

Sex Roles, Education, and Development in Africa

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This paper provides a general discussion of the effects of colonial rule on patterns of indigenous African education, division of labor, and social stratification. It explores changing patterns of sex roles and occupational structures giving special attention to the changing position of women.
ANTHROPOLOGY AND EDUCATION, SOCIAL STRUCTURE, AFRICA, SEX ROLES, WOMEN.

Introduction

With three-quarters of the twentieth century behind us, throughout most of the world, sex, race, ethnicity, and/or income are still de facto if not de jure bases of differential access to opportunities and resources. In the realm of education, sex is characteristically the primary basis of the inequalities that exist in most countries. In the developing nations, educational delivery systems are directed mainly toward males. Women partake of formal and nonformal education in fewer numbers and for shorter periods of time than do men. At the higher levels of schooling, women and men typically pursue different courses of study.

The differences in the availability of education to women and to men, and the different choices the two sexes make as regards educational opportunities that are open to them, are directly linked to the sex role differences that exist in the societies at large, most especially to differences in occupational roles and expectations. Evidence of a division of labor along sexual lines can be found in most countries, but in the non-Western world, this division of labor is often most pronounced and most pervasive. Africa is a prominent case in point. Thus, when we approach a discussion of the future of education in Africa or of education for Africa's future, we must grapple with the question of maintaining a division of labor that utilizes sex as one of its underpinnings.

Although some writers have answered this question by advocating what one critic termed the "western concept of *mechanical equality* [between] the sexes," and others have been equally critical of notions of occupational preserves (or reserves) for one sex or the other, (Boserup 1970) it is the view of the present author that the discussion of sex role differentiation in education and in occupations must take place within the context of a consideration of the present and projected structure of society in the parts of the world under consideration.

In this paper, I examine the question of sex role differentiation in

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education and occupations against the background of the realities of contemporary Africa and in light of some of the projections that have been offered for societal transformation in that part of the world. The paper is an exploration of, rather than an exposition on, various issues connected with the future of education as it affects women and sex roles in Africa.

Sex-Role Differentiation in Education and Occupations in Indigenous African Societies

The division of labor by sex that exists in contemporary Africa is rooted in the values and customs of the indigenous societies on the continent and in the legacy of sex-role differentiation bequeathed to these societies by the former colonial regimes.

Typically, in indigenous African societies, the occupational roles of women were different from but complementary to the roles of men (Sudarkasa 1976; Rousseau 1975). The particular occupations of women varied somewhat from society to society but, generally, women worked in agriculture, food processing, marketing, crafts production, and in domestic activities located more strictly "in the home." Very often men and women worked in the same occupation (for example, in farming or trading), but the tasks undertaken tended to be sex specific (for example, preparing the land for farming versus tending the crops or trading in one line of goods as opposed to another). There does not seem to be a basis for holding that women's occupations were considered to be "inferior" to those of men, although such occupations were usually thought to be *inappropriate* for men, just as men's occupations were normally considered inappropriate for women. The point here is that the maintenance of separate occupational domains for the two sexes did not automatically imply a hierarchical relationship between those two domains (Sudarkasa 1976). (And of course not all work was sex specific.) It would also seem inappropriate to view the traditional work of women as "drudgery" if that is meant to imply that men's work was not. Men and women worked in the fields, both sexes carried heavy loads, walked long distances in trade, and so on. Women may have spent long hours tending crops, pounding grain, or collecting firewood, but men also spent long hours felling trees and clearing the bush for farming, tending and harvesting crops, building and maintaining dwellings, and the like.

Given the interdependence and relative parity of male and female *economic* roles in most precolonial African societies, if one were to apply the "beast of burden" stereotype to women, one should also apply it to men. The disparities that are evident in the economic roles of men and women in contemporary Africa are for the most part resultant from socioeconomic changes that have taken place in the twentieth century.

