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**SUBJECTION OF AFRICAN WOMEN: THE EFFECTS ON ECONOMIC  
DEVELOPMENT**

**BY**

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## Introduction

If country-specific data, and the statistical analysis based on them are good surrogates of what they represent, then figures from The World Bank indicate, by any reasonable standard, that Nigeria's economic performance since independence in 1960 has been abysmal. Using the most reliable survey of the country to date, the figures show that in 1970 the per capita GDP for the country was US\$1,113, but by 2000 it had fallen to US\$1,084. Between 1970 and 2000, the poverty and income distribution indices show similar deterioration. The poverty rate, measured as those living on less than US\$1 per day, had risen from 36% to approximately 70%; this means, in raw numbers, that the number of people living in extreme poverty had risen from 19 million in 1970 to 90 million in 2000. The income distribution figures are no less discouraging; for they show that in 1970, the top 2% and the bottom 17% of the population had an equal percentage share of the national income; but in 2000, the top 2% and the bottom 55% had about the same share of the national income (World Bank, 2005). This, in spite of the fact that between 1965 and 2000, Nigeria had derived a total net revenue of US\$350 billion from oil exports. Similar surveys of many Sub-Saharan African countries reveal equally disquieting trends (World Bank, 2007).

The abysmal economic performance by African States in the past three decades is attributable to a host of known factors – mismanagement of resources, graft, and bureaucratic corruption (Mauro, 1995); but of all the known culprits that have so far suppressed economic growth, none are more intransigent, and yet least addressed, than Africa's patriarchal customary practices, and traditional observances. These pervasive practices are traceable, with relative facility, to controlling cultivated traits of ancient origin that have remained resilient to the moderating effects of education, and experiments with 'democratic' forms of governance. The failure to incorporate cultural sensibilities, and to see things from the point of view of Africans continue to frustrate all otherwise reasonable attempts at development. Amongst experts in the development community, it is widely acknowledged that a major cause of economic underdevelopment in modern Africa is the relative absence of industrialization, and lack of demonstrable opportunities for effective employment of both capital and human resources (De Soto, 1989). But while capital accumulation and industrialization are mutually self-sustaining and fundamental to development, how a society treats and deploys its human capital ultimately determine its development trajectory.

By testimony of evidence, it may now be forcefully declared that among the known culprits, the chief hindrance to social and economic development in the continent can be found in the cultural norms that regulate the relations between the sexes ----- the quasi legal subordination of women to men. This state of affairs in which African societies have perennially subjected women, instructs African women of their roles in society; which are, in the main, directly opposite to those reserved for men. They are informed, in this regard, on how to perfect the art of subservience to their male

counterparts, not to aspire to self-governance, or act in manners indicative of self-will (Bereria, 1982). They are told that morality requires of them to faithfully execute the function nature has reserved for them, which is to reproduce; and by abnegation of self, to nourish both husband and children through affection and dedication. For centuries, this understanding has defined the collective lot of African women, and sadly, it remains a debilitating influence on development efforts in the continent.

An overarching question, therefore, is how to further explore the effects of culturally induced disparate treatment of African women on economic development, and how the ensuing inequality of opportunities between the sexes detracts from development efforts. The thesis of this inquiry is that the denial of fair and equal treatment to women in African societies is a major contributing factor to perceived and actual economic underdevelopment, and that real and sustained socio-economic development is achievable only when such unjust practices are allowed to elapse into disuse. Using Nigeria as a case study, this work would provide a robust guidance on the effects of subjection on development, and how such effects may be ameliorated by gender-sensitive public policies in education, and employment opportunities. The analytic approach adopted is necessarily informed by a liberal interpretation of justice that presumes a moral equality of the sexes, and admits of no preference or natural disability of one or the other.

### **Historical social positioning of African Women and the effects on Development**

In early human societies, especially in ages long past, the 'law of superior strength' defined inter-personal or inter-community relations (Bauer, 1981); indeed it was the rule that governed human existence, and had public approbation as a source of sustenance. The African experience in this regard is no different. That the physically weaker sex came to be subordinated to the stronger one was a natural outcome of this primeval system of social discourse, and relations; a system of subjection and inequality derived, not from formal deliberation or forethought on what conduces to the social good, but from a prevailing social conditioning, and the understanding that women have value to men, and through brute force placed women in a state of semi bondage. With time, this state of affairs became socialized and accepted as the norm of social relations between the sexes; and as is customary in all other human activities, laws and customs that now govern the relations between the sexes took hold by formalizing what they found already in existence in society. What began as a physical reality is turned into a legal one; women, once compelled into submission and obedience by superior physical strength are now bound to them by operation of customary laws, and tradition.

