

African Feminism: A Worldwide Perspective

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THE NEED FOR A THEORY OF AFRICAN FEMINISM

Various schools of thought, perspectives, and ideological proclivities have influenced the study of feminism. Few studies have dealt with the issue of racism, since the dominant voice of the feminist movement has been that of the white female. The issue of racism can become threatening, for it identifies white feminists as possible participants in the oppression of blacks. In the main, the accusation of universal male oppression through the system of patriarchy has been politically advantageous to white women.

From the perspective of some black women, evidence of racism during the precarious period of affirmative action policy can cause a certain uneasiness. Upwardly mobile black women and those who have been co-opted to serve the interests of the white power structure may find the issue of racism provocative and threatening to their professional survival as individual "tokens." They may also be under various pressures to demonstrate allegiance to feminist, rather than racial, causes.

Significantly, the issue of racism combined with sexism is explosive and potentially revolutionary. It threatens to destroy the existing power base of the world economy, which is dominated by whites. Maintaining an inequitable and unjust world economic order is most profitable to the strongest, richest, and most powerful men and women in the world. The subordination of the majority of black men and women has been vital to this world order, for the productive and reproductive labor of black women

have served and continue to serve as necessary prerequisites for capital accumulation on a world scale. By being at the bottom of this structure, poor black women, not the mythical Atlas, hold up our unequal and unjust planet. For this reason, primarily, an African feminism that encompasses freedom from the complex configurations created by multiple oppression is necessary and urgent.

In Africa, as well as in the diaspora, the black women engaged in research on the black woman are involved in a process of liberation, as well as in a scholarly endeavor, since research, being essentially a product of the power structure, has sometimes been used as a tool of domination.¹ The increasing involvement of African women in research can lead to redefinitions and critical examinations of concepts, perspectives, and methodologies used in research and inspire a vital change that will render research activity as a basic human right and a process of liberation for oppressed groups.²

African feminism combines racial, sexual, class, and cultural dimensions of oppression to produce a more inclusive brand of feminism through which women are viewed first and foremost as *human*, rather than sexual, beings.³ It can be defined as that ideology which encompasses freedom from oppression based on the political, economic, social, and cultural manifestations of racial, cultural, sexual, and class biases. It is more inclusive than other forms of feminist ideologies and is largely a product of polarizations and conflicts that represent some of the worst and chronic forms of human suffering.

An inclusive feminism can signal the end of all vestiges of oppression, including those glossed over by revolutions based primarily on class conflicts. It can be argued that this type of feminism has the potential of emphasizing the totality of human experience, portraying the strength and resilience of the human spirit and resounding with optimism for the total liberation of humanity. African feminism is, in short, humanistic feminism.

The world we inherited generates polarizations at an alarming rate and now faces the possibility of total annihilation through nuclear war. African feminism does not need the threat of nuclear war to initiate a struggle for the preservation of life, for survival has always been a central issue for the African woman. In seeking

total liberation, African feminism is intrinsically a moral and political statement for human survival and well-being.

By using historical and global perspectives, this paper illustrates the way in which various economic, social, cultural, and political elements have interacted to produce a special brand of African feminism, despite differences in nationality and class among African women on the continent and in the diaspora.

THE ROOTS OF AFRICAN FEMINISM

Tensions and conflicts exist among all social groups, and African societies are no exception. The intention here is not to romanticize the African past but to draw on those features in traditional tribal societies that promoted complementary values—the essential framework for African feminism.

Precolonial African societies, in general, developed self-reliant social systems, as well as favorable and ecologically safe environments. These ensured the physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being of the population, despite droughts, floods, diseases, and wars. Postharvest preservation techniques, as well as intercommunity exchanges, provided some insulation against seasonal variations and natural calamities. Societies endeavored to achieve balance with the physical and metaphysical world by being in tune with, rather than in opposition to, nature.⁴

Men, women, and children were cooperatively involved in production in a social, rather than individual, context. Economic activities such as farming, fishing, hunting, and gathering were geared toward subsistence so that access to land, the vital resource, was determined, primarily, by rules of common property usufruct, rather than by private ownership. Communal values stressed cooperation and distribution, rather than individualism and accumulation.

