study by Amrane-Minne argues for a clear continuity between the struggle for independence and the mobilization of women against Islamic fundamentalism. She maintains that through their courage, Algerian women have become a symbol of resistance to religious fundamentalism. In this way, they use a variety of methods, including demonstrations, feminist writings, and the use of the media to get their message across.⁴⁴

According to Fades, women's activism appears to be transcending Algerian society in ways that defy the status quo and challenge the religious imperatives of the legislative process. She maintains that by calling for the repeal of the Family Code and discriminatory laws, and by demanding recognition of their status and rights as citizens, women are implicitly advancing their desirability for a secular state. According to her:

By aspiring to equality, women fundamentally refuse to accept oppression and necessarily pose the question of fundamental liberties; for the redistribution of power by institutional means, in a nutshell, the rule of law.⁴⁵

Summary

This chapter has shown how the main themes of this book have implications for other countries in Africa. The countries selected for special focus, have all experienced colonial rule and have been impacted negatively by the global political economy. Women's collective action continues to inspire efforts toward development and democratization. Underdevelopment and authoritarianism still pose many challenges that impede development and the quest for democratization. The situation of Sierra Leone is not unique in this regard. However, it has the added dimension of a ten-year civil war that occurred fairly recently and that has tended to intensify the challenge for women. The comparative review shows that the other countries have all faced armed conflict at some point of their history. However, even when a country is at peace, it can be confronted with ominous economic and political problems.

The war in Sierra Leone was not an isolated event. It was a phenomenon that had international dimensions, fuelled by conflicts over diamonds. Like many of the countries in Africa, Sierra Leone is also facing the oppressive conditions imposed by the global economy through the neoliberal agenda of corporate globalization and the conditionalities of SAPs.

The struggle to promote development and democratization has required collective action by women in many countries of Africa that go beyond gender concerns. As long as countries remain in protracted economic crisis fuelled by the global economy, the women's movement in Africa will be conditioned by exigencies that undermine society as a whole.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

COMPARATIVE INSIGHTS AT THE REGIONAL/PAN-AFRICAN AND INTERNATIONAL LEVELS

Introduction

Significant developments in regional and international cooperation have inspired women's collective action at the pan-African level, and this study would not be complete without a discussion of them. This is because of their impact on agenda setting and alliance building across the continent, and their link to the international women's movement. This chapter will explore the main themes of the book at the regional pan-African level and conclude with a reflection on the contribution of African women to the international women's movement.

The African Union (AU) places emphasis on the important role of women in promoting many of the objectives of the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD). Although NEPAD has been criticized for not involving grassroots organizations, especially women's associations, in its formulation, women have been lobbying for decision-making roles in the implementation of NEPAD and in the AU.

By operating at the regional level, pan-African women's associations hope to maximize their reach, amplify their objectives, and leverage larger resources and networks. They have developed strategies to overcome barriers and constraints imposed by both the authoritarianism of some governments and of corporate globalization that impact on development and the prospects for democratization.

The approach of intergovernmental bodies, such as the AU and the United Nations, to gender equality and the advancement of women, has been criticized for being too bureaucratic and government-controlled. Nonetheless, many of these pan-African associations work with United Nations organizations as a result of the women's world conferences and because of the funding opportunities provided by the United Nations. In addition, the United Nations, in general, especially the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) is increasingly stressing the goal of building partnerships with NGOs for international cooperation.

According to Viola Morgan, head of the Gender Program of the Regional Bureau for Africa of the UNDP:

The strength of these associations lies in their dynamism, commitment and resourcefulness. Many of them have evolved in response to some pressing issues that complement

what the governments may or may not be doing. Their ability to network at the national, regional, and international level and to mobilize resources are additional assets. Governments are often faced with competing priorities, some of which relate to urgent security issues. NGOs, especially women, are closer to the people and to the problems of development and are more inclined to act.¹

The Development–Underdevelopment Nexus

It is clear that pan-African women's associations have sprung up to face the challenges of development and underdevelopment. Without doubt, women continue to be the mainstay of most rural economies and the predominant players in the informal economy of the urban areas. The vulnerability of African economies to powerful global economic forces and faulty development policies become magnified at the regional level. These associations have played an important role in promoting women's economic participation and in challenging underdevelopment and environmental degradation. They also strive to promote development, especially in areas of entrepreneurship development, education, training, research on global and local political economies, access to technology, and information dissemination.

For example, the African Federation of Women Entrepreneurs (AFWE) facilitates cooperation among women entrepreneurs in Africa and internationally. It has affiliates in 45 countries and its membership consists of manufacturers and exporters of goods and services. Another association, ABANTU for development works in 19 African countries and focuses on development problems by building partnerships between women and men to overcome these problems. It aims to eliminate gender inequality by eradicating the cultural, legal, and political obstacles to women's attainment of equality and economic independence before the law and in society. Among its major activities are training in the area of policy analysis, economics, health care, leadership, the media, and environmental conservation.

The Greenbelt Movement founded in 1977 by Professor Wangari Maathai, an internationally renowned Kenyan scientist and Nobel Laureate for Peace, is one of the most well-known environmental women's associations in Africa. Its impact has been felt all over the world and it has spurred similar women-led tree-planting environmental associations and programs in other parts of Africa. It was founded in response to the plight of rural women in Kenya, where environmental degradation was rapidly leading to deforestation, forcing women to travel long distances for firewood. Soil erosion was also affecting the yield from their crops, leading to malnutrition. To make matters worse, pollution was contaminating their drinking water.

Twenty-six years after its founding, women of the Greenbelt Movement in Kenya had planted 15 million trees; run tree nurseries that generated income; and provided effective forestry management for their communities. According to Dr. Maathai and other leaders, the Greenbelt Movement has served as a mechanism for the empowerment of women.² It is credited with providing a forum for women to become creative and effective leaders and to change their environments for the better. They have also promoted public awareness about the linkages among food, energy, and health. Children learn about the Greenbelt Movement at school and small farmers have become more aware of the importance of agro-forestry.



Dr. Wangari Maathai of Kenya, winner of the 2005 Nobel Peace Prize, being congratulated by Kofi Annan, Secretary-General of the United Nations, a fellow Nobel Peace Prize Laureate. Courtesy: United Nations.

The Movement has also been politically active and has often come into conflict with the government's schemes for urban expansion that involve building of concrete structures in parks and commons. The Movement is well known for its passive resistance to such developments and has staged marches and protests that have sometimes led to arrests and police brutality. One such event involved the planting of trees at the Karura Forest, near Nairobi.

The Greenbelt Movement promotes the notion of planting trees as an act of promoting democracy. In 1998, Dr. Maathai stood as a candidate for the presidency of Kenya. Although she did not win, she established a place for women in Kenyan politics that linked nation building with ecologically sound and sustainable development. She is currently the deputy minister for environment.

A number of pan-African associations promote development through the media and communication. Some have increased women's access to information through various channels, including the Internet. The African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), which has a high international profile, is one such association. FEMNET was founded to strengthen the role of women NGOs in promoting gender equality and women's empowerment, through gender-sensitive policies and planning, equitable development, and capacity building. Comprised of a large number of women professionals, particularly in media, it publicizes its activities through the mass media, award ceremonies, exhibitions, and publications.³

A large number of associations promote development through education, skills development, and research. This is intended to overcome problems of underdevelopment related to illiteracy, the slow pace of educational equity, and lack of gender-relevant data for development. Although the gender gap is closing at the primary and secondary school levels in all regions of the world, women still lag behind in some countries of Africa and South Asia. It has been projected that the majority of the 866 million illiterates will consist of women living in Africa and South Asia in 2005. At the tertiary level and in decision-making positions in education, men outnumber women in most countries of the world.⁴

One of the associations working toward gender equality in education is the Forum for African Women Educationalists (FAWE), which operates in 31 countries. Its goal is to promote grassroots activism and mobilization to increase the demand for substantial improvements in female education. Its membership is comprised of professional women involved in education as teachers and administrators, and policy makers. Its advocacy involves challenging gender-based discrimination in education, which includes stereotypical beliefs that investing in women is a waste of money.

