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Women Researchers in Africa

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
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Dear Peter,

In October, en route to Africa, I stopped in Europe to talk with some researchers about their work on development, women, and forestry. One of my stops was in Geneva, where I met with women from two organizations to discuss their research on women and development issues, as well as their knowledge of women researchers and women's organizations in Africa.

One of the organizations that I visited in Geneva was ISIS, a women's international information and communication service, named after the Egyptian goddess Isis. ISIS is a feminist collective, with a second office in Rome. Both offices have a documentation and resource center, with records on women's groups and contacts worldwide. They publish periodic bulletins in English and Spanish on different topics, such as "women, land, and food production," "tourism and prostitution," or "motherhood," and occasional books, such as their recent Women in Development: A Resource Guide for Organization and Action. They are also involved in training sessions and cross-cultural exchanges for Third World women.

The ISIS staff member with whom I spoke was very helpful in explaining how their organization and documentation centers work. I spent a few hours there, looking at materials, and going through their list of contacts for Africa. Africa is the region of the world for which ISIS has the fewest names. Whether this is because there are fewer formal women's groups, women researchers, and active feminists in Africa, or whether the African women and ISIS don't yet know about each other, is unclear. But I took down what names exist, in hopes that I could find some of these organizations and individuals in Africa.

ISIS had recently received an invitation to the upcoming meeting of the Association of African Women for Research and Development(AAWORD), to be held in Dakar, Senegal, December 5-9, 1983. The meeting of women researchers from all over Africa seemed like an important opportunity for me to meet some colleagues, so I decided that I would attend the conference.

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The AAWORD conference was composed of a research seminar and a business meeting of the AAWORD members. The seminar was organized around the theme of "Research on African Women -- What Types of Methodologies ?" The conference was attended by over forty-five AAWORD members, as well as at least fifteen observers.

The conference gave African women researchers a chance to spend a week together, sharing their experiences, debating their differing perspectives, and deepening their ties with one another. The seminar brought together an interesting mixture of women -- northern African and sub-Saharan African, francophone and anglophone, Marxist and non-Marxist. Although women from northern Africa and Senegal were most numerous, there were women from most parts of Africa.

These women form an elite group, as most have done graduate work and many hold doctorates. All are fluent in either English or French, often both, as well as their native languages. Some hold government or teaching positions in their own countries, others struggle to do their research without any government support or funding, others have research grants from international organizations, and still others work or study in Europe and the United States. The group is composed primarily of social scientists -- sociologists, anthropologists, demographers, historians, communication specialists -- although some researchers from other disciplines, such as nutrition, belong.

Although AAWORD membership is only open to African women researchers, non-members were welcomed to attend the seminar sessions as observers. The observers were primarily researchers, development planners, or activists whose work focuses on women and development issues, and whom had been specifically invited to attend the conference. Most were from Europe, with a few from the United States, one from Trinidad, and one from Colombia. A few African researchers who are not AAWORD members also attended as observers. While not excluded as observers, few men attended the conference.

The Association of African Women in Research and Development was born in Lusaka, Zambia, in 1976 with 15 members. A year later its first major research conference was held in Dakar, on the subject of "The Decolonialization of Research." At that conference 47 AAWORD members strongly recommended that social science research in Africa be conducted by trained African researchers, familiar with the languages and cultures being studied. Such research should be based on African realities, rather than inappropriate Western theories, models, or research techniques. The research results should be used to help African development, rather than just exported to the West (as often happens with foreigners carrying out research to fulfill Ph.D. dissertation requirements). The women researchers also called for more research on women, all too often overlooked in conventional studies and development planning. Since 1977, AAWORD has held other workshops and seminars, and presented its perspectives at numerous international meetings.

The most recent seminar was a continuation of the earlier debate. Having accepted the premise that African women should be researching the situation of African women today, how to undertake the endeavor? As noted by many speakers, the creation of new approaches is more difficult than the critique of old ones. In examining "what types of methodologies" could be employed to study African women, researchers discussed the adequacy of various social science concepts, quantitative, qualitative, and historical sources of data, problems of analysis and interpretation, and the use of results. They also debated whether there are unique "African feminist methodologies".

These issues were discussed by various researchers in formal paper presentations, and debated by the seminar participants in discussion sessions as well as two working group meetings. The participants and observers themselves decided whether to join the working group on "rural development" or that on "urban development". As interesting as the formal presentations were, the discussion and debate were far more provocative.