In modern liberal democracies, the a priori presumption leans in favor of equality in treatment, and freedom (Giddens, 1998); by insisting on the equal distribution of these basal 'primary goods,' a special sense of social justice is prescribed. It is hence presumed, as a matter of public policy, that constraints on basic liberties are morally unacceptable; but if any is necessary for the social good, it must be properly balanced against individual liberties. Furthermore, rules and laws that regulate

public discussion and relations must be impartial unless justice dictates disparate treatment in favor of the disadvantaged (Rawls, 1971). This Rawlsian interpretation of justice informs this work, and has also been a guiding influence on recent policy initiatives in modern Africa, where proponents of progressive liberalism have not only urged the protection of individual rights from state practices, but have shaped the debate on human rights with 'a strong sense of justice that insists on protection from oppressive social roles and practices that developed under conditions of inequality' (Kymlicka, 2002). The chief distinguishing feature of social institutions in modern societies is the ability to generate and encourage divergent views on important social issues that progressively move societies farther away from the past and into more enlightenment. This separation from the past enables the dissolution of cultural bonds that chained people to the life they were born into, and frees them to apply their natural or refined intellect in any social endeavor they see fit. But history reminds us that this separation from the past is a slow and painful process, for no subordinated group ever began their quest from oppression by seeking complete freedom and equality immediately (Wise, 2006). The almost inevitable path is that those who are under any sort of oppression through power of ancient origin begin by complaining, not of the power itself, but of the excessive application of it. It is only after the exercise of such oppressive power is successfully challenged is the initial right to such power subjected to social scrutiny, and if found in discord with modern liberal sentiments, it is then pressed into disuse.

With time, and through the modernizing effects of human struggles for freedom and independence, it has become increasingly clear, even to the most disinterested observer, that individual liberty and freedom of choice are the best means to promote the economic welfare of societies (Lewis, 2005). By enabling individuals to engage in activities best suited to their natural talents and acquired skills, society procures for itself the highest possible level of social productivity. It is thus counterintuitive, and self-defeating for the same society to arbitrarily impose limitations on what half of its constituent members can, and cannot do on the grounds of unproven assumptions of capabilities. And even if the assumption that the sexes are suited for different productive activities is shown to hold, there would be exceptions; and to forbid those who fall outside this socialized assumption the opportunity to participate fully to their abilities is not only unjust, but also operates in detriment to individual benefits, and to those of society. Will Kymlicka goes a step further:

"The ideology of equal opportunity seems fair to many because it ensures that people's fate is determined by their choices, rather than their circumstances; success or failure is determined by performance, not by race or class or sex. If I fail it is not because I was born into the 'wrong' group, thus success is earned and merited through one's own efforts. It would be unfair for individuals to be disadvantaged or privileged by arbitrary and undeserved differences in their social circumstances." (Kymlicka, 2002).

What is being asked, within the context of a just society, is not that special privileges and benefits be conferred on women; it is rather that the special benefits and

privileges conferred on men so far be withdrawn to enable fair and equal participation by women in matters of social and private consequence.

### **Differences in Years of Schooling As a Contributing Factor**

It is still an observable fact in Nigeria that social institutions, with varying degrees of vitality and longevity, continue to impute right to might, and make it possible for those who originally acquired power through morally unjust avenues to retain it as a matter of course (Jeffries, 1993). And while other social institutions are gradually yielding to modern dictates by becoming less rigid, and accommodating of change, the ones more directly relevant to the relations between the sexes remain peculiarly intransigent, and less responsive to reformed sensibilities. That women, who make up more than half of Nigeria's population, remain largely in the unnatural state of inequality, and subordinated to their male counterparts in both familial and public spheres are manifestations of, and a causes of significant social and economic dislocations in the country.

The socially ascribed roles as now exist between the sexes did not originate from legitimate differentials on natural talents or capacities, but arose instead on assumed limitations on the part of women, and privileges advanced to men (Agarwal, 1986). The assumptions and privileges are further advanced by the differential treatment of the sexes within the family unit. In Nigeria, it has always been the case, until lately, that boys receive disproportionate portions of a family's resource in all manners of investment in human capital or in training necessary for independent pursuit of career choices. It is only after the educational or training requirements of the boys have been reasonably satisfied would those of the girls receive attention, assuming the family's resources are not yet depleted or severely constrained. This disparity in treatment is based on the customary belief that investments in girls are unwise, for once of the age of maturity, they are expected to leave their homes of birth by way of marriage, taking with them any investment in human capital, and all prospects for future returns on such investment. A parallel view does not apply to boys, for tradition requires of them to sustain their family of birth, and to do so in perpetuity. It is this initial distortion in resource allocation between the sexes at the family level that further aggravates the already compromised social and economic status of women. Lacking in skills and educational credentials, they are compelled to employ their substantial natural talents in domestic activities, petty trading, or in subsistence farming. While honorable, in the sense that these activities make for a reasonable livelihood, and help support immediate and extended family networks, they are not undertaken by 'free' choice, and hardly conduce to high-income growth rates or self-fulfilling careers necessary for sustained economic self-sufficiency, and national economic growth.