The household was an economic unit generating use values through production and reproduction. For the most part, communal ownership facilitated women's access to land and ensured a certain degree of control over their labor, as well as some decision making about their labor input. The sexual division of labor was essentially along parallel, rather than hierarchical,

lines, thereby giving, in general terms, equal value to male and female labor.⁵

(Social organization was based on the principle of patrilineal or matrilineal descent or a combination of both.) Socialization of children took place in a group, rather than within the context of a nuclear family, with men being actively involved in the socialization of boys. Polygamy, as an economic system, promoted communal and cooperative values and ensured the economic security of the members of the household. It also facilitated the shared mothering of children and guaranteed women some autonomy, personal freedom, and greater mobility than would be possible in a monogamous, nuclear family. Women had more time to themselves, developed strong bonds with other women, and experienced a more limited, rather than absolute, form of patriarchy. The emphasis on communal living, cooperation, and peaceful coexistence with cowives necessitated the development of good interpersonal skills, diplomacy, and responsibility for men and women. (It can be argued that despite the implication and manifestation of female subordination, polygamy provided several safeguards against male domination and female destitution. This may partly explain why it is still practiced today, even though its economic usefulness in production is increasingly becoming obsolete.)

Adolescents played an important role in the socialization of younger children. In some societies, particularly in East Africa, peer group socialization was institutionalized through units composed of "age" mates. In the West African nations Sierra Leone and Liberia, secret societies like the Poro (male) and Bondo (female) were mainly responsible for the collective socialization of adolescents into adulthood. They also provided institutionalized means of mutually sanctioning the behavior of members of the opposite sex.

A woman's status changed throughout the life cycle, rising significantly during her reproductive years and reaching its zenith during old age, when she became an elder eligible for certain political positions. It also signaled her approaching entry into the world of the ancestors; old age and ancestors were always revered and respected.⁷

Regardless of the forms of social organization, the dominant

ideology was group preservation and well-being ensured by institutionalized checks and controls to reduce tension, especially between the sexes. In patrilineal societies, all men and all women worked to preserve the patrilineage. In matrilineal societies, the preservation of the matrilineage by all men and all women was a supreme value. Sanctions were imposed through ritual expression, ridicule, supernatural interventions, and male and female pressure groups.⁸

(African women had definite social, political, and economic roles that induced them to achieve a measure of independence and autonomy and to develop their self-reliant capabilities through participation in production and reproduction.)⁹ In a number of societies women held executive positions as chiefs, paramount chiefs, and monarchs.¹⁰

Since production was primarily for use, it can be argued that the question of differential valuation between production and reproduction was not an issue. The basis for valuation of reproduction was more metaphysical and symbolic than purely materialistic. As a result, (a woman's role in reproduction often received supreme symbolic value, since it strengthened the human group, ensured continuity of life, and became equated with the life force itself. The bond between the mother and child surpassed all other human bonds and transcended patrilineal rules of descent.) In patrilineal societies, the structural position of women as those who perpetuate the patrilineage served to modify the undue male control made possible by the strong corporateness of localized patrilineage groups. Among the Swazi and the Ashanti, representing a patrilineal and a matrilineal society respectively, this principle received supreme political value through the institution of the dual monarchy in which a king ruled jointly with his mother—often referred to as the Queen mother.¹¹ The role of women as mothers operated at the symbolic level, where the very essence of female biology could be used to sanction the behavior of men. (Some male secret societies, such as the Gelede among the Yoruba of Nigeria, capitalize on the reproductive power of women to the extent of effecting cures for some illnesses among men. Women's power to give birth and their role as healers make them awesome figures in a sex-oriented culture.)

Parallel autonomy, communalism, and cooperation for the preservation of life are more useful concepts in developing an appropriate framework for examining African feminism than the frameworks of dichotomy, individualism, competition, and opposition, which Western feminism fosters. Men and women in traditional African societies had spheres of autonomy—in economic, social, ritual, and political terms—ensured by various mechanisms of checks and balances. Women's ability to utilize these mechanisms was an important aspect of their feminism. They had the added advantage of being intrinsically central to the preservation and continuation of life through their reproductive role.

