

## **Gender and Poverty in Uganda Today**

Poverty in Uganda is considered to have increased for the majority of people in the present era of structural adjustment programmes. In terms of absolute numbers, poor people constitute 61% of the population, while 30% constitute the absolute poor.<sup>1</sup> It is also asserted that women are the poorest of the poor, what has been termed the "feminization of poverty", thereby highlighting the significance of the gender dimension of poverty. However, poverty is a relative term the indicators of which cannot be universalized. It is not merely an issue about income and low purchasing power, but rather encompasses ideological and political implications which are partly determined by people's perceptions. Thus, beyond this generalization, there are various dimensions of poverty in terms of geography, urban/rural groups, and vulnerable groups and minorities.<sup>2</sup>

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1. See E. Kyesimire, "Food Security in Uganda", paper presented at a workshop on the "Gender Dimensions of Agricultural Policy in Uganda", Centre for Basic Research and UNRISD, Kampala, 1996.

2. See Centre for Basic Research, "Uganda's Renewable Natural Resources: A Background Paper", report prepared for the British Overseas Development Administration, Uganda Sector Review Mission, 1996.

Ever since Ester Boserup wrote the ground-breaking book, *Women's Role in Economic Development*,<sup>3</sup> the question of women, particularly in relation to issues of poverty alleviation and eradication, has assumed greater significance. At this point, I should perhaps clarify the distinction between "gender" and "women" and the relationship between the two. While women connote a biological category constituted by the female sex, gender refers to the social and historical constructions of maleness and femaleness. Gender is a broad concept that helps in looking at the concrete manifestations of disparities between men and women and to historicize it further. Thus, it is possible to capture the different lived experiences of different men and women, taking into account divisions such as class, race, religion, and nationality. This paper will attempt to give a critical view of the place of women in the poverty debate at the levels of theory and practice. It gives an overview of some of the realities of gender and poverty in Uganda, and concludes with some comments on the need for a substantial and holistic empowerment for women.

### ***Gender and Development: An Overview of Global Approaches***

When we talk of poverty, the thread within the whole discourse is that of development which is the overall improvement in the quality of life of the people. In the process of achieving development, however, there arise differentials, one of which is that between men and women. It is recognised that men and women play different roles, have different needs, and face different constraints arising from fundamental imbalances in their respective rights and obligations. Hence, they have differential standing in terms of access to resources which results in women becoming an economically deprived group.<sup>4</sup> Consequently initiatives evolved to address the question of women in relation to the development process.

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3. London: Earthscan Publishers, 1970.

4. See World Bank, *Uganda Growing out of Poverty*, Washington: World Bank, 1993.

First, was the welfare approach that dates back to colonial times, when church organisations took care of the poor and needy women and organised mothers= clubs. Basically, this approach conceptualises women, first and foremost, as mothers responsible for their children and family. It understands women to be objects of development and at best makes some improvement in the household welfare without, however, changing the existing forms of resource allocation and distribution. It is argued that the welfare approach became popular because the policies and programmes derived from it carried no redistributive consequences for men. This perhaps can also explain its acceptability, even today, in terms of multilateral aid.<sup>5</sup>

From women's circles, particularly in the United States, came the view that beyond welfare, there was a need to address the relative status of women **B** to address questions of equity. The approach emphasised the fact that women had been left behind in the process of development and that there was need to ensure equal access for men and women. This approach necessitated a strategy of integration, of ensuring that women were beneficiaries of development just as men were. This approach, however, began with a view of development as a monolithic process and was particularly flawed on questions of gender in development processes. Women, particularly in Africa, cannot be said to have been "outside" development; they were already integrated in terms of the cash economy, migrant labour and other process. Thus, the question should not be that of integration, but the nature of development which creates and reinforces inequalities between men and women.

Soon, the equity approach was eclipsed by the anti-poverty approach, which focused on poor women. The view here is that economic growth does not necessarily trickle down to the poor, especially women, and women's problems are related more to poverty rather than to subordination. In terms of institutionalization, this approach bred what is referred to as income-generating projects for women, productive activities for poor women to supplement their income. The underlying assumption

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5. See G. L. Nijeholt, *Women and the Meaning of Development*, Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, Working Paper 15, p. 9.

of income-generating projects is that women's labour time is assumed to be infinitely elastic while conversely harbouring notions of negative valuation of the responsibilities for daily subsistence that women already engage in thereby compounding the burden of work that women are supposed to carry.

