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### ***Gender Balance Issues in Africa***

#### **Abstract**

This paper explores existing issues of gender balances in the developing world, in Africa, focusing on South Sudan and its implications on family relations in Australia. These issues include lack of education, forced marriages, dowry, inheritances and change in family dynamics in Australia. Lack of educational opportunities placed women at highest level of illiteracy in the developing world, particularly in South Sudan. The norm is that families that keep their daughters at home are considered the best. Their parents will arrange their daughters' marriages at ease to secure high dowry price. It is also in active practice that widows are inherited by male in laws when their husbands die. On the top of these women are predominantly behind closed doors rearing children, willingly denied access the domain workforce. As a consequence women are victimized and unable to progress equally to men. However, with growing awareness on Human Rights education for women in Diaspora adding to opportunity for African women to resettle in Western countries women are able to claim some rights and are determined to turn the challenges into opportunities. There is hope for change in women's rights, but at price of family disintegration. As a result many men left their wives and children and went home to marriage abandoning their families in Diaspora.

#### **Introduction**

This paper is motivated by my personal experience to explore what is experience by women in our society today at three settings.

- Firstly, in the developing world (traditional societies) setting;
- Secondly in African setting; and
- Thirdly, in South Sudan and its implication on families resettling in Australia

Obviously in my experience, lack of education, forced marriages (known as arranged marriages), polygamy, bitter-early divorce, perpetual violence against women, discrimination in the workforce and males' stereotyped perception of their claimed superiority are the issues facing women in the three settings.

#### **In Developing World Setting**

Majority of women in the developing world suffered significantly from all the above issues and at different scale according to the culture in a particular setting. In some countries in the custom and belief that regulates the role of women and men in the society today, is rooted deeply in the community way of life and passed on from generation to generation intuitively. This understanding has been the principle in the history of social, economic, cultural, and religious development and has recently affected even the political participation in the developing world. Agreeably, researcher Holfstede (1991) believes that the attitude towards social female roles particularly gender-appropriate-behaviour, stereotypes and auto-stereotypes is one of the five most important factors which is instinctively rooted in the public consciousness.

In India, Pakistan, the Middle East, and even in some Indigenous communities in western countries, girls are growing up knowing that they are not equal to men. Only men are privileged to access education, good health care services and inheritance rights, whilst girls are logged into domestic duties. The stereotyping women behaviour in the traditional society has been a part of social development history but its functions vary greatly from generation to generation. They also differ from culture to culture. Polar opposites: in English society 'a fragile English lady laced in a corset without her knight' compared with African context 'an African woman is the inhabitant of deserts with a baby on her back under the scorching sun'.

#### In African Society Setting

In the African culture the difference between men and women's social life and leadership positions within the society are defined clearly. As the result they both grow up knowing their roles and society's expectation. They follow the communal system where boys herd and hunt and girls cook and clean. It is hard for someone who has grown up in a western society to understand this concept. Women face terrible oppression and humiliation. Women in African cultures get married at a young age because they are arranged for this, since early childhood. This contradicts the basic right of course to choose who to marry. According to this it would be right to say African societies are still trapped in the stone-age life style. This kind of life style in African society excludes the possibility of women aspiration and most importantly choice.

According to the standards of today's life in the developed world, traditional African culture is far from fair for women in Africa. Gender based inequality deep-rooted in society's norm and it is a profound challenge that complicates life surrounding women in Africa. For so long, many attempts are being made to create awareness about these gender-based inequalities in African communities, but it is comparatively immature to claim a considerable progress has been made toward reduction of these genders based inequalities. Accordingly the majority of African countries in the last twenty years have introduced a gender-based equality agenda on their socio-economic and political debates. As a result most African governments have approved an enactment into local, regional and national policies. Furthermore they have signed the international treaties and protocols and implemented other duties to promote gender equality at regional and global levels. Subsequently, more women are involved in processing these policies and consequently more girls are engaged in education today more than any other time in the history.. More women are now in leading roles in some sectors of the economy, politics and social institutions. Moreover, the intensity of women's membership in diverse areas of the government is increasing in a number of African countries. However, the lack of essential resourcing of women needs to excel further and equality is still a major challenge facing women. In spite of women's important roles in farming, women are left without the right to own or inherit land. Women hardly possess the right to access additional services, credit and teaching in new technologies. According to UNICEF (2009) recent data has indicated that only 2 girls for every 10 boys have access to primary school education in Africa. This limited access to education has extended wider into secondary and tertiary education where just four girls reside in a class of fifty boys. It is obvious that the lack of enlightening and teaching

