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GENDER AND POVERTY

The government of Uganda has, through several international and domestic fora, committed itself to eradicate poverty and achieve equality between women and men. In the national objectives contained in the recently (1995) promulgated constitution, it is set out that the state shall ensure gender balance and fair representation of marginalised groups on all constitutional and other bodies.

These commitments bind the government to the principles of the Copenhagen World Summit on Social Development (March 1995); and the Beijing Fourth World Conference on Women (September 1995), which among others, sought to commit governments to the promotion of «people-centred» development; and the «empowerment and advancement of women» by recognising the role played by women in development and promoting equal access to productive resources; ensuring full and equal participation by men and women in the formulation of macroeconomic and social policies and strategies for the eradication of poverty. Uganda is one of the nine countries that committed itself to allocate 20 per cent of its budget to basic education, primary health care, nutrition programmes, safe drinking water and sanitation at Oslo (April 1996).

GOVERNMENT STRATEGIES

Over the past five years, government has, in its struggle to fulfil its commitment to reduce the levels of poverty, emphasised the need for households to earn decent incomes. In order to raise people's incomes, government has implemented both macro and micro economic reforms. At the macro level, structural reforms have been undertaken to ensure macro-economic stability through economic liberalisation, reforms in agricultural produce marketing; restructuring of the civil service, privatisation of public enterprises and other government parastatals, promotion of foreign private investment, broadening the tax base, decentralisation of the public service and the removal of foreign exchange controls.

Micro-economic reforms have also been undertaken to ensure that people have secure access to productive assets and a system of landholding that effectively enables the poor to get access to land. Credit schemes such as the Entandikwa (meaning

starting capital) have been initiated to ensure that credit is available to the rural poor who have promising income generating enterprises. Under the scheme, funds are given to local financial intermediaries in order to cut down on administrative costs of using the traditional financial institutions which make conventional credit too expensive for the target borrowers.

Roads and other infrastructure are being rehabilitated to ensure that there is access to markets. Attempts are being made to ensure information is provided to the people on how to effectively use their resources to raise their incomes. The Government has undertaken programmes to ensure adequate levels of health and education to benefit the poor. The Government is giving special attention to vulnerable groups such as the old, young, sick or disabled. Recognising that raising incomes alone are not enough, government is also targeting the reduction in child mortality. To achieve these objectives, government is ensuring that there is good governance whereby people have the freedom to articulate their political views; and a mechanism to get these views heard through regular consultation. The Government has also put in place structure to deal with corruption in public office (*Background to the Budget, 1996; Government of Uganda, 1996*).

Although there have been far-reaching improvements in Uganda's economic indicators, with GDP growth averaging 7 per cent per annum since 1986 (*Government of Uganda, 1996; EPAU, 1996; World Bank, 1996*), these have not been matched by equivalent improvements in the social and political indicators, even using the different indicators for measuring poverty. Indicators used by Action Aid (1994) are different from those used by the CDRN (1996), Oxfam (1995) and from the most commonly used measure of poverty, the poverty line. The latter is based on the cost of 2,200 calories from a given food basket (poverty line) plus essential non-food expenditures (based on consumption of non-food items of the households whose total expenditures are equal to the food poverty line (*EPAU, 1996; World Bank, 1996; Action Aid, 1994*), on the basis of which, Uganda, with a per capita income of about US Dollars 220, is considered as one of the poorest countries in the world (*World Bank, 1996*).

Although these indicators remain suspect, given that no nation-wide study has been conducted to verify them (*Government of Uganda, 1996*), a number of inferences can be made. First, the poverty situation has increased in the present, in terms of the

absolute numbers of poor.

«Improvements in economic indicators have only benefited a small section of the society, especially those who have access to political power, those in trade and exchange sector and those who grow cash crops or food for the market » (*Government of Uganda, 1996*).

In 1995, 61 per cent of the population (11,712,000 people) were below the poverty line as shown below, of which 75 per cent were extremely poor.

TABLE 1.

| Distribution of Welfare in Uganda | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Distribution Percentiles | Welfare measure (highest value in each percentile) |
| 99% | 4.643 |
| 95% | 2.510 |
| 90% | 1.916 |
| 75% | 1.289 |
| 61% | 1.000 |
| 50% | 0.850 |
| 25% | 0.381 |
| 5% | 0.300 |
| 1% | 0.193 |

Source: World Bank, 1996.

