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Women, NEPAD and Nation Building: Revisiting a Dying Debate

Abstract

This article is not a contribution to the usual critiques levelled against the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) such as the credentials of its architects, the structural capacity of receiving African nations, the benefits of trade and investment proposals over inherent conditionalities for development aid. Rather, the analysis here revisits an earlier but short flurry of debates on the gender implications of this plan. NEPAD has been debated and assessed in many forums. Indeed, the scholarly discourse appears to have shifted to the prospects of a crucial pillar in the plan – the Peer Review Mechanism (PRM). In accentuating the need for a continuing debate on the substance of NEPAD's plan for gender inclusion in social governance, this article argues that the document, similar to its predecessors, remains incomplete, the usefulness of expert evaluations insufficient, as long as it refuses to confront the Women Question in concrete terms.

Introduction

Africa's struggle to achieve minimum living standards, with the exception of a few short years of post-colonial honeymoons here and there, have fallen largely on the shoulders of women (Gladwin 1991, Gordon 1996). Indeed, African women's contributions to family subsistence over these decades vividly portray the centrality of gender in the continent's march towards economic survival and sustainable development. The conditions under which these contributions are made leave no impressions as to the crippling poverty enveloping the majority of African women. Thus, any policy initiative, which boasts of improving the situation, however far-reaching, must be assessed in terms of how well it harnesses women's agency and involvement. As the current global initiative on the forum, the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD) emerged with some degree of support as a possible blueprint for Africa's twenty-first century Renaissance (Hope 2002, De Waal 2002, Kanbur 2002, Match 2002). But it also attracted formidable critiques as little more than an externally fielded propaganda which hardly reflects the voices and plight of Africa's teeming population (Chabal 2002, Owusu 2003, Edozie 2004, Ilorah 2004).

Based on the continent's present bent towards good governance, this paper assesses NEPAD's potential to integrate women into Africa's decision making process as actors. NEPAD aligns its claims of gender representation and sensitivity with the search for good governance by African leaders, policy makers, and civil societies. The paper provides a critical analysis of this new initiative's potential to empower Africa's women as a social group and as individuals in their own right, who should take their place with their male counterparts as equal partners in nation building. The analysis below is divided into four major sections. The first section provides a brief, conceptual framework for good governance based largely on UNDP reports – a major engine which gave momentum and steering wheels to the debate.¹ The second section examines the place of gender in Africa's search for good governance. The third section takes up the claims of NEPAD for good governance that embraces men and women as equal and able partners poised to tackle the continent's endemic challenge: poverty. The final section concludes the analysis with important considerations for full gender inclusion in Africa's hopeful renaissance.

Good Governance on the National Front and Beyond

Public governance may be defined as the exercise of political, economic and administrative authority in the management of a nation's affairs. It embraces the complex mechanisms, processes, relationships, and institutions through which citizens and groups articulate their interests, exercise their rights and mediate their differences (UNDP 1997). Within this framework public governance envelops actors that are drawn from and beyond the government circle itself, including those whose social location, interest, and responsibilities blur the boundaries (Chabal 2002). This public space is therefore a contested terrain, visibly so when one considers, for instance, the dynamics of power played out in the interactions between social groups (and institutions) engaged in collective action to effect change and stakeholders whose main interest lies in protecting what they consider their share of public resources (Stoker, 1998). These interactions, Jessop (1998) argues, introduce their own anarchies of exchange, given the fundamental contestations evident in the organisational hierarchy within which they occur. The art of governing therefore calls for considerable skill and diplomacy in managing social opportunities, interests, and conduct.

The UNDP (1997) categorised governance into four major dimensions, namely: economic, political, administrative and systemic. Economic governance includes the processes of decision making and implementation which impact, directly or indirectly, on the whole range of a country's material resources with an aim to effect optimal growth, efficient distribution, and mutual gain in relationships with other economies. Political governance refers to decision-making and policy implementation by elected persons in legiti-

mately constituted bodies charged with the responsibility of representing the range of interests of social groups within a state. As constituted bodies and institutions, the state comprises of separate legislative, executive and judicial branches. These entities represent the interests of a pluralistic polity that hold the mandate to freely elect their representatives. Administrative governance is a system of policy implementation carried out through an efficient, independent, accountable and open public sector. Systemic governance encompasses the processes and structures developed by society in order to protect cultural norms, religious beliefs and social values, while maintaining an environment of health, freedom, security. Systemic governance provides opportunities for individuals and groups to nurture and exercise forms of freedom and capabilities that lead to a better life for all.²