African patterns of feminism can be seen as having developed within a context that views human life from a total, rather than a dichotomous and exclusive, perspective. For women, the male is not "the other" but part of the human same. Each gender constitutes the critical half that makes the human whole. Neither sex is totally complete in itself to constitute a unit by itself. Each has and needs a complement, despite the possession of unique features of its own.

Sexual differences and similarities, as well as sex roles, enhance sexual autonomy and cooperation between women and men, rather than promote polarization and fragmentation. Within the metaphysical realm, both male and female principles encompass life and operate jointly to maintain cosmological balance.

AFRICAN FEMINISM WITHIN A WORLD ECONOMIC SYSTEM

The exploitation of Africa's resources, as well as the productive and reproductive labor of African men and women, and the subsequent appropriation by the West of the enormous wealth this generated, contributed greatly to the rapid development of Western countries and families.¹²

These modes of exploitation took the form of oppression of whole groups of people and gave rise to the ideology of racism to justify oppression on the grounds of fabricated notions of racial inferiority. The role of the black woman in ensuring the

survival and well-being of her people was significant and added other dimensions to her feminism—namely, liberation from white oppression and destruction of the ideology of racism.

The incorporation of Africa into the world economic system has made the continent a battlefield in an on-going struggle among world powers for economic, cultural, and ideological domination. This struggle has produced some of the most devastating effects on the African family. The processes of slavery, colonialism, imperialism, neocolonialism, and apartheid have resulted in chronic underdevelopment.

Slavery

The slave trade constitutes part of the beginning of a complex system through which the continent of Africa has been dominated for centuries. The single most important historical event responsible for the massive dispersal of Africans was the transatlantic slave trade. Some fifteen to twenty million Africans were shipped regularly across the Atlantic over a period of about four hundred years, from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries, to work as slaves in the Americas, the Antilles, and, to a lesser extent, in Europe.¹³ The majority of black women in the African diaspora are descended from African women brought to the New World as slaves. Black women from Africa became a key factor in the production of capital because of their capacity to reproduce slave labor.¹⁴

Some of the ideas of African feminism developed on the continent no doubt had relevance in the New World. Though parallel autonomy (or any autonomy for that matter) was impossible to achieve under slavery, self-reliance was a closely related concept and became a necessary ideology. African ideas stressing male-female cooperation, as well as belief in the totality of male and female beings, no doubt became enhanced under conditions of slavery, which threatened survival and fragmented social life.

African feminism in the New World, as in Africa, also took on activist dimensions, involving protests against the system of slavery, which exploited female slave labor in production and reproduction and abused female sexuality and biology. African

women were involved in several acts of resistance to slavery and in revolts, both in the Caribbean and in the United States.¹⁵

Female personalities like Harriet Tubman and Sojourner Truth became legends because of their role in the struggle against slavery in the United States. In the Caribbean, among the Maroons of Jamaica, for example, the myth of Nanny as an invincible warrior fighting against slavery became an ideal and inspiration and a cornerstone of Maroon feminism.¹⁶ Other forms of resistance involving subtle and subversive acts of rebellion like sexual abstinence, abortion, and infanticide, were not uncommon in the United States.¹⁷ These acts of protest, resistance, and rebellion were to continue through the Civil War and into the modern civil rights movements, in which black women played an important part in the struggle against racism.¹⁸

Colonialism

Colonial penetration in Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries produced the most profound changes in the lives of the African woman on the continent and disrupted the traditional system of production. It also reinforced existing systems of social inequality and introduced oppressive forms of social stratification, including racial segregation, through the machinery of the state. Other devastating effects of colonial penetration included the disintegration of self-provisioning agricultural systems, through the introduction of commercial agriculture and exploitative wage employment.

Long before European colonial penetration, Sub-Saharan Africa came under the influence of patriarchal Islam, but its societies never became as intensely orthodox as those in North Africa. Except among groups like the Hausa of Nigeria and the Swahili-speaking Muslims of Kenya, Islam never became entrenched as a way of life. In fact, the effects of colonial administration have been of greater significance on African societies. The impact of Islam on the majority of African women in the diaspora has been minimal.