In light of the foregoing discussion, it should be evident that occupational (or vocational) *training* in precolonial Africa was also differentiated along sexual lines. However, this training, which was usually provided through "formal" (i.e., structured) apprenticeship arrangements, was available to women as well as to men. A craftsman or -woman, health or religious practitioner, *griot*, and so on, each received varied duration. Training for some

occupations, such as farming or trading, did not usually involve formal apprenticeships; however, the trainee received a "formal education" through apprenticeship programs of years of tutelage (often from a parent) before being sent forth to work on her or his own.

Education in precolonial Africa was not limited to specialized vocational training. As the late Jomo Kenyatta, Africa's most illustrious anthropologist, illustrated for the Kikuyu, in African societies, all persons, female and male, were given a general education in addition to training in specific occupational skills (Kenyatta 1965). Even though schooling and literacy were not features of most precolonial African societies, education was not only important, it was universal for all freeborn members of these societies.

This is a point worth stressing because many Western scholars and laypersons seem to take the view that there was no tradition of education in indigenous Africa. Perhaps these persons would argue that the process of transmission of knowledge that took place in those societies should be subsumed under the concept of *socialization*, while reserving the concept of *education* to refer to the schooling process that developed in the Islamic world, in Europe, and elsewhere. This rather narrow view of education underlies Phillips's observation that

In Africa, education was extremely limited and associated with the very small numbers who were in contact with Islam over the land routes and later with Europeans in the ports or administrative centres already starting to be set up in those parts of Africa which were colonized. But basically the continent as a whole was still completely underdeveloped and tribal. African potential, though great, was late in being mobilized. (1975:24)

The Transformation of Occupational Roles and Educational Patterns in Twentieth-Century Africa

Since the publication of Ester Boserup's *Women's Role in Economic Development* in 1970, a number of scholars writing on Africa have pointed out various ways in which the processes of "modernization" and "development" have served as constraints on women's full participation in the economic and political arenas in their countries.¹ The complementarity and near parity of male and female occupational roles found in many indigenous economies were eroded by the spread of the market economy. Of course, it was not just women's roles that were affected by the expansion of capitalism in Africa. Males as well as females found that much of their "traditional work" was rendered nearly obsolete by the introduction of new goods and/or new technologies. They also found that in most cases they were forced to occupy the lowest levels of the economic pyramid because of the absorption of foreigners, typically Europeans and Asians, at the highest levels of that pyramid.

But in the case of African women, they not only experienced the general displacement caused by the colonial regimes; they also found that their economic status generally deteriorated vis-à-vis that of their male countrymen. Where women continued in their traditional occupations, as in the case of traders or farmers, they often found their opportunities circumscribed

because of the preference that the expatriate business community and/or governmental bureaucracy had for dealing with men. Extensions of sizable amounts of credit typically went to male traders rather than to women; innovative productive techniques were usually introduced to male farmers rather than to their female counterparts (Sudarkasa 1973). The migration of women from the rural areas to the cities often meant that if they did not work as petty traders, food sellers, or the like, they could not find work at all, and what had been economically a relatively independent female population found itself increasingly dependent on males for support (Sudarkasa 1977).

With the demise or near demise of various traditional crafts that had provided a livelihood for large numbers of the female population (crafts such as pottery making, weaving, dyeing, and soap manufacturing), women found that if they were to work at all they had to join the ranks of the petty traders, thereby rendering that level of commerce even less remunerative than it had come to be (Sudarkasa 1974).

At the center of the problems facing the mass of twentieth-century African women has been their near exclusion from the wage sector of their economies and their having to face various financial barriers to their movement from the lowest levels of commerce and food production into economic activities dominated by expatriates or African males. In both instances, the very fact of being female was often enough to call forth discriminatory treatment. However, one very important factor in the process by which women came to be "underdeveloped" in Africa has been their lack of the educational credentials that would enable them to enter into certain modern occupations or to expand the scale of their commercial or productive activities. Of course, being female was a barrier to participation in the educational systems themselves.

