

Women's Liberation: Has the African Woman settled for tokens?

by E. Maxine Ankrah

The *Rights of Women* throughout most of Africa are guaranteed, legally. Yet the full participation of women in the life of many African countries is still more a matter of policy than practice. Very few women share in the actual power of state. Former traditional securities are today less assured. Rather than more high-level appointments, the masses of women need more to be awakened to their potential as the changers of women's position. For this, 'Women's Lib' may have something to offer.

* * *

'Women's Liberation' is the current development in the United States, although the movement has since spread to Europe. However, a militant reformist movement of African women predates this upsurge of feminist rebellion by *nearly two decades*. It was born out of national struggles for independence. The women of Algeria fought and worked for their nation's independence and after the struggle a dynamic women's organization was founded. Sékou Touré described as 'decisive' the contribution of Guinea's women to the liberation of the country and the growth of the Democratic Party of Guinea.¹ The Mau Mau of Kenya's forests learned that their women had equally understood the high stakes at risk in the war against European settlers.

These activist roles in bringing about independence in many countries facilitated the development of an undoubtedly latent 'freedom consciousness'. However, this stirring was only for a duration centred on the struggle against the colonial authorities. In some instances, women's national movements were given impetus because of the gap between what women expected and had been promised, and what they actually received. Many independent governments, having failed to live up to their promises, forced women to re-examine their position *as women*.²

After a decade of ferment, on 27th July, 1962, at Dar-es-Salaam, the *All Africa Women's Conference* was founded, and women were provided with a framework, or structure, through which 'woman-power' could be expressed. They had at last a vehicle for their movement towards full participation in all aspects of society.

From its inception, the *AAWC* appears to have had two foci. The

¹M. Dobert, 'Liberation of the Women of Guinea', *African Report*, October 1970.

²See A. Wipper, 'Equal Rights for Women in Kenya?' *Modern African Studies*, October 1971.

first is primarily political: the liberation of an entire people of a continent still under colonial or neo-colonial domination. The second is the liberation of African women from those traditional customs which keep them in bondage. Given the immense forces (historical, economic and neo-colonist) militating against the development of Africa as a whole, the achievements of the women—individually, as well as through the movement spearheaded by *AAWC*—are laudable.

Notable progress has been made in stimulating the political consciousness of women on the continent. A striking example of this is the very theme chosen by the 300 delegates for the 10th anniversary meeting: 'The Roles of Women in the Liberation of Africa'. Emphasis was placed on the support of liberation struggles in territories still under white rule. Individually, also, women over a short period of time have come to prominence in the political arenas in Africa. One out of every fourteen Guinean women had public responsibilities in 1968. In Nairobi, Lomé and Monrovia the mayors are women. Women have been appointed ministers of government, e.g. Egypt—for Social Affairs, the present Director-General in the Ministry of Family Planning in Rwanda is a woman; Dahomey makes extensive use of women as front-line soldiers. Women's participation in the social sphere, too, is well known; through self-help, as professionals, on boards and committees, they increasingly provide leadership in areas of society affecting primary social institutions and services, e.g. education, health, home, religion, cultural programmes.

The above listing is not meant to be exhaustive, but to illustrate the prominence women *may be given* in national affairs. Or, are these so many individual successes? Has the plight of the masses of women actually changed appreciably? In a word, has the *AAWC* spectacularly succeeded in clarifying its first objective, while so far meeting with hardly realized obstacles towards the achievement of its second goal, the awakening of the women of Africa to themselves?

* * *

Within the space of less than six years, women have organized more than 10,000 groups in all the major cities of the United States. In the tradition of the 'suffrage' movement of a half century ago, the current feminists are both reformist and radical. They are rebelling against the principal, and often sole, role assigned to the woman in modern, industrial society, i.e. home-maker and motherhood. They claim that these sex-determined roles have been imposed on half of the population to keep them in perpetual servitude to men. Legislation and other measures designed for their 'protection' from the hazards of the work-world are now seen as discriminatory means of keeping the women dependent, and in a subordinate position. The flood of women's writings from western women show one dominant

reaction. They are *enraged* by their 'apparent' success which clouds, or completely covers, the injustices they believe that women as a whole suffer.