Through colonization by European powers such as Britain, France, Italy, Germany, Belgium, and Portugal, Africa was

brought into the world economic system as a major target for exploitation. Surplus was drawn from its great reservoir of natural resources in the form of raw materials, food crops, mineral resources, and cheap labor. The colonial machinery ensured a conducive political climate for the exploitation of the continent through a system of taxation, coercion, and military administration.¹⁹

The process of incorporation involved releasing male labor from agricultural and other subsistence activities, often by direct coercion in the form of forced labor. This produced a supply of cheap male labor which was often migratory and seasonal. The household continued to support the wage-earning male through unpaid family labor, creating a differential process of incorporation for women. Women served primarily as a labor reserve and as a mainstay for the subsistence and reproductive sectors.²⁰ If and when necessary, they became marginally proletarianized as cheap sources of labor.²¹

Colonialism was also established in the Caribbean with exploitative and oppressive consequences. In post-Civil War United States, many of the features of institutional racism have been viewed as forms of "internal colonialism." In all of these processes the productive and reproductive labor of women of African descent served to bolster capital accumulation by economically dominant white men and women.]

Independence and Neocolonialism

In Africa, independence did not bring about significant changes in the social, sexual, and racial inequalities perpetuated by colonialism mainly because many of the economic structures of colonialism remained intact and, in some cases, became even more exploitative. Contemporary Africa is marred by its dependency on the West and its adoption of exploitative models of development. Tensions are apparent not only in political ideology but also in the conflict between traditional African views of women's roles and European sexism. The minimal participation of African women in contemporary political institutions, as opposed to their complementary participation in traditional political institutions,

is only one of the numerous examples of the continuing cultural domination of the West.²²

Postindependence processes have thrown into sharp focus the unity of the world economic system, characterized by the development of some countries and some groups at the expense of others. It also reveals the tenacity of imperialism, through which a subjugated people remain in an economically subjugated position, perennially linked to their former, alien rulers.²³

The present inequalities in the global division of labor which continue to favor countries less dependent on primary products as their major resource are aspects of imperialism. The African economy has functioned, essentially, to develop countries outside of Africa and to make profits, primarily, for people with white skins; racism remains an important aspect of this subjugation. Bernard Magubane writes, "the ideology of racism . . . became a permanent stimulus for the ordering of unequal and exploitative relations of production along 'racial lines' and further demanded justification of these relations."²⁴

There are several examples of African women's resistance to the colonial system which, like slavery, exploited both their productive and reproductive labor. The Women's War of 1929 in Nigeria is probably the best known. This was a direct form of resistance against the colonial system of taxation and an indirect protest against the differential integration of women into the world economic system. The British plan to tax women as well as men provoked Ibo women to attack a British colonial station.²⁵

Apartheid

African women have also been very active in the struggle against the racial ideology, policy, and practice of apartheid in South Africa. Apartheid poignantly illustrates the most extreme form of monopolistic accumulation of wealth by whites at the expense of blacks, with the black woman as the worst victim. The subjugation of the black woman, who is considered a minor by law in South Africa, is the foundation of the apartheid system. Forced to live in reserves, or "homelands," the black woman reproduces the cheap black labor force. She also cares for the old and sick, as

well as the economic rejects who are discarded into the homelands when they cease to be productive.

The majority of African women who work for wages do so as agricultural laborers, domestic servants, and menial industrial workers, in a desperate attempt to save their families from starvation. African families are systematically separated, harassed, and forcibly moved into designated settlements. The destruction of the African family is only one aspect of the systematic attempt to eliminate the black race in South Africa. Other activities in this regard include forced settlement in non-arable homelands, man-made malnutrition, aggressive family-planning policies for blacks, and outright murders.