There is now near universal consensus that both the level of education attained by citizens of a country, and the quality of education so received are major determining factors of domestic productivity (Sen, 1999). The comparative levels of educational attainment in different countries are not, however, determinative of differential

economic growth rates, but are strongly correlative. A summary comparison of formal educational activities in South Korea and Nigeria, two countries that had near parity in levels of economic development in 1960, furnishes further evidence of the relevancy of an effective educational system to development (World Bank, 2005). Data and statistical figures from the World Bank, and the IMF are used for this comparison. They indicate that the rate of participation in formal education amongst the sexes in Nigeria has been improving in both absolute and relative terms since 1970; although the same cannot be said about the quality of instruction received. In 2006, the adult literacy rate was 69%, with a Gender Parity Index for all educational levels of 83% (measures the ratio of male to female enrolled in schools). A break-down of Nigeria's national educational data reveals the following figures:

Primary school enrollment rate: Boys -- 67.6%; Girls – 58.2%  
Primary school dropout rate: Boys --38.6%; Girls --35.9%  
Primary School completion rate: Boys --83%; Girls -- 68%  
Number of primary school age children out of school: Boys --3.6 million;  
Girls -- 4.5 million  
Primary School Gender gap: 9.4%  
Primary school Gender Parity Index: 82%

Secondary school enrollment rate: Male -- 35.6%; Female—2 9.2%  
Gender Gap: 6.4%  
Secondary school Gender Parity Index: 83%

Tertiary Schools Gross enrollment: Male -- 12%; Female -- 8.3%  
Tertiary Schools Gender gap: 3.7%

**\*Nigeria's Gross National Income per capita in 2006: US\$620.0**

Note, however, that these figures are only averages; the actual figures varied widely with income and geographical location. In comparison to the average figures for all sub-Saharan African countries in 2005, gross enrollment figures for primary school age children rose from 72% in 1990 to 93% in 2005, while completion rate went from 51% in 1990 to 62% in 2005. The gender difference in completion rate remained unchanged over the period

When contrasted with similar data for South Korea, the results, while explainable by a variety of contributing factors, contextualize the significant differential in current economic performances by both countries. The figures for South Korea show adult literacy rate of 75%, with a Gender Parity Index of 100% in primary and secondary schools.

Primary school enrollment rate: Boys – -106%; Girls --103.3%.  
Primary school completion rate: Boys -- 105%; Girls – -95.1%  
Primary school gender gap: 3.3%  
Primary school Gender Parity Index: 100%

Secondary school enrollment rate: Male -- 100.3%; Females -- 94.5%  
Secondary school gender gap: 5.8%  
Secondary school Gender Parity Index: 100%

Tertiary schools enrollment rate: Male -- 111.2%; Females -- 72.4%  
Tertiary gender gap: 38.7%

**\*South Korea's Gross national Income Per capita in 2006: US\$17,690.0**

In instances where the family of birth has sufficient resources to provide tertiary education for the girls, a major consideration that would discourage such commitment arises, not from the presumed absence of future returns on such expenditure, but from the pragmatic consideration of 'marriageability.' For, sadly, many African men are yet to be comfortable with the idea of marrying African women with advanced degrees; thus, to avoid educating herself out of marriage prospects, the family withholds needed support for education beyond a certain level. This cut-off line is, in many instances, the secondary school level. But this need to preserve the marriage prospects of daughters by limiting the level of education they may acquire is not without cost; for it is this need to be eligible for marriage that deprives women of the skills they need to be economically self-sufficient, and once married become completely dependent on the husband for sustenance. This dependence on husbands for economic well-being is a primary source of subjection of the African woman who fulfills both her wishes and those of society by becoming a wife; it is also from this source that some of the most vicious human rights abuses emanate, specifically the emotional and physical abuse visited upon many African women through genital circumcision.

### **Female Genital circumcision as a form of Subjection**

The practice of female circumcision is an old tradition in at least 28 countries in Africa; and generally performed, presumably, to prepare young girls for womanhood and marriage. Before the advent of Western medicine, all circumcisions were performed without the benefit of effective anesthetic, and under septic conditions; in countries where it is still prevalent, this is still the case, and often performed by lay practitioners without any medical background. The rationale for the practice is all too familiar – it conduces to good hygiene, promotes fertility, and discourages promiscuity. Generally, girls are subjected to this experience between the ages of five months to ten years. However, as more of the general population gained access to formal education, the practice in the mid 1960s became almost nonexistent amongst the middle class.