All developing societies face, in various degrees, continuing challenges of putting in place the relevant conditions for embracing new modalities of governance; modalities that could guide political, economic, and social activities towards a vision of sustainable development. As the World Bank (1989) report aptly reaffirms, the African situation is in many regards a 'crisis of governance'. Indeed, it was the increasing acknowledgement of this crisis by African leaders as well groups within civil society (that claim to speak for the teeming masses), which led to a renewed interest in the concept of good governance. The major objective behind more recent efforts to build regional co-operations and continental alliances in Africa is to achieve good governance. Good governance is defined as the ability to meet up with the critical needs of the society through efficient management of public resources. Good governance, experts argue, should redirect our footsteps from the crisis of ad hoc interventions to carefully designed strategies geared towards fundamental changes (Juma 2004, Owusu 2003). The emphasis in current debates on this subject is on development initiatives that could grapple with poverty as a challenge which demands high priority, address gender disparities in living conditions, provide employment opportunities to maximise the use of human resources, and sustain the environment for future expansion (UNDP 1994, Hope 2004). But ultimately, experts argue, the potential to achieve good governance inevitably rests on the capacity of African states to maintain a politically democratic environment for all stakeholders. As one of the prominent contributors to the debate aptly explained the vision:

Democracy should reduce the scope for conflict and make good government more likely. In turn, good government should bring about the political stability, the institutional consolidation and the operation of the rule of law that are universally seen as the necessary framework for investment. Greater investment should facilitate economic growth. Growth provides the foundation for development (Chabal, 447-449).

To achieve good governance, society must address the problem of institutional collapse. Every institution within a governing state consists of cognitive, normative and regulative structures and activities that provide stability and

meaning to social behaviour. It also includes: the legal and judicial systems, political systems, family and kinship structures, all of which mediate the legitimacy and authority of the state (UNDP, 1997). The state, in turn, impacts on these institutions as they operate and interact with one another within and across organisational webs. Institutional collapse is, in essence, a crisis that envelops the state and its various interactive segments. The majority of Africa's governance structures, both at local and national levels, are in a state of collapse (Kanbur 2002, Chabal. 2002). Good governance, the UNDP report reiterates, is crucial to addressing this problem.

Broadly defined, the concept of good governance is not only gender neutral, but also does not appear to suggest any discriminatory grounds either for the selection of its agents or the assignment of responsibilities. If the participation of men and women within a social entity is inherently acknowledged, why then should gender as a basis for social organisation pose a significant challenge to good governance?

Gender and Public Governance in Africa

The centrality of gender in Africa's social organisation and development cannot be denied. More importantly, its representations in contemporary society must not be taken for granted because in many ways they point to the roots of African women's present struggle to have their voices heard. Women's progress in most of Africa has been strongly tied to their place in the indigenous society, the colonial transition, and the re-configuration of this place in a post-colonial era. This historical passage was characterised by patriarchal continuities and contradictions that define the present hybridised social order. Patriarchal continuities may be seen as indigenous gender biases, which though traceable to the pre-colonial social arrangements, found a stronghold to germinate and flourish in the contemporary society, albeit in modified forms (Afonja 1990, Moshi 1998, Okeke 2004). The status of women at present, however, appears in many cases, to be stripped of ties to traditional female structures of authority embedded in indigenous societies. For instance, formal politics in much of Africa is considered a male preserve that mirrors, to some extent, the assumedly stronger presence of men in pre-colonial power regimes. But, such an assumption ignores the various openings through which women made their voices heard in traditional African settings. Further, the gender division of labour in the domestic sphere and paid work, gender roles in agriculture, especially women's restricted access to land, and women's near absence in international commerce, are all believed to find some resonance in the relations of gender that characterised much of pre-colonial Africa. 'Indigenous' codes are often invoked to silence women in a contemporary social order that has in many ways parted ways with the past (Amadiume 1987, Imam 1997, Sall 2000). Such assertions of pre-colonial social relations remain one-sided in

as much as they fail to bring into view the culturally placed checks and balances that gave women a foothold to stand on in indigenous social configurations.

Moreover, these gender biases are not easily separable from facets of foreign patriarchy that came with western colonisation and capitalist development as significant markers of Africa's social transformation. Compared to women, these markers afforded men a stronger foothold to legitimise new power bases and privileges, establishing continuities that are hardly justifiable solely on indigenous grounds. Social relations in today's Africa are therefore built on a hybridised social order where men and women must deal with both foreign and indigenous dictates. Women, however, must negotiate their place within this social order – as subordinate persons to men (Okeke 2004, Moshi 1998). Although the exact interaction of foreign and indigenous elements during the historical passage remains unclear, the decline of African women's status from the colonial period to the present is clearly evident (Rogers 1980, Gordon 1996, Snyder and Tadesse 1997).