opportunities, in conjunction with other inequitable practices in the labour and financial market, seriously restricts women's employment rights and alternatives. At the same time, as women's labour membership has considerably increased in the last twenty years, many women are concentrated in less profitable sectors of the economy. Beyond their high losses and fatalities, conflicts have appeared due to enormous social, economic and political disruptions from which women have suffered unreasonably. Women and girls became the major parts of the refugee populations and victims of tremendously high incidences of rape and sexual abuses during wartime. Nevertheless, gender violence is enveloping and not restricted to countries in conflict. Women and young girls are made to compete with the brutal, cruel and lasting effects of gender-based violence that negatively influence their health and emotional life, economic and social expectations.

According to the report of the Pardee Center Conference *Africa 2060: Good News from Africa*, the speakers named a lot that is possible to be classified as "good news" from Africa that could change the life of African society and influence prejudices and unfair attitudes towards women: poverty in Africa is diminishing rapidly Pinkovskiy (2007), food production is increasing Denning (2009), inequality is declining Young (2010), women are occupying leadership positions Ngunjiri (2006), democracy and elections are becoming the norm Rotberg and Gisselquist (2009), local markets are increasing Mahajan (2008), anti-corruption actions are taking on a growing importance Rotberg and Gisselquist (2009), Africa is becoming an essential target for foreign direct investment, especially from China Mahajan (2008), African intelligence is assuming an increasing importance in defining Africa's options Zewde (2008) and continent-wide cultural expression is growing Adichie (2010) and Barakatt (2010, p.3).

In conclusion, although the progress is fairly slow nevertheless it is the next step in the right direction

#### In South Sudan Setting

Under this section, will discuss the issues of force marriages and violence, lack of education, arranged marriages for dowry, polygamous, farming, shift in family relationships in Australia.

South Sudan gained independence from Sudan on July 9, 2011 as the outcome of the 2005 peace deal that ended Africa's longest-running civil war. Women in Sudan comprise more than sixty percent of the population, but eighty percent of them are illiterate. Empowerment of Women of Southern Sudan will be a crucial point in accelerating improvements in gloomy indicators of country development.

Today the gender gap is impressively bigger in South Sudan. The society is keeping differential gender-based practice as the result the gap grew wider in all front. In this setting women manage the household according to Bolnick and Mitlin (1999b).

Commission for Africa Report (2005) in contrast to men, women spend the biggest part of their incomes towards household needs and to take care of their children. According to Schlyter (1996) women frequently find themselves in a weaker housing situation than men, even though both under official and regular law.

The South Sudanese people in general during the one Sudan, have experienced marginalization for so long. Women in particular have been on the extreme side of it. Sudan as a country has been at war with itself for so many years, and this has prevented the progress made in support of women rights.

The following paragraphs will to some extent elaborate on the issues facing women in South Sudan in a case study manner.

#### *Lack of Education*

The South Sudanese constantly view education as the most appropriate tool that could be used to end gender inequalities in a prerogative way. During this peacetime, no matter how short it is, significant progress is being made at the moment. School attendance levels for both genders rose notably after the end of the war. The result of upper literacy levels for both men and women, and of greater exposure to global influences is already affecting the aspirations of southern Sudanese youth and will have a significant effect on gender hopes over the middle term Benjamin (2010).

The introduction of education during the colonial period was the prerogative of boys. The result was a high number of educated men in comparison with women. The educational process for persons with special needs was absolutely disregarded.

According to the Southern Sudan Gender Assessment, the secondary school for girls did not exist in Southern Sudan from 1956 to 1972. According to Benjamin (2010) the first secondary school was opened in Juba in 1972 after adopting the Addis Ababa Agreement.

At the time boys and girls attend high school and college, gender inequality becomes much wider. The African government minister during the conference in Beijing in October affirmed that at tertiary and university levels, the low participation for women continued. She declared that gender gaps were mainly marked in science, mathematics and computer sciences.