Due to economic crises in the 1980s, there came a shift in development discourse, and efficiency came to be emphasised as a key concept. In relation to women, the efficiency approach highlights the fact that development can no longer afford to ignore women. President Yoweri Museveni is often quoted as saying that involving women is not only a question of social justice but also (and perhaps most importantly) a question of good economics. Implied in this stance is that women are the newly-discovered instruments to be harnessed in the pursuance of the development process. This instrumentalism or conceptualization of women as instruments or objects to be used, tends to permeate initiatives such as those on the environment, family planning, population control, and child health. In the particular case of population control as one of the ways of addressing development problems, women's bodies are specifically targeted as the instruments through which specified goals can be achieved; this gives much less concern to women as human beings and citizens.

All these approaches have one major aspect in common: they ignore the question of power; it was for this reason that the empowerment approach was developed. Empowerment was strongly articulated by feminists of the third world who argued that most of approaches from the west ignored differing power relations between men and women, between classes and regions, and, above all, the power relations between nations. Empowerment was defined as freedom from oppression, the power for women to control their own lives both within and outside their homes, and the removal of all forms of inequity through the creation of a more just social and economic order both nationally and internationally.<sup>6</sup> Empowerment as a concept, therefore, embodies a holistic approach to addressing problems of social inequality.

### ***Gender and Poverty: Realities in Uganda***

The World Bank report of 1993 presents the profile of women in Uganda

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6. *ibid.*, p. 14.

as follows: women are responsible for producing 80% of the food and provide 70% of the total agricultural labour; they carry out all these tasks without benefit of technology. Women have primary responsibility for all chores that ensure social existence; the combination of multiple responsibilities means that women work longer hours than men. As a result of their heavy workload, women's own ill health is significant. 40% of women, as opposed to 26% of men, are illiterate and have very little knowledge of health nutrition and hygiene. One characteristic of women's lives in rural areas is their relative isolation; they are virtually excluded from the few communication channels that do exist.<sup>7</sup>

This World Bank study focuses on asymmetries in what would be considered as key areas and it presents data that match the generally-accepted picture of womanhood in Uganda. The report highlights an understanding of gender issues for poverty eradication, the laws and customs that constitute a greater obstacle to women's and men's advancement, and the diversity and composition of households in relation to the gender division of labour. Because the question of gender and poverty is understandably intricate, this paper will limit its focus to one of the aspects considered critical in this debate and that is the gender division of labour.

### ***Resource Ownership and Utilisation: Division of Labour in Rural Uganda***

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7. *Uganda Growing Out of Poverty.*

Uganda is an agricultural country in that agriculture accounts for over 90% of the economy.<sup>8</sup> This means that since the household is the most basic unit of production in rural areas, the way its labour is utilised becomes a pertinent question in terms of poverty and poverty eradication. An overview of the gender division of labour in Uganda indicates that there are certain tasks to be done by men, and others by women and children. Men tend to perform those managerial roles that concern livestock and produce for the market, such as cotton and coffee, leaving the subsistence responsibility (although not the authority) to women. In the process, production and benefit from farm labour activities, especially tasks earning more income and which are less back-breaking are masculinized, while less profitable tasks are feminized. Even within the livestock and crop sectors, defined as male sectors, activities involving slow back-breaking and painstaking labour tasks, such as weeding and primary processing, are feminized.<sup>9</sup> Also, as food crops become

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8. See Republic of Uganda, *Background to the Budget 1996-1997 and National Development Strategy 1996-97-1998-99*, Kampala: Ministry of Finance and Economic Planning, 1996.

9. It should, however, be noted that the division of labour and distribution of tasks should not ignore the fact that there are variations according to place and time. For instance, while cultivation has increasingly become a woman's task in the western region of Uganda, the situation is different in the east, especially in Teso where the ox-plough is widely used, making men's labour part of the farming process. It should also be remembered that colonialism had a great impact on the division of labour; see "Uganda's Renewable Resources: A Background Paper", p. 26.

increasingly commercialized, there is a tendency for men to assume managerial responsibilities over what should be sold or not.