Secondly, poverty has also increased in terms of its intensity among those who were already poor before Structural Adjustment Programmes began, and have now become very poor. These comprise 30 per cent of the population (*Background to the Budget, 1996; World Bank, 1996*). Even among the local population, poverty is not only considered as being widespread among both rural and urban communities, but the poverty situation is also perceived as having worsened for the majority (*CDRN, 1996*).

Thirdly, poverty has disproportionately affected the women more than men although in terms of expenditures, female headed households do not seem to be poorer than others. Poor households are more likely than other households to be headed by an elderly person, a young person or a widow. The majority of those in the lowest quartile of the poor were women (*Background to Budget, 1996*). Female households are also disadvantaged on several social indicators. They are characterised by low school enrolment for girls, higher mortality and lower usage of curative health care (*World Bank, 1996*).

ACCESS TO HEALTH

While the progress made in primary health care is so far encouraging, the share of health in the recurrent budget is still below the 10 per cent target for most countries in sub-Saharan Africa. There has only been slight progress made in the field of health, with mortality falling from 120 to 97 per thousand, full immunisation coverage rising from between 20 and 30 per cent to 50 per

cent, and the proportion of children with diarrhoea treated by Oral Rehydration Therapy increasing significantly (*Republic of Uganda, 1996*).

The introduction of user fees in health has improved the quality of services for those who can afford theirs. It has also made the services inaccessible to large sections of society, especially the poor. There was never sufficient safety nets put for the poor in design of these programmes. As a result, life expectancy has fallen. Adult mortality has deteriorated because of the AIDS epidemic. Although AIDS has largely affected all categories of the population, the women are far more vulnerable than the men, which is, among other, largely a question of poverty. The available statistical data on HIV/AIDS indicate that 84 per cent of the reported cases are transmitted by heterosexual contact, implying that the sexually active persons are at a greater risk of infection. 52.3 per cent of the reported cases are female. When stratified for both sex and age, 83.2 per cent of the reported cases in the 15–19 age bracket are female, implying that the male to female ratio in this particular age group is 1 to 6 (*ACP, 1994*).

Women have tended to be more vulnerable than their male counterparts. The national sero-surveys of 1987/88 suggested that women were three times as likely to be infected than men. In 1992, HIV prevalence amongst pregnant women varied within the country from 7.5 per cent to 30.2 per cent. By 1993, there was estimated to be 571,000 infected women in the age group of 30–39 compared to 529,000 men in the same age group. More than 700,000 new infections are estimated to occur in women every year (*ACP, 1994*). Women are vulnerable because of the following factors:

- Their biological nature which easily predispose them to infection.
- They often get blood transfusion when they get complications in labour. If the blood is not well screened the risk of getting HIV cannot be avoided.
- The health seeking behaviour in women is so poor that often they cannot treat most of the STDs which are asymptomatic.
- Women's poor socio-economic status in the society cannot make them negotiate for safer sex.
- Cultural factors such as female genital mutilation contribute to the vulnerability of women to STD infection.

ACCESS TO EDUCATION

Although there has been a significant increase in the share of public spending going to education, the actual spending by the Ministry of Education and Sports, standing at 18 per cent of the total recurrent expenditure in 1992/93, was just two per cent of the GDP, which is well below the Sub-Saharan average of five per cent (*World Bank, 1996*). A number of programmes have been in place to achieve Universal Primary Education by 2001. Four children per family are to be given free education by the government. However, no mechanisms have been put in place to ensure that no gender differences come up in terms of who benefits from this scheme, especially in polygamous families. Article 30 of the 1995 constitution provides that all persons shall have right to educa-

tion. The responsibility for this basic education falls on the family. But if a family has little money and has to make a choice between education of the children, the preference will be to send the boys to schools and not the girls.

Sexual differences abound in education. Not all children of school going age are in school. The majority of these are female. Although total enrolment in primary school is reported as having increased over the years, drop-out rates have also increased over time, especially among females. Of primary school children enrolled in 1986, 70 per cent dropped out by P7 (females 75 per cent, males 64 per cent). In 1986 only 16 per cent of students entering secondary school dropped out. By 1991, 47 per cent were dropping out in the same period of time (*World Bank, 1996*). Although more children may be entering school than before, a higher proportion are dropping out. Only 48 per cent of boys and 29 per cent of girls complete primary school. Girls comprise a higher percentage of drop-outs.