The most oppressive factor is that women in Africa continue to be prohibited from acquiring education, which is frequently the only way out of poverty. Inequality between girls and boys begins in primary school and the differences broaden up through the whole educational system and never cease. Africa registered the uppermost comparative increase among regions in primary education during the last ten years. The low percentage of girls enrolled was represented. Southern Sudan is far from the target to attain intake equality Mutume (2005).

#### *Forced Marriages and Domestic Violence*

In comparison with men, women of Southern Sudan possess the lowest quality of life. As in the majority of countries of Africa, women of Southern Sudan often become victims of sexual, physical violence and are given very little legal protection. They are exposed to a high maternal death rate. Women suffer from a considerable illiteracy rate. They work long hours. They suffer from cultural prejudices due to their membership in community and public projects Bichiok (2009).

It is known that legitimate statistics on the female population in Southern Sudan do not exist. The Ministry just realises that the number of women exceeds the number of men because of the influence of the war that took more male lives than female. However, women and vulnerable groups were exposed to risks due to the effects of the war. The risks were abduction, separation, sexual and physical violence and the lack of basic social service Bichiok (2009).

Gender-based violence includes a number of rapes, forced early marriages and domestic violence against women. These were serious troubles during the years of conflict and continue in peaceful times. Gender-based violence became a way of life for many Sudanese.

According to the Gender Working Group, forced early marriages happen under the age of 18. The arrangement of early marriages is well-known and deeply rooted in the culture of Sudan. The Sudanese do not know that the marriage age is 18. Instead they believe that the girl is mature and can get married when her menstruation starts. Young girls are not acquainted with a person whom they will marry. They do not know the date of marriage. Many organisations have tried to protect girls and help children to avoid forced marriages but there are still no results.

#### *Huge Dowry Collection from Marriages*

It is said that dowry prices became extremely expensive. The Dowry payment is one of the bases of the family financial side in South Sudan. The families are waiting for a dowry in the household right from the beginning, at the birth of a girl. Because of its high price, a dowry is associated with early marriage. It is regularly connected with the lifestyle and desire to own more cows than a neighbor, as the number of cattle owned is a sign of power and status. The tradition is deeply rooted in the cultures of southern Sudan and is almost impossible to be changed.

A group debate in Yei, consisting of a mixed group of society of outreach employees and older women, was told how dowry occurred in the times of her mother. She depicted an extensive procedure that involved phases of present exchanges among the families of the newlyweds. The presents, such as spears and jewellery, were ordinary but valuable to the families. A number of focus group participants agreed that they would rather return to the old times and traditions instead of the existing practice which is a difficulty for the family of the groom. Also they establish a price of the bride who is treated as a purchase and after the wedding is considered the property of the man and his family. This leads to wife-beating and forced labour for the woman Benjamin (2010).

It is known that daughters of Southern Sudanese families are permitted to marry at a very young age because of the dowry. It is a kind of economic measure to survive. The years of conflict and tremendous poverty brought people to this way of life.

### *Farming*

In order to make it possible for women to avoid poverty, a development policy should highlight women's contributions to the economy. Although women comprise a considerable part of the economically active population, their contribution is far from being wholly recorded due to the fact that they are mostly occupied with family farming or in other sectors, for example, household work that is not considered an economic activity Mutume (2005).

The United Nations reported that almost eighty per cent of Africa's farm work is done by women. The majority of girls in these regions have to drop out of school due to the fact that preference is given to boys. "The *raison d'être* of this is that the meagre resources available should cater for the boys, since they are the ones who will always be with their parents" quoted in Daniels (2007).

There is the traditional division of labour for the production of sorghum. It is divided that men clear the territory and women with children plant, weed, and cut off the tops of sorghum stalks in harvest. Women carry baskets of sorghum on their heads from the field. They are responsible for threshing and winnowing the grain by hand. Male farmers believe that the amount of planted land depends on the amount of sorghum women can carry. To address this issue, Food, Agribusiness and Rural Markets (FARM) is going to present some small tractors to move the crops from fields. Such devices will help to save time in labour and provide benefits to both women and men. This will not eliminate women's contribution in the process, which could decrease income. Such machines and devices in farming are usually operated only by male farmers. Women are able to use machinery and should be given equal opportunities for training and usage techniques.