Educating girls and women is the single most important investment that yields maximum returns for development. The infant mortality rates decrease, children have a higher probability of getting a good education and most importantly, women become generators, which increased the economic base of the family. The most important issue in any country is the number of girls that have access to education and the quality of education they receive as measured by levels of retention and performance.⁵

FAWE conducts research on the impact of official policies on female education and tries to evaluate ways of using resources more efficiently, thus enabling more girls

to receive adequate education. It is engaged in advocacy for educational reform and for an end to gender-based discrimination through its publications, the media, and scholarships. It also gives awards for innovative approaches to the promotion of female education. FAWE has established links to other women's associations engaged in similar activities as well as with international organizations such as the United Nations Educational, Social and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

The association also works with many partners, including the Female Education in Mathematics and Science in Africa Association (FEMSA) in increasing the levels of education of women in Africa. The aim of FEMSA is to improve the participation and performance of girls in science, mathematics, and technology at the primary and secondary levels. Its activities include reforming the curriculum, teacher education, training, and improvement in testing to ensure greater participation and better test scores in these subjects for girls as well as boys.

The performance record increasingly shows that although boys, in general, perform better than girls, the failure rate was high for both genders. Many of the schools did not have the basic necessities for a good education and often lacked facilities and equipment, as well as textbooks in science and mathematics. According to FEMSA, poverty is a major factor in the failure of students in these subjects.⁶ This underscores the fact that the underdevelopment and impoverishment of many African countries is a major factor in poor educational performance of pupils, especially girls.

Some associations are engaged in conducting research and in analyzing the problems of development and its gender implications. The Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) analyzes the problems of underdevelopment from a historical and global perspective. AAWORD's mission includes decolonizing research, which for the most part has served and responded to needs outside of Africa and centering African priorities. It also advocates for the transformation of gender relations and the social conditions of underdevelopment.

It has organized continent-wide research projects on democratization, globalization, the impact of the HIV/AIDS epidemic on women, and the role of young women in research and development. The ultimate aim is to build a powerful women's movement that links human rights to the theory and practice of development and making visible and effective, the contribution of African women to development. AAWORD regards feminism as an ideological, social, and political movement, whose ultimate goal is the fundamental transformation of the existing social structures based on patriarchal values.

AAWORD also seeks women's empowerment and full participation in all stages and at all levels of the political power structure. It regards politics as an all encompassing and democratic process. To this end, it emphasizes the fact that feminism can be an agent of economic and social change and can advance our understanding of the relationship between gender subordination and human development.⁷

Akina Mama wa Africa which is Swahili for "solidarity among African women," is a pan-African association that emphasizes training for development and policy reform. It aims "to create space for African women to organize autonomously, identify issues of concern to them and speak for themselves. It also seeks to provide solidarity, support, awareness and to build links with African women active in the areas of their own development."⁸

It is based in London with a regional secretariat in Uganda, and has branches in other parts of Africa. The association established the African Women's Leadership Institute (AWLI) to encourage and train sufficient numbers of women for informed and enlightened leadership that will ultimately promote a progressive African women's development agenda. Training is provided in organizational skills, feminist leadership, and policy-related advocacy. It is convinced that the development of a feminist constituency among the next generation of African women leaders is essential to the future success of the African women's movement.

The Democratization–Authoritarianism Nexus

Associations operating at the pan-African level give women a chance to maximize their influence on political processes in the African region as a whole. Many of them promote the empowerment of women by seeking to advance the process of democratization and to influence policies toward greater social and gender equality in political decision making. A number of them have established alliances with international women's associations and regularly attend international meetings.

One of the most prominent pan-African women's associations working to advance democratization and to challenge authoritarianism is the Women, Law and Development in Africa (WILDAF), based in Harare. It is a women's network dedicated to promoting democratization and human rights for women. It also seeks to strengthen strategies which link law and development with an increase in women's political participation.

The network brings together over 150 associations in 22 countries. It also advocates and supports programs on violence against women. WILDAF played an important role in mainstreaming women's rights into the African Charter on Human and People's Rights.

The Pan-African Women's Liberation Organization (PAWLO) aims to create awareness about the role of pan-Africanism and African women in liberation struggles. It is an outcome of the Congress of Pan African Organizations held in Kampala, Uganda in 1994. It develops networks with similar associations in Africa and in the African Diaspora and conducts workshops in training and skills building for political participation.⁹

The Study and Research Group on Democracy and Economic and Social Development in Africa (GERDDES) is based in Benin, with branches in 21 other countries. It is charged with promoting and consolidating democracy in Africa. It conducts training seminars aimed at developing the capabilities of women politicians, especially at the local level. It has been credited with the large turnout of women rural voters in the Senegalese presidential election of 2000. GERDDES has also had some success in Mali, a country that has been subject to military rule for more than two decades.

Although all of these associations have development objectives some have taken on the challenge of the two themes in a decisive manner. Included in their activities is political participation to promote democratization, conflict prevention, and peace building. They also advocate and have activities for economic empowerment, gender budgeting, media advocacy, communication, and research for development and

education. On the international level, they are building alliances with other women's associations to combat problems stemming from international economic policies that promote underdevelopment.

Although the Forum for Women in Democracy (FAWODE), based in Uganda, has a national origin, its impact has been significant outside of Uganda. It emerged out of a two-decade armed struggle, based on the belief that women's political participation was essential to the ending of conflicts in Uganda and the subregion.

After two decades of war, 51 women who were part of the 284 members of the new Constituent Assembly working on a new Constitution, formed a Women's Caucus. They joined forces with youth, workers, and disabled persons in pushing for equality between men and women under the law, in the new Constitution and its successive bills adopted by the Ugandan Parliament. In time, The Women for Action for Development Organization joined them to form a new association called the FAWODE.

The association has held numerous "Gender Dialogues" ranging from agricultural subjects to health and education. It gives voice to grassroots women through the media and in bringing them in touch with policy makers. It aims to strengthen the skills and capabilities of women for effective political participation, electioneering, and decision-making. Its activities include guaranteeing women one-third of the local council seats; offering courses for women councilors on the legislative process; and training of parliamentarians.

It also organizes workshops for trainers at the national and subregional levels. Emphasis is placed on policy reform relating to land tenure and family law. These are areas of special concern to women, who have been restricted by gender-biased policies and laws from contributing fully in to shaping new national democracy.¹⁰

FAWODE's impact on the subregion has been significant. For example, its candidates' training package, combined with its Parliamentarian's Training Project have been successfully applied to winning seats for women from all socioeconomic groups in Uganda and in other countries as well. This training package is now being used by women political candidates in countries of the subregion, such as Malawi, Namibia, Rwanda, South Africa, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, and Botswana.

Among the problems cited by FAWODE are resource constraints that have hampered its activities at networking in the subregion. Despite these problems, it is forging ahead, strengthening old activities, and initiating new ones. Although it is difficult to assess its full impact, especially of new activities, it shows a generally positive trend in building women's capacity for political participation toward democratization.

The Women's Development Foundation (WDF) is a South African-based NGO that also aims to increase women's political participation leadership in decision-making bodies. While the main focus of its activities are in South Africa, it has also worked with women public officials throughout East and Southern Africa, including Uganda, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Botswana, and Kenya. It also works with men and holds training sessions for both male and female local councilors and parliamentarians in constituency building, assertiveness, and gender sensitization.¹¹

The association has been innovative in the concept, plan, and implementation of electoral rules, procedures, and management. For example, it seeks to alleviate cultural obstacles and stereotypes about women's roles in society that impede their participation in politics by using indigenous methods of communication as well as

the media. It also tries to surmount practical obstacles to women's participation, such as transportation to polling stations and organizes child-care services on the day of elections. The Foundation initiated the 50/50 quota system for political parties to promote gender equality in the selection of political candidates. It also lobbies the South African Independent Electoral Commission to make political parties accountable in meeting this target.