African women have not only shown considerable resistance to the social forces that impact negatively on their lives, but have also made significant contributions to political struggles within the continent. African women played a significant role in national liberation struggles, resisting, as well, various colonial incursions to their social, economic and political domains (Tripp 2001, Chuku 2002, Johnson-Odim 1997). Between the 1940s and 1960s when most African states gained political independence, many prominent African women leaders carved out a political niche for women through their participation in mainstream political movements and individual female organisations. The various national liberation movements, however, showed little commitment to women's advancement beyond the periods of political struggles. Often as was the case across Africa, women emerged in the post-colonial society as second class citizens subordinate to a male ruling class who kept them on the sidelines of formal politics, the state machinery and the modern economy (Urdang 1989, Wieranga 1995).

Gender in development literature is often viewed in terms of societal relationships bound by the traditionally defined roles for and attitudes, values, and norms towards men and women in a given household, work-place or community (UNECA, 1999). Given its centrality in social organisation and interaction, gender cannot be ignored in the analysis of failure or success of governance in Africa. As the South African President, Thabo Mbeki admitted in a meeting of African heads of state,

In all Commonwealth societies women are suppressed. Our continuing failure to genuinely respond to the challenge of attaining human equality is demonstrated by the very composition of our meeting. We need only to look at the group gathered here to see that maleness is a prerequisite for political leadership. It cannot be that we pride ourselves as a Commonwealth when this special collective distinguishes itself by defining women as alien beings.³

Democracy at its core is about representation and resources. As the Nigeria lawyer, scholar and social activist, Ayesha Imam drives home to many others who challenge the underpinnings of inequality in Africa, the struggle to build a socially inclusive society 'is also necessarily and simultaneously profoundly a political struggle over power and resources' (1997: 2). When women, who make up 50 percent of the population, are left out; kept at the margins in political decision making, the extent to which the other half represent women's interests cannot be left unquestioned. Participation is a key factor in the governance process. Participation is even more critical in a situation where far more women, compared to men, are both economically and politically helpless to articulate their demands and demand action. What good would women's continued acquiescence to the status quo be in a situation where their present life conditions are clearly traceable to 'an insufficient access to resources, a lack of political rights and social options'? (Rodenberg 2002: 1) At the very core of African women's struggle to be recognised as equal partners with men in nation building is their denigration, apparent and subtle, in a contemporary society where their potential as productive citizens is exploited rather than nurtured for social progress. Good governance incorporates the idea that all or the majority of stakeholders in the polity should be active participants in this process. In terms of gender relations good governance suggests parity. It calls for the extraction of human ideals of excellence in a world of diverse talents. Parity, in this context, has to be negotiated on a contested terrain with an agreeable balance struck between tolerance and respect for personal autonomy. The achievement of these ideals largely depends on equal political participation; the integration of every group in society into active political life. Such a framework must embrace the interaction of men and women in all spheres of public life, including their representation in all power structures (UNDP 1995). In adopting the Universal Declaration on Democracy in September 1997, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)⁴ reiterated the crucial link between gender equity and good and governance, noting that 'the achievement of democracy presupposes a genuine partnership between men and women in the conduct of the affairs of society in which they work in equality and complementarily, drawing mutual enrichment from their differences' (Pintat 1998, 2). Such solemn declarations are yet to find a solid footing in Africa's many initiatives to rethink its development path.

The challenge to empower women; to enable them improve their conditions of life as a prerequisite for contributing to nation-building is a battle fought on different platforms and with various degrees of success. More specifically, the global movement to bring women into forums of decision making has gradually gained momentum over the past two decades. During this period, women have organised at local, national, and international levels to demand action. For example, from the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies (1985), to the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), women have elicited support from

national leaders, international organisations, and eminent world figures to push their case for participation in public decision making. Five years after Beijing, women in parliaments world-wide registered an increase from 10 to 12 percent. Regional increases range from 36.6 percent in the Nordic countries to 15.5 percent in the Americas; from 13.4 percent in Asia to 12.5 percent in Europe (excluding Nordic countries). Women represent 11.5 percent of parliamentarians in sub-Saharan Africa, those in the Pacific 8.3 percent, and the Arab States at the bottom with 3.3 percent (Pintat 2000: 4). Despite the range of policies and programmes developed in response to the gender gap in public leadership and decision making, available records still show that women, even on a global scale, are vastly under-represented. At present, women's global representation in decision making is nowhere close to the 30 percent threshold advocated by the United Nations Development Programme (Karam 2000: 9). Even these present gains were not a result of a restructuring of the political space to *include* women as equal partners. Indeed, the IPU (2005) succinctly articulated this development as 'the result of electoral engineering' to accommodate women, often in response to both internal and external diplomatic pressures.

