

# **GENDER INEQUALITY AND WOMEN'S RIGHTS IN THE GREAT LAKES: CAN CULTURE CONTRIBUTE TO WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT?**

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## **Introduction**

The Great Lakes region of Africa is faced by numerous problems ranging from military conflict and political instability to poverty, economic uncertainty, social upheavals and tensions, disease and gender inequality. These problems exist within a context of global advances in science and technology. Although some of these challenges are a consequence of globalization and unequal trade relations, colonial subjugation and ethnicity, others may be blamed on culture. While recognizing that, indeed, there are numerous cultural practices that require immediate eradication it is vital to appreciate that there are still many others that are useful, either potentially or in reality.

But what do we mean by culture? Culture may be viewed as the total sum of a people's way of life. It includes norms and values of a society: their religion, politics, economics, technology, food habits, medicine, rules of marriage, the performing arts, law and so on. For Geertz (1973:44-5) culture is "a set of control mechanisms – plans, recipes, rules, instruments (what computer engineers call "programs") – for governing of behaviour." According to him, this view of culture "begins with the assumption that human thought is basically both social and public – that its natural habitat is the house yard, the market place, and the town square." Geertz's interpretation of culture has the requisite implications of power and control mechanisms embedded in culture, which allow for the exploration of gender inequality and inequity.

In his discussion of culture, Edward Said (1994) identifies two meanings of culture. First, it refers to the many practices like the arts, communication, and representation which have relative autonomy from the economic, social, and political domains. These human expressions have an aesthetic dimension embedded in art and seek to cause pleasure and entertainment. Second, culture includes a community's reservoir of what defines them as a people which in most cases represents the best that has been known and thought. Through culture we are able to see society in its strengths and weaknesses and to see ourselves. Culture, viewed as such, becomes a space for engagement by various interests and forces. The danger with the uncritical reading of this notion of culture is that it may entail a valorization of one's culture and an assumption that it is not answerable to views from the rest of the world. Thus the dehumanizing aspects of culture could easily be lost in this blind endorsement of one's culture. Equally, viewed from the 'outside', a people's culture could be rebuked in totality, without due regard to its positive attributes. Thus it is vital to recognize certain universal values, informed by advances in human thought and knowledge, and to respect the particularities of communities.

Culture is an important capability that people bring into development. It influences development through its various forms of expression; attitudes and behavior related to work, reward and exchange; traditions of public discussion and participation; social support and association; cultural sites of heritage and memory; and influences on values and morals. In this paper, we address the issue of gender inequalities by looking at ways in which the cultural repertoire in the Great Lakes region can contribute to women's empowerment.

## **Gender inequalities**

Gender is a social construct which asserts that the expectations, capabilities and responsibilities of men and women are not always biologically determined. The gender roles assigned to men and women are significantly defined – structurally and culturally – in ways which create, reinforce, and perpetuate relationships of male dominance and female subordination. Through the process of socialization within the family, in educational institutions and other social spheres, boys and girls are conditioned to behave in certain ways and to play different roles in society. They are encouraged to conform to established cultural norms by being rewarded or punished for their behavior. At times, the places women occupy in society are essentialized through claims of innate predispositions. This conditioning and stereotyping could easily have the effect of questioning the capability of girls and women to perform certain tasks. Repeated regularly, it may solidify and become difficult to uproot from the mental frames of people.

But it is not just through socialization that inequalities are planted. Glaring gaps in policy, legal frameworks and investment opportunities make it difficult for women to perform to their full potential in social, economic and political spheres. For example, government policies and practices may view the *jua kali* (informal sector) and subsistence farming, dominated by women, as not requiring as much support as the foreign-exchange earning and export-oriented economic activities associated with men. The lack of support leads to poor performance and sustainability. But a closer look at sub-Saharan Africa shows that the survival of many countries depends heavily on activities associated with women in the *jua kali* sector. Furthermore, there are laws that deny women access to land ownership and opportunities to invest freely. These laws function as a handicap to women's economic capabilities and perpetuate a culture of dependence. Yet the economic independence of women is a major stage in bridging inequalities, preventing violence and fostering self esteem and well-being. Economically independent women are more likely to assert and demand their rights whenever they are violated. They are also likely to mentor girls and function as their role models.