Despite the difficulties of finding an appropriate framework for regional corporation, it has had some successful collaborative activities with other countries. This resulted in some of the gains by women in elections in Botswana, Tanzania, and Uganda.

Emang Basidi is another important political association with impact that goes beyond its national boundaries. Although based in Botswana, it has successfully collaborated with women's associations in Namibia, South Africa, and Tanzania. Bolstered by its motto, "Stand Up for Women," it works to heighten awareness of gender-specific issues and to promote the political empowerment of women. Since 1986, it has been a strong advocate for women's legal rights and has aggressively lobbied for legal reform.¹²

Prior to the 1994 parliamentary elections, Emang Basidi elevated and expanded its activities to include a broad-based and multifaceted "Political Education Project." The project aimed to increase the level of women's representation in elected office and include women's rights and issues on political platform of parties. It also supported activities to educate women on the link between voting and improving their living conditions and to promote the awareness of women's under-representation in politics.

Its "Vote for Women" campaign has successfully mobilized public opinion in favor of gender equality in government and sparked the interest of political parties as well. Its voter education workshops have been held frequently, involving sessions in which voters are able to question candidates and learn the true meaning of democracy and accountability which go beyond mere voting. It produced a "Democracy/Voter Education Manual" in conjunction with the Women's Development Foundation of South Africa.

Training programs are organized for women local councilors and members of parliament; women's wings of political parties and women decision-makers in government, parastatals, and in the private sector. Its curriculum includes the following: learning about the structures and procedures of local government, including the relationship between local and national governance; lobbying, coalition building, gender analysis, and gender budgeting; delivering constituency services and organizing programs with the media.

As a result of its activities, the number of women Members of Parliament in Botswana has doubled from 9 to 18. As such it has contributed to enlarging the pool of role models for young women, not only in Botswana, but also in the subregion.

Conflict Prevention and Peace Building

Women form a substantial percentage of the people involved in peace movements in Africa. As a result of the proliferation of armed conflicts in many countries in Africa,



Sarah Daraba Kaba of the Mano River Women's Peace Network of West Africa (second from left) with other members of the Mano River Women's Peace Network. Courtesy: UN Photo/Stephanie Hollyman, New York.

a number of women's associations have emerged to promote conflict prevention and peace building at the pan-African level. They often work behind the scenes and away from the limelight of the media, which tends to focus on the activities of men in situations of conflict and in peace negotiations.

As one of the most affected victims of war, women have a vested interest in peace. In addition, the task of caring for the sick and wounded imposes additional responsibilities on women that continue long after the wars have ended. Women's associations and peace networks have been active in almost all the areas of conflict, especially in Rwanda, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Mali, Ethiopia, Mozambique, Angola, South Africa, Uganda, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.

According to some of the leaders of associations interviewed, peace building ideally should encompass a preventive and sustained strategy applicable before, throughout, and after the conflict. Despite the tendency to exclude women from peace-building efforts, there are several encouraging examples of women's associations working for peace at a pan-African level.

Among these is the Federation de Réseau des Femmes Africaines pour la Paix (FERFAP) founded in response to the genocide in Rwanda that left 60 percent of the adult female population widowed. It promotes education for peace through workshops, adult literacy, and non-formal education for children, whose education had been affected by armed conflict. The association also works through traditional community and council procedures to see that justice is done and that the 125,000 war prisoners awaiting trial in Arusha pay for their crimes against humanity.¹³

Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS) was founded by African women leaders after the 1995 World conference on Women in Beijing. Based in Geneva, Switzerland, it works on peace-building programs throughout Africa and in close collaboration with the AU, the Economic Commission for Africa, and women's associations. It was created in response to "the explosion of violent conflicts tearing apart the fabric of society in Africa" and to advance the implementation of the Beijing Platform for Action. Their objectives include giving value to women's initiatives and enhancing their capabilities and rights as fully fledged participants in peace making and peace building. It has supported women's peace efforts in Burundi, Sierra Leone, and Liberia.¹⁴ The Mano River Women's Peace Network of West Africa (MARWOPNET) which operates in Sierra Leone and Liberia is affiliated to FAS.

An international conference was organized in South Africa in 1997 on "Leadership in the Burundi Peace Process." Women from Burundi had the opportunity to discuss and analyze the historical causes and consequences of the conflict. From their perspective, the conflict was a result of colonial rule that instituted notions of ethnic superiority and discrimination.

While large-scale ethnic killings did not seem to have occurred during the colonial period, the advent of German and Belgian rule cultivated the notion of superiority of the Tutsi over the Hutu. Because all those in management positions and in the universities during the colonial administration were Tutsi, the groundwork was laid for the mechanism that perpetuated this discrimination following independence.¹⁵

FAS identifies poverty as a major factor in preventing the development of pluralism and democracy from becoming a reality. Poverty is viewed as being responsible for the

social injustices that provoke war. FAS sees economic vitalization as an essential complement to the peace process. It considers the war in Burundi as “war against poverty.”¹⁶

This appears to be in keeping with a study by UNIFEM that argues that although women and men may bring their interests and ideological proclivities into the peace process, their perspectives and impacts are different. The study argues that women’s understanding of social justice and of the deleterious impact of wars on development can influence peace negotiations so that they can produce more constructive, inclusive, and sustainable outcomes.

The absence of women from the process results in setbacks to the development of society at large and undermines democracy.¹⁷

There are many factors contributing to armed conflict in Africa of which underdevelopment and poverty play a major part. Also of importance is the unjust economic world economic system being propelled by corporate globalization that is destroying many of the economies of Africa. This has become reinforced by the sale of arms and illegal drugs used by rebels and insurgents.

The Contribution of African Women to the International Women’s Movement

One of the most important ways in which African women have contributed to the international women’s movement is by emphasizing and expanding the agenda of development. This included giving emphasis to the negative impact of the global political economy on African countries and bringing it to the attention of the international community.

In addition they have helped to promote a rights-based approach to development that is now considered a *sine qua non* to the advancement of women. The right to development is now accepted as a basic human right. This has reinforced the need to address the negative impact of the international political economy on African countries. This is particularly marked by the continuing *de facto* debt burden, SAPs, and corporate globalization. Many Plans of Action and Declarations emanating from International meetings have sought to address the negative impact of the global economy on many countries, especially in Africa.

Concerns about the impact of the global economy have also led to African women forming alliances with other associations from the Global South, since they have not been regarded as priority by the majority of feminists from the Global North. As a result, development problems emanating from the global economy have tended to assume a low profile in the international women’s agenda.

Some associations of women from the Global South, such as the AAWORD have made the challenge of the global economy their primary focus. They have contributed significantly to revising the paradigms used to study gender relations and women’s location in the international economy.

AAWORD emphasizes the neocolonial nature of research on African women and analyzes the negative impact of the global political economy associated with the



Nkosazana Dlamini Zuma, Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of South Africa, addressing participants at the Forty-Ninth Session of the Commission on the Status of Women, today at UN Headquarters. Courtesy: UN Photo/Mark Garten, New York.

burdens of debt, SAPs, and neoliberal policies, such as privatization.¹⁸ It has organized conferences against the negative effects of globalization. It urges African women to become actively involved in the assessment of the Highly Indebted Poor Countries Initiative (HIPC) of international financial institutions:

It is thus time for us to launch an African women's movement that goes beyond monitoring the World Bank's commitment to women, but engages itself with monitoring the international financial institutions that are actively contributing to mortgaging women's well-being. In so doing, we may need to recall that the Bretton Woods Institutions—the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the General Agreements on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) founded in 1944, are indeed agencies of the United Nations. For that reason, we would make them accountable to women's needs, despite the fact that unlike the United Nations General Assembly, they do not function on the principle of "one country, one vote" but on the basis of "one dollar, one vote."¹⁹

Other pan-African women's associations, such as ABANTU for Development, have also criticized the inimical consequences of corporate globalization. In a statement issued at a regional meeting held in Cape Town, South Africa in 1996, the association called for joint campaigns against the World Bank and the IMF and other financial institutions:

to restructure their economically unsound, undemocratic and dehumanizing policies and programs.²⁰

Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN) was founded in 1984 as an alliance of women activists, researchers, and policy makers of women in the "Third World" or Global South. It was inspired by AAWORD.²¹ It is an international feminist network that promotes critical perspectives on development and challenges the unequal and androcentric model of development that is propelled by market forces that impoverish many nations, social groups, and women.²²

DAWN is committed to developing an alternative framework and method to attain the goals of economic and social development, based on the principles of justice and freedom from all forms of oppression by gender, class, and nation. It maintains that existing structures of domination are embedded in a colonial heritage that perpetuate the objectives of powerful nations and social classes.