By the 1970s, female genital circumcision was confined, almost exclusively, to villagers and peasants. While practices vary widely, there are three basic forms of genital circumcision. One is essentially a clitoridectomy, where part or all of the clitoris is amputated, the second is an excision that involves the removal of the clitoris and the labia minora; the third is the most severe, and is what is commonly referred to as infibulation. This requires the excision of the clitoris and the labia



minora, the labia majora is cut and then stitched by the edges, the legs are then tied together until the wounds heal. When the wounds heal, scar tissues join the labia and cover most of the virginal opening, barely enough to allow the flow of urine and menstrual blood. In this regard, Janice Boddy gives an account of her experience in the Sudanese village of 'Hofriyat':

"Though conventionally termed "circumcision," the procedure is not physically equivalent to the like-named operation performed on boys. In Hofriyat, male circumcision entails removal of the penile prepuce, as generally done throughout the Middle East and, indeed, the West. Pharaonic circumcision, however, is more extreme, involving excision of most external genitalia followed by infibulation: intentional occlusion of the vulva and obliteration of the vaginal meatus. It results in the formation of thick, resistant scar tissue, a formidable obstruction to penetration. A less severe operation, structurally similar to that performed on boys, is currently gaining ground in Khartoum.... This is referred to as masari or sunna circumcision and consists in removing only the prepuce or hood of the clitoris.... While realizing that it is less hazardous to health than pharaonic circumcision, they continue to oppose it on aesthetic and hygienic grounds and in this lies a clue to its deeper significance. Several women I questioned in 1984 made their feelings graphically clear: each depicted sunna circumcision by opening her mouth, and pharaonic, by clamping her lips together. "which is better," they asked, "an ugly opening or a dignified closure?" Women avoid being photographed laughing or smiling for precisely this reason: orifices of the human body, and particularly those of women, are considered most appropriate when closed or, failing that, minimized."(Boddy, 1989).

For those that survive the ordeal, the pain from damaged nerve endings never goes away, and remain susceptible to urinary tract infections. For those who continue to reinfibulate after each birth, the opening gets smaller, thus raising the likelihood of menstrual blockage and obstruction of the urethra which in turn may lead to reproductive tract infections and compromised fertility. Janice Boddy again gives an account of what circumcised Sudanese women in 'Hofriyat' must endure:

"A young girl both dreads and eagerly anticipates her wedding day: she welcomes the elevation in status while fearing what it implies, having to endure sexual relations with her husband. Informants told me that for women circumcised in the radical manner, it may take as long as two years of continuous effort before penetration can occur.... Because they find it so painful, many of the women I spoke to said they avoid sex whenever possible, encouraging their husbands only when they wish to become pregnant .... Sexual relations do not necessarily become easier for the couple over time. When a woman gives birth the midwife must be present not only to cut through the scar tissue and release the child, but also to reinfibulate her once the child is born."(Boddy, 1989).

The reasons given by practitioners in Nigeria, and Sudan for female circumcision are almost identical. The idea that circumcision conduces to purity, fertility, or chastity is a common ground invariably adduced by the natives. If the procedure did not

come with unimaginable pain that borders on inhumane treatment, the practice may have remained unnoticed by human rights advocates both in Africa, and in other parts of the world. If the associated health risks, when compared to assumed benefits, were marginal the practice may also remain under the radar of international women's organizations. But this is not the case, for there is now strong indication that the presumed benefits, with the exception of chastity, are imaginary; the practice cannot be shown to have increased the fertility of women because uncircumcised women are found to be just as fertile. The best that can be said about purity and fertility is that they mask the real reason for the practice: in patrimonial societies where men have perennially subjugated the rights of women, this was just another means by which control is exerted. Men simply want their women to remain 'pure' by making leisure sexual activities very painful for women; this is especially true for the most severe form of circumcision – infibulation. And to guarantee chastity long after marriage, the women are reinfibulated after each birth. Here again is Boddy's interpretation of her informants' rationale for the practice in Sudan:

"There exists a broad range of explanations for infibulation which together form a complex rationale that operates to sustain and justify the practice. Among them, however, those which refer to the preservation of chastity and curbing of women's sexual desire seem more persuasive, given that in Sudan, as in elsewhere in the Muslim world, the dignity and honor of a family are vested in the conduct of its womenfolk.... Hence the need for circumcision to curb and socialize their sexual desires, lest a woman should, even unwittingly, bring irreparable shame to her family through misbehavior." (Boddy, 1989).

When subjected to the principal doctrines of modern human rights regimes, female genital circumcision looks suspiciously brutish, hence the new designation by human rights advocates--- Female Genital Mutilation or FGM for short (Rich, 1997). Beginning with the 1948 articulation of rights declared in the United Nations' Universal declaration of Human Rights (UN, 1984), feminists and rights advocates have relentlessly sought the elimination of female circumcision (WHO, 1979). As early as the 1950s, African medical practitioners and activists have brought to the attention of international bodies such WHO and the UN the health risks of female circumcision (Assaad, 1980). It was not, however, until 1979 that a formal policy statement on this issue was made in an international seminar held in Khartoum. The seminar focused exclusively on traditional practices that affect the health of women and children, and at its conclusion issued recommendations to governments that require the elimination of female circumcision.