Three of the opening day's speakers were critical of the "integration of women into development" approach often adopted by Western planners. Zenebeworke Tadesse, the current AAWORD secretary, suggested that to engage social change, researchers must construct alternative structures of the world, rather than attempting to integrate women into existing patterns. Marie-Angélique Savané, the current AAWORD president, criticized the concept of "women in development" as just a "feminization of the theory of modernization theory" (which postulates that social processes of development follow universal patterns of modernization). The simplicity of modernization theory accounts for the failure of development projects regarding women. Filomena Steady suggested that much of the research on Africa and African women has been designed for their domination and exploitation, rather than for positive social change. The "integration of women into development" approach involves an Europeanization of African women, with a consequent loss in their status.

These researchers suggested various alternative strategies. Tadesse proposed that data on women must be collected in such a way that it will also engage social change. Savané argued that researchers must also examine the exchange of resources and the performance of activities, such as the fetching of water and firewood, within households on the basis of age and sex. Steady suggested that for research to be committed to social change, it must look at past, present, and future, link analysis of small-scale("micro") and large-scale("macro") social structures, and focus on working with and analyzing social groups rather than individuals.

Participants also discussed how the use of other Western social science concepts and theoretical assumptions may be very problematic in African cultures. Certain concepts, such as "household head," "work," or "fertility," have assumptions of Western family structure, economics, and the division of labor

built into them and thus, as conventionally defined, are inappropriate for African realities. (These terms have also come under heavy criticism from Western feminist researchers.) Even terms which seem relatively unproblematic in Western society, such as "age" or "woman," may be difficult to measure in Africa. Although many African societies have highly accurate traditional means of measuring time, some individuals may not know their own age. Furthermore, cultural factors modify the interpretation of age: although conventional census definitions consider those under the age of sixteen to be children, a married African woman of fourteen behaves as an adult, fulfilling adult roles, and thus cannot be considered as a "non-economically active child".

The definition of womanhood may vary greatly among different cultural groups in even the same country. One Tanzanian researcher, Betty Mlingi, recounted how some Tanzanian groups consider that a girl becomes a woman when she marries, others when she has a child, and still others only upon the birth of her first male child. This definitional difference raises problems for the design of studies comparable across a national population.

The cultural preference in many areas for male children can lead to serious undercounting of the population. When an adult is interviewed about the number of children in the household and only responds about the number of boys, a researcher can come up with a figure of zero children for a household with eight girls.

Some researchers suggested that it may be important to analyze why misinformation on women's lives exists. The non-reporting of girl children occurs because of the social pressure on people to have boys. If a couple already has two or three boys, they may be advised not to have any more children: however, if a couple has eight girls, they may be encouraged to keep trying for a boy.

Similarly, the reluctance of governments to change definitions of "work" to more fully include women's activities may be due to political and economic considerations. For example, a country's Gross National Product (GNP) is calculated only from paid work. GNP measures are used to determine eligibility for international aid. Consequently, if the domestic and informal sector activities of women were to be included, a country's GNP would rise. Even if all countries were to agree to such definitional changes, the relative increases might vary from country to country, and thus change a country's relative standing in terms of need aid.

Several researchers noted that the inherent biases in censuses and other quantitative data bases make it difficult to design representative samples. It is difficult to decide how to sample women from different social classes or strata, when income measures for household heads (usually assumed to be men) are such poor indicators of women's standards of living or their potential social power.

The AAWORD seminar considered ways in which various qualitative research methodologies could be employed, particularly in

defining research problems and questions, understanding how African women themselves may understand their lives and the contradictions with which they must live. This approach was particularly stressed for working with rural women, often "illiterate"(as conventionally defined) and thus unable to fill out researchers' written questionnaires. So researchers must seek other means to examine women's knowledge and women's lives, such as working with oral histories, analyzing the contents of women's songs, examining the meaning of women's use of magic, having groups of women act out their perceptions of situations in dramas, or living and working with rural women, observing their daily lives. The latter, although recognized as very important, is seldom done: African researchers, like intellectuals throughout the world, are typically city dwellers, lacking daily intimate contact with poor rural women.

Ayesha Iman, a researcher in Nigeria, gave an illustration of how she had used drama to evaluate the effectiveness of a development project. She was evaluating a church training project and found it difficult to get women to express any criticisms of the project, due to their loyalty to the church. So then she asked the group to do a drama, which she filmed and analyzed, of how the project could be improved. In this way she was able to get the group to define what was important, what they thought should be in the film, and what they saw as the problem areas in the project.

Christine Obbo provoked a great deal of debate with her observations on agricultural work in Uganda. She argued that if one accepted the common observations that women perform agricultural work more slowly than men, could this be due to differences in the content of their work? Obbo presented qualitative information on the agricultural work of women and men in Uganda and noted that the women are much more meticulous and thorough in their hoeing to control weeds. Since the women are more thorough, they weed more slowly than the men, but consequently have to do repeat weedings less frequently than the men. Although weeds are a problem for both subsistence and cash crops, women must take particular care with weeds to grow certain food crops such as spinach.