As founding members of DAWN, African women have helped to develop a position that views existing global economic and political structures as producing inequalities between classes, genders, and ethnic groups, at international, regional levels, and national levels. As researchers and activists, they seek to build alliances with women at the grassroots level. DAWN has branches in Africa, holds regular research meetings on topics dealing with subjects like globalization, the feminist movement, the state, and governance.

Much of DAWN's global advocacy involves building partnerships with other associations and networks to achieve reform of international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF. It also advocates for the accountability of governments to the commitments made at international meetings and Plans of Action on gender equality, as well as on poverty alleviation.

African women have also contributed to the decolonization project in general, as delegates to international conferences and as members of movements for nationalism and independence. The struggle against Apartheid was another important contribution. International solidarity among feminists, inspired by African women, contributed in part to bringing down the Apartheid regime in South Africa. The United Nations Commission on the Status of Women established an agenda item on "Women and Apartheid," which has led to several agreements opposing *de jure* and *de facto* Apartheid and proposing guidelines for racial equality. The United Nations Conference Against Racism held in South Africa in 2001 also bolstered the struggle of women against *de facto* Apartheid.

Individual African women have also made important contributions to the international agenda and the international women's movement. [Dr. Professor Wangari Maathai, winner of the 2004 Nobel Prize for Peace, is not only the first African woman to win the Nobel Prize, but is also an icon for both intellectual and activist leadership in the international women's movement.] She is committed to women's empowerment at the grassroots level and works to protect the environment against degradation, which can be a central point of conflict. In the area of legal equality, one of the first female Supreme Court justices in the world, Justice Annie Jiajge from Ghana was among the pioneers who contributed to the drafting of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW).

In the 1980s and 1990s, a number of African women involved in the work of the United Nations for gender equality and the advancement of women made noteworthy contributions. For the fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995, Mrs. Gertrude Mongella of Tanzania served as the Secretary-General of the conference. She is now the president/speaker of the parliament of the AU. Ambassador Marvat Tallawy of Egypt was a member of the Commission on the Status of Women that drafted the Declaration on Violence Against Women. Mrs. Shafika Selami-Meslem from Algeria served as Director of the Division for the Advancement of Women and deputy secretary-general of the Third World Conference on Women in Nairobi in 1985.

Several other African women have contributed in a number of ways to the work on the advancement of women within the United Nations System and have also contributed to improving the situation for women within these organizations. These include Dr. Achola Pala Okeyo of Kenya, Ms. Thelma Awori of Uganda, Dr. Felicia Ekejiuba of Nigeria, Ms. Philomena Kintu of Tanzania, Ms. Yasmine Fall of Senegal, Ms. Rachel Mayanja of Uganda, Dr. Laketch Dirasse of Ethiopia, Ms. Viola Morgan and Dr. Filomina Steady, both of Sierra Leone.

Despite these international and collective efforts, government-inspired policies for gender equality and for the advancement of women have their limitations. African female scholars are among those that have criticized state-oriented and intergovernmental approaches that can limit the effectiveness of International Plans of Action and Conventions. These international approaches are increasingly being viewed as examples of bureaucratic and state sponsored feminism that tends to accommodate rather than challenge patriarchy.²³

For this reason, the emphasis on development alternatives and the challenge of the global economic system by African women and women from the Global South have been important for the international women's agenda. Without doubt, the international

women's movement would not be the same without the contributions of women from Africa.²⁴ Conceptual and theoretical advancement have been influenced both by the contributions of AAWORD, WILDAF, FEMNET, FAS, and DAWN, among others.

The contributions to the agenda on development, human rights, and the elimination of racism by African women's associations and individual women from Africa have been significant. Through collective action and individual effort, women in Africa are contributing to the transformation and empowerment of women's lives, not only in Africa but also internationally.

Summary

Women's associations at the pan-African level expand the opportunities for collective action by women. They reflect the importance of the themes of this study at the regional level, since some of the problems of underdevelopment and authoritarianism transcend national boundaries. They also facilitate the development of formal and informal networks and strategies to overcome barriers and other constraints that might impede action at the national level. Many of the pan-African associations promoting peace, such as FAS are able to avoid polarizations and tensions at the national level and can offer neutral and safe spaces for resolving conflict.

A number of problems transcend national boundaries. These include cross-border conflicts, environmental degradation, cross-border trade, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, and corporate globalization. As has been demonstrated, conflict prevention and peace building have gender implications, some of which can best be addressed at the pan-African level. Regional associations can also expand the potential for development and democratization by maximizing their resources and exchanging ideas and information that can promote a more active role for women in economic and political decision-making.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

CONCLUSION

Engendering and Enhancing Development and Democratization

This book has sought to answer the following questions: What is the significance of women's collective action in Africa? What does this tell us about the relationship between development and underdevelopment? What is the role of women in promoting democratization, given the legacy of authoritarianism at national and international levels? How does the social fabrication of women's positions and roles determine collective identities, the nature and function of women's associations, and their institutional manifestations? How do women seek to empower themselves collectively and for what reason? What is the contribution of African women to the international women's movement?

To answer these questions, I have used a conceptual model based on two explanatory themes, namely the development–underdevelopment nexus and the democratization–authoritarianism nexus. The link between these processes represents a *nexus of action and reaction*. I argue that it is this nexus that becomes the main theater for their collective action. It is in the dynamic interface of the two themes that the symbolic and material significance of women's collective action are expressed.

A review of relevant theoretical frameworks showed that no single theoretical approach would suffice. What is required is an eclecticism that draws insights from development theories, especially dependency and theories of the political economy, feminist theory, and social movement theory.

Dichotomous models were found limiting and required more flexible interpretations. This was particularly true of the public–private debate and rigid social distinctions implied by the term “gender.” For example, rather than being a representation of the devaluation of women's roles in social reproduction, “motherhood,” an integral function of the private sphere, can be a mobilizing force for development and democratization. Studies from Sierra Leone, Nigeria, and Kenya bear this out.

Similarly, the private sphere does not constitute an exclusive female domain. In fact, it is constantly being invaded by the “public” hand of the state in determining laws that regulate marriage and family matters. Colonial-based statutory laws are notoriously discriminatory against women and their repeal has been a significant factor in female mobilization in many countries.

A “collective empowerment index” appears to be the missing link for bridging the gap between what Longwe and Clarke describe as a lack of correlation between a “women’s self-reliance index” linked to individual capacity and “women’s empowerment index” that measures levels of female representation in political and managerial positions.¹

Empowerment through collective action tends to facilitate the movement of women from self-reliance to empowerment in terms of political and managerial positions, not only in Sierra Leone, but also in other countries and at the pan-African level. However, the gender bias in the body politic and women’s generally low numbers in government can prevent them from being effective after they get into political office.

In exploring both the essentialist and the post-modernist paradigms, it could be argued that, given the hegemonic and universalizing nature of corporate globalization, essentialist and modernist realities continue to be relevant. Despite their diverse origins and social locations, women of the Global South have tended to act collectively and in an essentialist manner when resisting the negative, universal, and totalizing impact of the global political economy.