Under the system of apartheid, African men, women, and children in South Africa and Namibia are constantly subjected to oppression, imprisonment, tortures, and killings if they oppose apartheid, the most diabolical political system ever fashioned by the human mind.²⁶

Liberation from colonialism and racism has been an equally important dimension of African feminism on the continent, as well as in the diaspora. For example, the liberation battles of Mozambique, Angola, Guinea-Bissau, and Zimbabwe, as well as the civil rights battles in the United States and the Caribbean, were fought by both men and women.

Chronic Underdevelopment

One of the consequences of the disintegration of the self-provisioning agricultural system in Africa has been rapid urbanization. The urbanization process in Africa contains all the features of asymmetrical development characteristic of Third World countries with a colonial history.²⁷ Inequalities based on race, class, and sex are most marked in urban areas.

High rates of rural and urban migration, chronic unemployment, and the proliferation of shanty towns and extreme poverty characterize large sections of cities in the developing world and in Third World sections of the United States. A large number of the urban poor, particularly migrants and women, eke out a living in the informal labor market as service workers, laborers, artisans,

prostitutes, petty traders, and unskilled factory workers. By all indications, the condition of the urban poor in many Third World countries is worsening, and women, particularly black women, are among the most vulnerable victims of poverty, a persistent feature of chronic underdevelopment.

In Africa, urbanization far exceeds the rate of industrialization, which is often capital-intensive, foreign-owned, and oriented toward production for an external market, rather than an internal one. Because industrialization was inspired, primarily, by colonization, the dominant pattern has been the establishment of mines, plantations, and export-oriented industries. Male labor was made cheap and plentiful, but female proletarianization has become effective in a number of situations, such as in the case of male absenteeism as a result of male migration. In Swaziland, for example, where men migrate to South Africa to work in the mines, women constitute 60 percent of the labor force in the sugar plantations and 95 percent in the citrus industries.²⁸

The precarious, casual, and seasonal nature of industrial employment applies to both men and women in Africa, as do the low wages paid. However, some agro-industries with monopolies have been known to exploit women further by hiring them at lower wages than men. In the Ivory Coast, for example, women in the sugar industry are paid wages that are 40 percent lower than men's wages.²⁹

Significant, and even more ominous, is the tendency of agro-industries to take over the best land for cultivation of cash crops. Intensification of cash-crop production can seriously threaten the ecological health of the society by undermining the quality of the soil. Livestock industries can produce similar effects when their objective is the intensification of production for export. In Botswana, for example, heavy grazing and pressure on the land for the export-oriented livestock industry has undermined the production of the staple crop, sorghum.

Similar, negative trends of urbanization and industrialization are apparent in the African diaspora. In the Caribbean, the use of black women in conversion and export-oriented industries as cheap sources of labor is now becoming a tradition. The same is true of the majority of black women workers in Europe, particularly in England and France. In the United

States, urbanization and industrialization have also had several deleterious effects on the black woman.

In an illustrative study of the United States by Rogers-Rose, migration to the urban areas continues to keep the majority of black women in poverty without the benefit of access to rural land. Furthermore, the urban environment imposes a structure that tends to separate wives from their husbands. The poorer the family, the more likely it is to be headed by a woman, and the number of children living with both parents has been drastically declining since 1940. The welfare system fosters this by supporting dependent children, rather than struggling families.³⁰ What we learn from this is that the urbanization process in the United States is reproducing cheap black labor at the lowest possible cost.

RESISTANCE AND THE CREATION OF SURVIVAL IMPERATIVES

As a reaction to conditions and processes of economic marginalization and racial oppression, African women developed various means of resistance and survival, despite the fact that these processes sometimes created conditions that were uncondusive to traditional family life. Men were often rendered peripheral to the family and household unit through male migration, unemployment, imprisonment, and wars. In developing coping mechanisms for these disruptive conditions, African women added other dimensions to their feminism. Female-headed households developed as a survival mechanism among black women not only in Africa but also in the diaspora, as this form of social organization was adaptive to precarious and subsistent economic and military situations.³¹ In some instances also, notably in the English-speaking Caribbean, the female-headed household became an important aspect of resistance to processes that threatened the survival of the black race, and it provided a base for the development of female independence and autonomy.