In order to see the inequalities clearly one would need to scan various domains of life and to question them vis-à-vis roles accorded to women. Gender inequality manifests itself in a number of spheres within the family, labor market, politico-judicial structures and in cultural-ideological productions, for example in the mass media. Values, norms, and practices enshrined in domains of social interaction may contribute to fostering inequalities, reinforce gender related power differentials or increase violence against women. For instance, the cultural practice of son preference may contribute to denial of girls' access to education and curtail their opportunities in life. It may lead to early marriage and the onset of childbearing. In addition, perceptions that politics and

economics are principally the preserve of males may lead to disparities in political, economic and social participation, decision-making and leadership. In spite of these deprivations, it is important to recognize that gender equality and women's empowerment are an integral part of national development, peace building and conflict-resolution. They are at the center of humanizing the world. Whereas interventions to redress these inequalities could be political and economic, others may be cultural. A closer look at the cultures of this region may show practices that have the potential of contributing in bridging the inequalities, as we shall show presently.

### **The political domain**

The empowerment of women has long been a goal of development work and it results from the respect of women's rights and also because women's political participation, their education, socio-economic status, legal rights (for example, related to land inheritance), health and welfare are intricately linked to the survival of children and an improvement in the human condition. Equality is key to the formation of a democratic society which aspires to social justice and human rights. It is achieved by addressing imbalances in families, communities and nations. Thus action is required in political, economic, social and cultural spheres to ensure that women are not subjected to discrimination.

International conferences of the last decade such as the 1993 conference on Human Rights, the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, and the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women, established that women's rights are human rights and that gender equality is key to national development, the institutionalization of democracy and good governance. Organizations, communities and governments were required to integrate women's empowerment in their activities and to eliminate or modify practices that are discriminatory of women and that curtail their pursuit of rights and capabilities.

The Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) stipulates the urgency of eliminating stereotypes, customs, and norms that give rise to the many legal, political and economic constraints on women. Article I of CEDAW defines discrimination as "any distinction, exclusion, or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, human rights, and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field." Discriminations contribute to the perpetuation of gender inequalities. For instance, when women are not adequately represented in decision-making levels, their rights and freedoms may be violated. Notice that equality relates to the dignity, rights, opportunities and worth of men and women to participate in different spheres of life (Kameri-Mbote, 2002). Empowerment demands political participation, civil rights and reproductive rights for all women and a review of constitution, laws, policies that inhibit equality would be necessary. Equally, an enactment of women friendly statutes and policies would be a prerequisite for gender equality.

On the subject of the rights of women in Africa, the Protocol to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights states in Article 17 that "Women shall have the

right to live in a positive cultural context and to participate at all levels in the determination of cultural policies.” This is in addition to Article 2 of the African Charter on Human and Peoples’ Rights which “enshrines the principles of non-discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnic group, color, sex, language, religion, political or any other opinion, national and social origin, fortune, birth or other status.” Articles 60 and 61 of the above Charter also recognize the “regional and international human rights instruments and African practices consistent with international norms on human and peoples’ rights...” Despite the declaration and recognition of these regional and international rights, women in Africa continue to face inequality and inequity in many spheres of their societies.

Early ethnographic and anthropological accounts, travelogues, monographs, and books are an important source for the extrapolation of positive aspects of culture in politics. In certain cultures, women held prominent or dominant positions, especially those that were matrilineal. For instance, in the ancient Kingdom of Congo there were female regents and rulers such as Donna Veronica and Donna Susanne di Nobrena (Loth 1987:31). It has been noted that matrilineal societies were not based on subordination but rather on cooperation, harmonious coexistence and development. Research shows that where matrilineality persisted, agriculture predominated; whereas animal husbandry predominated in patrilineal societies. Martin, Kay, and Voorhies (1975: 22-39) point out that descent and residence rules oriented to the maternal line are adaptive in favorable environment where conquest has not subjugated peoples. On the other hand, descent and residence rules oriented to the paternal line are adaptive where resources are scarce or where populations have been subjugated by “patrilineal invaders.” According to these authors, “matrilineal structures are accommodating and integrative” while “patrilineal ones are acquisitive and internally divisive.” Therefore, whereas patrilineal descent is associated with sexual inequality, matrilineal descent is associated with sexual equality. Sanday (1981:177), concurring with the above view, notes that in her research, 52% of the matrilineal societies, as compared to 19% of the patrilineal societies, are sexually equal. Further, 50% of the matrilocal societies, as compared to 20% of the strictly patrilocal ones, are sexually equal.