### **The consequences of Subjection on Development**

In urban and rural parts of Nigeria, the vast majority of women are employed in the extralegal or informal sectors of the economy. This informal economy includes small scale farming of cash crops, trading on domestically produced or imported household wares, and provision of service as domestic helps. In almost all instances, and even in cases where they are successful enough to derive more than subsistence income, they are deprived access to bank loans necessary to leverage their

operations to a higher level because their activities are outside the formal or legal sphere of recognized business practices (UN Doc. 2005). This lack of access to credit in the formal sector drives, in the main, from the inability to furnish banks with verifiable titles to real estate or to assets that may be used to collateralize loans. The inability to leverage business operations through serviceable credit is, incidentally, a major cause of underdevelopment in Africa; for, men who also operate in informal sectors are subject to the same experience (De Soto, 2002). But it is the case that the most successful entrepreneurs in Nigeria, though limited in number, are men who have unique access to government issued contracts, access to credit, and other privileges not readily available to women, except for a few. It is also the case that the many who are trapped in the informal sectors of the economy make economic growth almost impossible, and as a consequence also bear disproportionately the burdens of an underdeveloped economy. Since women are over represented in these informal sectors, they are invariably saddled with low income, and poverty; the fact that they also represent more than 50% of the country's population means that the drag effect on the economy would be remarkable, and sustained economic growth impossible. Herein lies one of the major consequences of subjection, and denial of equal educational and employment opportunities to African women.

The economic effect of female subjection can also be traced to the fact that women in rural Nigeria, with minor exceptions, deploy their entire productive talents, in one form or the other, in the agricultural sector (UN Doc., 2005) The problem with agrarian economies, especially those based on unskilled labor and unmechanized form of production, is that the level of output is subject to diminishing returns to effort, and derived revenue is determined by the interplay of market forces. This is because the production of agricultural commodities and raw materials depend heavily on the availability of a fixed input, land. As a consequence, and by operation of the properties of physics, the fixed capacity of land means that agrarian production is invariably subject to the law of diminishing returns after a certain point. This necessarily imposes a limit to growth; and because the commodities produced are universally 'identical', producers have no control over prices received for their products. They must rely on demand and supply to determine how much their products would fetch in the market; this is the essence of 'perfect competition,' where under free and unmonopolized market conditions, competition in identical commodities lead to the lowest prices possible. Thus, there two natural phenomena operating against small scale farmers: with diminishing returns to effort, agrarian economies cannot improve their collective lot through higher sustained effort beyond a certain level; and when compelled, as they must, to engage in trade, the market further depresses their level of income through competition that includes competitors from countries with advanced industrial capacities (Reinert, 2007).The result is lower income, and when coupled with population growth, abject poverty. This is the collective lot of many African countries where the majority of their productive human capital, women, is consigned to the agricultural sector.

### **Literature Review of 'Known' Causes of Underdevelopment In Africa**

Beginning in the early 1970s, African leaders and 'well-meaning' international agencies grappled with the forces that have, almost interminably, subdued socio-economic development in the continent despite generous foreign aid, progressive moves toward western-style democracy, and significant independence in resource management (UNDP REP., 2000). But in spite of these indicators that should, in the normal run of things, conduce to sustainable development, Africa remains economically backward, and boasts the highest incidence of poverty and illiteracy in the world while being ravaged by devastating civil wars, and intractable diseases (World Bank, 2001).

The sources of these undesirable attributes are readily identifiable, and indeed well-documented (Rose-Ackerman, 1978); it is the fundamental causes that remain problematic, both in identification, and attempted solution. Incompetence, graft, and mismanagement of resources at the national level are known culprits, but so are attempted solutions to underdevelopment problems by African policy makers at the behest of foreign aid givers, and international lending institutions. Up until the mid-1970s, development experts from the IMF and the World Bank advised African leaders that development was synonymous with economic productivity and growth (Killick, 1998). The leaders concurred; in part because they needed financial assistance since they had essentially bankrupted their economies, and because they had no pragmatic alternative description of what development in Africa entailed.

But this interpretation of the essence of development by foreign experts was not merely advisory; African leaders could not take it or leave it, for it formed the basis of aid or loan programs received from the IMF, the World Bank, and members of the Paris Club of international lenders (Klitgaard, 1990). Since the assumed goal was to help African countries develop economically, it was deemed essential that domestic productivity be modified to accommodate more export-oriented goods. However, for these goods to be competitive in the world market, domestic currencies had to be devalued; moreover, currency devaluation served the additional need to dampen the appetite for imports, and compel more internal consumption of domestically produced goods. Currency devaluation and 'Structural Adjustment' of domestic programs thus became the primary prerequisites for loans from both the IMF and the World Bank (Van de Walle, 2001).

Evidence now shows that both programs failed miserably, and that their combined effects were devastating to African economies ...currency devaluation meant that these countries could not afford to import advanced technologies from developed countries, and the structural adjustment programs insisted on by World Bank experts in the early 1970s discouraged investment in human capital, i.e. healthcare and educational systems (Klitgaard, 1990). The precipitous decline in both sectors in Sub-Saharan African countries is a direct consequence of these policies; for they enabled venal African leaders to re-direct resources to 'white elephant' projects that were more conducive to misappropriation of financial resources than to production of goods and services needed to enhance industrial capacity, and infrastructure development (Jeffries, 1993).