When we survey the education of women in contemporary Africa, we find ourselves reviewing a familiar pattern. The vast majority of African women have no formal or nonformal education of the Western type. Taking the average of all African countries, the median educational attainment for women in the age group from 15 to 24 is not up to two years. The median level of education for women aged 35 to 64 is less than one year. Eighty-five percent of all African women are illiterate (Boulding 1976).

It should be noted, however, that most African women still do receive a traditional form of vocational or occupational training. That is, they are instructed by their mothers or other female relatives with whom they live and work until they marry, at which time they usually begin to work on their own. It is my impression that nowadays quite a sizable number of young women (at least those in West Africa) acquire some degree of training in certain skills (of which sewing is the most popular) through small privately run "vocational schools." These "schools" or "institutes," as they are often called, are usually held in a woman's home or in a small shop that she rents. The running of such institutes has become a form of business for a number of women who are themselves small-scale entrepreneurs. Girls enrolling in these vocational institutes would often have had some primary schooling, but that is not usually a prerequisite for entry.

United Nations data from 1969 show that in the primary schools, on the average, girl students constituted 36 percent of the total enrollment. (UNECA

1975). These data also show that girls enrolled in primary school comprise 49.8 percent of all the African girls of primary school age. Some of these female students were undoubtedly older than the official cutoff age for the primary school population; hence, the percentage of primary-school-age girls who were actually enrolled in school was less than 49.8 percent. These statistics for sub-Saharan Africa compare with the figure of 100 percent enrollment of all primary-school-age girls in Europe and North America, approximately 57 percent enrollment of all primary-school-age girls in North Africa and the Middle East, approximately 76 percent enrollment of primary-school-age girls in Asia, and an approximate 100 percent enrollment statistic for Latin America. (Boulding 1976)

The data on enrollment in secondary schools show that in 25 African countries girls constituted between 8 and 28 percent of the student population in 1969. Of the four African countries in which girls constituted between 30 and 40 percent of the secondary school population, two (Zambia and Dahomey) are Black African states. Interestingly, it is in the southern part of the continent (Swaziland, Botswana, Lesotho, and Malagasy Republic) that girls make up between 42 and 52 percent of those attending secondary school. (UNECA 1975) (These statistics probably reflect the fact that young men in the three countries bordering South Africa migrate to work in the mines rather than remain at home to attend school.) It should be noted that the females enrolled in secondary schools in 1969 comprised only 4.5 percent of all girls of secondary school age. (Boulding 1976) Obviously, there is a very high rate of female attrition between the first and second levels of schooling in Africa.

At the university level in 1967, African women constituted between 1 and 10 percent of the student population in eight countries. They were between 10 and 20 percent of the university student population in eleven countries. Only in three North African countries (Tunisia, Algeria, and Egypt) did women constitute more than 20 percent of the university student population. (UNECA 1975) In 1972, women comprised 16.6 percent of the African students enrolled in universities, teacher training colleges, and technical colleges.

Generally, the data on education in Africa show that girls enter schools in smaller numbers than boys and that they leave at an earlier age. Outside of primary school, they typically enroll in shorter-cycle courses, such as are offered by small private "vocational training" schools. Information on the fields of study that women pursue at the higher levels of formal education show that they have clustered in the areas that the colonial educators first defined as appropriate for women: elementary school teaching, nursing, and other health-related fields such as domestic science or home economics. (Boserup 1970) Of the professional fields, law and medicine are the two that attract most women, but the proportion of women in these fields is typically under 20 percent in all countries. Women who pursue academic careers predictably end up in education, the arts, or social sciences.

