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STRUCTURAL CHANGES AND THE ROLE OF WOMEN, WITH SPECIAL
REGARD TO EFFECTS OF URBANIZATION AND MIGRATION

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Structural Changes and the Role of Women, with Special
Regard to Effects of Urbanization and Migration

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During the last International Seminar for Women in Berlin in 1967, two statements were made by the delegates from Upper Volta and Senegal which we should keep in mind during our present discussions: "We have to preserve the African soul," and "We do want modern women, but first of all they have to be Africans." These statements convey the basic truth that every country has its own historical, cultural, and economic development. Consequently, neither material, intellectual nor mental development can be indoctrinated from outside. Internal or endogene growth is required. Development has to grow in an organic way, it has to be born, supported and desired by all Africans.

Mobilization for Development

The reactions to this process of development vary considerably according to region and social strata: The disparities between the wealthy and the poor, between towns and villages, between the university cities and the high illiteracy rate in the rural areas manifest the wide gap between highly developed and underdeveloped societies within one and the same country.

Therefore, all of us assembled here should realize that we don't speak and work on behalf of ourselves. The majority of the African populations do not yet participate to the full extent in nor are they benefitting from development. Yet hardly any group is so backward as not to realize more or less this contrast. They all are seized by a certain dissatisfaction with the present situation. The youngsters in particular consider village life as dull and backward.

All countries have created development plans. However, no plan will be realized unless the total population is mobilized and prepared to accept the plan, to understand its necessity and to respond to public demands with activity and initiative. This change of mind and the mobilization for development, which is a long-lasting and time-consuming process, will be primarily achieved by Africans themselves. It is a foremost educational task. Therefore, African women, in particular, carry a high responsibility as mothers, as social workers or teachers, or in whatever profession they are active; only so can this process be fully successful.

Position of Women in Traditional Societies

The African Lawyer Olawale Elias recently defined the obligations and privileges within the family according to the African tribal law: "On fait partie intégrante de la famille; tout se passe par la famille; de ce fait, tous les droits sont conférés par la famille à l'individu en tant que membre passif de la famille." ¹⁾ The extended family system and the clan system principally dominate within the immobile society, headed by the chief of family, elected on the basis of authority and age. The extended family, which in general comprises the generations in ascending lines—in the case of polygamy the various wives and their children, represents a unit of consumption and production. The family members share the joint property. A Nigerian chief is reported to have made the statement: "I conceive that land belongs to a vast family of which many are dead, few are living, and countless members are unborn." ²⁾ In urban families mutual support or a joint share in the income of those who are wealthy is in general expected.

In the traditional societies the elders of the families have a strong influence on the contract of marriage, which under those circumstances is a contract between two families. The individual interests of the groom and the bride are formally recognized, yet they are subordinate to the interests of their families. The ascertainment of the marriage is done by material transactions in cash or kind.

The status of women in traditional African societies is remarkably strong, despite all the duties they have to fulfill. Apart from very conservative groups, there are groups of women in West Africa who enjoy extensive economic and social independence, not only in matrilineal societies. Women have their own realm, with obligations and recognition for cultivation of land, for the home and family, for rituals concerned with fertility. No one can fail to admire the energy and initiative of women traders in West Africa who most efficiently govern the trade of agricultural and consumer goods.

Those obligations emanating from customary law are at present changing. We have learned during the former Seminars that in nearly all African countries a new family law has been adopted. However, legal prescriptions change faster than social and sociological rules do, and the extended family and its principles are still valid both in rural and urban areas, as will be shown later.

This affects in particular the status and the position of women. In principle, all African constitutions recently promulgated concede equal rights and duties to men and women. The reality, however, deviates from the principle of equality due to biological, sociological and economic reasons, such as is the case in both the highly industrialized and industrializing countries.