Where do African women stand? Besides the struggle for basic economic survival in which the majority of African women are immersed, the challenges of nurturing sustainable development initiatives faced by the continent certainly demand women's participation in charting a path forward. These two streams of interest are inextricable. African women need to situate themselves strategically in order to influence the decisions that affect their lives and those of their families. They are not immune to changes and trends in the political economy of their communities and nations, or what transpires outside the borders of nation state. As Karam (1998) argues,

... women's equal participation in political life plays a pivotal role in the general process of the advancement of women. Women's equal participation in decision-making is not only a demand for simple justice or democracy but can also be seen as a necessary condition for women's interest to be taken into account. Without the active participation of women and incorporation of women's perspectives at all levels of decision making, goals of equality, development and peace cannot be achieved.⁵

The verdict has come in after three decades of research and praxis on both the status of African women as well as their role in nation building. Over this period, the need to access their wasting potential has been variously expressed by national leaders and policy makers. Indeed, women's growing international profile fanned by the growth of international feminist movements in the past three decades, has propelled African governments to voice a number of policy declarations.⁶ For instance, *The Lagos plan of Action* (1988), called for both the integration of African women into the development process, particularly in policy designs that aim at optimising the use of human resources. Further, the *Arusha Declaration* (UNECA 1990) took great pains to highlight the

marginalisation of women in Africa's development initiatives, outlining measures to reverse the trend. Following a similar pattern of response to earlier United Nations initiatives, many African countries have also endorsed the *Beijing Platform for Action* which spells out the strategies for raising the global status of women arrived at by international women's coalitions, national governments and international development agencies at the (1995) Fourth World Women's Conference in China. Such responses by African governments in the past may have introduced a number of policy measures to address women's concerns, but they are yet to get to the roots of their marginalisation in contemporary society.

Indeed, a good number of scholars argue that the rise of international feminist movements and discourses that raised women's global appears to have made little impact on African women's social status, particularly their role in national development. Apparently, the various national regimes have exploited this international profile to their benefit, instituting 'state feminism' managed by their female consorts within political circles, who drum up popular support from the less privileged female majority, as they sabotage the efforts of female collectives that question the status quo (Mama 1995, Okeke and Franceschet 2002). African women appear to have also suffered a similar fate with the wave of democratisation across Africa since the late 1980s. As many scholars engaged in this debate clearly point out, African governments may voice their commitment to advancing women's status in the continent, but such declarations do nothing but pay lip service to the gender question, if they do not confront the structural and ideological barriers that militate against women's social mobility.⁷ For the most part, women have been kept away from the forefront, and only in a few cases, particularly in East and Southern Africa, has female mobilisation exerted appreciable influence to earn some degree of recognition in the corridors of power (Tripp 2001). Not surprisingly, women's representation in politics and urban governance and their general presence in the modern society remain woefully low. For instance, women's average share of seats in national parliaments across Africa is still below 10 percent compared to Asia and the Pacific (14.5 percent) and the advanced industrial countries (22.6 percent).⁸

For those critically conscious of the patriarchal underpinnings of women's lives in Africa, this record is hardly surprising. The tentacles of patriarchy have an instinctive hold on every effort African women make to assert their citizenship in society. It defines their group interaction, sphere of action and degree of social support. These tentacles continue to undermine African women's struggle to mobilise beyond the boundaries outside which they would have to confront men, male establishments and strongholds (Chuku 2002, Okeke 2004). African women may be organising around all kinds of issues but have yet to question tradition where it holds down their progress. As Nadia Youseff (1995: 287) rightly asserted, 'Women's organizations exist in Africa,

but most are not the kind through which women can become empowered to use law or to effect changes to secure their rights'. Women are left to bear much of the brunt of a social order burdened with archaic systems of gender relations inflexible to the demands of modernisation in economic, social and political terms. If they existed, indigenous social spaces of power and authority have suffered the severe stranglehold of modernity, leaving women to seek concessions on very shaky platforms, wrapping their demands in ever so delicate a parcel to avoid stepping on the toes of the powers that be. African women's minimal political representation only underscores the definition of their role in the contemporary society; their place beside men in nation-building. Women's political representation in Africa reflects the narrow niche carved out for them in a contemporary society where they are expected to harness their efforts towards family subsistence, registering their presence in the public sphere only to the extent that it does not challenge their subordinate status beside men as brothers, fathers, husbands and leaders who hold the fort and chart the path.