FARM is going to help women, give them a chance for equal access to technical job opportunities and improve the image and status of women.

### *Polygamy marriages*

When one starts analysing discriminatory practices against women, those forms of discrimination that are still considered normal in some societies and in many countries are not banned by law. Polygamy for example is still widely spread and commonly justified in some African and Middle Eastern countries. While some people erroneously confuse polygamy with bigamy, which provides for one person having two separate marriages simultaneously, polygamy can have several forms such as polygamy, polyandry and group marriages. All of these forms are similar as they involve multiple partners sharing the same household. At the present day, polygamy is not accepted by Christian doctrine and modern societies but allowed under customary law. "[The] practice treats women as inferior members of their families and as inferior in status to men" Von, V.M.G. (2005). A wife in a polygamous marriage may not object to her husband marrying another woman. The number of children in such families is usually much larger.

This causes competition but the African male believes that marrying many women improves the generation of wealth knowing that they will bear girls. Also having many boys is an advantage because they fight to protect the family. On the other

hand, polygamy marriage could be a way of Sudanese avoiding prostitution on the streets due to the fact that the country has been in war for a long time and that young men have been killed. Yet polygamy is considered to violate the right to dignity, equality, health, and equal protection under the law, adversely affecting the mental health, sexual and reproductive health of women.

*The impact of women rights awareness on family dynamics in Australia*

Resettlement in the western countries has been viewed as the catalyst in growing awareness in gender-based inequalities. Upon arrival to Australia family dynamics begin to experience change, for instance, women begun to explore the opportunities of personal development including entitlements from the government. This off course is considered a challenge by men as traditional head of families and families' breadwinners.

Another aspect of balance shift is relationships between a wife and her husband's family members are not easy for any household in any culture; there are cases of severe maltreatment of women by in-laws in Africa. Especially common is such maltreatment during pregnancy or after giving birth. According to the results of one of the studies conducted in the low-income Mumbai community in India, more than one in four women reported violence from in-laws during pregnancy or after giving birth. This varied from verbal humiliation to impeding access to health care and denial of food during pregnancy Chedekel (2010). It is also common that a woman is dictated to become pregnant. In-laws make a decision as to who would care for a child. In South Sudan it is believed that in-laws have every right over their daughter- or sister-in-law, so she is obliged to serve them even though she is pregnant or just had a baby. This misconception causes confrontation between family members and leads to the use of violence.

The practices described above are humiliating for women. They are not accepted in modern, civilized societies. They are justified by customary law and hence not easy to eradicate. If traditions of a particular society encourage violent treatment of a woman by in-laws then no law passed by the government will ever be able to change the existing situation. In Pakistan for example no effective steps were taken to end discrimination against women and to protect their human rights, even after the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women had been ratified Pakistan (1998). If women's rights are neglected, violence against women is encouraged in mass media. If women are not able to access equal legal protection or exercise their rights, then society will not be able to establish a true democracy. First of all, it is important to change people's minds, the way the young generation thinks, so that they will learn to appreciate and value women as an integral part of society. Women's rights organizations and movements are very effective instruments in promoting a better understanding of women's needs and the importance of women's rights protection. Such organizations include the Arab Women's Leadership Institute, New Woman Foundation, Women in Law in South Africa and Women's Aid Collective. It is for good reason that Article 5(a) of the UN Women's Convention specifies that "State Parties shall take all appropriate measures ... to modify the social and cultural patterns of conduct of men and women, with a view to achieving the elimination of prejudices and customary and all

other practices which are based on the idea of the inferiority or the superiority of either of the sexes or on stereotyped roles for men and women” (CEDAW, 1979).

As the world is progressing, women are starting to play an even more important role, participating in revolutions and uprisings for example in Egypt and Tunisia, fighting for the rights of their people, in just the same way as men are and consequently deserve respect for their rights. So no matter what discriminatory practices against women are present in society, it is important that these practices be eliminated and equality between men and women becomes one of the fundamental principles.

#### *Conclusion Remarks*

Although the South Sudan Ministry of Gender Social Welfare and Religious Affairs is developing policy that supports gender equality effectively through advocacy for girl child education, 25% for women in workforce predetermined in the interim constitution of Southern Sudan 2005. The Ministry is running workshops at all levels of government, the rural communities and support activities geared towards ensuring gender balance and fighting gender violent behavior in the society Bichiok (2009).