In African countries the majority of women live in rural areas as members of rural societies, where they have to fulfill special tasks and duties, in general the heavy work. They are furthermore dependent on the authority of a man, be it the father, the brother, the uncle, or the husband. Add to this the high fertility rates emanating from religious taboos. With the introduction of modern hygienic and medical care, infant and child mortality declines. The number of children increases, which results in a high population increase. This again affects or burdens women.

Mobile Societies

The traditional institution of marriage is gradually being replaced, particularly among middle-class Africans, by the Western monogamous pattern; marriage changes towards a more personal relationship between husband and wife. This entails the change from a contract between families to a companionship between individuals, such as Peter Omari confirmed among Ghanaian students in 1960.³⁾

With the emancipation and adoption of Western patterns of life and behaviour, the African woman may be deprived of her traditional duties and her honoured place. This may occur particularly if she is living in a city or town far away from her respected place in village life. The transition from village life, where security is based on land, to the insecurity and hazards of a city life, means a profound change. Women are more affected than men are, since women usually are the more conservative elements in family and society. Family life is no longer primarily embedded in the rigid rules of kinship. The individualized nuclear family consists of only two generations, the parents and the children. The father is primarily responsible for earning the family's living. If he cannot earn enough or if the mother so desires, she may also contribute to the family income. Since the woman

enters independently into marriage, she is equally responsible with her husband for all aspects of married life, including the provision of mutual help and understanding.

In addition to her task as educator, the mother carries full responsibility for economic and practical decisions within the family. The woman in the nuclear family enjoys a much greater degree of independence and a much greater freedom of decision within the family than did the woman in the pre-industrial period. These newly-won personal rights bring with them a much greater degree of responsibility towards the modern small family, thus making it necessary for the young girl to fully prepare herself for the task through adequate education and training. Since, however, the modern small family is mainly founded on ties of love and mutual respect and no longer firmly rooted in rigid traditions, the marriage partners must be properly prepared for marriage and must work together to preserve their marriage. Thus the mother's duties are on the one hand enlarged and on the other more restricted, an ambivalence which imposes great demands on women. Therefore society should see to it that the necessary advisory institutions in the fields of education, preparation for marriage, and homemaking are made available to enable women to cope with their new tasks.

Urbanization and Migration

The fluctuation to the towns and cities has a great bearing on the trend towards the westernized nuclear family, with all its pros and cons, in Africa South of the Sahara. Urban areas have been in evidence for centuries.

Commercial and cultural centres like Timbukto and Kano, like the Yoruba towns in West Nigeria, the so-called grassland towns of the Ibos with local and regional trading centres, came into existence in medieval times prior to

any political contact with Western powers. They are genuine African towns just as are the East African harbour cities Mogadiscio, Mombassa, Dar-es-Salaam. A number of them later on assumed supra-regional functions on the initiative of the colonial powers.

The modern cities in general are colonial foundations serving as administrative and trading centres. Thus they were more oriented towards Europe than towards their hinterland. Therefore, the modern urbanization of Africa was started from the coasts. Important cities in the interior came only recently into being. The middle towns of the hinterland do not yet function as local promoters and do not attract the migrant labour, who preferably tend to seek the main cities. Thus an integrated economic, social and cultural development of the interior of the continent is seriously retarded.

This short survey of the urbanization process of Africa was required to corroborate the opinion that urbanization is an important precondition of economic development. In Europe, as in Africa, too many voices have been raised deploring urbanization as a main cause of social unrest and disintegration. A rapid urbanization certainly increases the tensions and frictions of adjustment in value systems different from pre-urban ways of life. However, this negative attitude does not pay due tribute to the positive aspects of urbanization as a means of mobilization for development.

Let me mention a few of them: The migratory movements from rural to urban centres mainly occur during the dry season when the labour force is lying idle. The migrants tend towards the cities or towards the commercial crops of the tropical rain forest areas to earn cash. Those seasonal migrations may turn out to last several years or eventually become permanent ones. In the majority,

men of the middle-age groups, among them more literates than illiterates, leave their home villages. 4) The agrarian structure of landed property and the traditional division of rural labour between men and women facilitates the seasonal migration. The close ties within the extended family, kinship, clan and tribe corroborates the wish of returning, even if only to die there.