No single organization speaks for all of them. Reformist groups believe that what women want can be achieved within existing frameworks and under the law. 'What they want' includes equality with men—NOW! They want an end to all forms of discrimination on the basis of sex, access to leadership positions based on merit, and equal employment opportunities—not just in legislation, but in practice. Women subscribing to this platform want better maternity benefits and child care services; they want emancipation from the penalties of unwanted pregnancies. Other demands have to do with guaranteeing equal opportunities in education and in the professions.

Priorities of the radical feminists differ. These groups are young, educated, organized in a variety of groups none of which represents *the* radical position, although there are such notables as Kate Millett (*Sexual Politics*) and Germaine Greer (*The Female Eunuch*). But Jane Kramer, writing in the *New Yorker*, remarks that 'they share a sense of damage, and they have risked ridicule, to express an outrage that *other women are reluctant to admit they feel . . .*'¹

Although they differ in their approach and in their rhetoric, both reformists and radicals are together on the essentials: the liberation of the women from sexual myths and the making of male and female people just human!

* * *

M. Dobert and N. Shields in a recent article² draw a scenario of the African woman—past and present. They suggest that to ascertain if women are really free or oppressed, one needs first to distinguish the illiterate and semi-educated, rural, tradition-bound woman from the educated, semi-educated, urbanized woman. Moreover, they argue that the traditional patterns of living still entrenched in many parts of the continent should be seen as distinct from the patterns emerging because of colonial experiences and modernization through science and technology.

The careful, scientific analysis *implied* has been undertaken by, amongst the many, Ester Boserup, an economist. In her study, *Woman's Role in Economic Development* (1970), she concluded that *with the present trends in the process of transition and modernization, women may actually be losing some of the status and security which they formerly enjoyed in their traditional setting.*

This startling revelation is also reflected in other authoritative sources, notably ECA publications. The Human Resources Develop-

¹Kramer, 'Founding Cadres', the *New Yorker*, 28th November, 1970.

²'Africa's Women: Security in Tradition, Challenge in Change', *Africa Report*, July-August 1972.

ment Division of the Economic Commission for Africa, in July 1972, released a paper for publication in the *Canadian Journal of African Studies* entitled 'Women: The Neglected Human Resources for African Development'. The Division examines the traditional and modern roles of African women in three sectors: agriculture and animal husbandry, commerce, and wage employment. It further assesses the impact of modernization on these roles.

I. Agriculture

This is an area in which continentally the women still dominate. It is estimated, ECA reports, that 'from 60 to 80 per cent of the agricultural labour in Africa is contributed by women' (p. 6). Many of the scientific and technological innovations have facilitated the performance of women's tasks. The example is given of some that are especially favourable to women, e.g. pipe-borne water, which contributes to better hygiene, irrigation of crops, lessening of the expenditure of energy on water carrying.

'But in some aspects of development, in particular where agricultural labour is involved, African women may not be faring so well. . . . While information is inadequate to make final judgments, it appears that some technological introductions, though unquestioned ingredients of development, may have the unanticipated and unrecognizable effects of increasing the exhausting tasks performed by women, while giving them few, if any, of the rewards of the monetary economy. Other innovations—in particular, mechanization—may drive women out of agricultural production and thus out of active participation in economic development' (p. 7).

In effect, the masses of women in the rural areas do not remain unaffected by the modernizing influences around them. These may have the effect of oppressing them no less severely than the enslavement of traditional subsistence farming.

Dr M. Gatzke, in discussing the Regional Conference on Education, Vocational Training and Work Opportunities for Girls and Women in Rabat, Morocco (*International Women's News*, August—September 1971), further indicates the extent to which technological and scientific advancements in agriculture are, so far, working to the advantage of men. 'While women still do most of the farm work, this is not in the wage-earning and economically productive capacity . . . in the course of agricultural development it is men's labour productivity that tends to increase' (p. 60). Since men are selected for training in new agricultural technology (i.e. how to use new methods and tools), women stand to be more and more excluded.