This economic view of development, which held sway from the early 1960s to the mid 1970s, is essentially one that requires a shift from an agrarian economy to one dominated by export-based manufacturing, and provision of modern services in secondary and tertiary sectors. The aim being to stimulate faster growth of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), encourage more export of domestically produced goods, attract foreign investments, aid, and loans for infrastructure enhancement (Emizet, 1998). Thus, to the economist, development in Africa is reducible to certain quantifiable indicators that indicate a trend ---the economy is either moving in the right direction or not; if the GDP is rising and sustainable over a certain period, then mission accomplished. The country is developing. Other social factors that should complement a developing society were essentially ignored, e.g. the level of literacy, availability of adequate healthcare services, the educational system, political stability, housing, and cultural observances.

The literature on development is immense, and continues to evolve to reflect the insights of specialized fields and disciplines that were once considered outside the scope of matters relevant to development studies. There is now near unanimity amongst academics and practitioners that development is driven by innovation (Knack and Keefer, 1995), good governance (Osborn, 2004), responsive institutions (North, 1990), capability enhancement, and an effective educational system. These views are particularly relevant to the forty-eight countries that constitute Sub-Saharan Africa, where all efforts in the last three decades to nudge them towards sustainable development have failed (Williamson, 1994).

A number of reasons have been cited for this conundrum, including in many instances, the persistent contradictions between private and public roles (Johnson, 1982). In this regard, it is emphasized that most African nations are yet to fully emerge from the patrimonial mode of post-colonial era wherein transplanted ideas and domestically informed notions of integrity compete and clash with the goals of personal enrichment and group enhancement made possible by the state apparatus (Meredith, 2005). Thus, 'the legacy of colonial legality, with its suppression of indigenous economic and political competition against the state' has encouraged and enabled African elites to dominate and misappropriate resources by means of the state rather than allow transparency and accountability (Goldman, 1980). This outcome, argues Berg (1993), is the essence of bad governance that perverts the norms of legitimacy, laws, and conventions embodied in domestic institutions designed to administer the affairs of a society.

These institutions, in a very important sense, are rules; rules that dictate, regulate, and constrain civil activities and behavior, and consequently play critical roles in the economic development and the wellbeing of society. On this basis, Caiden (1992) theorized that the difference between developed Western countries and poor African nations has less to do with productive capacity than with prevailing domestic institutions that affect individual incentives for innovation, and the deployment of factors of production. Furthermore, because developed economies

have institutions that support contracts and property rights that are essential for effective market transactions and complex commercial agreements, the system is able to enhance predictability of actions by restraining opportunism and arbitrary influences by the elites. To this effect Douglass North (1990) wrote, “The inability of societies to develop effective low cost enforcement of contracts is the most important source of both historical and contemporary underdevelopment in the Third World.”

Despite the influx of development aid, both in-kind and financial, from donor nations and international financial institutions, Africa’s economy remains abysmally weak, and accounts for less than 1.2 percent of the World’s GDP (World bank, 2006), even though more than 10 percent of the world’s population calls it home (UNDP, 1996). The World Bank and the IMF, beginning in the early 1970s used different combinations of monetary and fiscal policy instruments that included loans and technical assistance to help spur development in the region but to no avail. By the late 1990s, it became clear to all concerned that reform efforts in Africa have failed (Meredith, 2005); but why? Why has development proved so elusive in Africa? Why was Europe able to get back on her feet after the second World War under the ‘Marshall Plan’ with relative ease, and the ‘Asian Miracle’ made possible and sustained while Africa continues her backward slid in the face of massive assistance, and windfalls from the oil revenue? World Bank staff economists took the lead in seeking answers to these questions, and as a result numerous economic studies have since been commissioned, and undertaken (Van de Walle, 2001). The results and policy recommendations vary.

### **A Contextual Approach to Development**

Any serious effort to engage development problems in Nigeria must begin by taking notice of the reality that socio-economic development in the country may be attained, and sustained only if the processes engaged toward these ends are properly mindful of the cultural and social experiences of Africans. This means looking at things from the point of view of those whose welfare one seeks to improve; for only when the life experiences of the indigenous people are clearly understood would it be possible to work within the context of their cultural and traditional observances to establish accommodative social and economic institutions necessary for sustained development. This approach is what I have termed ‘contextual development;’ a process that requires a balanced integration of indigenous cultures, religious beliefs, prevailing social arrangements, and new ideas from developed nations into a unique development strategy that suits a particular nation-state. Contextual development thus requires a good understanding not only of the needs of the people but how to design and implement programs that take advantage of the peculiarities of the society, and expectations. It also requires, as an imperative, that one who embarks on development programs in Nigeria be acquainted with the cultural belief system in the country, the role religion plays, the level of literacy, availability of skilled labor, traditional roles of the sexes, prevailing social arrangements, and most importantly, what development means to the people.