In addition, 51 of the 53 AU member countries ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW). The Convention was accepted in 1979 by the UN General Assembly and was considered to be the international bill of rights for women. In 2003 activists convinced their heads of state to approve a protocol for the rights of women. Today the lobbying states exist to perform the final step and confirm the protocol to make it come into force Daniels (2007). Despite that, yet women have not realized these policies.

Despite the Ministry plans for 2007-2009 and women’s attempts to reach equality, the research results of the US Agency for International Development are unfavorable. The USAID/Southern Sudan Gender Assessment considered the period between 2003 and 2010 to find certain positive changes for men and women of Southern Sudan. The table below represents a summary comparison of noticeable improvements that occurred during the period under consideration.

The following table (2003-2010) is tracking my claim of women have not made it yet

2003 Gender Assessment	2010 Gender Assessment
Increase in sexual violence against women.	Continued sexual violence (GBV) against women.
Domestic violence; excessive alcohol use contributes.	Domestic violence; excessive alcohol use common.
18-hour workday dual roles household and economic.	18-hour workday dual roles household and economic.
Women do not have rights to land ownership.	Improvements but still struggle to own land.
Women farmers are denied training on tractor methods.	Improvements but men are still given preference in training.
Lack of markets for shea products produced by women.	Recent attention to expanding the market for shea products.
Extremely high illiteracy for women.	Educational improvement but still very high illiteracy.
Low enrolment and high dropout rates for girls.	Girls' enrolment improved but dropout remains high.
Lack of school sanitary facilities increases dropout for girls especially around adolescence.	Slight improvement in school infrastructure but water and sanitary facilities are still lacking.
Lack of trained female teachers; lack of role models for girl students.	Continued lack of trained female teachers even with programs implemented specifically to attract women teachers.
Severe lack of trained staff in ante and post natal care places women at greater risk; high maternal mortality rates.	Continued lack of trained health staff but USAID programs are providing training; maternal mortality remains extremely high and unacceptable.
Long distances to health facilities and lack of transport make it difficult for children to be immunized, which raises child morbidity and mortality rates.	New roads will continue to increase access to health centres but the problem remains; rural women still do not have access to health care.
Reproductive health needs to be addressed as part of primary health to receive proper funding.	Reproductive health needs remain largely unmet. The needs of women unrelated to children are not met.
Access to family planning unavailable for most women and men.	Family planning services do not meet the needs; lack of family planning commodities (pills, injections, IUDs).
Girls drop out when water is not available. Community water/sanitation committees established and strive for 30% participation by women.	Distance to water affects girls' school attendance because girls must fetch water; providing water at schools increases attendance and improves sanitation and the health of students and teachers.

The results of the table are a vivid example of slow changes in the society of the developing country. Ms. Mayanja declared to the delegates, who came from 165 countries during the World Conference on Women in Mexico that men had gone to

the moon and back, yet women were still at the same place trying to sensitise the world to the unnecessary and improper marginalisation of women, which deprived them of their civil constitutional rights.

Speaking about the role of women in society, it is a fact that women play important roles in political and social life. This is highlighted through their influence on the physical and moral health of the younger generation and on the future of the nation.

Any woman, no matter where in must be treated equally and must have accesses to the following:

- appropriate support for professional training
- increase participation in all government levels (local, state and national)
- open debate on cultures deem an appropriate such as dowry, arrange marriages, inheritance of widows, polygamy etc
- government sponsored campaign aim to increase girl child participation in education
- use of public media in campaigns to inform women about their rights concerning land; and to inform communities about women's rights to land. Posters and radio announcements should be used to recall these rights to society.
- Assenting acts are desirable to be organized in terms of employing women in government offices and participate in projects introduced by global organizations.
- Employing criteria should take into account the life skills of women so they are appropriate for the positions. Additional training is necessary to put women on necessary levels for occupying permanent leading positions. This point needs to be integrated into USAID plan and agreement budgets.
- They receive adequate legal protection from any violent actions against them. Giving women and those who fight for their rights an opportunity to use all legal instruments to eradicate such practices once and for all.

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