II. Industry

There is considerable evidence that the women are not succeeding any better through commerce and industry

'In Africa, by contrast with Asia, the modern sector is virtually a

male preserve' (writes Boserup, p. 190). Very few, 4 per cent of the total population of women, are employed in industry. Another 14 per cent work in the services. One of the reasons she gives is that the men continue to reserve for themselves the much-desired jobs in the modern sector. Indeed, the Five-Year Plan of the ECA Division notes that 'governments are concerned primarily with creating jobs for men'.¹

Market trade, the major employment opportunity available to the urbanized woman, too, tends to deteriorate under the competition of large commercial (often government) enterprises. The ECA Plan indicates that 'self-employed women risk being squeezed out of business entirely' in spite of the fact that many are heads of households having children dependent upon them for maintenance (p. 5).

A decline in the percentages of women in commerce has already been observed.² Boserup's analysis reveals that as market trade and home industries give way to modern forms of industry and commerce, men move into the positions created. Men, Gatzke concludes, learn the new ways of life and work while women are left to continue in the old ones (p. 6). Consequently, the percentage of women employed has increased only slowly and in some countries not at all. Women who obtain secondary and higher education succeed in getting jobs in larger numbers but usually in teaching, nursing, social work and clerical work. These are typical openings for women and are normally identified as such by employers, policy makers and planners—usually all men!

Only a few women are practising a profession in Africa because so few have qualified. The reasons are well known: lack of access—until the last few decades in most countries—to schooling, prejudices of parents towards the education of their sons, early marriages or pregnancies, emphasis of the family on the preparation of females for their traditional roles as mother and farmer. Though to a less universal degree, these influences still prevail. Thus, of girls entering primary school, up to 90 per cent leave, 90 per cent of secondary school entrants drop out before completing the course of study. For the successful few, any sex barriers that might exist do not bar their entry into the professions. However, except for the highly qualified, they are relegated to the lower, less prestigious, less responsible positions.

Facilities for the vocational and technical skills required in the modern sector, too, are chiefly provided for boys and men. *UNESCO's Comparative Study on the Access of Girls and Women to Technical and*

¹ECA's plan: *Pre-vocational and Vocational Training of Girls and Women Toward Their Full Participation in Development*, 1972-1976, p. 8.

²Their numbers decreased in Dahomey from 95 per cent to 89 per cent between 1961 and 1967, the percentage of females among petty traders in Nigeria (N. government statistics) dropped from 84 per cent to 70 per cent between 1950 and 1963. Moreover, this sector has become so crowded that the earnings of most women remain quite small (Dobert, Shields, p. 19).

Vocational Education (December 1968) shows that Africa has the world's lowest percentage of girls and women receiving such training. Where vocational programmes are designed for girls or women, they are generally tailored to their traditional duties to the exclusion of the economic activities which take up as much as 50 per cent of their time. Although there are signs of movement away from this 'home economics' approach to training in all areas (see ECA, 'Women', p. 14) most females are not yet affected.

III. Educational opportunity

Rather than the attitudes of men towards women or the conservatism of women themselves, education is often cited as both the culprit and the panacea for women's predicament. Truly, to a large extent education does contribute not only to eliminating the idea of inferiority, but to the actual inferiority of women's position. Therefore, women fighting for the awakening of others, regard it not only as a social, but also as a political tool for their liberation. They hold that unless women themselves react to the traditional stereotyped education offered to them, external agencies will be powerless to alter what their menfolk contrive.

