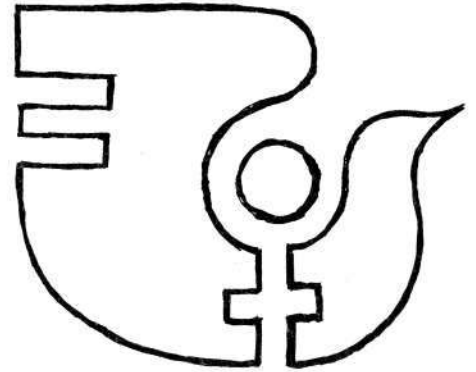


FOR AFRICAN WOMEN EQUAL RIGHTS ARE NOT ENOUGH

by Thelma Awori

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The international cry for equal rights for women is not the panacea for the problems of the African woman. Whether equal rights have been the solution to the problems of an oppressed group anywhere has yet to be proved. It is therefore necessary that the problems which the African woman faces be examined and their nature determined before an adequate solution is suggested.

My standpoint is that the exploitation which the African woman experiences today, as a result of her changing role within changing social systems, can only be solved by also taking a look at the role men play in society.

So I propose to examine one of the most prevalent problems of the African woman today, namely the problem of increased and ever increasing responsibilities, in the light of women's response to these problems and the proposed international solution of equal rights.

When it is said in Africa that the home is the responsibility of the woman, the statement is not to be interpreted lightly. It does not simply refer to the cleaning and cooking and child-care, but also to the production and preparation of all that goes into making her home.

In the Western world a man works to "provide" for his family. In the traditional African sense this is the responsibility of the woman. The father was important in that it was through him that a woman and her children gained membership of a group and rights within it. He was also supposed to be the protector and custodian of his family and its wealth.

So whereas the wealth, property, children and even the wife could be said to be "owned" by the father and his agnatic group, the responsibility of maintaining and improving those items owned by her husband fell to the wife. Even though the responsibility was great, at least she had the assistance of others in the homestead together with the assistance and moral support of her husband.

In colonial and post independent Africa this situation has been subjected to severe changes. The mobility of men in search of employment and education leaves women with the full burden of the family. From Cape Town to Tunis millions of women have experienced what it means to be father, mother, husband, wife even though they are not widows. The drift into urban areas and mines leaves women without the protection and assistance of their husbands.

Our rural sister is the worst hit by this mobility. Her husband left her years ago to find work in the towns. She might see him two or three times a year, but the rest of their communication is limited to messages and letters often written by others, since both of them may be illiterate. If she is lucky, money may trickle back home in small amounts for school fees or as capital for development. Otherwise she must engage in farming or business in order to keep herself and her children fed and clothed.

The towns and mines forgot she existed when they planned the one room for her husband to live in, and bath and cooking facilities to be shared with other single men. His wage does not take his seven children back home into consideration. Worse still he must have his small luxuries—alcohol and a few prostitutes.

If she is very poor her children may not go to school. They stay at home and help her with the work. Nowadays many children go to school or drift to the urban areas as soon as they are old enough, leaving a great labour vacuum in the rural areas. Cattle have to be tended, the land has to be ploughed, sowed and harvested, daily household chores must be attended to.

This situation influenced Kenya's Attorney General to make the following statement to a conference of women in East Africa: "Although wives have a right to be maintained by their husbands under customary law, in effect, the dying influence of customary sanctions has resulted in many abuses whereby husbands go to work in the towns leaving their wives in the country without adequate provision. This aspect must be remedied."

She is amazingly calm and hardworking for all her suffering, this rural woman. Perhaps we do not take a close enough look at her face to see the anxiety behind her eyes and the rapid aging of her figure. She goes on from day to day carrying out her duties, assuming the responsibilities left to her by her husband. She must protect and provide for herself and her household. It is she who has come to understand and accept the clear distinction between ownership and responsibility; not conceptually but in practice.

As long as she has children her plight is sealed. It would seem that the closer the African woman is to tradition, the more seriously she takes her responsibility for her children. Motherhood has a mystical slavish influence on her. She feels she must always be prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice for them—a feeling not equally shared by the father.

A mother is always a child's last resort. So that to leave her husband's home would mean leaving her children in the care of an equally over-burdened woman and an absentee father. This would not be an especially favourable situation for the children. Yet to take them as dependents to her parents, who themselves need her help, would be unacceptable to her people. So she does what is necessary to maintain her family.

This woman has a lot to teach her urban sister who finds herself stripped of traditional protection and barely able to cope with her new situation. Even if she does come to realise the distinction between ownership and responsibility, it is when it is too late; after she has had a baby by someone who admits that it is his, but will leave the bulk of the responsibility of rearing the child to her.

Many African countries have Affiliation Acts granting the unmarried mother rights to claim maintenance for her child from its father, but the amount is usually ridiculously small, sometimes 3 dollars a month. Kenya, in fact, repealed its Affiliation Act in 1969.