The urban experience, the cash money and consumer goods brought back by the migrants certainly stimulate the rural and economic social life. On principle, the impulses and stimulations for the remote areas emanating from the personal contact with the cities may carry an even more considerable weight as compared with moral and social disturbances of the migratory labour. 5)

A further aspect deserves mention: The larger the cities, the more they comprise an ethnic diversity, thus mitigating ethnic and racial controversies. It is known that even at present a considerable number of Ibos are employed by the administration of Lagos.

Yet, the problems of the African cities result from the discrepancies between offer and demand of working places in administration, commerce and trade, and industrial production.

The insufficient economic development of Africa and the increasing population figures cause the financial weakness of cities. Urban institutions and facilities cannot keep up with the population increase. Reasonable city planning and city extension becomes impossible. Consequently the urban population frequently assumes the initiative. Contrary to any city planning squatter settlements are mushrooming, centres with a great many inherent social,

hygienic and political dangers. A number of empirical studies have stressed that the loss of traditional values and obligations of the African extended family, criminality of youth, prostitution, and mental diseases increase within the slums. ⁶⁾ However, a certain sceptical view seems to be justified, since a control research among the corresponding rural populations so far has not been undertaken.

The strong family ties indeed manifest themselves within the cities, even within the so-called slums, since the number of the dependents, for example, relying on one income increases with its amount. This corresponds to a redistribution of higher income in favour of the poorer members of the family. ⁷⁾ ⁸⁾ The intent of the urban African labour to return to the villages at the time of the harvest, in case of need, or in old age furthermore clearly indicate the strength of family ties.

The numerous voluntary groups and associations among the urban population with social, ethnic, cultural and financial purposes furthermore indicate the integration and acculturation of the urban migrants and of their adaptation to the values of the new economic and social life. ⁹⁾ The reports given by the representatives during the Seminars in Berlin on their numerous activities have convincingly shown how efficiently African women participate in the building of this new society.

Education of Women for new Responsibilities

African women stress the necessity that female juveniles receive an education in keeping with their qualifications and their aptitudes. In the first place the mothers are the educators of a people. Secondly, the women must be capable of intellectually understanding and comprehending their

husbands and their children. And thirdly, the mother must be enabled to make a fruitful contribution to society in that period of her life, usually beginning in the middle forties, when her children have left home and her responsibility as a mother has ended. This is all the more important for those women who have not married and for those mothers, who, for one reason or another, must support their children financially. No social security system can guarantee the absolute security of a family. Every mother must be capable of carrying the complete financial burden, if the need arises.

It is therefore evident that with the developing economy, education and training play an ever increasing role in the family and society. The material and intellectual achievements of a society are a reflection of the average level of education of the entire population, including women.

An African Concept of Development is Necessary

The question may arise whether or not the experience of the affluent industrial societies can be transferred to Africa. In my opinion the path of African women has to a certain extent been prescribed by the emancipation once achieved in Western countries. The urbanization and gradual industrialization, the rationalization of agriculture will impose similar demands on women in Africa as has been the case in the highly industrialized countries. And yet, as we have stressed in the beginning, this process will be based on African tradition, customs and religions, in order to arrive at an evolution and to avoid a revolution. Women who are more inclined to cling to traditions will be the promoters of a synthesis between the past, the present, and the future.

African women gathered here at this Regional Meeting have testified already during the Berlin Seminars know actively they are contributing and working for a better future of their respective countries. They all have stressed the necessity of a partnership between men and women in all spheres of life in order to achieve this better future for the generations to come.

It is our sincere hope that this Meeting may contribute to a closer cooperation and a better mutual understanding between our two continents and between all countries represented here in the next and distant future.

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