Among the Luba of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), matrilineal systems existed and women were exalted. The Lunda in Congo had a bi-linear system of succession that is both matrilineal and patrilineal. The Lunda people had a strong centrally controlled political hierarchy. The Banyankole of Uganda recognized sisters and mothers as important people, which suggests that originally they had matrilineal succession. Later on, they assumed the patrilineal system. Because of the importance of Princesses among the Baganda, Banyoro, Toro and Banyankole, it is likely that the groups were initially matrilineal. According to Loth (1987:32) “the significant reason why matrilinearity continued to exert an influence on the position of women for a long time was the absolute predominance of the rural population. Agriculture constitutes the economic basis for most people, either crop-growing or animal husbandry or both together ...supplemented by hunting, gathering and fishing.”

There are several examples of matrilineal societies where women ruled or had leadership roles in governance structures. Women were regents, co-regents, city founders, army commanders, officers and soldiers, and bodyguards. For example, in West Africa in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Queen Amina ruled the Kingdom of Songhai in mid-Niger. Oral traditions note that Queen Amina was a warrior who waged successful

campaigns against neighboring territories. She was able to extend her empire to the Atlantic coast. It is said that she founded cities, received tributes from important chiefs, and is reputed to have introduced the cola nut (Loth, 1981:35). Other records show that elsewhere in West Africa, women enjoyed high status. For instance, in Senegal, when diplomatic negotiations were being carried out with foreigners, the king was always surrounded by his wives who held prominent positions (Demagnet, 1778). At times women led from the front, at other times they did so from behind. They would advise the rulers and guide their communities. In the Lunda kingdom of the Congo, the queen, Lukoksha, had her own court, income, and she played a decisive role in the election of the king. Her husbands were classified officially as women and possessed no power whatsoever (Loth, 1987:57).

Several early writers mention the existence of female army commanders, or Amazons, in various parts of Africa. The name is said to mean ‘breastless’ because one or both breasts were removed to enable the women to carry firearms easily. In Dahomey (Benin) regiments of Amazons guarded the royal palace in Abomey, the capital. A writer noted that these female soldiers were “an extremely impressive in sight... well-armed, usually beautiful, strong and healthy” (Loth, 1987:64). Additionally, these women were renowned for their military skills. Mekatilili in Kenya waged a war against the British in 1913 and 1914. She was denounced as a witch by the British colonial government. The British administrators destroyed the sacred kayas (reservoirs of cultural beliefs, spiritual, medicinal knowledge) in an effort to coerce the Mijikenda to participate in the war and in an effort to collect poll tax. But Mekatilili organized her people to resist, leading to her imprisonment. Later she was to escape from prison to rejoin her people.

Clearly, there is a relationship between matrilinearity and the empowerment of women. In African communities, men and women substantially occupy different positions, most of which are culturally determined. In a number of cases, due to skewed relations of power, women occupy subordinate positions and this subordination is captured in African languages. In Botswana a man was traditionally viewed as a “*mosadi ke ngwana wa monna*” – a woman is the child of the man. Consequently, women had limited legal capacity, though in reality some women had more independence and rights than others depending on social and marital status, individual drive and the broadmindedness of the men around them. Women in Africa and in many other parts of the world have been demanding to be treated equally and to be judged on the basis of their ability and intellect. The continued invocation of culture and religion in order to treat women unequally is under constant well grounded criticism.

Within the contemporary political culture, a number of actions have been undertaken by governments to bridge the gap of gender inequality. Key among these is the attempt to mainstream gender issues in development efforts – agriculture, water, environment, industry, health, education, politics and decision making positions in order to influence politics that affect them directly. Through lobbying and sensitization, the phenomenon of Affirmative Action, even when it is not sufficiently institutionalized has started paying dividends. For example, in 1993 the Joint Admissions Board of the state universities in Kenya passed a policy to lower the cut off point by one mark for women applicants to the state universities. Also, the principle of Affirmative Action was adopted in the constitutions of Uganda and Tanzania and the 1998 Constitution of Kenya Amendment Bill. In Kenya, Affirmative Action in the 1997 Inter Parties Parliamentary Group (IPPG) recommendations gave birth to 50% of the current women members of

parliament. Women parliamentarians have taken to parliament key motions that will contribute to the empowerment of women, the most recent being the 2005 Sexual Offences Bill. The Affirmative Action Bill in Kenya seeks to increase the participation of women in parliament and in local authorities. Through the Collaborative Centre for Gender and Development, FIDA, FEMNET, Coalition on Violence Against Women and other organizations committed to women's empowerment, national policies are being realigned in order to protect the human rights of women and girls and to create opportunities for the realization of their full potential. The Children Act 2001 which makes provision for parental responsibility, fostering, adoption, custody, guardianship, care and protection of children and gives effect to the principles of the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Africa Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child is likely to enhance gender equality in Kenya because it has specific provisions protecting the girl child.