As noted earlier, African women's situation does not stand apart from the common pattern characteristic of life in the developing world. But its patriarchal facets display their own peculiar features which give them potency in each cultural domain. In each case, culture appears to have outclassed other factors in marring women's political ambitions and efforts to join the relevant forums. Defined simply as the ways of life of a people, culture could easily shape women's and men's involvement in production, reproduction, resource use and distribution. The defense of such non-egalitarian systems bars those under its oppressive clutches from asking the question: Should tradition serve us or should we serve tradition? It is a similar state of affairs that bars African women from questioning (even when they enter the political forums) the underlying patriarchal assumptions which inform cultural practices such as women's usufruct access to land, the treatment of widows, and early marriage. A more decisive question buried within the literature on gender and development in Africa begs to be answered in political terms: is it in society's interest to maintain these practices or is it time for a trade-off between cultural practices and human development priorities such as progress in development, human rights and democracy? (UNDP 2004).

This paper argues that a people's culture not only shapes the nature of its democracy and phenomenon of governance. If we admit that governance also involves, among other facets, the management of gender relations, especially with reference to the distribution of public resources, then, the cultural landscape which defines this social order cannot be left unchecked.

NEPAD, Public Governance and the Gender Question

NEPAD is supposedly an African-made-project; a synthesis of three initiatives – Thabo Mbeki, South Africa president's vision of a political, cultural and

economic renaissance for the continent in the twenty-first century; the Millennium Partnership for Africa's recovery Programme (MAP), the Omega Plan for Africa spearheaded by president Wade of Senegal, which focused extensively on infrastructural and skill development; and the Compact for African Recovery, a contribution from the executive secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa (UNECA). NEPAD is designed to reverse Africa's underdevelopment in the twenty-first century through a sustained regional engagement among African States, on the one hand, and a partnership with advanced industrial countries, on the other. In order to tackle Africa's problems of poverty and social exclusion – a basic prerequisite for full integration into the current global economic globalisation process – these multilateral and bilateral relationships are to be nurtured within the framework of good governance. Towards this end, African states are expected not only to put their houses in order but also to endorse and accept hook-line-and-sinker, orthodox economic reforms (such as trade liberalisation, currency devaluation, subsidy withdrawals, privatisation and private sector-driven economy) stipulated by donor agencies and in bilateral agreements. NEPAD 2001 promises to undertake a fundamental restructuring of Africa's development programme, taking into consideration many of the concerns raised by critics of earlier attempts at hoisting Africa onto the development path. NEPAD is presented as the brainchild of Africa's leaders who have embraced the common vision of eliminating poverty as a crucial prerequisite to the continent's economic and social renaissance. This common vision, the architects of NEPAD explain, must be endorsed by the African peoples whose participation in the various approaches to action cannot be compromised. The basic stance of NEPAD is captured in the following affirmation contained in the first paragraph of the document:

... a pledge by African leaders based on common vision and a firm and shared conviction, that they have a pressing duty to eradicate poverty and to place their countries, both individually and collectively, on a path of sustainable growth and development, and at the same time to participate actively in the world economy and body politic...a program anchored on the determination of Africans to extricate themselves and their continent from the malaise of underdevelopment and exclusion in a globalization world (NEPAD, 2001, Paragraph 1).

The basic challenge to Africa's development, according to the authors of the document, is therefore poverty and the eradication of poverty must of necessity be a consequence of sustained economic growth – the backbone on which the overall well-being of the teeming populations across the continent rests. To keep the economic engine rolling, African states must embrace participatory democracy, which is expected further to guarantee political stability, public security and rule of law. The World Bank had blamed the lack of investment in the continent by both foreigners and indigenous businesses on the absence of these fundamental prerequisites. It defined a good government as the one that

does not interfere in the economic process but limits its activities to providing physical and social infrastructure, including legal frameworks, especially for private sector development. This pressure for good governance has led to the blurring of boundaries between democratisation and the retreat of the state from the social and economic fields. As stated earlier on, the debate on Africa's economic renaissance gained considerable momentum around discourses on 'good governance' (Mafeje, 2002). The present state of affairs was the direct result of what the World Bank saw as a gross, prolonged mismanagement of public resources and interests by African governments. Therefore, whatever support extended was hinged on African leaders' preparedness to work towards an efficient, transparent and corruption free governance.