In 1990, the government introduced a bonus scheme for women joining Makerere University to boost their numbers. Percentage of women admitted rose from 22 per cent in 1989/90 to 35 per cent in 1990/1, fell to 30 per cent in 1991/2, rising again to 33 per cent in 1992/3. This scheme has largely been criticised for favouring mostly women students from urban schools where children of rich parents dominate. Hence, it affirmatively leaves out those who most need it.

GENDER BIASES IN THE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

Being a predominantly agricultural country, Uganda's economic programmes targeting poverty alleviation have primarily emphasised growth in agricultural production and exports, considered as being vital in achieving poverty reduction and ensuring food security. One of the strategies adopted in order to achieve this growth has been to reduce the biases against women in economic production since it is widely acknowledged how women provide about 70 per cent of the agricultural labour force, are responsible for 70 to 80 per cent of crops grown and more than 50 per cent of the cash crops, and virtually all the food processing (*Background to the Budget, 1996; EPAU, 1996*).

Empowering women in economic production, it is argued, is to be achieved, among others, by increasing their access to productive resources such as credit, land, technology and information, etc. However, the choice of an agricultural development strategy, and how the government has decided to go about implementing the strategy fail to underscore how engendering agricultural production can be significant in constraining the objectives of achieving equality between genders.

First and foremost, because power relations at the level of the household, which influences the decision making processes have remained intact, economic programmes have facilitated, not only the withdrawal of mainly male labour from non-cash to the cash agricultural sector; but also from agriculture into other more rewarding sectors. For having low returns to labour and lacking com-

mercial profitability, agriculture is unattractive to male labour, especially when alternative employment areas are available. Outside the cash sector, the value of female work is either completely unrecognised or severely underestimated (*Barton and Wamai, 1994*). It has for long been argued that:

«development programmes have been built on erroneous assumptions in a society where women provide the largest share of family's basic needs and men hold their incomes in separate accounts» (New Vision, June 28, 1989).

Secondly, the division of labour at the household level is highly gendered because of the cultural ideologies that are produced, nurtured and perpetuated within households. It is common knowledge to hear that the men tend to do the more physically demanding tasks, leaving the 'lighter ones' for women and children. What is described here is not the actual amount of labour put in but the social valuation of who does which tasks. The situation is not any better if one looked at access to land and credit, as productive resources.

SECURITY OF TENURE

The current government policy recognises the role of women in food production and one of the strategies to ensure food security is to improve women's security of property rights (*Republic of Uganda, 1996: 117*). Property may refer to many things, including land. The law with respect to land and other property is gender blind. Article 237 in the 1995 constitution vests the ownership of land in Uganda to the citizens. Nowhere does it mention that women cannot own land. Although working women now can acquire land through purchase and the absolute rights to that land, it is common knowledge that the majority of rural women only have access to land without control or ownership of land. Once a woman gets married, the majority lose the rights to land in their parent's home. They can return to their parents home in case of divorce and stay on the land, but can never marry another man on that land.

Even where women have access to land security of tenure is constrained because women generally have rights to land through their male kins such as husbands, fathers or brothers. Despite these constraints, a significant amount of agricultural labour and production comes from women. This improvement in access to productive resources may have the following consequences:

First, it may increase their ability to generate incomes and to maximise the benefits from their incomes necessary to enhance their status. Second, the system of male dominance is firmly entrenched in what men and women do and think and tackling a single factor such as property would not yield substantial changes in the gender relations.

Unless certain practices and techniques are changed, we risk to have a deliberate policy agenda of intensifying the

burden of women in the name of ensuring increased agricultural production.

The concern for women's rights to property has largely been tailored to realising national goals, that is, making them instruments in the poverty alleviation agenda rather than one of social justice. In other words, our development strategies ignore the fact that women are already carrying a heavy burden on their back, and go ahead to suggest how women can be used further to develop increased agricultural growth. In a world in which the subsistence sector is subordinate to the cash sector; the food crop to the cash crop sector; peasants to the middle class; agriculture to industry; rural to urban sector; domestic to public sector, one cannot redress these gender imbalances without dealing with the unequal sectoral relations. Questions of efficiency and output cannot be addressed without adequately taking into account the issues of social justice. These are among other issues which are being raised in a recently constituted Network on Land by NGOs intended to champion the cause of the marginalised.

WHAT ABOUT CREDIT?