In Uganda, the Forum for Women in Democracy (FOWODE) has since 1997 been advocating for gender equity in the national budget, an important prerequisite for equality. After implementing a project to increase gender awareness and enhancing the capabilities of women parliamentarians and their allies in parliament and civil society to analyze bills and policies from a gender perspective, FOWODE built in skills in budget and financial analysis among politicians and activists (Byanyima 2001:5). FOWODE has a Memorandum of Understanding with the Parliamentary Budget office to work together on gender analyses of the budget and the Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development has introduced a gender dimension in the budget making process. Because the budget is the main tool for executing the Poverty Eradication Action Plan, the involvement of organizations committed to gender equality in its formulation will contribute to the consolidation of gender friendly policies and cultures.

During the debate for a new constitution in Uganda, Action for Development (ACFODE), founded in 1985, agitated for inclusion of women's rights. At the continental level the transition from the Organization of Africa Union (OAU) to the African Union (AU) in July 2002 and the re-establishment of the East African Community (EAC) have paved the way for broader women's participation and political and economic empowerment. Whereas the OAU was a gathering of political leaders of Africa, the AU is a union of Africa's peoples. For example, the Constitutive Council establishing the AU includes institutions for peoples' participation such as the Pan African Parliament (PAP) and the Economic, Social and Cultural Council. The Constitutive Act provides that the AU shall strive to promote gender equality, and protect human and peoples' rights in accordance with the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights and other relevant human rights instruments.

As a result of the advocacy work undertaken by Pan-African networks, the Durban AU Summit in 2002 recognized the contributions of African women and civil society organizations and affirmed that without the full involvement and participation of women the objectives of the AU could not be achieved (Wandia 2003:51). Gender mainstreaming at the AU will invariably yield positive results for similar action at the national levels. For example, Departments of Gender have been set up in a number of ministries in Kenya such as the Ministry of Trade and Industry, and the Ministry of Gender and Social Services. In Tanzania, the Tanzania Media Women Association (TAMWA) as well as other lobby groups have ensured that gender inequalities are addressed at the national level and discriminative policies and laws repealed.

Equally, in Uganda a number of organizations such as (ACFODE) – an NGO founded in 1985 – FIDA, Uganda Gender Resource Centre, the Legal Aid Project of the Uganda Law Society, the Human Rights Foundation and the Ministry of Gender and Community Development, have continued pushing for promotion and protection of human rights. The Uganda Constitution of 1995 has been declared a ‘women’s constitution because it guarantees all the principles needed by women to facilitate their empowerment, development, dignity and rights (Matembe 2002:228).

Although the new Constitutions in the East Africa provide a space for gender equality and the culture of democracy, of greater significance is the process of constitution-making. The numerous workshops and seminars as well as public meetings have created opportunities for women to learn about their rights and the inadequacies of judicial processes and the law.

### **The economic domain**

The economic growth of Africa and the success of the development agenda will depend on the continent’s ability to increase the capabilities and self-esteem of the majority of the people. Development is intricately related to freedoms that people enjoy. This view requires that we focus on the ends that make development important – social and economic arrangements and political and civil rights. This approach sees people as the agents, the means and the end of development. If that is the case, development has to be construed, according to Claude Ake (1996:142) initially as rural development where over 70 percent of the people in Africa get their livelihood. By facilitating agricultural development, the Great Lakes region would contribute in alleviating gender inequalities.

Matrilineal societies appear to have had a sustainable agricultural base. According to Allen et al (1991:37), “sustainable agriculture is one that equitably balances concerns of environmental soundness, economic viability, and social justice among all sectors of society.” As far as the empowerment of women is concerned, sustainable agriculture provides spaces of empowerment for women farmers. These spaces of work have the potential to be constructed as sites of resistance from which we can witness the creation of new gender identities (Trauger, 2004:290). One of the most ubiquitous divisions of labor in this region is the collection of fuel wood. In many communities fuel wood collecting is the domain of women (Osborn 1990). Also, among the Jie of Uganda, agriculture was dominated by women who mainly worked communally. The Jie say that “sorghum is the cattle of women” (Gulliver, 1954:65). Although in many subsistence economies women work on the farm and are intricately connected with land, they do not have ownership over land.