In other cases she might marry someone and find that full emotional and financial support is not as forthcoming from him as might have been expected. The bitterness with which she accepts this situation shows in her face and her manners more than in the case of her rural sister. If she is a working girl she can take care of herself. But she is often still in school and her parents have to bear the responsibility.

Only an insignificantly small number of African women, married or single, are non-income producing members of their families, whether the income is in cash or in kind. This is linked with tradition and with anxiety. The tradition is that African women have always worked. The tradition of polygamy seems to have made it necessary for the African woman to be self-sufficient. The anxiety is related to making sure that ends meet regardless of the circumstances.

In traditional society the anxiety was not as great because society had built-in securities for its members. In the present situation the anxieties, especially of the urban African woman, are tremendous. The family structure, even though still existent, no longer provides all the security she needs.

She is anxious about her own support and welfare. She is anxious about her husband's continued and undivided affection. Ten years ago, in **Kenya Women Look Ahead** (East African Literature Bureau, Nairobi, 1965) C. Oloo and V. Cone alluded to the tensions the modern African woman experiences. Today these tensions are full blown.



Photo Pamela Johnson

World Bank

Many women married to the most responsible men will fear to praise their husbands openly. "He is good today," they say, "but men change, you know." The anxieties of the modern African woman are justified. Men change and the African male has undergone many changes which have also caused him anxieties, the most severe being that of maintaining his image as "the boss". This translates itself into very oppressive behaviour to both men and women.

What is the African woman doing about her situation? The answer is contingent upon several factors. As has been said before, our rural sister is more calm about her plight, especially if she is married and has several children. If she is unmarried and young, the town is the answer with its multifarious means of "happiness", independence, and a life which is physically less strenuous.

Even as a single girl her relationship with men is not rosy and totally to her advantage. She is constantly in competition with other girls who are out to get the big spenders, the "sugar-daddies".

If she accidentally becomes pregnant and the relationship falls apart, she must take full responsibility for the child or leave it in the dust-bin, where the social workers collect babies for charitable homes.

But if she is lucky and her relationship with her man continues, the baby will get support and she might get her rent paid and even a car. These girls are the envy of women generally. Without the obligations of wifehood they seem to be able to get exactly what they want from men.

Men also seem to respond better to this situation, which is free of psychological, financial and legal complexities. A man can step in or out of it whenever he likes. Many single girls and young divorcees find this a perfect situation.

The older, Christian woman will take her problems to the Lord in prayer. After all, she reasons, the life of Christ was a sacrificial one. So why not hers? Without this attitude many of our young men and women today would be unable to boast of an education and a family home life.

Yet this woman too, unable to leave an oppressive situation because of her children, will spend sleepless nights figuring ways of stretching meagre earnings and making the best use of them. She has accepted the responsibility-ownership dichotomy and will take the responsibility.

The most problematic case seems to be the younger, more educated African girl. Regardless of the advice she receives from her elders, she psychologically rejects the irresponsibility of her man, but not without a battle. This reformist believes in doing something about her situation and the battle is often fought on many fronts—psychologically, socially, financially and sometimes even physically.

This is the girl who believes that one's rights are not to be taken away without a struggle. But with what results? Often, in defeat, she resorts to the legal system when she may secure her divorce, only to increase her anxieties. The care of three or four children in a male-dominated society is no easy task for a single woman. Besides, society has more sympathy with widows than with divorcees.

If her elders prevail upon her and she remains in the union she does so with bitterness; a bitterness that produces ulcers, bad headaches, depression and aggressiveness. But this is the fighter for equal rights. Her anxiety moves her to act. She has fought for equal pay, paid maternity leave, housing in her own right, the right to own property in her own name even if she is married.

She has succeeded in achieving these ambitions, but none of these have improved her relationship with her husband. The more rights she secures the more independent she becomes and the more responsibility she assumes. Unlike her lucky urban sister with a "sugar-daddy", she finds herself contributing more than her fair share for family maintenance.

The situation is so prevalent, many women wonder why it is necessary to have a husband. Somehow the African man does not seem to respond well in this atmosphere. He feels overshadowed, overpowered and humiliated.

For those who are concerned about the family as an institution of a healthy society, this situation in Africa warrants examination from a fresh perspective. Clearly the struggle for equal opportunities and equal rights might be more difficult in some countries than in others, but African women within a decade of independence are miles ahead of their European sisters in their legal achievements.

In Uganda, as soon as women were courageous enough to ask for certain rights, by sending a delegation to the President, everything they asked for was granted. In Somalia, a predominantly Muslim country with a military government, women also have been legally given equal rights. It would seem therefore that the struggle for **more** opportunities and rights for women (the word "equal" is totally irrelevant) is not a priority. These are being achieved with the co-operation of men.

The problem that warrants attention is a clearer definition of the male role in African society today and this needs to be done in conjunction with a definition of the female role. Our men are having just as many problems adjusting to the changing circumstances of society.