Overall, then, it can be said that the spread of the market economy in Africa adversely affected the economic status of women, turning sexual differentiation within the economic sphere into sexual discrimination within that sphere, and that the spread of Western education also served to increase the economic gap between male and female because, on the one hand, most women were not exposed to the advantages that attach to being educated,

and on the other hand, most educated women were channeled into occupations that were lower paying and/or less prestigious than those held by educated males. Of course, higher education has enabled some women to move into positions comparable to that of men, and where this has been the case, *such women have often experienced less prejudice and differential treatment than Western women in comparable positions.* However, the point being made here is that, on balance, Westernization in the occupational and educational spheres has widened rather than narrowed the gap between males and females. This could and did occur while at the same time the position of women was in various ways being improved by their exposure (however limited and in whatever limited numbers) to Western education.²

Occupational and Educational Sex-Role Distinctions and the Future Social Order in Africa

Many of the discussions of the future of women's education in Africa include generalities concerning the necessity of providing equal access for women to schooling at all levels and of training women for occupational roles (such as that of engineer) presently dominated by men. It would appear, however, that a number of considerations should precede any prescriptions, however tentative, concerning the desirable quantity or quality of education for Africa's female population. (Some might want to challenge the legitimacy of speaking at all about education for *women*, maintaining that we should simply discuss education for *people*—old and young—in the societies concerned. It is hoped that ample justification for the focus on education for women will be provided in the next section of this paper).

Among the broad issues to be considered in discussing women's education and the future of Africa or the future of women's education in Africa are the following:

1. What is to be the nature of the social order for which women are being educated and in which future generations of women will be educated? What are the values undergirding this social order? What are some of the distinctive features of the basic institutions that make up that social order?
2. Is this new order to be achieved through directed "social engineering," or is it envisioned as resulting from the cumulation of a somewhat more discrete, less manipulated series of changes?
3. To what extent is education being viewed primarily as a catalyst rather than as a consequence of movement toward this new social order?
4. To what extent must the present realities of life in African societies, most especially in the present discussion the realities of the life of women, guide decision making as to the direction, rate, and/or magnitude of social (including educational) change?

These are obviously questions to be raised for discussion rather than ones for which we have definitive answers.

In relating the first broad question to the discussion of sex-role differentiation in education and occupations, one issue that must be dealt with head

on is the question of whether the future social order envisioned by African peoples (or by their social engineers) is one in which sex-role distinctions are virtually obliterated. Is it desirable to move toward the creation of a society in which virtually all roles are androgynous roles? If there is any hesitancy about answering this question in the affirmative, then educational planners must ask to what extent would the obliteration of sex-role distinctions in education and in occupations have negative implications for the preservation of valued institutions or life-styles that have their genesis or their existence rooted in sexual distinctiveness?

Analysis of present-day African societies would suggest that advocating the evolution toward androgynous roles would not receive widespread support. African women have consistently maintained that one of their differences with Western women's liberation movements concerns the fact that some of the latter's spokeswomen are "antimale" or they seek to obliterate sex-role distinctions between male and female. There are practically no indications that the male population in Africa would support the "androgynization" of roles. The tentative moves toward what Mazrui has termed "androgynous liberation" through the incorporation of women into the ranks of the freedom fighters in Guinea Bissau and in Southern Africa do not appear to have social corollaries in other realms of society. (Mazrui 1977)

The family, which is still the most important institution in African societies, is rooted in sex-role differentiation. The African family is built up around the two principles of conjugality (represented in the husband-wife relationship of polygynous as well as monogamous marriages) and consanguinity (represented by the lineage that forms the core of the compound-based extended family). In both the conjugally based immediate family and consanguineally based extended family, separate contributions are expected of males and females in material as well as nonmaterial realms. Although there is much more sex-role flexibility within the African family than is indicated by stereotypic and misleading interpretations of husband-wife roles (Rosaldo 1974), there is no ideology of sex-role interchangeability within these units.

Any educational policy decisions that lead in the direction of eliminating sex-role distinctions should be scrutinized for their possible impact on the family. Obviously, African families can and will change. The question, however, is in what direction and to what extent.³

Another point to be made in connection with the discussion of the possible elimination of sex-role distinctions concerns the strength of same-sex solidarity in African traditions and in contemporary life. Africa is a continent on which same-sex associations (i.e., sodalities, guilds, age-grades, and the like) have a long history and a thriving existence. Interestingly, Western women's liberation movements are just now seeking to create the sense of solidarity that can sustain women's associations of the type that have always been a feature of African life. It would seem that the education of women away from those values that have nurtured and sustained this sense of sisterhood (values that stress the differences between male and female) could have adverse political as well as social implications. It is precisely such all-female associations and movements that have the potential for being highly effective instruments for the attainment of equality and equity in the political and economic realms.