In keeping with the above premises, NEPAD was structured to cover four major areas, namely: Peace and Security Initiative; Democracy and Political Governance Initiative; Economic Governance Initiative, and Sub-Regional and Regional Approaches to Development. The democracy and political Governance Initiative centre on the place of democracy and 'good' political governance in Africa's quest for sustainable development. It incorporates a commitment by African leaders to create and consolidate basic processes and practices of governance that are in line with the principles of transparency, respect for human rights, promotion of the rule of law, accountability, and integrity; support initiatives that foster good governance; respect for the global standards of democracy (including political pluralism and multiparty politics, the right of workers to form unions, fair and open elections organised periodically). The leadership of African countries has to function with an aim to institutionalising all these commitments that ensure adherence to the political core values enshrined in the NEPAD. Political leadership in the NEPAD era is expected to respect the basic standards of democratic behaviour; identify existing institutional weaknesses, and mobilise the resources and expertise necessary for redressing them. Sustainable development is considered inconceivable without the emplacement of an appropriate political governance frame within which the development project can be undertaken (Olukoshi, 2002).

NEPAD potentially wields considerable international support given the commitments (albeit in promissory terms) western industrial countries have made, especially in financial terms. NEPAD also boasts in certain sections of its policy declarations a sensitivity to the concerns of gender as an un-negotiable facet of Africa's struggle to join and compete with the global community in the development race. In spearheading Africa's anti-poverty war, NEPAD promises to take a different path, beginning with a clear recognition of the social structures of gender relations that have kept women under for so long. It seeks to catapult the global indices of women's progress with very prominent references to their presence in formal sector politics, government, education and formal employment. As clearly stated in paragraph 67 of the NEPAD document, the architects of Africa's foremost development

blue print have undertaken the challenge of bringing women into every aspect of nation building, promoting women's roles in those activities specifically earmarked for their progress. In specific terms, NEPAD plans to develop and implement programmes to confront the huge burden of poverty African women carry, to make women visible in the governance process, to address the various forms of discrimination and segregation women suffer in education and formal employment. On the same premise, NEPAD also seeks to transform the existing legal system, modern and customary, to make it responsive especially to socially accepted practices and beliefs which limit or deny women their rights.

NEPAD's sound footing on an assumedly solid resolution of African leaders, the assertion within the document to mobilise the human agency within its populations, and the economic support of western industrialised countries, appear to present some hope for the continent's renaissance. But a closer look at its foundations calls for a more critical reflection of the directions for progress which the document spells out. Such declarations cannot be accepted at face value given the pattern already set by previous policy initiatives in the continent. For one thing, the architects of the document have come under severe criticism for the fact that the deliberations that went into its production did not engage the full awareness and participation of the African peoples. For another, the democratic orientation of NEPAD also presents a problem for critics, given its strong declarations for promoting women's participation in the governance process. The democratic imperative questions the very tenets of NEPAD's conceptualisation, especially the ethical references of its authors: the Presidents of Nigeria, Senegal, Algeria and South Africa. The credentials of these African leaders as political players and the history of their nations as democracies do not provide much ground for embracing NEPAD as anything more than a political exercise organised for the viewing of local and foreign constituencies. In his critique of the process that gave birth to NEPAD, Zo Randriamaro (2002: 4-5) maintains that:

The civil society and social forces within the continent had not been considered a priority. Even if this can be interpreted as a strategic option aimed at securing the support of influential players in international cooperation, namely the G8, it also reflects a particular conception of the relations between the state and its citizens which contradicts the claims of the NEPAD for democracy, pluralism, transparency, and accountability.

The fact appears to have been taken for granted that the support of Africa's teeming populations, women included, can be harnessed without providing platforms where they can voice their experiences and debate alternative causes of action. Even in their assessments of NEPAD which agreed with some of its policy initiatives, various groups within civil society across Africa have openly criticised the absence of a people-centred approach to the process of the document's formulation.⁹ The participation of the masses of African peoples, critics like Zo insist therefore, is not significantly valued by NEPAD given that

it reinforces the relations of power and paradigms of discourses which underpin the neo-liberal model on which most attempts at Africa's economic surge forward are founded. It is therefore safe to argue that NEPAD's basic objectives and the steps outlined to reach them clearly exclude the perspectives and needs of marginalised groups. The consultation of a number of groups within civil society (including women's organisations), after the document had emerged, they argue further, was merely an attempt to co-opt groups of unsuspecting observers into a process with already predetermined goals. In other words, this was merely an effort at managing the exclusion of the large majority of popular social forces while legitimising the economic framework and macroeconomic policies agreed on with bilateral and international partners. In conceiving, developing and presenting NEPAD in the package it was sold, Africa's teeming populations were denied the right to make their own contribution.

