

W.K. Subbo (2002) **Concept of Gender and Development**

Abstract

The term gender became popular in the late 1980s as a replacement for women and development. Gender is a social construct that asserts that the expectations and responsibilities of men and women are not always biologically determined. Advocates of the gender approach point out that the term easily accommodate race, class, ethnicity and male and female power relationships. (Snyder and Tadesse 1995:14)

Gender role differentiation is structurally and culturally defined in ways which create and reinforce relationships of male dominance and female subordination. For instance, ideas of what patterns of behavior and activities are appropriate or inappropriate for women and men are largely social and cultural in origin and they are acquired through the socialization process. From the time children are born, they are socialized into different roles on the basis of sex. They are rewarded when their behavior is seen as sex appropriate and ridiculed or reprimanded when they deviate from these established culture norms (Suda, 1991:1).

In most African countries, the problems that affect women are largely cultural. The role of women has been spelt out, that is, they are not supposed to be part of the decision making process. For example, Molokomme (1990) observes that in Botswana it was traditionally said “mosadi ke ngwana wa monna” a woman is the child of a man, in reference to the fact that women under Tswana customary law always had guardians. Thus, under strict rules of customary law, therefore, women had limited legal capacity, although in practice, some women were more independent than others, depending on their social and marital status. Unmarried women below marriageable age are like their male counterparts, without full legal capacity, being under the authority of a male guardian – a father, an uncle or some other senior male relative. The main question that we ask ourselves is: How do we change cultures that suppress women in the society? Studies have revealed that often people misinterpret religion to suit their cultural ends. What women in Africa and elsewhere are, therefore, asking for is to be treated equally. Secondly, women want to be charged by their ability and not by any other subjective standards. It has also been established that more often than not it is not culture per se that suppresses women but misinterpretations and distortions of people.

It should be emphasized that culture is dynamic and any practices that discriminate against women are, therefore, subject to change. However, more often than not when people try to ask questions regarding oppressive cultural practices the only reason why they are given by parents and other elderly people is that that is how people have practiced them since time immemorial. In short, some practices have simply not been questioned and have been there for generations.

It is necessary to point out that we all live in a gendered world. As children we are either boys or girls and as adults we are men or women. This fact means that we are called upon to think about certain issues and make decisions about them on a continuous basis. Furthermore, many of the issues involve what is called personal life. These usually comprises the activities that a person

decides upon on her own, without necessarily consulting anyone, plus those which he considers the views of other people to whom she is related by personal ties.

The issues also revolve mainly around education, skill development, economic opportunities and the level of participation in development. The major argument is that despite women's active participation in community activities, they have less opportunities in education and skill development and are less represented in powerful positions where decisions are made. In Kenya, for example, all the development plans indicate that women are marginalized despite their contribution being highly acknowledged, especially in food production. Over 70% of the food in Kenya is produced by women. Orodho (1998:119) observes that, in Vihiga district, men devote a large proportion of their labour in land preparation and planting, while the rest of the more tedious and laborious activities, like weeding, harvesting, processing and marketing of crops, were left to women and children. He points out that these latter activities were considered a female responsibility. The implication of this finding is that small-holder agriculture in Vihiga District basically relies on family labour, of which women contribute the lion's share. This paper examines the concept of gender from an African perspective, indeed, it aims at highlighting those issues that influence the lives of women and men particularly those that serve as constrains in enabling women and men to realize their full potential. It argues that the concept of gender needs to be redefined as it is now associate gender only with women's issues.

Paper presented at Gender Sensitization Workshop - Ukweli Centre, Kisumu. Workshop organized by Kenya Episcopal Conference, Catholic Secretariat, Waumini House, Westlands, 24th June, 2002.