They have been among the activists in the anti-globalization movement and in challenging the authoritarian and undemocratic proclivities of multinational corporations and the international financial institutions, such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the World Trade Organization (WTO). Through collective action, associations like Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD) and Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN) have sought to promote alternative approaches to development that are more humane, egalitarian and that are based on advancing the welfare of people, rather than accumulating profits.

The domination of economic structures, and the exploitative nature of the neo-colonial post-independence period are clearly being reinforced by corporate globalization. These events construct gender relations in a manner that has reinforced women’s disadvantages in the economic, political, and social spheres. This leads to the further exclusion of women from the structures of power and to the devaluation of their contributions.

Much of women’s activism through collective action is in response to the phenomenon of global economic domination. As this study has shown, women have been challenging structures of power and demanding access to decision making for many years. In addition, they have been constructing alternative avenues for power through leadership in associations; developing alternative mechanisms for capital accumulation; and promoting democratization and a culture of peace. In some cases, they have had success but in most instances they are struggling against formidable odds.

As has been demonstrated, these associations have the capacity to transform themselves into politically active entities, individually or collectively to challenge exploitative economic conditions and gender-based hierarchies. Almost always, however, their agenda is not limited to women or gender issues, but have a larger socio-centric objective to transform society through development and democratization.

With regard to Sierra Leone, the in-depth study of over eighty women’s associations in Freetown supports the thesis that women’s collective action seeks to accomplish

two main overlapping objectives. One is to promote development while resisting underdevelopment, and the other is to promote democratization while challenging authoritarianism. In this process, women seek to empower themselves collectively as well as to transform their societies.

Mobilization and agenda setting in Sierra Leone are influenced to a large extent by primary group ties of kinship, ethnicity, and community. However, associations operating at the national level as umbrella associations, federations, and spontaneous movements for development and democratization, tend to cut across primary group ties and to be representative of a more diverse group.

The concern of women over larger development-oriented goals and issues of democratization and citizenship has taken priority over narrow feminist goals. Feminist quests for gender equality in terms of jobs and political positions can sometimes be viewed as being too individualistic and self-centered and as a luxury, given the major challenges of underdevelopment and poverty. Instead, objectives are broadly defined and generally in the main goals of promoting development and democratization. The country has ratified the *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women*, making women's legal rights guaranteed by law in a technical sense. However, compliance remains a challenge, due largely to problems of underdevelopment. Translating international laws into domestic legislation and enforcing them can be hampered by the paucity of resources.

Sierra Leone's recent history of political upheavals and a rebel war has helped to shape the priorities of these associations and has intensified the quest for development and democratization, both of which are viewed as interrelated. Women have been in the forefront of the movements for both development and democratization that incorporate, rather than centralize, gender equality and the advancement of women.

The real and potential contributions of women's associations have been significant in many areas. Among these is their function as shadow development agencies contributing to many development projects, including large-scale ventures, such as the building of schools, orphanages, collectives, and clinics.

They have also helped to promote an informed and active female citizenry and have kept women abreast of civic matters and of events on the political landscape. Through these efforts, they have increased awareness about the important role of women in development and have influenced many policy changes toward the establishment of a National Policy for Women. Women's needs, concerns, and aspirations are now articulated at several ministerial levels and in National Development Policies and Plans.

The development of female human resources and the building of women's skills and legal capacity to a large extent have been due to the work of women's associations. They have also enriched the social, cultural, and recreational life of Freetown through their fund-raising activities and public events. These associations serve as the conscience of society and have often advocated against a number of social problems including the high cost of living, unemployment, crime, and militarization. They have established programs to combat the increasing school dropout rate for girls and the rehabilitation of women and girls affected by the war.

Regardless of size or membership composition, almost all associations pursue interests that pertain to society as a whole. These *socio-centric interests* can and often

include "practical women's interests" and "strategic gender interests." They often take the form of political, economic, and educational empowerment; alleviating poverty; providing mutual aid; promoting philanthropic objectives for the less fortunate; and improving their social, cultural, spiritual, and personal well-being.

Their weakness lies primarily in their generally low level of funding, which imposes resource constraints and limits their effectiveness. Cultural attitudes toward women and gender biases also tend to impede their work, especially when dealing with entrenched bureaucracies and the military. Some associations are plagued with structural weaknesses that stem from role conflicts between the leadership and the rank and file, and personality conflicts among the leadership. Internal problems of management have also surfaced from time to time, especially in the larger associations, leading in a few cases to factions being formed or splinter groups separating from the main body.

By far the greatest challenge is that which operates within the constraints of a colonial legacy and the hostile international political economic system led by corporate globalization. These forces work against development and democratization and undermine the welfare and well-being of African peoples of both genders.

The explanatory themes were then examined in other countries, namely Nigeria, Kenya, South Africa, and Algeria, representing the four subregions of Africa. In particular, similarities were found in terms of the impact of corporate globalization and protracted recession in creating and reinforcing underdevelopment and poverty. To a large extent, women employed comparable strategies of resistance to underdevelopment. All the countries face similar challenges to democratization. These were apparent in the relationship with the state, the role in nationalism, and the impact of religion and fundamentalism on democratization.

This comparative insight was further extended to women's associations operating at the regional/pan-African level. These continent-wide associations maximize the objectives, activities, and resources of those that operate at the national level. They also help to coordinate and harmonize agendas that are of priority to the African region. An analysis has also been made of the contribution of African women to the international women's movement.

One striking feature of the pan-African women's associations is their tendency to have an agenda that gives a higher profile to feminist concerns in the narrow sense of promoting gender equality. Although they are also promoting development and democratization, they tend to work more closely with international feminist movements and international organizations that are more inclined to promote gender equality above other issues. Since much of their funding comes from international sources that sometimes impose their own priorities, these associations have been inclined to align their agenda-setting priorities with those of their international donors.

The driving force behind the themes of this book is a critique of the dominant model of development, based on economic and political liberalization. Instead of producing development and democratization, it has fostered underdevelopment and authoritarianism. It is the tension between the ideals and realities of the international political economy and its national and local manifestations that has defined, promoted, and circumscribed women's collective action.

Through this process women seek to empower themselves and to develop their own brand of African feminism, with its altruistic and humanistic overtones. In this feminism factors such as colonialism, Apartheid, structural racism, and the international political economy are central.

Women engage in collective action to maximize the social capital generated, not only from new opportunities, such as the international women's movement and the new momentum for democratization, but also from their traditional modes of mobilization. In addition, because the nature of power introduced through colonialism excluded them, they mobilize to capitalize on the new political spaces opened by the global momentum for democratization.

The study illustrates one of the main arguments of the book, that women's associations are primarily shadow development agencies, providing goods and services that are either minimally provided by governments or not provided at all. This is a characteristic symptom of underdevelopment, inspired by a colonial legacy that exploited Africa's resources, but failed to build structures for development. The postcolonial period has continued this legacy into the new millennium. It has been marked by dependent economic relations and the marginalization of Africa in the process of corporate globalization.

The objectives and actions of women's associations are not limited to gender issues. Given the reality of oppressive global economic forces and the mounting poverty faced by the majority of women, narrow feminist concerns pale in the face of the material and existential conditions of women and their families that continue to deteriorate.

My study has shown that women's interests are socio-centric and that women's rights include the rights to development. The challenge for development is underdevelopment that profoundly undermines not only women's rights, but also the rights of all members of society. Democratization is essential in restoring these rights and is a critical aspect of development, since it involves challenging authoritarianism, including the authoritarianism of the global economy.

As this study has shown, African women have been in the forefront of the international women's movement. Furthermore, they have made substantial contributions as governmental delegates, NGOs, international civil servants and as individuals in the development of international Plans of Action, Conventions and Declarations. Their contribution has been particularly marked in the areas of decolonization and in the struggles against racism, especially Apartheid.