But among the Kamba of Kenya, if a man had more than one wife, he was responsible for clearing bushes to create a farm plot for each wife. Each wife’s plot was close to her own hut, away from the other co-wives. The woman’s younger son would inherit this plot after his mother’s death. The Kikuyu of Kenya had a similar tradition. Both groups usually allowed unmarried daughters a plot of their own on which they could build a house. It is significant that women could own rights to land ownership, at least in certain cultures such as the Ameru of Kenya. Some crops belonged exclusively to women, especially if they were subsistence crops or example sorghum, finger millet,

*njugu*, *njahi*, sweet potatoes, and arrowroot. Crops like yams, sugarcane, and tobacco belong to men, as did *miraa* (khat). Goats and sheep could belong to both women and men, but cattle belonged exclusively to men. Poultry and poultry products belonged to women as did milk and ghee (Simiyu, 1986:30-37). Among the Bagesu of Uganda, each wife in a polygamous homestead had her own field and kept her own store of food (Roscoe, 1924:15). The right to ownership of crops and animals is indicative of a willingness by society to recognize the critical role played by women. The plot was exclusively theirs as was the produce from it. This ensured that the family was assured of food security.

As the 2004 Nobel Laureate Wangari Maathai notes in her Green Belt Movement Bulletin, “the myth of male superiority can only be demolished, with shining examples of female achievement against which nobody could argue intelligently. The Green Belt Movement, and many other rural projects initiated by women, are exemplary projects not dominated, as men so often claim, by the concerns of the kitchen, babies, nappies or sex. They are good examples of female achievements which should serve at least to encourage women to form a more positive image of themselves” (p.19). These sentiments coming from a woman who has done a lot for the conservation of forests in Africa are a call for people to appreciate the contributions of women in national development and to see more clearly their leadership roles. But women require financial support through interest-free loans, efficient methods of farming and support in marketing their goods. Legal provisions that make it easy for them to own land, invest and sell their goods would contribute immensely in bridging the gender gap.

### **The social domain**

African women have borne the brunt of cultural traditions, many of which have been described as oppressive, and which limit the advancement of women. Male dominance has been cited as a major obstacle to gender equality. Friedl (1975:7) defines male dominance as “a situation in which men have highly preferential access, although not always exclusive rights, to those activities to which the society accords the greatest values, and the exercise of which permits a measure of control over others.” It is significant that Friedl recognizes that men are favored in terms of accessing certain economically and socially significant materials and rights, such as access to land and property. These institutions and positions in communities play a role in elevating men over women. The asymmetrical relations are also highlighted by Divale and Harris (1976:521-38) who define male dominance in terms of an “institutionalized complex” consisting of “asymmetrical frequencies of sex-linked practices and beliefs...” The practices and beliefs, in this case, would instill prestige and status to the male gender and devalue the contributions and capabilities of females.

The preferential allocation of rights may also be accompanied by attitudes and beliefs about gender roles. Indeed, Sanday (1981:164) looks at male dominance from two angles. First, is the “exclusion of women from political and economic decision-making” and second, “male aggression towards women.” Sanday measures this aggression using five traits: (1) expectation that males should be tough, brave, and aggressive; (2) the presence of men’s houses or specific places where only men may congregate; (3) frequent quarrelling, fighting, or wife beating; (4) institutionalization or regular occurrence of rape; and (5) raiding other groups for wives. Sanday suggests that the presence of these

five traits in a society indicates a high degree of male aggression; while an absence of all five traits indicates that male aggression is weakly developed (1984:164). This type of dominance may be expressed in the cultural stereotype of 'machismo' or masculinity.

Interestingly, Sanday's research shows that where females have economic control but no political power, 53% of women are prone to male aggression. Thus economic empowerment and political participation are important for women's empowerment. Male aggression against women does not necessarily lead to female passivity. In some societies, it is expected that women will fight back; while in others, it is assumed that women will adopt the submissive role. But even when women are submissive, they will use their own tools of resistance to show displeasure. Sanday posits that "male dominance is significantly associated with environmental and historical conditions" and that domination of women is a response to stress. Such stress may manifest itself in endemic warfare and chronic hunger (1981:171-2). The displaced aggression looking for an outlet is injurious to women.

It is important to delineate the root causes of male dominance in order to understand gender inequality and inequity. This can only be done by understanding the cultural context in which the dominance manifests itself. Because cultures have their own organized systems which determine how members of that particular culture behave towards each other and towards their environment, they have the potential of empowering or dis-empowering men and women. Mead (1963:284) argues that in all cultures, there is the same range of basic temperamental types established on the basis of heredity. These differences provide "the clues from which culture works, selecting one temperament, or a combination of related and congruent types, as desirable." In other words, there are certain universal tendencies which are particularized by context and history. The particular traits solidify and become key to defining communities.