Beyond these general assessments, we pose a question that calls for more specific deliberation – In what particular ways has NEPAD handled the clamour for gender inclusion in governance process across Africa? This question (though not new) has been severally posed by scholars, activists and leaders. We argue in this paper that beyond acknowledging the existence of gender inequities in every sphere of society, the NEPAD document lacks a critical analysis of the problem matched with follow-up strategies to begin the task of dismantling process. The treatment of the 'woman question', does not deviate remarkably from previous development initiatives. As Karuuombe, Barney aptly describes this section of the document, (Randriamaro, 2002: 22-23), it takes the usual 'add women and stir' approach. In its hurry to eradicate the feminisation of poverty, NEPAD buries other forms of gender inequality under one banner, avoiding the necessary confrontation with other major barriers to women's progress. The Trojan horse of forward liberation to expand private (especially foreign) investment is another prescription for further erosion of what was left after the decimation of African women's economic foothold by Structural Adjustment Programmes:

NEPAD wants to implement the Poverty Reduction Strategies of the Bretton Woods institutions which resemble dreadful SAPs which have exacerbated the burden of women as mothers and carers. Further liberalisation of African economies will again hit women the hardest as it will increase the household subsistence burden, which already rests on women's labor and meagre incomes. The majority of women are found in the vulnerable sectors such as textile and clothing, leather, and food. These sectors which, if faced with competition and unfavorable world markets, tend to decrease wages, benefits and job security (Kauuombe 2003: 18).

As with other African development plans, NEPAD's recognition of market forces in the governance process hardly coincides with the recognition of the well-being of the masses and to that extent bears little relation to the process of social transformation. The latter has little or no possibility of emerging where

liberal economic measures often reinforce the exclusion of the poor, the majority of whom are women, in the distribution of social resources while further entrenching patriarchal patterns in the forums of politics and decision making (Randriamaro 2002). The economic framework championed by NEPAD has the potential of keeping women in the poverty trap by re-emphasising access to the usual economic and social opportunities designed to meet their basic needs rather than raising their social status to take their place as equal partners with men in nation building. Women's economic empowerment must go beyond the struggle to earn a living. Attempts to empower women have to go beyond the usual micro-level projects that have little or no connection to the macroeconomic framework that shapes women's overall status in society. By and large, NEPAD appears to have ignored the macro-level interactions in society which speak to the structural causes of women's subordination.

With respect to the concerns of gender therefore, the NEPAD document not only has a very weak appreciation of the roots of African women's marginalisation in today's society but also lacks a viable vision of where to begin the process of redress. NEPAD in all its programmes of action does not embrace the now globally applauded African Development Bank's gender policy which insists that 'the cultural environment is among the factors that influenced the participation of women and men in both the public and private sphere. Indeed, culture has been invoked to legitimise differences in gender status, values and roles to justify unequal gender relations in a manner that, to a large extent, favors men and disadvantages women' (Match 2002: 12). NEPAD outlines in very broad terms gender neutral measures to boost enrolment across the educational system, strengthen the infrastructural support for this expansion and halt the brain drain.¹⁰ But it fails to probe the underpinnings of a learning curriculum embedded in sexist values by which Africa's children grow up. Indeed, the policy document identifies only in vague terms women's access to schooling among its strategies for human capacity building. Beside its traditionally attractive economic prospects for individuals, higher education must be recognised as the basic mechanism for equipping African men and women with the skills for participation in the public sphere. Similar to their male counterparts, higher education for African women should equally provide them with the credentials that would equip them for a career in the professions, civil service and public life.

NEPAD also remains silent on questions of women's access into particular fields of learning and the implication of gender segregation for their chances of competing effectively with men in the new global economy. It ignores the gaping under-representation of women, especially within the lucrative 'male preserves' of tertiary education and provides little if any proactive steps to redress this gross imbalance. On a basic level, the process of empowering women should consider the level of professional skills acquired by women as

the arbiter of family subsistence across the continent. As the United Nations International Fund for Women (UNIFEM) Progress Report, 2000 notes, paid work directly enhances women's economic autonomy, providing them with 'productive resources' outside the control of men. With the exacerbation of regional inequalities resulting from globalisation, this economic autonomy is crucial, especially in poorer regions such as sub-Saharan Africa where women increasingly bear the burden of family subsistence. As the report equally noted, globalisation may have destabilised African economies, but has also brought along new economic opportunities mainly for the highly educated to tap. In this harsh economic climate, African women's access to higher education certainly represents a crucial policy initiative for fighting Africa's war of survival.

With women's access to tertiary education seriously tied to the availability of public funding, the growth of private institutions raises serious questions of social responsibility for their advancement in society. NEPAD in its policy statements appears to subsume the challenges posed by the privatisation of tertiary education in Africa within the general programme of system expansion. It pays little attention to the challenges these changes are already posing to existing measures to enhance gender equality. Indeed, the policy document barely scratches the surface in as much as it does not even recognise women's absence in the formal sectors of African economies as a fundamental flaw in the blueprint for Africa's progress.