South Africa, through its policy of apartheid, provides the most extreme example of making adult males peripheral to black family life. Through a pass system, migration to urban areas is

strictly controlled. Men who migrate to work in the mines and in other industrial complexes often are not permitted to bring their families with them. Women, children, and the old are left behind in the homelands. Consequently, long periods of separation of family members inevitably leads to the breakdown of the family. The imposition of the Bantustans can be seen as reinforcing this destructive pattern. One study by Sibisi that has dealt specifically with the effect of male migration on black women in South Africa poignantly illustrates the difficult adjustment of black women to male absenteeism.³²

Male peripherality in the Caribbean and the United States, as in African societies undergoing industrialization, is also the result of economic marginalization and imposed poverty. The controversial theory of the black matriarchy in the United States is increasingly being viewed as a form of imposed male peripherality. Because of the high rates of unemployment among black males in the United States, black women, the majority of whom are poor, often lack the economic support which society deems to be the responsibility of males.

Black women in the New World have used the strong bonds among female kin,³³ in addition to an ideology of self-reliance, to reinforce their survival strategies. In Africa, as well as in the diaspora, black women have consistently had to ensure not only their economic, political, and social survival but their physical survival as well. Because of poverty, racial and sexual discrimination, and a generally low status in society, most black women are constantly exposed to health hazards. As a result, black women generally have a lower life expectancy than white women. Black women also suffer child loss more frequently than do white women. In Africa, the mean infant mortality rate is 147 per thousand live births. In the United States and the Caribbean, there is a higher mortality rate for black infants than for white infants. Nevertheless, black women have been the targets of aggressive population control activities worldwide. Black women are also among Third World women used in experiments with new contraceptives and dangerous drugs, and they lose more children through marasmus, an often fatal disease related to infant formula feeding.³⁴

The work patterns of the majority of black women usually

involve long hours of strenuous physical labor; often, they work without receiving adequate nutrition, particularly in the rural areas. The majority of black working women in the United States perform heavy physical tasks in the lower ranks of industry and as domestics.³⁵ The remunerative and nonremunerative aspect of women's work has been a dominant paradigm in feminist analyses. For the black woman, the framework of analysis also should seek to demonstrate the link between women's work and their health, nutrition, and well-being.

In order to ensure their physical survival, black women have had to develop survival imperatives, one of which is the provision of health care. During slavery black women performed healing roles, including midwifery. This is also true in Africa, the Caribbean, and South America, where women traditionally provide primary health-care services and deliver babies. Also during slavery, infectious diseases and gynecological problems due to biological and sexual abuse were prevalent, and black women had to rely on a number of home remedies for survival. Some of this knowledge, particularly of the value of medicinal herbs, was derived from Africa.³⁶

The struggle against modern forms of oppression, economic hardship, illness, and unethical marketing practices adds new dimensions to the configuration of African feminism, which is resulting in increasing political awareness, grass-roots organizing, and political action at the national and international levels. One important aspect of African feminism, which is both an aspect of the coping with *critical* historical processes, as well as a feature of African societies, is the overlap, rather than the dichotomy, between the public and private spheres. Sudarkasa has argued that in precapitalist societies in West Africa this dichotomy was not marked nor did it correspond to masculine and feminine domains,³⁷ as most Western feminist theories have suggested.³⁸

It can be argued also that in societies where survival is critical, as in many black societies, the exigencies of survival would militate against dichotomies between the private and public spheres. In the United States, for instance, men were depicted in slave narratives as performing roles of cooking, serving, and child rearing. As Perkins points out, the disenfranchisement and oppression of all blacks during slavery left little room for male

chauvinism.³⁹ For the Caribbean, a study by Mathurin has observed that during slavery, men and women were equal both in production outside the household context and also "under the whip."⁴⁰

In recent times, some neo-Marxist interpretations of female subordination have shown the dichotomy between the private and public domains to be only a superficial one in capitalist societies when, in fact, the public sphere maintains powerful organic links with the private sphere as an important feature of the exploitative relations of production.⁴¹

For the black woman, the global processes of capital accumulation ensure that she is unpaid for her labor in the reproductive, private domain and is paid very cheaply in the productive, public domain. To survive and to ensure the survival of her family, she *must* operate in both domains. Racism ensures that she *does* operate in both domains under the most exploitative and oppressive conditions. For the black woman, then, these powerful, organic links become even more exploitative.