The ideology of female liberation in Western societies explicitly or implicitly promotes the view that equality of the sexes leads (or should lead) to the elimination of sex-role distinctions. In the United States, the trend is for educational institutions, particularly the publicly supported ones, to integrate this viewpoint into their curricula.

The study of the precolonial political and economic structures and of certain linguistic features of a number of African societies suggest that parity or near parity between the sexes in the economic sphere resulted from, or was at least correlated with, the maintenance of essentially separate "domains" for males and females (Lebeuf 1973). A challenge facing contemporary Africa, in which sex-role differentiation still exists but in which near parity of the sexes has been replaced by the subordination of women, is whether or not a new social order can be created in which the positive features of same-sex solidarity and of sex-role complementarity can be combined with social justice and political and economic equality for females as well as for males.

It is being suggested, in other words, that as regards the issue of sex-role differentiation in occupations and education, indigenous African models might provide a basis for change in a direction that is both culturally acceptable and socially progressive.

The education of women to fill certain occupational roles (and, correspondingly, the education of men to fill certain complementary ones) should not be taken as an a priori sign of unfair or unequal treatment of women. *Societies can determine the remuneration to be given for the various occupational roles within them.* There is no a priori reason why physicians, for example, should be paid more than nurses (and certainly not on a life-long basis) or why elementary school teachers should earn less than college professors. Similarly, the fact that farmers are economically less well off than some other professionals is a function of the type of economic order under which they live rather than of the nature of the work they do. The prestige that attaches to certain occupations and the lack of respect for others are likewise *culturally manipulable*. As long as discussions of sex-role differentiation in occupations and education *presume* the continuation of a political and economic order that thrives on inequalities of various sorts (that of the sexes being only one), the "solution" to the problem of the injustices caused by these *inequalities will continue to be elusive*.

Educating Women for Africa's Future

What are the implications for educational development of the realities of the present position of women in sub-Saharan Africa and of the prevailing attitudes toward and the institutionalization of sex roles on that continent? In other words, given the existence of sex-role differentiation in various spheres, how do we approach the problem of including both sexes in any plan for educational development? It is necessary, first, to accept the premise that

If all of the persons who are involved in the human tasks of survival and creation of a better life are allowed to share the opportunities available to apply scientific knowledge and technological advances, development will be achieved at the most rapid rate possible. Conversely, if some persons are left outside the

stream of this knowledge, the pace of development will be slowed down for the whole society. And the latter is particularly true if those left out play a major part in economic production and are at the same time the persons who bear the chief responsibility for the health and well-being of all the people. (UNECA 1975)

If it is accepted that both sexes must be included in all plans for development, then we can proceed to ask how this will be achieved. We are aware that according to indicators currently used in the measurement of educational development, African populations generally are "in the worst position of the developing regions" (Phillips 1975:39). In 1970, less than half the children of primary school age were actually enrolled in school. And, as was pointed out in a preceding section of this paper, only about one-third of those enrolled in primary school and less than 5 percent of those enrolled in secondary school were female.

Moving into the twenty-first century, then, Africa faces the problem of "catching up" with the rest of the world as far as its overall educational development is concerned, and it also faces the problem of closing a rather substantial gap between the educational preparedness of its male and female populations.

Much of the discussion in educational circles today concerns the possibility of providing for all the world's populations a "minimum basic education", that is, "literacy, numeracy, and elementary knowledge of the environment, of health, of civics and of standard moral codes" (Phillips 1975:8). Regardless of the position one takes as to the proportion of the educational budget that should be devoted to this minimal education, it would seem that some form of universal basic education (with the terminability that implies), or of universal primary education, is a necessary goal for all states concerned with development for the masses rather than just for the few.