I found Obbo's presentation particularly interesting, as I had never before considered that women might have to deal with "more noxious weed problems" (or other more difficult resource management problems) than those which confront the men. Many of the AAWORD participants were quite upset, however, with Obbo's acceptance -- even for analytical consideration -- of statements that women work more slowly than men or are less strong. Several insisted that countless studies have shown that women often do work requiring more strength and endurance than that done by men, and that women work harder and longer than men.

Questions were raised with the presentation of papers using various methods of historical research. When women are absent from conventional history, it can be quite challenging to find data on them. Sometimes data exists, but has been overlooked, as in historical archives. Other sources of data can be tapped, such as diaries.

An example of the use of diaries for historical analysis was presented by Soha Kader. She had examined the diary of a secluded, middle-class Egyptian woman written at the turn of the century. She suggested that such women could not be considered feminists , but seemed rather "content" and perhaps even "happy" with their lives. This presentation touched off a heated discussion as to whether such women could be considered content with their lives if they were unaware of alternatives, living almost entirely within the confines of their own homes, and whether it was possible to measure "happiness".

In the workshops and discussions, the participants debated how data could be analyzed to arrive at explanations, rather than merely descriptions, of women's lives, and how the results should be used. Several speakers stressed the need to conduct research with, rather than on, African women, and to go back to them to share and discuss the results. Meaningful "talks" with ten women -- in which the researcher would share her own life experiences with the women with whom she was working, as well as trying to understand their lives -- was suggested to be of greater value than more superficial questionnaires to a larger sample of women.

Many of the African researchers argued that research should not be for its own sake, but for action -- to improve the lives of women. Suggestions were made on how this action-oriented perspective should influence the selection of research problems, as well as steps taken once the research is concluded. For example, a researcher could design "intervention packages" of strategies that women could employ to better their situations, and suggest these to women along with discussing the research results.

The AAWORD members have varying opinions as to the degree to which their research approaches are uniquely African ones, and whether the work of African women researchers can be described as feminist . Some believe that their work constitutes a break from Western science, whereas others believe it is part of a larger, ongoing critique of dominant research paradigms. In terms of feminism , many participants feel that their research differs significantly from that of Western feminists. Many African women are, for example, not as preoccupied as some Western women with the problem of "who does the housework", although they are concerned that the value of such work be recognized. However, if feminism is believed to be the struggle of women against oppression, then it is a universal objective of both Western and Third World women researchers regardless of the situational differences in specific problems addressed. Another researcher reminded us that women researchers should not limit themselves to feminist approaches, as the causes of women's oppression are not limited to reasons of male dominance.

Some of these latter issues were also raised in the addresses by two Senegalese ministers which opened and closed the conference. The first, Moussa Balla Daffé, the Minister of Scientific and

Technological Research, stated that research on African women constitutes a fundamental question at the juncture of the decolonialization of research. He also remarked that the search for new research methodologies is important for indigenous and self-confident African development. Maimouna Kane, the Minister of Social and Women's Affairs, suggested that AAWORD had been formed as an act of faith in the future of African women. She said that government policy makers are in need of research on women. But she also cautionned the researchers that too often research on women has been done in marginal areas, overlooking important factors which must be addressed in development planning. The challenge, thus, is to translate research models into reality.

Some of the most interesting issues at the conference were ones that were not formally raised. A very important factor is the political situation within which an African researcher works, and the type of support which she may have for her research. Many of these women have difficulty in obtaining research funding from their own governments. Some women talked privately about their problems in conducting research that was critical of government policy: some, in fact, cannot currently work in their own countries because of the political situation. Research may also be difficult if the government places a low priority on it. A researcher from Cape Verde gave an illustration of her own difficulties in conducting historical research. When independance was achieved in Cape Verde, all the old colonial archives were moved so that the building housing them could be put to another use. Consequently she was obliged to travel to Portugal, the former colonial power, to get access to copies of the records.

AAWORD seems to be a good forum for African researchers to interact, and for influencing research and policy decisions. The organization has been successful in obtaining international funding for its own activities: this conference, for example, received funding from the Swedish government, the Ford Foundation, and UNESCO. Furthermore, as result of the activities of AAWORD and other groups of Third World researchers, many international organizations now look harder to find Third World researchers whom they can fund to work on development research than they did formerly.

Some of the Western observers noted that AAWORD is interacting more with Western researchers now than when the group was originally founded. There seems to be a mutual learning process at work: some Western researchers have become aware of how past research practices have been exploitative and have sought to undertake more ethical research, while African researchers have acknowledged that some Western researchers are sympathetic to their aims and have done useful and sensitive research, which has benefited their host countries.