CONCLUSION: TOWARD HUMANISTIC FEMINISM

For the majority of black women poverty is a way of life. For the majority of black women also racism has been the most important obstacle in the acquisition of the basic needs for survival. Through the manipulation of racism the world economic institutions have produced a situation which negatively affects black people, particularly black women. Various forms of domination have resulted in a situation in which black women reproduce and maintain a steady supply of cheap labor and become available as cheap sources of labor themselves. Poor black women in Africa and from Africa not only reproduce the labor force for free but reproduce a labor force that is significantly and qualitatively different from the mainstream labor force in economic and political terms.

In structural terms black women and black men under conditions of domination, economic exploitation, and racial

oppression share a similar position of subordination in relation to the dominant group. What we have, then, is not a simple issue of sex or class differences but a situation which, because of the racial factor, is castelike in character on both a national and global scale.

Within the present unequal socioeconomic structure between and within nations, a campaign for sexual equality without class equality would benefit women in more privileged classes. This is particularly true of white women of these classes in Western societies, who already raise, nurture, and comfort the white male oppressor and share with him a bond of privilege.

The struggle for class equality is impossible without racial equality, since the ideology of racism, though often ignored in class analyses, has been a very potent and expedient method for maintaining class inequality. Even when changes seem apparent and inevitable, the ideology of racism can rebound with tenacity to maintain the unequal character and global imbalance in the world economic system.

Many questions remain unanswered in current theoretical approaches in feminist studies when the racial factor is included. For instance, much has been written about the reproductive role of women as a common denominator of their oppression, but not enough analysis has been made of the vastly different contexts of reproduction for different groups of women. Among important research questions to be asked are the following:

1. What are the structural relationships of social and racial groups to the reproduction of the labor force? How do these produce and reinforce social inequality, discrimination, exploitation, and the oppression of one group by another?
2. How is the reproduction of the labor force qualitatively different in different social contexts? Is the reproduction of Prince William by Princess Di in a posh medical suite, for example, the same as the reproduction of Mary by Jane in the black ghetto? Or of Fatu by Geneva in a Freetown slum or of Buntu by Martha in Soweto? How are these linked?
3. What roles have women in structurally subordinate racial groups played, and what roles do they continue to play in the

- reproduction of structurally dominant racial groups when they serve as childminders, wet-nurses, domestics, and emotional shock absorbers and tension relievers?
4. How are the profits generated from male labor expropriated in various racial and social groups, and what role do economically dominant women play in its expropriation?
 5. If and when women from racially dominant groups become politically powerful, will the exercise of their power be qualitatively different from that wielded by racially dominant men? What form will the new, reinforced partnership between economically dominant white men and women take?
 6. Using the family as the unit of analysis, might not the additional material gains of some white women, in terms of total family income, create even greater marginalization of black families within the current racial and unequal distribution in the world economic system?

To summarize, one can say that because of the need for male-female complementarity in ensuring the totality of human existence within a balanced ecosystem, and because of the negative and destructive effects of historical processes and racism on Africa and its people, values stressing human totality, parallel autonomy, cooperation, self-reliance, adaptation, survival, and liberation have developed as important aspects of African feminism. These are important concepts in developing a framework for the study of women in Africa and in the diaspora.

To some extent, elements of African feminism have a reality sui generis in the diaspora. Nevertheless, the cultural roots of African feminism have survived and become important in the ensuing development of the global division of labor and its concomitant unequal class, racial, and sexual manifestations. From a worldwide perspective, the oppression of the black woman is complex, structural, and sexual. For the majority of black women, liberation from sexual oppression has always been fused with liberation from other forms of oppression, such as racial and class oppression, as well as liberation from slavery, colonialism, neocolonialism, and imperialism. African feminism, therefore, has a practical aspect linked to social action and change.