Common knowledge on the gendered division of labour is that it is based on the physical requirement of the tasks: men tend to perform those tasks that are more physically demanding, leaving "lighter" tasks for women and children.<sup>10</sup> It should be noted, however, that the division of labour between men and women is fundamentally based on produced cultural ideologies that are perpetuated and nurtured within households. What is described is not so much the actual amount of labour input but rather, the social valuation of who does what. It is not uncommon to hear Ugandan women being called to wake up and contribute to development! The Vice-president, Dr Wandira Kazibwe was quoted as saying that government would tax "idle housewives".<sup>11</sup> Such statements are indeed guided by notions of work that do not assign value to women's work. Within these perspectives, work for subsistence, which most women engage in, is taken for granted and not valued. Development is assumed to begin only when people produce for the market.

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10. See B. Keller, *Uganda - Country Gender Profile*, Stockholm, Swedish International Development Co-operation Agency, 1996.

11. "Government to Tax Idle Housewives", *The Monitor*, 21 March 1998.

According to statistics available today, women provide about 70% of the agricultural labour force and are responsible for 70-80% of production of food crops and virtually for all the food processing. They also provide an estimated 60% of the labour in cash crop production of coffee, cotton, and sesame.<sup>12</sup> In other words, agriculture is becoming increasingly feminised. This relates partly to the fact that the agricultural sector tends to have low returns on labour, and its low commercial profitability tends to push out whoever can find alternative sources of livelihood. Here it is important to point out that men and boys not only have the potential to enter into other sectors such as trade, but they can also afford to be idle. Over time, there has also been an unprecedented withdrawal of male labour from agriculture to other sectors or to full-time leisure. This fact was exemplified in a study on alcoholism in Mbarara District, where a considerable section of the male population spends most of the time on the roadside or in beer halls.<sup>13</sup> They can afford to do this because some woman (wife, sister, mother, or even grandmother) is shouldering the responsibility of providing food, one of the most basic necessities for human existence. It is even more interesting to focus on the levels of men's power to make decisions in the households even when they are idle, since men are generally known to make decisions about food crops to be grown, including the size of the land allocated to food production.<sup>14</sup> This skewed mode of labour utilisation must necessarily inform any initiatives for poverty eradication.

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12. See Ministry of Planning and Economic Development, "National Food Strategy: A Response to Overcome the Challenge of Poverty and Growth", paper presented to the National Forum on Food Strategy, Kampala, 1992, and B. Keller, *op. cit.*

13. See S. Rutabajuka, *Alcoholism among the Peasantry in Itojo Village, Rwampara County, Mbarara District*, Kampala: Centre for Basic Research (Consultancy Report of the NRM Secretariat), 1992.

14. See T. Barton and G. Wamai, *Equity and Vulnerability: A Situation Analysis of Women and Adolescents in Uganda*, Kampala: UNICEF, 1994, p. 175.



*Resource Ownership: Land*

The gender pattern of resource ownership is also critical in terms of the problem of poverty. Women generally have rights to land through their male kin such as, husband, father or brother. One of the government strategies to ensure food security is to improve women's security to property rights.<sup>15</sup> The issue of land rights for women was hotly debated during the recently concluded debate on the land bill. A voice from women activists prompted a provision that provided for co-ownership of the matrimonial home (land); this was aimed at ensuring land rights for spouses especially women.<sup>16</sup>

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15. See *Background to the Budget*, p. 176.

16. See S. Tamale, "Land Act Leaves Women in the Cold", *The Monitor*, 30 July 1998.

It should, however, be noted that the issue of pursuing land rights principally in marriage is complex, principally because the system of male dominance is firmly entrenched. To focus only upon land rights in marriage means that we are imposing rights on an already established system the logic or guiding philosophy of which is no longer amenable to change.<sup>17</sup> The conception of women as in an eternal relation to some man, either husband, father or brother, is one of the basic explanations of women's collective identity of dependence. Women should be seen principally as citizens, as men are, and the same rights should be enjoyed by all irrespective of marital or social status.

This paper is, therefore, arguing that the pursuance of land rights for spouses (women) though a logical goal in terms of poverty eradication and social justice, is untenable because it lacks foundation in terms of the whole pattern of social arrangement. It is actually argued in some circles that giving women land without any transformation in other areas of life, will intensify women's burdens. Firm patriarchal arrangements are generally difficult to transform. As long as patriarchal discourses still prevail in marriage and other relations, there is little that can be done to change the status of women. Indeed, it could be argued that women's rights to land could be the very route to undermining these discourses but our contention here is that the very process of ensuring land rights for women will be circumscribed by patriarchal discourses and structures if those rights are addressed in isolation. This leads us to the question of what empowerment would entail in relation to this debate on gender and poverty, for in order for poverty eradication to begin to make sense, questions of power relations must be addressed in a fundamental way.