Access to formal credit is generally problematic to the women. A number of organisations sprang up, offering credit without any mortgage required, to poor women in women groups. Among others, these include such organisation as the Uganda Women's Finance and Credit Trust (UWFCT), ACFODE, FINCA and Uganda Rural Development and Training (URDT) etc. But at the end of the day, these credit programmes favour women who are slightly more exposed than others. Secondly, increasing women's access to credit may be a necessary prerequisite for increasing opportunities for their economic empowerment, but it may not be a sufficient condition to overcome the structural constraints that keep them behind. Thirdly, this initiative should not in any way be taken as a substitute to the role that government should play. Fourth, there is a problem with the credit itself. For example, it is increasingly becoming more evident that women who are in stable marriages are more unable to make independent use of funds advanced to them through such credit schemes. Husbands interfere in the running of the projects set up with the credit funds at the extreme of taking money realised from the project. What is needed is to appreciate the rights of women as being human rights, which at the household level calls for the women to look at the relationships which they have with the men in their lives, and how these affect their ability to enjoy their human rights.

AFFIRMATIVE ACTION AND EMPOWERMENT

Apart from structural economic reforms and improving the provision of basic social services, poverty eradication also calls for increasing the participation by the people living in poverty. Not so much for being identified as one of the most vulnerable groups, but because of the role women played in the National Resistance armed struggles between 1980 and 1986, the gender question has been top of the National Resistance Movement government agenda, since capturing power in 1986.

The NRM established various structures and institutions intended to increase the participation of women in the decision making processes at the local and national levels. In 1986, a Women's desk was established at the NRM Secretariat to coordinate all women issues, and was later transformed into the Directorate of Women Affairs for mobilising and politicising women throughout the country. To facilitate increased participation of women in the political processes, a position was created for a secretary for women affairs at all levels from the village local Council to district local council. Women have been reserved a special seat from every district in the Parliament which is contested for by only women.

While a number of policies have been in place to promote the empowerment of women, the implementation of these policies has left a lot to be desired. One, the policies have not led to a qualitative emancipation of the women folk; two, some of the policies have exacerbated gender inequality, especially by marginalising further disadvantaged categories of women mostly in the rural areas; three, these policies have targeted women as if they were ever a homogenous category. The following highlight the nature of the problem.

Although an attempt has been made to address the status of women in terms of constitutional provision, a number of constraints are still evident. The 1995 constitution in article 33 provides for equal opportunities to men and women in terms of political, economic and social activities, and states in clause 1 that women shall be accorded full and equal dignity of the person with men. It provides for the right to vote, to stand and to be elected. In previous constitutions, discrimination against women was only prohibited on grounds other than sex. Discrimination was not unconstitutional if it related to the matters of personal law – marriage, divorce, inheritance. However, even in this new constitution, there are several factors which inhibit their rights to freely participate. The women have to present themselves to predominantly male electoral colleges.

Government seems very content with what it has done to increase the participation of women in senior government positions. It is in most official functions intended to show the achievements of the NRM administration for the people of Uganda, highlighted as one of the greatest accomplishments. However, if the figures for 1993 are compared with those of 1996, one is stunned by the revelation that there has not been any significant increase in women in senior management positions (Table 2).

The Government has done just enough to achieve its political objectives. More than any other considerations (religion, regional balance etc.), it was gender that influenced the recent re-appointment of Africa's only Woman Vice President, Dr. Specioza Wandira Kazibwe (*Monitor*, July 5–7, 1996). If there was enormous pres-

TABLE 2.

| Women compared to Men in Selected Senior Government Positions | | | | |
|---|-----------|------|---------------|------|
| | July 1993 | | December 1996 | |
| | Female | Male | Female | Male |
| Cabinet Ministers | 2 | 20 | 2 | 19 |
| Ministers of State | 1 | 9 | 4 | 28 |
| Deputy Ministers | 2 | 9 | – | – |
| Permanent Secretaries | 7 | 35 | 7 | 26 |
| Under Secretaries | 16 | 45 | 9 | 26 |
| RDCs | 5 | 34 | 4 | 32 |
| Deputy RDCs | – | – | 3 | 11 |
| Assistant RDCs | – | – | 2 | 26 |

sure from a women's lobby in Parliament, demanding for one third of the cabinet posts (Monitor, July 3–4, 1996), then it is only clear that either the women did not push hard enough, or they failed to arouse sufficient interests from their colleagues, or there wasn't reason for the women to get more than they got.

The latter is an unfortunate situation. There have been isolated complaints from women who argue they worked hard during the recent NRM campaigns, but got only a «small political bone» with only 2 cabinet ministers, and 4 ministers of state (*The Monitor*, December 7, 1996). But even the few who are there have not made significant a break-through for their folks. What all this implies is that, without an agenda for women's movement and an ideology guiding their movement, the mere increase of women ministers may not necessarily lead to better results in terms of improvement of conditions of women in particular and greater gender equality. A study recently commissioned by DENIVA to study gender perceptions among NGOs has also identified this as an important missing link.

