

GENDER IN SUB-SAHARA AFRICAN HISTORY

Overview Traditional African patterns involved a number of rather distinctive features in terms of gender and family relations, some of which arguably involved distinctive opportunities and protections for women. Western intrusions, from the slave trade to the imperialism of the later 19th and 20th century, disrupted many of these features, which is why some African feminists have particularly decried the Western influence. Major religious changes, including widespread conversions to Islam and to Christianity, have also complicated the picture. At the same time some developments during the past century, including new educational opportunities and the impact of global human rights efforts, have introduced some changes along what might be regarded as standard modern lines.

Traditional features Evidence of African patterns before at least the early modern period is hampered by lack of written evidence, though travelers accounts and oral histories fill in some of the gaps. Furthermore, regional variations, in the vast subcontinent, complicate generalization, though several common features stand out. First, Africans emphasized matrilineal relationships in defining the all-important kinship groups, placing women at the center of many family interactions. Motherhood was deeply honored. Other customs offered protection for women; for example, if a husband died and a brother was available, he was expected to marry the widow to help provide support. At the same time, polygyny was widespread, and since women in Africa did much of the field work, having numerous wives would allow larger landholdings (while supporting the wives in turn). Also in Africa, emphasis on a bride price required men to provide property (often cattle) as part of a marriage arrangement, in contrast to practices elsewhere that emphasized female dowries. The bride price provided the economic base for the new family, while attesting to the man's commitment to the woman. Women were often involved in market trading and sometimes wielded political power, as queens or queen mothers. In one Ashanti state there were 18 reigning queens between 1295 and 1740. Many customs survived the initial introduction of Islam in the postclassical period, in parts of West Africa and also the Swahili coast, resulting in greater independence for women and less restrictive dress than was true in the Middle East (a situation which shocked North African travelers to the region). However, particularly in East Africa, women's independence declined over time. Many East African women also formed part of the slave trade to the Middle East, where their skilled in marketing were often appreciated.

Western influence and imperialism The rise of the Atlantic slave trade from the 16th century onward had major impact on African family, quite apart from the seizure of some young women as slaves and the attendant loss of independence. Far more men were taken, resulting in major gender imbalance in much of West Africa which in turn led to the expansion of polygyny. Then the expansion of imperialism in the 19th century led to more extensive interactions with European officials and eager Christian missionaries. Europeans did not understand African family traditions, which often seemed contrary to what they saw as the proper authority of husbands. Colonial legislation often sought to limit women's market activities, in favor on concentration on motherhood. Missionaries, also, often urged women to be docile homemakers – as one put it, “purer wives and better mothers”. Colonial officials also broke up many informal local councils, in which women had maintained a role. At the same time, European-led ventures, such as mining, recruiting mainly male labor, leaving women to more traditional agricultural roles. At the same time, some young men, taking advantage of money wages, returned to villages to seek wives or companions, sometimes disrupting more traditional marriage arrangements. On the policy side, new colonial rules sought to limit polygyny (which had been a source of protection for some women) and also child marriage. Other laws aimed at restricting women's sexuality (sometimes support by African men eager to assert rights as fathers and husbands). On the other hand, missionaries and, by the 20th century, colonial governments expanded educational opportunities for some women, leading some toward jobs in nursing or teaching; a small number even entered the professions – like the first female lawyer in Nigeria in 1935. Some women's groups also sprang up at this point, seeking to advance women's interests in several directions.

Nationalism and independence Women participated actively in many nationalist movements toward the middle of the 20th century. Many male nationalists, however, did not see women's issues as a priority and sometimes even defended older traditions as part of the distinctive African heritage. Thus some leaders in East Africa even defended female circumcision because of its root in older regional culture – one described it as “mere bodily mutilation.” Some leaders also touted an aggressive masculinity, as an antidote to the decades of subservience that had unfolded under imperialism. On the whole, the early results of national independence, as it spread after the late 1950s, disappointed the women involved, as their issues were pushed aside. As an example: the constitution of the newly-independent Ivory Coast, in 1960, assured equal rights regardless of gender, but then a new family code in 1964 emphasized men as undisputed heads of household and limited widows' rights to inheritance. Husbands even gained control over their wives' earnings.

Later 20th-early 21st centuries By the 1970, human rights efforts by the United Nations highlighted women's issues – this included a major conference in Nairobi – while local women's groups became more active. Countries like the Ivory Coast began to set up government ministries to deal with women's concerns, while revising laws in order to protect women's rights, and earnings, in the family. African courts began to cite international law in rulings favoring women's property ownership. Thus a court in Botswana asserted that “now more than ever before, the whole world has realized that discrimination on the grounds of sex...can no longer be permitted or even tolerated.” The Organization of African Unity, in 1981, urged that “the state shall ensure the elimination of every discrimination against women”. At the same time, in most countries, young women gained greater access to education (though not yet at rates equal to men's). While men continued to have greater access to urban jobs, still leaving some women back in the villages, disparities eased somewhat. In Liberia a woman even became President, a first in modern African history. Opposition to older practices like female circumcision grew as well, though traditions retained a strong hold. Important issues remained. African birth rates, though falling, continued to be quite high, a major factor in women's lives. The AIDs epidemic, rampant in southern Africa, was exacerbated by male insistence on having unprotected sex. On another front, African courts sometimes backpedaled, with rulings in favor of male property control on grounds of African tradition. Women were often disproportionately affected by violence, including sexual violence, in strife-torn regions like Rwanda, in the 1990s, or Ethiopia and Sudan in the 21st century. African feminist organizations continued to develop in many countries however. Some sought a combination of new rights but also a “doctrine of cultural revival” that would protect women against the excessive individualism of Western feminism and restore the older virtue of African community.

Study questions

- 1, What were the most distinctive features of African family traditions, in terms of gender relations?
2. In what ways did Western intrusions, from the 16th century onward, worsen women's conditions?
3. How did new human rights standards influence gender relations in Africa, but what limitations have continued?

Further reading

Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: gender and sex in an African society* (London: Zed Books, 1987).

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Aili Mari Tripp, Isabel Casimoro, Joy Kewsiga and Alice Mangwa, *African Women's Movements: transforming political landscapes* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).