The struggle for more opportunities for women will solve other problems in society but not the problem of the male-female relationship, which is a human relations problem, and these are seldom solved by laws.

The prevalent attitude of most men towards their present situation was well expressed by one African leader in a speech to a women's seminar. He said, "The wife is responsible for peace and stability in the home. She must create a safe and steady base which would encourage her husband to succeed in the world of business or employment. This attitude on the part of women would reduce heavy drinking and road accidents and would induce husbands and children to stay at home." This statement may be interpreted in many ways, but it must never be mistaken for anything other than what it really is—a **cry for help**.

A statement of this nature shows a strong unwillingness to take responsibility for one's own behaviour. In effect it says, "My role is to succeed in employment and business, but you too must get a job or go into business because I cannot do it alone. And if I fail, it is really your fault because you have made conditions at home so unpleasant for me. You must also always be prepared to cover the tracks of my failure by keeping a smiling face and an appearance of financial and psychological well-being regardless of what I do." The woman, therefore, becomes the scapegoat for all his failures, and not being fully aware of her situation, she fights for equal rights and thereby becomes a better scapegoat.

The African woman today must get rid of this man-child on her back. This is the responsibility, the burden. Equal rights will not rid her of this burden. She must help her man to stand on his feet and discover his role in a relationship of equal responsibility.

The mechanics of how the role of men will be defined and how men will become committed to a more responsible role in their relationship with women is what requires public discussion and public concern. At present our men find their

profession, time spent in bars, and other non-productive behaviour useful facades for their problems.

The task therefore that must begin in 1975, declared "International Women's Year" by the United Nations, is the task of helping our men on the African continent to

NUSAS

by Edgar Brookes

Few groups of South African citizens have been so ruthlessly and persistently persecuted as NUSAS. It is remarkable that the English-speaking population of the country has protested so little against the persecution of its own courageous sons. For whatever else NUSAS has been and done its members have never lacked courage.

As one who believes neither in the infallibility of the Pope nor in the infallibility of Karl Marx, I am not prepared to argue for infallibility of NUSAS. NUSAS has made many mistakes. It has done the right thing at the wrong time, it has expressed right views in a wrong way. At times it seems as if it has gone out of its way to provoke the authorities. But surely these are characteristics of young people in politics, whether they be the young members of the Afrikaanse Studente Bond or the Young Liberals of England.

Let us get down to ultimate realities. NUSAS is persecuted not because it is provocative or dangerous or unwise, but simply because it is opposed to apartheid. It sees in apartheid a process which is wholly wrong and is dangerous to South Africa. And here we who call ourselves Liberals must examine ourselves and see whether we are really opposed to apartheid in principle. One of my reasons for signing a minority report in the Spro-cas Report on Politics was that there seemed to be too much to-nerading with homelands and other forms of apartheid in it. Even if the Homelands were much more viable than they actually are, true liberalism must regard as wrong a system built up on racial separation. The fundamental faith of liberalism has been faith in the individual human being as a person and not as a member of a particular race. To this NUSAS has been loyal and we should be loyal. True, we are all marching forward. The supporters of apartheid have shown themselves much more teachable than one would at one time have expected. The way out may well be found. But that capable and courageous young people should be persecuted for

define their role in a meaningful relationship with women. The training of our sons, an opportunity often forgotten, is an area of great potential. As for our husbands and fathers of our children, the battle seems impossible, but to win it would certainly be worth the effort. □

saying that apartheid is not the ultimate remedy for our ills is something quite indefensible, and that liberals should condone this persecution is even less defensible.

Another point which should be made is that NUSAS has been actuated by motives of genuine South African patriotism, they have loved South Africa as a whole and they have been actuated by a sense of doing the best for our country. Anyone who has known NUSAS leaders and members will certainly subscribe to this picture of them. Their patriotism has been to South Africa as a whole and not to any one section of it, but it has been a very real thing. From the beginning NUSAS aimed at an inclusive South African patriotism. Delegates from the then unilingual University of Natal were surprised and dismayed at the first NUSAS Conference that Afrikaans was freely spoken and they had to be helped out by friendly bilingual members. (This was in the days when Afrikaans had not risen to its present position of dignity).

In the course of the years the Afrikaans-speaking Universities withdrew from NUSAS because of its acceptance of African members, and African students withdrew from it because it was not completely acceptable to "Black Power" theorists. It left the majority of NUSAS English-speaking South Africans, although right up to the present day there have been others in its membership.

It is not part of the plan of NUSAS to stand for only English-speaking South Africa. It has been forced into something like this position, but never of its own free will.

But it certainly represents the best of English-speaking South Africa in wonderful contrast to the apathy and the concentration on profits of so much of the English-speaking population. If English-speaking South Africa were to wish to justify itself, one of its greatest assets would be the work of NUSAS. □