In my introduction to *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*, I

concluded that the African woman was the original feminist. I also indicated that the continent of Africa as the birthplace of human life must also be the birthplace of human struggles. One can optimistically conclude, then, having examined the evolution and constitution of African feminism within a world perspective, that by virtue of its inclusive and humanistic character, the emergence of African feminism no doubt signals a major step in the intellectual and pragmatic struggle for societies devoid of class, caste, racial, and gender biases.

NOTES

This paper continues the discussions initiated in my introduction and overview to the pioneering anthology on the black woman in Africa, the United States, the Caribbean, and South America. Some of the ideas presented there have been repeated for emphasis. See Filomina Chioma Steady, ed., *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Cambridge: Schenkman Publishing Company, 1981).

1. Numerous studies have demonstrated this. A critique of the promotion of racism and sexism through research is Inez Reid, "Science, Politics and Race," *Signs* 2 (Winter 1975): 397-422.
2. Some of these ideas and principles have been adopted by the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD), of which I am a founding member. See "The Experience of the Association of African Women for Research and Development," *Development Dialogue*, 1982: 1-2, 101-13.
3. Steady, "The Black Woman Cross-Culturally: An Overview," in Steady, *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*.
4. References from oral and written histories, ethnographies, biographies, and African literature are too numerous to mention. For an understanding of the general philosophical tenets of African societies, see John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1970.)
5. See *Women in Food Production, Food Handling and Nutrition: With Special Emphasis on Africa* (New York: United Nations, Protein Advisory Group, 1977).
6. A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and D. Forde, eds., *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage* (London: Oxford University Press, 1950).
7. See, for example, Harriet Sibisi, "The positions of a Zulu married woman in relation to her ancestors and to her natal family" (Mimeographed paper, 1975).
8. See, for example, Jean Borgatti, "Songs of Ritual License from Midwestern Nigeria," *Alcheringa*, n.s. 2 (1976): 66-71.
9. Filomina C. Steady, "The Social Position of Women: Selected West

- African Societies" (Unpublished B. Litt. thesis, Oxford University, 1968).
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 23. See, for example, Samir Amin, *Neocolonialism in West Africa* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1976).
 24. Bernard Magubane, *The Political Economy of Race and Class in South Africa* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979).
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27. See Filomina Chioma Steady, "Urban Malnutrition in West Africa: A Consequence of Abnormal Urbanization and Underdevelopment," in *Towards a Political Economy of Urbanization in Developing Countries*, ed. Helen Safa (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982).
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29. Aminata Traore, "Agro-business and Female Employment in the Ivory Coast" (Paper presented at the AAWORD conference on *Women and Rural Development*, Algiers, September 1982).
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31. See, for example, Edith Clark, *My Mother Who Fathered Me* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1957); Fred Strodbeck, "The Poverty-Dependency Syndrome of the ADC Female-Based Negro Family," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry* 34 (March 1964): 216-17; and Bilby and Steady, "Black Women and Survival," in Steady, *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally*.
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The "Status of Women" in Indigenous African Societies

Niara Sudarkasa

INTRODUCTION

Long before the women's movement ushered in an era of renewed concern with the "status of women" in various societies and cultures, a number of writers had addressed the question of the "status of women" in various African societies.¹ Some writers characterized women in African societies as "jural minors" for most of their lives, falling under the guardianship first of their fathers and then their husbands. Other writers stressed the independence of African women, noting their control over their own lives and resources.

From my own readings on Africa and my research among the Yoruba in Nigeria and other parts of West Africa, it appears that except for the highly Islamized societies in Sub-Saharan Africa, in this part of the world more than any other, in precolonial times women were conspicuous in high places. They were queen-mothers; queen-sisters; princesses; chiefs; and holders of other offices in towns and villages; occasional warriors; and, in one well known case, that of the Lovedu, the supreme monarch. Furthermore, it was almost invariably the case that African women were conspicuous in the economic life of their societies, being involved in farming, trade, or craft production.

The purviews of female and male in African societies were often described as separate and complementary.² Yet, whenever most writers compared the lot of women and men in Africa, they ascribed to men a better situation, a higher status. Women were depicted as saddled with home and domesticity; men were