The novelty of this approach to development can be found, not so much in the idea, but in its implementation; for experts in development studies are now very much aware that the old policy of imposing change from without has not produced desired results, but has instead made matters worse despite decades of development assistance to Africa (Easterly, 2001). This strategy necessarily rejects the old development model of one-size-fits-all that assumes social and political institutions as given, and then proceeds to impose pre-packaged solutions that lack relevance to local practices. To this end, contextual development agenda for Nigeria would incorporate, minimally, the following strategies: use of 'the African experience' as a guide to development policies; grounding development efforts on progressive principles of social justice; and implementing gender-mainstreaming in all public and private social institutions. These are briefly discussed below.

### **The African Experience as a Guide to Solutions**

In African societies, especially those found in West and Central Africa, important personal and collective decisions have perennially been made from the vantage point of clan or group interest (Schraeder, 2000). While Western democracies may trace democratic principles to ancient Greece, Africans have known and practiced its essence from time immemorial, for, decisions on social matters are seldom made without proper consultations with members of the clan, the elders or 'titled' men in the community. Depending on the matter to be resolved, deference is usually given to the elders or titled men (Chiefs) during deliberations, but in no instance would the final decision be devoid of controlling traditional and cultural precepts (Laitin, 1986). This has been, and to a very large extent today, the primary method of decision-making in traditional African societies; the advent of colonial rule never changed much at this grass-roots level.

Thus, traditional observances and cultural constraints remain very powerful determinants of behavior amongst Africans as manifested in different social arrangements throughout the continent (Huntington, 1996). The Ibos of Eastern Nigeria for instance, defer to titled men for final adjudication of social issues; the Yorubas of the same country on the other hand, look to a collectively recognized leader to make important decisions for the social group. In either method, the final decision invariably enjoys near universal acceptance, and almost without exception carries with it some form of penalties for dissenters. The reason for this is simple; in traditional African societies, there is a strong need to belong to a social group, if only for the fact that an individual is defined by his or her group affiliation. One is first and foremost an Ibo, and secondarily a Nigerian; it is never the other way around. It is this need for group affiliation that shapes and determines how African societies deal with social and personal matters, and it is within this context that one must seek ways to introduce new ideas of development.

### **Social Justice as a foundation for Development**

The African approach to decision making approximates what has been variously described as communitarianism --- a system of social relations based on shared meanings, and shared values on how to balance communal needs against those of

individual members, between the common good and liberty, and between individual rights and social responsibility (Etzioni, 1998). To communitarians, shared values, prevailing social practices, and cultural traditions are the controlling elements that define a society, not externally derived principles or ahistorical norms; thus all social actions are necessarily informed by principles of justice that reflect contextual and community-based sensibilities. The point here being that actions or decisions based on shared social understanding take better notice of the general welfare or the common good of a particular people, which in turn conduces to individual benefits. In this regard, Walzer, a leading proponent of communitarian ideals argues 'that there is no such thing as a perspective external to the community, no way to step outside our history and culture. The only way to identify the requirements of justice is to see how each particular community understands the value of social goods' (Walzer, 1983). To Walzer, a society is just in its practices so long as it adheres to the characteristic features that define its social institutions, and acts in accordance to received cultural beliefs. In a very special sense, and to a very large extent, traditional and customary practices in Africa conform to this interpretation of the communitarian ideal, hence the observed resistance to outside influence and ideas not nourished from within. This, of course, is a form of cultural relativism; where principles or norms of rights and justice external to a particular culture are denied legitimacy. Thus, for instance, to cultural relativists, 'slavery is wrong if our society disapproves of it. But that is not how most people understand claims of justice, i.e. we disapprove slavery because it is wrong' (kymlicka, 2002).

In Nigeria, where African women have been for quite too long the most identifiable group with marginalized rights, the need for a liberating rule of social engagement that at once redresses past inequities, and provides responsive guide to future distributive schemes is unmistakable. For only in a just and fair society are citizens, working co-operatively as moral equals, and without hindrance to free exercise of will, able to progressively improve their collective and personal lot. But herein lies the challenge; which rule to chose?

While no rule of social engagement so far designed by modern societies would render complete satisfaction of social wants, the experiences of nation-states far more successful in advancing the common good have shown deliberative democracy to be the least encumbered with undesirable side-effects (Galbraith, 2006). It has also been shown to be the most successful in protecting basic human rights and enabling individuals to participate meaningfully in decisions most relevant to their welfare (Joseph, 1998). But most importantly for the issue under consideration, deliberative democracy is remarkably conducive to the free exchange of ideas, and individual choice necessary for development, and hence readily recommends itself as the appropriate model of social arrangement in Nigeria.

As a rule for social engagement, deliberative democracy recognizes the realities of modern pluralistic societies, and the necessity for engaged discourse amongst citizens. It is the sum of its unique features – forums by which different interests, ideas, and compromises are made – that enables groups that would normally be



marginalized by the more powerful group to have meaningful input in the political and social matters of the state, or society (Feldman, Gellert, 2006). The absence of these features, or the obligation to actively participate in the political life of society distinguishes the age-old practice of liberal democracy from deliberative democracy; the conflation of their substantive differences have led many African nations to confuse one for the other, and to the detriment of women, and minorities with marginalized rights. Judith Squires makes the point much simpler:

“The basic impulse behind deliberative democracy is the notion that people will modify their perceptions of what society should do in the course of discussing this with others. The point of democratic participation is to manufacture, rather than to discover and aggregate, the common good. A deliberative decision will, have taken all relevant evidence, perspectives, and persons into account, will not favor some over others on morally arbitrary grounds. Legitimacy here requires not only a lack of bias, but also inclusivity” (Squires, 2005).