The AAWORD conference was quite informative for me, in providing an overview of current research of African women. I was quite encouraged that several of these researchers were stressing the importance of researching the daily activities of women, such as their participation in agricultural tasks or their fetching of firewood and water.

Although none of the AAWORD members are conducting research on women's involvement in firewood or other forest resource use, I did meet two other researchers in Dakar whose work touches on this topic. One was Jill Posner, whose study of street foods suggests some of the complexities of interactions between cuisine and firewood consumption. The other, Fatou Sou, has been researching women and energy issues in Senegal and the Gambia.

Jill Posner's study is one of a series of case studies on street foods being undertaken by the Equity Policy Center(EPOC). The Equity Policy Center is a Washington, D.C. based organization established by Irene Tinker to conduct policy-oriented research on development issues of particular interest to women. EPOC had chosen to study street foods, i.e., foods sold and often consumed on the streets in urban areas, because they constitute a significant and growing service sector in Third World cities, important both as a source of employment and a source of nutrition.

Posner is an American researcher who had previously worked in West Africa as a Peace Corps volunteer and conducting research on local markets. Her case study examined street foods in Ziguinchor, the regional capital of the Casmances in southwestern Senegal. She undertook surveys of those who cooked and sold a variety of street foods, as well as surveys of consumers. Posner found that two-thirds of the street food vendors were women, and that women and men vendors specialized in selling different food types. The men were more likely to sell foods such as meat brochettes(shish kebobs), which require more initial capital investment, but also yield higher profits than the foods, such as porridge or fruit, sold by the women.

While this was not explicitly studied, the rise of street foods with urban growth is probably altering the consumption patterns of forest products. First, the use of firewood to cook street foods may shift previous patterns. There may be some economies of scale in large-quantity cooking as opposed to separate household cooking. The forms of fuel used may also represent changed patterns: for example, Posner found that the men selling brochettes in Ziguinchor make their own charcoal. Second, the use of other forest products as ingredients for street foods may be worth examining.

I had learned of Fatou Sou's research on women and energy when I was in Geneva, and had met with Elizabeth Cecelski. Cecelski is managing a project for the International Labour Office (ILO) of the United Nations on women's work, energy, and nutrition. She currently has researchers in four countries looking at how women's work activities and family nutrition are affected by their need to spend time searching for and transporting home firewood and other locally-available fuels. Two of the case studies are being conducted in Africa, in Ghana and Mozambique. The final reports for this project should be done within a year.

Cecelski had recommended that I should try to meet Fatou Sou when I got to Dakar, as she is working on a related women and energy study for ILO. After the AAWORD conference was over, I

went to the Institut Fondamental de l'Afrique Noire(IFAN), where Sou works as a sociologist, to talk with her about her work. Sou has worked on a number of studies regarding women and energy. In 1982, for example, she did a survey of energy consumption in the Gambia. Since women are responsible for managing household energy consumption in the Gambia, her survey was only addressed to women. She told me, however, that the predominant involvement of women in this sector did not seem to be of great interest to Gambian policy makers.

Currently Sou is undertaking a study, funded by ILO, to assess how various energy projects in Senegal have affected women. She has examined not only reforestation projects designed to provide firewood, but also cookstove, windmill, and thermodynamic projects. One of the reforestation projects, an industrial plantation designed to grow firewood for charcoal, had focused on replacing the decimated natural forest with fast-growing exotic trees, i.e., trees not native to that area. The project had been detrimental to women's work opportunities in two ways. First, it had overlooked women's needs for indigenous tree species, such as baobab. In the past, local women had gathered numerous resources from these trees for food and medicine, either for their own use, or to cook and sell in the local markets as an important source of employment. Now women must go further in search of such resources. Second, the project had only employed young men as workers in the tree nurseries and for planting tree seedlings. No work had been offered to local women.

My recent trip to Dakar, as well as my earlier stop in Geneva, provided me with a good overview of how women researchers in Africa and their Western colleagues are working to uncover the reality of women's lives. These efforts benefit from the sharing of knowledge among researchers, policy makers, and urban and rural women. The existence of women's networks, whether formal or informal, the holding of conferences, the talks of a researcher with the women with whom she conducts research, are all important means of striving towards new visions of the world, new social alternatives which will improve the lives of women, children, and men, and constitute true social development. The challenges are great, but I believe that women researchers in Africa have a good start on the task.

Sincerely,

Paula J. Williams

Paula J. Williams
Forest and Society Fellow

Received in Hanover 1/25/84