Women's participation in schooling and paid work in Africa makes a powerful statement about the roles society has carved for them compared to their male counterparts in the task of nation building. It would not make sense for African leaders and policy makers to promote levels and kinds of training for women, encouraging them to aspire to positions that they are not expected to assume. It is not surprising that in the arenas of public governance and decision making, the document points to the potential input women could provide, but leaves untouched the social structures already in place which deny them a place as a crucial political force to be reckoned with. As cheerleaders for men in African political forums, women 'observe', for the most part, the machinery of public decision making. Without their strong presence in such forums the huge economic burden of social survival placed on their backs receives the usual lip service.

Inasmuch as it does not earmark any crucial steps for integrating gender into the structures of public governance, especially in sectors where women's contributions have been duly recognised, NEPAD's stance does not necessarily question the status quo. For instance, in outlining measures to revive agricultural sectors across Africa, NEPAD affirms women's important contribution to family subsistence, but hardly reflects this noble contribution in the specific initiatives outlined for boosting food production. Even in its resolutions for sustaining important environmental conditions for social development, NEPAD bypasses female agency which has been internationally

acclaimed. Women's status as the repositories of knowledge whose survival is tied to their management of natural resources, has anything but a prominent role to play in the various initiatives for action.

Conclusion

What implications does the lack of gender sensitivity in the governance process have in Africa's struggle for sustainable development? This is a pertinent question, which if properly addressed would help reduce the corrosive orientation of cultural interpretation of gender roles in the development process. Overall, the neglect of women's needs and rights undermines the potential of entire communities to grow and develop. Poverty, it notes, is deeply rooted not only in the glaring imbalance between what women do and what they have – in terms of both assets and rights – but also in women's exclusion from the forums where decisions are made about the distributions of available resources. Gender sensitivity in the policy making process will also facilitate the global struggle for poverty reduction to a level that meets, at least, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set by the UNDP. We argue that as women's status appreciates, so do the benefits to society.

While NEPAD reinstates the need to move women at the centre of social progress, it does not outline the concrete steps towards this goal. It does not address in any clear terms how to boost women's presence in the crucial facets of its development strategies and programmes. In outlining the major facets that must be addressed: public governance, energy conservation, environmental management, food production, human capital development and international relations, women are left on the sidelines with little or no input in decision making processes that govern their everyday lives. Any initiative that aims to lift Africa up cannot sidestep serious questions about women's fundamental subordination and absence in political decision making. African women's lack of power is at the very centre of their inability to assert their claims of equal partnership with equal men in the development process. In ignoring this state of affairs, African states continue to endorse not only women's disempowerment but also the massive waste of human resources at the altar of traditions and cultures that block our path to progress. The continent cannot move ahead without confronting the roots of cultures and traditions which justify the treatment African women receive at the hands of men and the state. In this regard, NEPAD may seem to start out on a bolder note than previous continental initiatives, but its foundations remain shaky in as much as it refuses to begin its process of rebuilding Africa with a serious questioning of the status quo that places African men and women on an unequal footing for the journey ahead.

Notes

1. Ever since the onset of Africa's assumed democratic surge from the 1990s after a decade of economic decline, war and political conflicts, the UNDP has been at the forefront of a revitalised debate on both sustainable development and good governance in the continent. See references in this article from 1997 to 2004.
2. These are brief but concise definitions drawn from debates that gave birth to the volume.
3. Excerpts of speech delivered by South African president, Thabo Mbeki in Durban, South Africa, 12 November 1999.
4. The IPU is an international organisation of Parliaments of sovereign States (Article 1 of the Statutes of the Inter-Parliamentary Union). It was established in 1989 as a focal point for world-wide parliamentary dialogue and works for peace and co-operation among peoples and for the firm establishment of representative democracy.
5. See Web page in the referenced collection at the end of this article.
6. The growing concern over African women's declining status can be traced to the resolutions that gave rise to the United Nation's Decade for Women (1975-85), at the end of which the Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies were formulated (1986). The poor results yielded by the latter over a ten-year period once more brought international attention back to women in the developing world. This has been clearly demonstrated in more recent international women's conferences.
7. See, for instance, a revisit of this argument in Moshi, L. (1998) *Forward to Women and Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Power, Opportunities and Constraints*, M. Block, J. Beoku-Betts and R. Tabachnick, eds., ix-xii. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
8. Collated from UNIFEM Progress of the World's Women Biennial Report, Tables and Charts on line: www.undp.org/unifem/progressww/2000/index.html.
9. This has been a common point of agreement among those involved in the debate on NEPAD in both the academic forums and feminist coalitions' position papers. See Match International's (2002) position paper.
10. See page 49 of the NEPAD document.

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