African women brought their own theories, critiques, wisdom, and experiences to the international agenda-setting process and have contributed to a truly global and humanistic revisionist project. They have also helped to refine and advance the post-modernist vision, by insisting on multiple truths, histories, and realities, while also recognizing the continuing relevance of essentialist paradigms. Above all, it is worth reiterating that African women have helped to advance the agenda on development and democratization and have joined in the global resistance to forces of underdevelopment and authoritarianism, emanating primarily from the global economic system.

Women's associations in Africa are an exploding phenomenon changing the African landscape and representing a dual interactive process. On the one hand, they act collectively to promote objectives of development and democratization, which

include an empowered female citizenry. On the other hand, they aim to resist the forces of underdevelopment, globalization, and authoritarianism.

Pursuing development is an integral part of a brand of African feminism and an African feminist agenda. While encompassing struggles for gender equality, it often goes beyond controversies about male dominance, sexuality, reproductive rights, and the quest for person fulfillment. This is in keeping with the holistic nature of African feminism that of necessity has to take into account the colonial legacy, the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, structural racism in Africa and in the African Diaspora, underdevelopment, and the impact of the global political economy on both men and women. The collective consciousness reflects a feminism that is socio-centric and humanistic, with concerns that apply to society as a whole.

According to the positions explored in this book, African feminism transcends individualism and tends to involve women as a group in struggles against oppression of all kinds, based on economic, political, and cultural domination. It is more holistic and humanistic and has a greater potential for social transformation. In this regard, it conforms to the definitions of African Feminism first articulated in 1981 in *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* and in later publications.

African feminism was defined there as a feminism in which sexism cannot be isolated from the larger political and economic forces responsible for the exploitation and oppression of both men and women of Africa and of the African Diaspora. It also seeks to promote these objectives within in a human-centered context.²

Judging from the proliferation of women's associations over the last quarter of a century in Africa, one can say with some certainty that a type of gender revolution is taking place in Africa. This revolution has more to do with the economic challenges of underdevelopment and poverty and with political instability than with narrow feminist concerns. It is a revolution against the economic injustice of the global economy that is wreaking havoc on African countries and on the social fabric and well-being of African peoples. It is also a revolution against authoritarianism, at both the national level and at the level of the global political economy.

Collective action by women will have to involve building alliances with other movements within and outside Africa, which are seeking to humanize and democratize the unjust international economic system. This calls for an international feminist agenda that gives priority to promoting economic justice at the global level. Based on this study of women's collective action at national, regional, and international levels, one can conclude with some certainty that it is only through effective transformation of the global political economy that feminist concerns can assume center stage in Africa.

NOTES

Chapter One The Challenge and Conceptual Framework

1. Steady, 1981, 2002; AAWORD, 1985; Sen and Grown, 1986; Dembele, 1999, 2002; Fall, 1999, among others.
2. Beauvoir, 1989 edition; Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974; Kaplan, 1992; Katzenstein and Mueller, 1987 among others for various interpretations of this approach.
3. Lebeuf, 1963; MacCormack (Hoffer), 1974; Aidoo, 1981; Okonjo, 1981; Sudarkasa, 1981.
4. See for example, Steady, 1981; Amadiume, 1987, 1997; Oyewumi, 1997; Nnaemeka, 2003.
5. Collins, 1990 (2000 edition); Mohanty, Russo, and Terres, 1991; Basu, 1995; Nnaemeka, 1998. See also Steady, 1981.
6. Sivard, 1977; See AAWORD, 1985; Sen and Grown, 1986; Reno, 1998; Starr, 2000; Rowbotham and Linkogle, 2001.
7. Jayawardena, 1986; Moghadam, 1994; Wieringa, 1992, 1995; Alexander and Mohanty, 1997; Rosander, 1997; Nnaemeka, 1998; Tripp, 2000, among others.
8. Rowbotham, 1975; Beneria, 1978, 2003; Young, Wolkowitz, and McCullagh, 1981. For development see Boserup, 1989; Sen and Grown, 1986, among others. See also Rosaldo and Lamphere, 1974 for one of the earliest cultural interpretations.
9. Caplan and Budjra, 1982.
10. See Urdang, 1979, 1989; Lewis, 1976; Wipper, 1984; Kabira *et al.*, 1993; Khasiani and Njiro, 1993; Rosander, 1997; Woodford-Berger, 1997; Tripp, 2000, 2001.
11. Wipper, 1984.
12. See Abdullah, 1995.
13. For a variety of views, see Stroebel, 1976; Caplan and Budjra, 1982; Kabira *et al.*, 1993; Khasiani and Njiro, 1993; Abdullah, 1995; Aubrey, 1997.
14. Aubrey, 1997, p. 38.
15. Steady, 1981, 1987.
16. Copestake and Welled, 1993; Aubrey, 1997.
17. Sen and Grown, 1986, pp. 90–93 and Wipper, 1995 for classifications.
18. Rosander, 1997, p. 9.
19. Dworkin, 1976, 1989; Daly, 1978, 1985. Ecofeminists also see a universal essence that links women to nature and its preservation and condemns patriarchal values that lead to the domination and destruction of nature. See Reuther, 1975; Shiva, 1989; Diamond and Orenstein, 1990 for expressions of this view.
20. See Foucault, 1984; Robinow, 1984.
21. Ray and Korteweg, 1999.
22. Molyneaux, 1985. Some scholars have not supported Molyneaux's model, based on their research in countries of the Global South. These include Agarwal, 1992.
23. See Steady, 1981, 1987, 2000 for African Feminism and Basu, 1995 for local feminisms.

24. Steady, 2002a.
25. Amadiume, 1987; Oyewumi, 1997.
26. Amadiume, 1987, 1997; see also Oyewumi, 1997.
27. Okonjo, 1981. See also Lebeuf, 1963; Paulme, 1963; Sudarkasa, 1987 among others, for women's participation in politics and in the public sphere.
28. See Amadiume, 1987 for the Igbo of Nigeria; Stamp, 1986 for Kenya and Steady, 1975 for Sierra Leone.
29. Awe, 1997.
30. Rai, 2000.
31. Zulu, 1998.
32. Cohen and Rai, 2000.
33. Zirakzadah, 1997 for the first position; Stienstra, 2000 and Cockburn, 2000 for the second position.
34. Rai, 1994.
35. Alvarez, 1990, p. 29.
36. Lloyd, 1999.
37. Tarrow, 1998. Parpart and Staudt for some perspectives on women and the state in Africa.
38. *Wisconsin State Journal*, July 16, 2002 among others.
39. Amadiume, 1987, p. 196.
40. Wolfensohn, 2000.
41. UNAIDS, 2003.
42. The life expectancy rate is 54 years; adult female literacy 34%; maternal mortality 500 per 100,000 births; infant mortality 92 per 1000 live births; and the majority of refugees and people living with HIV/AIDS are women.
43. Sarris and Shams, 1991; Dembele, 1999, 2002; McBride and Wiseman, 2000.
44. Ake, 1990.
45. See Rostow, 1967 for modernization theory in general. Boserup, 1989, for one of its earliest critiques in terms of its application to women of the Global South; Snyder and Tadesse, 1995.
46. Pettman, 1996; Fall, 1999; Khor, 2000; Starr, 2000; Dembele, 1999, 2002; Steady, 2002.
47. Bundlender and Hewitt, 2002; UNDP, 2002; Morgan and Tropps, 2000; Council of Europe, 1998.
48. Mama, 1997.
49. United Nations, 2000, p. 42.
50. United Nations, 1995b.
51. Also referred to as "The Third World" and "Developing Countries." See Etienne and Leacock, 1980 for a study of women and colonialism.
52. See Bangura, 1992, 1994; Falk, 1999; Sethi, 1999; Fall, 1999; Rupert, 2000; Temple, 2000; Steady, 2002.
53. Khor, 2000.
54. Frank, 1969; Amin, 1973; Frank, 1981; were leading examples of this theoretical viewpoint. The feminist version was well articulated by Sen and Grown, 1986; Fall, 1999.
55. See Steady, 2002 for a study of the impact of globalization on Black Women in Africa and the African Diaspora.
56. Tarrow, 1998.
57. Ake, 1990, 1996.
58. Tarrow, 1998, p. 3.
59. Staudt, 1986.
60. AAWORD, 1985; Sen and Grown, 1986 for the articulation of these positions.
61. Sen and Grown, p. 19, following similar views expressed earlier in *AAWORD Newsletter—Feminism in Africa*, vol. II/III, 1985.
62. Longwe and Clarke 1999. See also Longwe, 1990.
63. Longwe and Clarke, 1999. See also United Nations, 1995a.