Despite the highly politicized platform of the AAWC, politics, both nationally and locally with few exceptions (e.g. Nigeria, Guinea) is almost completely a 'man's game'.¹ Military régimes are in control of almost half of the *black* countries on the continent. But the overthrow of an elected régime by the military generally means that the ladies are turned out as well. The prospect of women then entering or re-entering politics in significant numbers with sufficient power becomes rather dim. Where parliaments still sit, it is all too common for the male representatives and party officials publically to affirm women's political rights while simultaneously ignoring them as serious contestors.

Even without the impediment of a military régime, the attitude of women towards politics often hinders their involvement in this important sphere. They, too, feel it's 'a man's business'. Thus, one-half of the adult population is left out of political action. Comparing that percentage with a single or even a dozen 'men-picked' women in political positions, it becomes increasingly obvious that individual women's gains may be no gain for women, but tokens.

The foregone discussion is a deliberate attempt to highlight vital aspects of the current condition of African women that seriously challenge any notion of equality with men. Most of these are developments subsequent to increasing modernization. They reveal the present and forecast the future. It would appear harmful, therefore, if women, seeking to propel themselves and the continent into 'full development', continued to see themselves in the traditional,

¹See *Africa*, 'Our Women in Politics', November 1972.

idyllic terms, common in articles about them. They are not so secure, not so successful, not really advancing at the pace required if women are to even catch up with men, let alone share in 'liberating Africa' with them.

* * *

In principle, the solution to women's problems of a decline into further 'oppression' and exclusion might lie in the promulgation of laws favouring them. Indeed most African countries upon independence, rejected from the outset all *forms* of legal discrimination against women.¹ Civic, social and political provisions lacking in pre-independence legislation in many countries have since been added. Women generally receive equal pay for equal work. Admission into educational facilities is non-discriminatory. Civil Service openings may, generally, be filled by male or female, etc.

Why then the problem, if through legal channels the 'women's rights' approach can secure a change in the situation described in previous paragraphs? There is to this, as with other such complex issues, no single answer. But viewing it from the position taken by both reforming and radical feminists in the 'Women's Lib' Movement, confronted by a similar paradox, one answer is predictable: Women of Africa have obtained their laws through either the incidence of history (thus, a colonial legacy), or through the 'magnanimity' of 'enlightened, selfless' men. Understandably, the laws do not secure what women need, as men have given 'rights' theoretically through laws: they have not given *way* to the women to share equally in *all aspects* of life—economics, politics, power, etc. Women have been the passive recipients. Unless they, as a whole, are awakened out of a subtle mental passivity and together push themselves into a more central commanding position, *vis-a-vis* men, they will fail to keep pace with the times, legal rights notwithstanding.

Circumstances of history have dictated the emergence, as well as the direction of women's involvement in both Africa and North America. There is thus the temptation to think that the situation of the latter continent bears no resemblance to that of the former.

An objective examination will show otherwise. For example, in both cases, women are struggling against being the property of men.² Both are fighting against roles implicitly (in the modern sector) or explicitly (in the traditional) defined by men as 'their place' in the society. They are combating the same condescending male attitudes which must be changed if men and women are to reverse historical

¹See ECA Regional Meeting on the Role of Women in National Development, Addis Ababa, 26th March, 1969.

²Gunnar Myrdal, *An American Dilemma*, Vol. 2, Appendix 5, and Rwegayura, *The Days of Women as Property are Gone* (*Daily News*, Dar-es-Salaam, 24th July, 1972).

and current trends. The African as well as the western woman is increasingly released by certain technological developments. The pills free both from the burden of incessant pregnancies. There are more labour-saving devices in or for the home. Women have more and more access to each other directly and indirectly, because of transportation and through the mass media. They learn what others are doing and can be motivated by such knowledge. Clearly, it is a question of 'counting the days' before the African woman, too, will have *time* for the same revolution as is now at work abroad.

Judging by the present pronouncements of women's spokesmen and their platforms, the African women's movement will not in the foreseeable future be defined in terms of a struggle between the sexes. Women are unlikely to take such radical positions as to be labelled 'man-haters' (as in America). This does not mean that women are unaware that men's attitudes, as well as exterior forces of a previous era, are largely responsible for their plight. Rather, there appears to be a wisdom in keeping to the right priorities. The women, too, are familiar with the strategy of 'divide and rule'. Thus there will be no question of women *replacing* men.