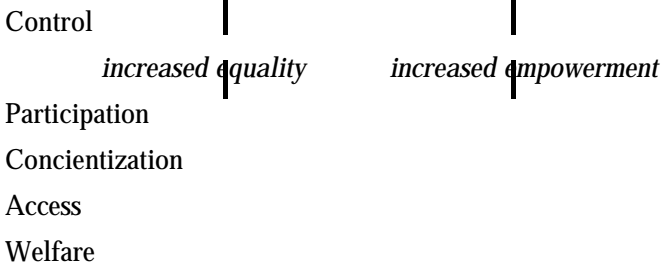
### ***Gender, Poverty and Empowerment***

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17. See J. Ahikire, "Land Rights for Wives or for Women?", *The Monitor*, 15 August 1998.

Empowerment as an approach to women and development is not yet widely recognised as an approach to development. As already noted, it arose from third-world perspectives which questioned some of the fundamental assumptions concerning the interrelationship between power and development. It also seeks to pose the question of power, less in terms of domination over others and more in terms of the capacity for women to increase their own self reliance and internal strength.<sup>18</sup> Sara H. Longwe proposes specific criteria for levels of women's empowerment in terms of women's development criteria.<sup>19</sup>

**Level of equality**



According to Longwe, the levels of equality are in a hierarchical relationship, so that equality of control is more important for women's

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18. See C. Moser, "Gender Planning in the Third World: Meeting Practical and Strategic Needs", in *Changing Perceptions: Writings on Gender and Development*, Oxford: Oxfam, 1991, p. 168.

19. See "Gender Awareness: The Missing Element in the Third-World Development Project", in *Changing Perceptions: Writings on Gender and Development*, p. 151.

development than equality of welfare. ~~A~~The higher levels of equality are automatically higher levels of development and empowerment<sup>20</sup>

***Implications for Policy and Practice***

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20. *ibid.*

It is not always easy to translate issues arising out of a debate into recommendations for future action. This paper will attempt to give pointers instead of specific policy recommendations. Firstly, it should be noted that the relative material deprivation of women occurs as a result of structural inequality and subordination, and it seems that gender subordination and poverty are continuously reinforcing each other. It also means that gender subordination is largely independent of individual behaviour such that, even when some women have surpassed questions of poverty, they still have to face different forms of subordination. Hence, there is a need to change wider inequalities and for a policy emphasis on holistic strategies and on development as a process.<sup>21</sup> A multi-dimensional approach to poverty and gender subordination that takes into account the different needs of men and women is required. In other words, gender inequality needs to be the guiding principle to help to highlight other sources of social inequality such as poverty.

Secondly, initiatives to tackle household poverty should emphasize people's participation as subjects rather than as objects of development. In the specific case of women, women's labour should neither be taken for granted nor instrumentalized. Rather, women should be involved fully in the planning and implementation of development initiatives.

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21. See L. Mayoux, "From Vicious Circle to Virtuous Circle", United Nations Research Institute for Social Development, Occasional Paper 3, Geneva: 1995, p. 12.

Thirdly, in relation to the question of organisation, women have generally been organised from above, or have been assumed to be organised in order to benefit from development dispensations such as credit and income-generating projects. It should be noted that these assumptions about women as an already constituted category are critical. Although it is recognised that organisation is capable of achieving more than an individual would be able to achieve, this unity among women should not be assumed to be natural.<sup>22</sup> It should stem organically from specific interests. This is why it has been argued that "women only" projects tend to be a failure because they are generally imposed onto a reality in which men and women exist in constant interaction.<sup>23</sup> In other words, initiatives on women and poverty have to take into account the fact that women and men exist together in a complex social system. Once gender inequality has been rectified, we can hope to see drastic changes in relation to poverty eradication.

Department of Women's Studies  
Makerere University  
Kampala  
Uganda

Josephine Ahikire

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22. *ibid.*

23. See N. Kabeer, *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought*, London: Verso, 1994.