The recruitment of girls on a completely equal footing with boys is implied in the concept of universal basic education; however, governments should take special measures to see that female students are not allowed to drop out of these programs in larger percentages than boys. This is a special likelihood in cases where the age of entry into the program is raised to eight or nine years and/or the duration of the program is more than four years. Parents might find it "necessary" to remove girls of about 12 years of age from school in order to be of assistance in the home, on the farms, or elsewhere.

Provision should also be made for females to have equal access to the channels leading from the basic education level to higher levels of education. Realities of life in Africa are such that even with policies of open enrollment, females will probably not move into higher education in as large numbers as males. It will be extremely important, therefore, for there to be a vigorous and imaginative program of nonformal continuing education for women in the places where they work and in the communities at large. In fact, such programs should be planned and funded alongside programs for basic education, because it is through the extra classroom educational experience that literacy, numeracy, and so on, can be provided for the women (and men) who constitute today's illiterate parent generation.

The reality of differential enrollment rates and attrition rates for males and females (especially beyond the basic level) means also that special supportive services should be provided for women to ensure that as many as possible of those who enter the higher educational levels will in fact complete the courses they start. Given the strong male biases of existing educational institutions, it is likely that if women are not given special supportive counseling and academic services, large numbers of them will not have the motivation nor receive the attention necessary to succeed.

With respect to occupations or career goals, it would seem that all fields should be open to both sexes; however, if for various reasons women continue to self-select or be channeled into certain fields, one aim of governmental policy should be to ensure that these fields not become or not remain "second-class" occupations by virtue of the differential rewards attached to them.

In any case, it is unrealistic to assume that in the foreseeable future the masses of African women (most of whom, in any case, will probably be recipients of only the basic level of education) or the masses of African men will be engaged in any occupations other than those of farming, trading, food processing, and the like. As long as the tasks in these areas tend toward sexual specificity, then the mass of children will be socialized to think in terms of a sexual division of labor. Thus, even should these children have the opportunity to move to higher levels of schooling, they would probably self-select occupations in which members of their own sex predominate.

In Africa today, as in the rest of the world, women will tend to move into or be channeled into lower paying, less prestigious jobs than those occupied by men. The higher up the occupational or educational ladder, the fewer the women to be found there (Committee to Study the Status of Women in Graduate Education and Later Careers 1974). Efforts to remedy this situation by providing equal access for women to the higher rungs of the ladder have failed because (1) the process of change is too slow, so women do not in fact "catch up," and (2) too many factors intervene that prevent *de facto* equality of access from occurring.

Nothing short of changing the structure of these societies and the value system that supports them can accomplish the goal of equality for the sexes in occupations and in other spheres. Work of all types must be valued, and vast differences in compensation for different types of work must be eliminated.

Male and female *occupational* roles were more or less at parity in many precolonial, preindustrial, precapitalist African societies. It has been suggested by this author, as by a number of other writers, that it was the capitalist economic system that accentuated and/or created differentials in income between males and females and led to the subordination of women's work roles. It is being suggested that planned change away from the market economic structure and the capitalist ethic can lead to a situation where there is equality of the sexes without identity or interchangeability of the sexes.

Endnotes

1. See for example, Judith Van Allen, "Women in Africa: Modernization Means More Dependency," *Center Magazine*, Santa Barbara, Calif., 7:3 (1974), 60-67; Marjorie

- Mbilinyi, "The 'New Woman' and Traditional Norms in Tanzania," *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 10:1 (1972), 57-72; Achola Pala, "African Women in Rural Development," Overseas Liaison Committee, American Council on Education, Washington, D.C., 1976.
2. Of course it is relatively commonplace to find that the economic status of one group improves over time without improving vis-à-vis a superordinate group, viz. the situation of the black population in the United State vis-à-vis the white population in that country.
 3. I am not aware of any research specifically relating to changing conceptions of sex roles within the African family.

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