Chapter Two The Context and Background

1. Rodney, 1981.
2. See Steady, 2001 for a study of the culture of this group with a focus on women.
3. Reno, 1995; Hirsch, 2001.
4. Sierra Leone Government, 1965, 1968, 1992. The last census done in 1985 (published in 1992) listed the population as 3.5 million. The latest census was conducted in December 2004 and the Provisional Results give the total population as approximately five million.
5. McCulloch, 1950 and updated data from censuses, household surveys, and interviews.
6. See Davies, Davies, Gyorgy and Kayser, 1992 for interviews with women in various occupations.
7. Provinces Land Act, Chapter 122 of the Laws of Sierra Leone was enacted to regulate the use, ownership, and occupation of Provincial land.
8. Koroma, 2003.
9. Most of the references for the historical background are from the following sources: Mota, Teixeira, 1625, translated by Paul Hair, 1977; Fyfe, 1962; Fyle, 1981. See also Foray, 1977.
10. Steady, 1985 for a study of the role of polygamy, among other things in women's work in two rural areas in Sierra Leone.
11. Combahee River Collective Statement, 1986.
12. Banton, 1957; Little, 1965.
13. Dworzak, 1994.
14. Dworzak, 1994. See also, Dworzak, 1990; Barlay, 1990; Sierra Leone Government, 1994; Department of Economic and Development Planning, 1993. Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) is a term used by the United Nations that has become popularized to include all women's association. NGOs usually have some international contacts and collaboration.
15. United Nations, 1985.
16. Abdullah, 1995 for first ladies' associations in Nigeria.
17. *Ibid.*
18. Preamble of the constitution of the National Federation of Sierra Leone Women.
19. Williams, 2003.
20. Personal communication, 1994.
21. Field research was conducted in 2002 in conjunction with the Human Resource Development Organization of Freetown (HURDO).

Chapter Three Collective Action for Political Empowerment

1. MacCormack, 1974.
2. Lucan, 2004.
3. The title of Mayor in Freetown was replaced by "Chairman of the Committee of Management." However, this has reverted to Mayor following a move to decentralization and greater autonomy in local government in 2004.
4. Steady, 1975.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Steady, 1975, p. 11.
7. See Day, 1997 for a profile of Kadi Sesay.
8. Weeks, 1992.
9. Akhigbe, 1999, p. 5
10. Women's Forum, 1997, p. 34.
11. Jusu-Sheriff, 2000, p. 2.
12. Women's Forum, 1997, p. 86.
13. Women's Forum, 1997.

14. Personal communication, June 8, 1998.
15. Women's Forum, 1997, pp. 92 and 93.
16. Women's Forum, 1997, p. 98.
17. National Commission for Democracy in Sierra Leone, 1996.
18. See French, 1997a for further discussion of this issue and the events surrounding it.
19. Women's Forum, 1997, pp. 89–90.
20. Jusu-Sheriff, 2000.
21. Jusu-Sheriff, 2000, p. 4.
22. Field interviews and Femmes Africa Solidarité website, 2004.
23. Darbor, 2003. See also Campaign for Good Governance, 2004.
24. UNFPA unpublished documents and those of the Ministry of Health confirm this.
25. Movement for Progress Party, 2002.
26. Jusu-Sheriff, 2000, p. 5.

Chapter Four Collective Action for Economic Empowerment

1. Sierra Leone Government, 1992.
2. White, 1987, among others.
3. United Nations, 2000, p. 144.
4. United Nations, 2000, p. 130.
5. IPAM, 1991.
6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. Concord Times, 2004.
9. Personal communication with members of the association during several field research encounters.
10. Cummings-John, 1995, pp. 92–93.
11. Cummings-John, 1995; Denzer, 1981.
12. Cummings-John, 1995, p. 89.
13. Cummings-John, 1995.
14. Cummings-John, 1995; see also obituary by Fyfe, 2000.
15. See Ardener, 1964; Geertz, 1962.
16. Geertz, 1962.

Chapter Five Collective Action for Educational and Occupational Empowerment

1. Numerous studies exist on this subject. See Bloch *et al.*, 1998; Chanana, 2001 and Kwesiga, 2002.
2. Fyfe, 1962, p. 132.
3. Fyfe, 1962, p. 102.
4. *Ibid.*
5. Fyfe, 1962, p. 514.
6. Mrs. Lati Hyde-Forster, personal communication.
7. Hamilton, 1971; see also Cromwell, 1989.
8. UNDP, 1996, 1997.
9. See also United Nations, 2000, p. 85.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 94.
11. Many studies have documented these trends. Among these are May-Parker, 1986 and Beoku-Betts, 1998.
12. Cummings-John, 1995.
13. Cummings-John, 1995, p. 78.

14. See Steady, 1985.
15. J. Dworzak, personal communication, 1996.
16. Thorpe, 2000.
17. *Ibid.*
18. *Ibid.*
19. *Ibid.*
20. United Nations, 1985.
21. African Development Bank, 1990. Reinforced in subsequent publications of the Africa Development Report, especially in 1996 and 1997.
22. Assie-Lumumba, 1995; Beoku-Betts, 1998.
23. Beoku-Betts, 1998, p. 173.

Chapter Six “Traditional” Associations

1. Data and information on traditional secret societies and on traditional religious societies, in general, are derived from several published and unpublished sources, interviews, and discussion group sessions. Published sources include; Margai, 1948; Porter, 1953, 1963; Banton, 1957; Van Gennep, 1960; Kenyatta, 1938; Little, 1965; D’Azevedo, 1962, 1980; Peterson, 1968, 1969; MacCormack, 1974, 1977; McCulloch, 1950; Richards, 1975; Steady, 1975; Williams, 1979; Bledsoe, 1980; Wilson, 1981; Boone, 1986; Harrell-Bond, 1976; Cohen, 1971; Day, 1998.
2. Cohen, 1971.
3. D’Azevedo, 1962.
4. Richards, 1975.
5. Williams, 1979.
6. Information on the organization of Sande are from fieldwork interviews, general knowledge living in Freetown, and from studies, in particular, Richards, 1975.
7. MacCormack, 1974, 1977.
8. Van Gennep, 1960.
9. Margai, 1948.
10. Data based on information from informants and supplemented by Richards, 1975.
11. See Phillips, 1979 for an analysis of the iconography of the Mende Soweï mask. See also Boone, 1986 for a study by an art historian of the Sande/Bondo mask and other symbols of the Sande/Bondo society and ritual.
12. Bledsoe, 1980.
13. Published information on the Poro Society is difficult to obtain. It is almost impossible for a woman to conduct research on this society. Most of the information is derived from Little, 1951.
14. Little, 1951.
15. Margai, 1948.
16. Peterson, 1969, p. 298.
17. Banton, 1957.
18. Williams, 1979.
19. Williams, 1979, p. 14 and Koso-Thomas, 1987.
20. Koso-Thomas, 1987.
21. Dreifus, 1977.
22. Baker-Bensfield, 1977.
23. See JENDA, 2000 for a critique of the quest for “designer vaginas” through plastic surgery in relation to criticisms of genital mutilation. See Weitz, 1998, for extensive and rare discussions on the subject from a feminist perspective. See also Robertson, 1996; James and Robertson, 2002.
24. Williams, 1979.

