

Imported ideas on gender don't work, a new study shows, so the challenge now is...

Anchoring gender issues in African realities

by Senorina Wendoh

In the last two *Haramata* editions, Adam Thiam and Mariame Dem offered insightful discussions on women's advancement and the need for vigilance in ensuring that 'African women's participation and leadership' is not hijacked. Both writers concur that while strides have been made, we still have a long way to go to be treated, in Dem's words, 'as full members of the human race'.

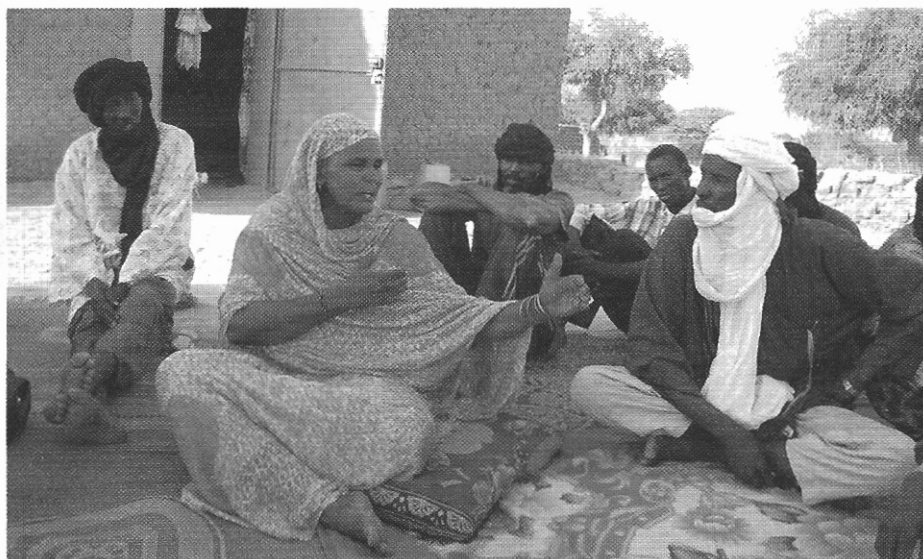
Even as we count the gains we have made, women still suffer oppression and violence, and a growing number of African feminist thinkers signal the need for continued interrogation of gender inequity.¹

Research conducted by the Transform Network² found that some of the obstacles to gender equity lie in the contested language of gender and its concepts, which are evidently seen as alien to African realities but also as 'something favouring women at the expense of men'. The research showed that these challenges lie partly in gender ideas and frameworks that are fashioned elsewhere, in different contexts, transported to Africa and then regurgitated in many African NGOs and communities. These concepts are viewed as alien and resisted – because they have not been developed in collaboration with those

who implement them. That some of these concepts and frameworks come bound up in aid packages – ('to secure donor funding we have to include a gender component in our proposal') – causes conflict in those charged with implementing them.

We found gender messages problematic – for example, 'gender equals women wanting to take power from men', 'gender equals 50-50', 'what men can do, women can do' and so on. These misconceptions were propagated in the early days through TV captions, local government workers and 'technical experts', and they led to resistance, with many men viewing them as threatening to traditional power bases. And apart from the men, many poor and vulnerable women, bound by strict social norms, dependent on their husband's family, were fearful that 'becoming empowered' would lead to their expulsion from safe extended families.

Beneath the success record of women's advancement, the Transform research found that in some areas, grassroots women's positions were still very dependent on the good-will of the extended family. One woman told of how she had to buy back land from her husband who was selling it, so that they



Marie Moulmar

Gender means men and women working together. Halimatou Sotbar, leader of a women's group in Menaka, Mali talks to the men in Inagar village

could still have a place to stay. How, one might ask, can this happen, when there are laws to protect women in matters to do with land? Could it be, perhaps, that approaches to gender equity do not cover the complex realities, social norms and fabrics faced by women and men on the ground? Even after reclaiming the land, the woman in question would still have to live among the people – likely her husband's relatives. So how to address the legislation on behalf of women on the one hand, and to provide the family-social networks that they all need? The stories of these women abound in many of our communities.

Grandes Dames or Big Men of Development?

Returning to Thiam's graphic representation of the 'pitfalls and progress' in women's advance, the Transform research team encountered

many (predominantly men, although not exclusively) who dismissed efforts by educated African women as self-centred and lacking in empathy for poor women. These generalisations stereotype women and do not help the case for their empowerment.

So let us challenge the negative traits represented by the '*grand dames*' and '*big men*' of development, but let us lend our support to transforming women's lives through supporting rather than belittling women's leadership.

To address these challenges, we need to begin by fashioning a definition of gender that draws from our varied local realities, then foster a sense of ownership through participation across the board. 'The solutions to our problems,' asserts Wangari Maathai, 'lie within us'. In adding to this discussion, one might ask what in fact is 'gender'? How is it viewed in Africa by Africans? Why is there so much resistance to 'gender'? In some