Nor is it expected that in their struggle to secure the rightful place of 50 per cent of the adult population, African women will attack institutions deemed vital to society. The human grouping, the family, with various sanctions is recognized as an essential pattern throughout Africa. Women themselves accept the notion that to be childless is close to being worthless as a woman. So motherhood will be preserved. However, for many years even in Muslim strongholds (e.g. Tunisia, Nigeria, Algeria) as well as Christian, women have fought the polygamy system that gives to men sexual access to, and authority in the affairs of several women. From the vigour of their attack on the system, there is a suggestion that all social forms—although currently considered 'basic'—may be called into question when they are seen to be contrary to the women's interest. On the list is likely to be the bride-price which becomes more commercialized with the advanced education of the girl. Rules of deference will go. Marriage and divorce laws which currently favour men will be more strongly challenged in time. Thus it can be surmised that a 'liberating process' will be begun by the African woman as with the westerner at essentially the same point—at the centre of her life, the home—in her interpersonal relationships.

Moving out from that point, the African women have generally applied a common male strategy, of examining problems and planning attacks within the context of the large conference or seminar. There is little evidence that they have ever adopted as a primary strategy the galvanizing of individual members into a single force, through the small intimate group. The 'Women's Lib' movement through these small cadres has become *one* movement rather than 10,000 organizations. This is due to the solidarity generated by a

process dubbed 'raising of consciousness'. While not all forms in any movement will, or should be transportable, some objectives and content may very well be relevant. Consciousness raising is one objective worthy of note. The *All Africa Women's Conference* and other organizations desirous of 'awakening' or 'liberating' African women and breaking through layers of psychological resistance to change may learn from the West about this process. For it has not only *scientitized* millions of western women; but because of it, an entire nation has been aroused as well.

The editorial comment on the opening day of the AAWC proclaims: 'We believe that from here this liberation (of Africa) will evolve a new consciousness and that from the womb of this new consciousness will be born even greater awareness to the task that must characterize not only her role in the liberation of Africa, but her entire life'.¹

Implied is the birth of new thought patterns. Zaire's Mrs Karine was quite specific. She pointed out the need for all African women to be 'psychologically liberated' and to 'rid themselves of colonial hang-ups which have been responsible for their negligible contribution to the affairs of their countries!' The ECA paper suggests that a 'major contribution to the exclusion of women in the modern sector is *attitudes*, formed over the years and in the process of formation every day' (p. 17). The 'hang-ups' or attitudes are subtle, deeply entrenched, and are not usually easily grasped as decisive factors, even by women themselves. To begin a process of 'liberation' where this condition is a determining factor, the examination of attitudes is a must.

'Consciousness-raising' is an approach to this scrutiny. It aims to make the individual woman aware that built into her own habits and expressions are hidden assumptions that she tends not to review consciously. They change only if flashed continually before her. These assumptions lead her to accept a *status quo* that renders her passive, inferior, frustrated. Studies have shown that expectations limit the intellectual interest and ambitions of girls in western society. The exploitation of the African woman's labour has surely helped to share her self-image. What hinders *her* in *her* flight for 'emancipation'? Consciousness-raising would seek to break through any hesitancy in examining sentiments, institutions, or structures that might be causing her problems. It is also important to the mobilizing of women as a whole, since it prepares them for basic structural as well as personal change.