What all this signifies is that the organisation of women to advocate for their rights is still very weak. This is partly the result of leadership, not that women organisations are lacking leaders, but because women leaders, especially those in senior government positions have not been good role models to champion the cause of the women, and provide nascent women organisations with a vision of where they want to lead the women movement. For example, during the recently concluded parliamentary elections, many women, some of them Ministers, were accused of denying other women a chance of benefiting from affirmative action by perpetually wanting to represent women as District representatives more than once (*Crusader*, May 28, 1996). Some women in the current parliament have been there three times as women's representatives, hence blocking the chances of other women from coming up on the political scene. 106 women contested for the 39 seats reserved for women from the districts. Out of these 35 had been either in former National Resistance Council or the Constituent Assembly, and 8 had even served as Ministers in the National Resistance Movement government. Out of the 40 women legislators who entered Parliament in 1989, only two were directly elected. During the recently concluded parliamentary elections, 23 women contested in the direct elections, and only 4 wom-

en were elected. Commenting on this sad situation, a political analyst observed that: «*whereas the beneficiaries (elite cadres) are often heard ululating happily on the concessions that allowed women into parliament, which trebled their physical numbers in the House... its actual impact in terms of liberation of women if we persist by the present method will be nil*» (New Vision, August 5, 1992).

Despite having played a very crucial role in active combat, the highest ranking woman officer in the Uganda People's Defence Forces alive is a Captain, and has been so for a very long time. It has been argued that the majority of women combatants could not get promoted because they were not educated, and the majority abandoned the army after capturing power. It is important, however to note that status of the few who remained in the army has not been any different. Although women are still faced with enormous socio-cultural constraints, as many men were still of the opinion that the women's rightful position is still in the backyard. They insist that the change in the attitude towards women was politically instigated by the NRM which was desperate for their votes. Some women have, however, risen to the challenges. One man is reported to have complained:

«my wife refused to stay at home to dig and instead opted to go and pick tea leaves in a nearby plantation. Even Local Council officials supported her.» (The New Vision, November 26, 1996)

Such is the consciousness among women, which women organisation should take credit for. However, the qualitative dimension which women organisations acquired after 1986, is not so much out of vigour and effectiveness of diverse women organisations, but a deliberate and a systematic implementation of policy on women by the NRM – which to many the women organisations have failed to successfully build on. A number of women groups has started questioning the logic of affirmative action, arguing that it has not helped the women as much as it should have. Women have left affirmative action firmly in the hands of men who affirmatively put women where it does not matter.

Women organisations have failed to create a capacity to mobilise their folks en-masse country-wide, for the simple reason that women organisations have not found any need to do so, since there exist administrative organs created by the National Resistance Movement. Apart from creating openings for a few women, institutional concessions made by the NRM have not created a capacity for women organisations to enhance the political dynamism of the women.

Several women organisations have mushroomed targeting different aspects of empowerment of women. Several achievements have been made in networking. Like women in senior government positions, one underlying weakness of women organisations is the lack of a common agenda and ideology in the networking activities of the women organisation. As a result, their efforts have failed to translate into formidable mass movement advocating for basic rights of the women. For example, during the May 1996 Presidential elections, acts of violence, mostly by husbands, were reported against wives with different political opinions. UWONET

raised this issue as a serious crime (*New Vision*, May 18, 1996). As a network of women from different organisations and men who share their vision, its cause was never picked up by any individual women organisation, despite their being several hundred women organisations. A planned demonstration by the group to highlight the seriousness of the matter failed to materialise, despite the fact such election related acts of violence were cited by a supreme court judge as constituting criminal offences (*New Vision*, June 5, 1996). A similar planned demonstration by Action for Development (ACFODE) to protest the few cabinet posts given to women failed to get the support of other women organisations.

The experience of the women movement in Uganda has shown that putting in place diverse structures and institutions intended to increase the participation of women in the political process alone is not enough to realise the objectives of economically emancipating the majority of women who live in abject conditions of poverty. Government's various concessions have not benefited the majority of the women, except the urban elite. Efforts to improve the status of women need to deal with the culturally constructed super-structure that influences people's perceptions about gender through a very comprehensive system of education which should start in the family.

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