Adopting the tenets of deliberative democracy in Nigeria would not require a radical shift in the institutional framework already in place in the country, since, as previously stressed, social actions at the local level benefit immensely from deliberative processes, albeit without half of the constituency. The process only has to be improved upon, and made more inclusive, and responsive to the needs and rights of women.

### **Gender Mainstreaming Programs as Solution to Female Subjection**

Gender mainstreaming, in one of its various articulations, is a progressively enlarged corrective agenda that builds upon previously employed programs to redress past inequalities against females in society. In this special apprehension, social programs such as equal treatment of men and women, and positive actions to remove discriminations against women, serve as the basis for policy instruments that seek to neutralize structurally built-in biases in social institutions, and common practices. Thus, gender mainstreaming is a strategy for gender-neutrality that is shaped by inclusion of females in decision-making processes, recognition of females as moral equals, and removal of gender-induced social disabilities or privileges.

Again Judith Squire:

“At the heart of the mainstreaming process is a concern to determine, scrutinize, and transform the norms of equivalence currently used to evaluate competing equality claims, such that they cease to reproduce structural inequalities --- rectification of unequal circumstances cannot be achieved by applying preconceived interpretation of the term equality itself. This is because a necessary, if not sufficient, condition of equality is the enabling of excluded groups to unsettle and destabilize meanings and interpretations which institutional culture has hitherto taken as universal and complete” (Squire, 2005).

Once the idea of liberty and equal opportunity amongst the sexes is made central in rules that govern social relations in Nigeria, it would then be necessary to operationalize it through public policies that encourage and enforce it on a national

scale. This means using the various branches of government, and traditional institutions to devise and implement programs that cater equally to the needs of women and men; it also means using social resources to implement programs that may have disparate economic outcomes so long as they benefit those who were initially placed at a disadvantage by unjust past practices, in this case women. A good example of this would be a program of affirmative action in admissions to academies of higher education that favors women, or employment policies that require a certain proportion of those hired to be women. But with time, such programs should be replaced with ones that stress neutrality in outcome, and effect.

It must be acknowledged, however, that gender mainstreaming, with all its promises, and its potential to remarkably change the social and cultural landscape of Nigeria if properly implemented, requires a dramatic sea-change in cultivated and ingrained sensibilities. It would require a tremendous commitment of resources to educational programs, and to formal training of low and high-ranking civil servants who would be responsible for its implementation. Though a daunting task, it is not insurmountable; good leadership, and effective deployment of resources are necessary but may not be sufficient. A whole new set of social institutions may be required.

In point of fact, certain aspects of gender mainstreaming, although very limited in scope and depth, are superficially evident in Nigeria, especially in the educational system where there is significant female enrollment in primary and secondary schools, and in tertiary or professional schools (World Bank, 2005). The problem, however, is that only a small fraction of the female population in the country has such access; moreover, the gains made by female students could easily be reversed if the driving force derives from an ephemeral source, and not from a fundamental change in underlying social structures. The observed gains in female school enrollments are indeed attributable, in large measure, to the UN Millennium Goals' initiatives agreed to by Nigeria, and other developing countries (UN Doc.; 2006).

Meanwhile, the vast majority of the female population of Nigeria remains confined to rural parts of the country where they subsist on petty trading, low-scale animal husbandry and farming (World Bank, 2005). If the old practices that relegate women to second-class status are to be successfully excised from Nigerian society, more social resources should be dedicated to the following areas: 1. Provide financial relief to families that depend on their young men and women as helps in subsistence and cash crop agriculture; 2. Provide more affordable schools and colleges in near proximity to both densely and sparsely populated centers; 3. Require all public funded projects to have clearly defined gender-neutral components in planning and execution; and 4. Provide continuous educational programs on the social values of human rights, and equality of opportunity.

### **Concluding remarks**

The preceding analytics was based on a particular interpretation of social justice that insists on the removal of all disabilities imposed by society on African women; this means their recognition as moral equals to men, the opportunity for all meaningful employment of their talents, and equal access to educational and training programs necessary for effective participation in modern societies. For, by allowing African women the free application of their faculties, and making it possible for them to engage their talents in occupations undertaken through free choice, society would, in effect, double its collective mental faculties, and its pool of skilled workers. Where previously, for instance, society had one qualified engineer or medical doctor to serve its needs, it now would have the opportunity to make it two; and given that there is always a shortage of well-qualified talents in any endeavor that requires considerable ability, the loss to society through inefficient use of half of its whole would remain a major impediment to economic development.

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