Advocacy of small groups in which women look initially 'inward' does not imply 'exclusiveness' for women, but for them to stand alone as individuals in order to co-operate with males as equals, the vast majority will need a new sense of themselves. Consciousness-

¹*Daily News*, Dar-es-Salaam, 24th July, 1972.

raising, painful as it sometimes is, helps women to go beyond self-awareness. The next step is to conscientize others (men) to the damage done when women are downgraded. Thus, in the Geneva group of which the author is a member, increasingly the focus of discussion is on ways of beginning a new type of dialogue with the men in our lives. Male liberation becomes the target. Women seem, after such encounters with each other, quickly to grasp the fact that men need liberating too, that their hangups are as enslaving as men are of women. A sign of this is the persistence of the 'colonial mentality' in African men with regard to women—inherited from former colonialists. ECA suggests that the attitudes which perpetuate such trends be recognized, analysed, and discussed, if changes are to be effected. No one sex can undertake that task alone.

Small groups of women abound throughout Africa—women's guilds, voluntary bodies—Red Cross, Mandeleo ya Wanawakes, political wings, etc. But seldom do the programmes of such clubs include plans for radical change, let alone personal or attitudinal change. Such groups generally form the backbone of the Africa movement as it now exists. Organized protests of women farmers and traders have shown what dynamism is generated when their objectives are clear.

Still to be manifested, nonetheless, is the pressure for change that could be exerted by the hundreds of women's groups working towards a common goal. This leads to several questions: how relevant are the majority of 'clubs' in which the women participate? Do they simply perpetuate expressions and attitudes inherited from colonialists (e.g. missionaries)? Do their activities restrict women solely to traditional roles? Is the political group the only tenable one for the 'liberation of women', when the target is the freeing from attitudes or retrogressive, psychological hang-ups? Are the existing structures appropriately used? Could not, for example, the adult literacy classes—in which women are often the only pupils—be transformed into consciousness-raising cadres? The demonstrated effect of many groups of illiterate women indicates that a high degree of education or sophistication is not necessarily an absolute. Nevertheless, educated women owe a great debt to their sisters to help stimulate and guide the great mass of uneducated and unskilled women.

Consciousness-raising is not being offered as a panacea for the problems of the status of women in Africa. The ultimate solution to women's problems is, of course, tied to the basic social-economic and political problems of African countries, where questions of economic and political dependence on western powers is the major issue. The role they must play in ridding the continent of neo-colonialism has already been examined in the July *AAWC* Conference. To deal with the immediate problems, however, other stratagems are equally

valid and being put forward. ECA has set out in the Human Resources Development Division's Five-Year Plan, a programme of study and involvement directed towards 'integrating women more progressively in modern sectors of African development'. But the actions of development planners and social engineers would be rendered much more effective by conscientized awakened women, prepared to act against downward trends. A great deal is at stake in revolutionizing women's thinking about themselves. The development of the continent is adversely affected when 50 per cent of its adult population is kept immobilized for lack of opportunity for equal personal development and use of capacities.

* * *

The Women's Liberation movement, in essence, says that woman is as much a human being as man. It defines 'liberation' in terms of women having an equal share with men in both the responsibilities *and* the opportunities available in society. It implies freedom of choice in playing out various roles—economic, social, political. Stereotyped life-styles enforced by man-power are rejected. It means the overhauling of institutions or structures which enhance the sex, rather than the humanity, of the individual. If the question as to whether the African woman is equal or subordinate to the man is measured by these definitions, the answer would be that the mass of women are indeed second-class citizens. Serious study of women in the transitional stage and modern sectors of Africa's current development would reveal a downward trend in their already disadvantaged position. They have not failed to indicate the causes which create bad conditions. Amongst these, they include neo-colonialism that keeps the whole continent in chains. But the lack of success in arousing the women to the point where there is continental rebellion about their own state of affairs may well be due to inadequate methodology and ideology. Both have depended upon an evolutionary change in the thinking of both man and woman. 'Women's Lib' is revolutionary: and a revolution may well be the answer.

A model of the 'liberated' woman appropriate for Africa has yet to be decided upon. For liberation means different things depending upon such factors as region, familial context, level of education, etc. But whatever the basis for the decision, it should be the women's definition and not men's stereotypes. Is the African women's current movement adequate for the struggle ahead? Is it getting the right message across? 'Women's Lib' has started the liberation of women on one side of the hemisphere. What are women doing on the other?