25. Oladipupo, 2003.
26. French, 1997b.
27. Haja Sally Sasso, personal communication.
28. *Ibid.*
29. Foday, 1996.
30. Dugger, 1997.
31. French, 1997a.
32. French, 1997b.
33. Babatunde, 1997.
34. *Ibid.*
35. Steady, 1975.

Chapter Seven Mutual-Aid Associations

1. Social Welfare Department Unpublished Reports, several years.
2. See Porter, 1953, 1963; Banton, 1957.
3. Banton, 1957; Little, 1965.
4. Harrell-Bond, 1976.
5. A Yoruba custom popularized in Freetown by the Krios.

Chapter Eight Islam and Women's Associations

1. Fyle, 1981.
2. Peterson, 1969; Fyle, 1981.
3. See Blyden, 1967.
4. Bassir, 1954, p. 252.
5. Trimingham, 1961, p. 46.
6. Mernissi, 1975, p. 81.
7. Stroebel, 1976.
8. Trimingham, 1961.
9. Stroebel, 1976.

Chapter Nine Christianity and Women's Associations

1. See Steady, 1976, 1978.
2. Selena Hastings, Countess of Huntingdon (1707–1991) was the central figure in the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century in England and founder of the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion. Countess of Huntingdon Churches were founded in Sierra Leone by Blacks from Nova Scotia who landed in Freetown in 1792 after being granted freedom following the American Revolutionary War.
3. See Fashole-Luke, 1968.
4. Fashole-Luke, 1968, p. 132.
5. See Steady, 2001.
6. Weber, 1930.
7. Amin, 1973.
8. See Fyfe, 1962; Porter, 1963; Peterson, 1969; Wyse, 1980, 1991; Steady, 2001 among others.
9. Fashole-Luke, 1968.
10. Mothers' Union, 1996.
11. Mothers' Union, 1996, pp. 14–15.
12. Fyfe, 1962.

13. Sierra Leone Household Surveys and Censuses were conducted at relatively frequent intervals before the war. The latest census was conducted in December 2004.
14. Mothers' Union, 1996.
15. Fyfe, 1962.

Chapter Ten Comparative Insights at the National Level

1. The case study of Kenya relies on Kameri-Mbote and Kibwana, 1993; Khasiani and Njiro, 1993; Nzomo, 1993a, b; Odoul and Kabira, 1995; Kabira, Odoul, and Nzomo, 1993; Stamp, 1986; Wipper, 1984 and United Nations documents. Studies of Nigeria relied on Okonjo, 1981; Mba, 1982; Ekejiuba, 1991; Abdullah, 1991, 1995; Okeke, 2000, 2002. Studies of South Africa relied on Magubane, 1979; Rivkin, 1981; Walker, 1991; Zulu, 1998, 2000; Pheko, 2002. Studies on Algeria and the North Africa relied on Bouatta, 1997; Fades, 1994; Fernea, 2000; Karem, 1997; Lazreg, 1990; Lloyd, 1999; Ziai, 1997.
2. Abdullah, 1991.
3. Several studies are aware of this phenomenon, including Zulu, 1998, 2000.
4. Fernea, 2000.
5. Odoul and Kabira, 1995.
6. See UNDP, *Human Development Report*, several years and UN, *The World's Women*, several years. UNDP, 2002. Enterprise Africa, Regional Bureau for Africa. See Lancaster, 1991 for a study of SAPs.
7. Government of Kenya, 1990; See also Nzomo, 1993a, b and Khasiana and Njiro, 1993.
8. Government of Kenya, 1990.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Abdullah, 1995.
11. *Wisconsin State Journal*, July 16, 2002.
12. Most of the references for post-Apartheid South Africa come from Zulu, 1998 and 2000; presentations at the World Conference Against Racism in Durban in 2001 and my interviews with South African women in 2001.
13. Several grassroots movements staged demonstrations against the dumping of mercury and other industrial waste products from corporations in the United States on lands inhabited by Blacks, particularly Zululand. Clor Chemicals, which dumps mercury on Zululand, is one of the culprits.
14. Zulu, 1998, p. 147. Garba and Garba, 1999, p. 16.
15. Pheko, 2002, p. 102.
16. Lloyd, 1999.
17. See Raissiguier, 2002 for a study of African women migrants in France.
18. Urdang, 1979; Van Allen, 1972, 1976; Nzomo, 1993; Odoul and Kabira, 1995.
19. Tamale, 1999.
20. Hale, 2000.
21. Zulu, 1998 expresses this, as do many African women's associations interviewed in South Africa during the World Conference against Racism in Durban, 2001.
22. See Kameri-Mobote, 1993.
23. Parpart and Staudt, 1989.
24. See discussions of bureaucratic feminism in Alvarez, 1990; Oyewumi, 1997.
25. Odoul and Kabira, 1995.
26. Abdullah, 1995.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Ziai, 1997.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*
31. Tamale, 1999, p. 200.

32. Amadiume, 1987, p. 183; also Mba, 1982.
33. Zulu, 1998, p. 156.
34. Tarrow, 1998.
35. Studies of women's associations in Nigeria cited here include, Mba, 1982; Ekejiuba, 1991; Abdullah, 1995 and United Nations documents.
36. Odoul and Kabira, 1995.
37. References for South Africa are taken from several sources that include Rivkin, 1981, Lapchik, 1981; Zulu, 1998, 2000.
38. United Nations, 2000.
39. Lazreg, 1990.
40. See Saadi, 1991; Bouatta, 1997.
41. A number of studies have discussed these developments, see Ekejiuba, 1991; Okonjo, 1981.
42. Ekejiuba, 1991 among others.
43. Lloyd, 1999, p. 6.
44. Amrane-Minne, 1999.
45. Fades, 1994, p. 61.

Chapter Eleven Comparative Insights at the Regional/Pan-African International Levels

1. Viola Morgan, personal communication, 2003.
2. Data on the Greenbelt Movement is derived from several sources including the association's own documents, personal communication with the leaders, especially Professor Maathai, site visits to projects in Kenya, and the Internet.
3. Data and information on FEMNET are derived from its documents and interviews with its members, especially the executive. Of importance also is AMWA/FEMNET/WILDAF, unpublished Report, 2000.
4. United Nations, 2000.
5. FAWA, 2001.
6. FEMSA Project, 2001.
7. Expressed in a number of AAWORD documents, reports, and its journal *ECHO*.
8. Data on Akina Mama Wa Africa is derived from unpublished annual reports, proposals, speeches, UNDP reports, Morgan and Tropps, 2000, Akina Mama website, and interviews with members, especially the executive members.
9. Morgan and Tropps, 2000.
10. Much of the data on regional associations is derived from Morgan and Tropps, 2000, UNDP documents, NGO documents and reports and interviews with leaders of some of these associations.
11. Morgan and Tropps, 2000. Most of the data on WDF is derived from UNDP libraries, documents from the association and interviews.
12. UNDP, 2001; Morgan and Tropps, 2000; Documents of the association and interviews.
13. Morgan and Tropps, 2000 and UNDP documents from the Gender Program.
14. Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS), 2001; Data used for FAS include interviews, reports from the organization, reports from countries, and associations working with FAS, UNDP, and the United Nations library. Also Morgan and Tropps, 2000; UNIFEM, 2000.
15. Femmes Africa Solidarité (FAS), 2001, p. 15.
16. *Ibid.*
17. UNIFEM, 2000.
18. AAWORD, 1998.
19. AAWORD, 1998, p. 8.
20. ABANTU, 1996, p. 5.

21. Much of the revisionist scholarship, which inspired Third World Feminist writings can be traced to AAWORD; its publications; meetings; journal *ECHO* and its contributions to UN meetings and publications, especially during the United Nations World Conference on Women held in Nairobi, Kenya in 1985.
22. Sen and Grown, 1986.
23. Oyewumi, 1997; Alvarez, 1990.
24. Snyder and Tadesse, 1995.

Chapter Twelve Conclusion

1. Longwe and Clarke, 1999.
2. Steady, 1981, 1987, 2000, 2002.

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