Drawing on Mead's position, Sanday suggests that "each culture must select a sex-role plan – that is, a template for the organization of sex-role expectations... sex-role plans form one kind of symbolic template. Such plans help men and women orient themselves as male and female to each other, to the world around them, and to the growing boys and girls whose behavior they must shape to a commonly accepted mold" (1981:3). In essence then, "sex-role plans are part of the system of meanings by which a people explain their successes, come to terms with their fears, enshrine their past, and stamp themselves with a sense of "people hood" (1981:163). The socio-cultural meanings shape behavior, attitudes and beliefs. Women are key in transferring these interpretations of the world because of their role of bringing up families and teaching languages to their children.

Indeed, Mead (1968:19) is of the opinion that the more men are removed from the phenomenon of human birth, the more the male imagination contributes to the "cultural superstructure of belief and practice, regarding childbearing." In many African societies, it is women who rear children and teach them manners, respect, and social obligations. Women, when empowered could contribute significantly in reshaping gender roles and expectations. They can subvert the stereotype while fulfilling the social and cultural role of child rearing and socializing. Thus critical interventions targeted at mothers could contribute in women's empowerment by reorganizing and restructuring gender relations. Due to the patrilineal nature of countries in the Great Lakes Region, women have found themselves denied many capabilities. They have less access to education, skills

development, economic opportunities and participation in decision-making. The Nairobi Forward Looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women (1985) had reiterated the need for women to be given the opportunity to reach their full potential. The meeting affirmed:

...social and economic development should be encouraged to secure the participation of women as equal partners with men in the fields of work, equal access to all positions of employment, equal pay for work of equal value, and equal opportunities for education and vocational training.

Gender equality continues being a challenge in the Great Lakes Region and statute books contain legal rules and principles which can be used to legitimize the subordination of women. Even where women's rights are catered for in the statutes, ignorance of such rights, worsened by lack of education and levels of poverty, makes it difficult for women to enjoy them. Moreover, cultural biases prevent women from reporting injustices and violations especially when they relate to sexuality. For instance, it is viewed as 'unnatural and disrespectful for a married woman to assert her rights as against her husband. Hence, "cases of spousal abuse and property confiscated are rarely reported" (Omamo, 2002). Economic dependence and fear of social stigmatization and rejection contribute in the non-reporting of such violations.

Circumcision is practiced in many societies in the Great Lakes region, and often serves as a rite of passage to adulthood. Female circumcision (female genital cut; female genital mutilation) can have negative health implications for women. The practice is universal in North Eastern Province of Kenya (99%) and least in Western Province (5%) (KDHS 2003). It is also related to education and is more prevalent among the uneducated. In Kenya, genital cutting is highest among the Somali, Kisii, and Maasai and lowest among Luhya and Luo. The Maasai and Kuria of Tanzania circumcise their girls. The practice of not circumcising girls, practiced by certain communities in the region, could be copied onto those communities which circumcise and this would be one way of ensuring that girls remain in school and are not married off while young. Successful uncircumcised women from circumcising communities could be presented as role models. For instance, a minister in Kenya, Hon. Linah Jebii Kilimo, has spoken against female circumcision among the Marakwet and presented herself as a role model. In addition, some Kenyan and Tanzanian communities are starting to adopt alternative rites of passage for girls. In these rites, girls are secluded and 'circumcised' without a cut in their genitals. They undergo life planning skills and are prepared for the future through counseling. The life planning skills relate to decision-making, adolescent development, gender roles and equality, relationships, teenage pregnancy, sexually transmitted infections, and planning for the future (African Youth Alliance, 2002). The positive elements of the culture are retained while the negative ones are modified or eradicated. These alternative rites of passage give girls an opportunity to continue their education and protect them from the dangers of circumcision. The cultural practice of 'unyago' practiced among the Digo of Tanzania is being reformulated. In 'unyago' girls are taught by a 'kungwi' how to behave when they get married; how to take care of their bodies and how to relate to men. In the contemporary 'unyago' they also learn how to assert their rights and to negotiate for them.

In the context of gender inequality, male attitudes and behaviors are at the center of the HIV/AIDS problem, and Singhal and Rogers (2003) show that culture can indeed

be an ally in combating HIV/AIDS. They provide an example in Mali in which the green *pendelu* campaign utilized the cultural strength represented by the husband's supportive role during pregnancy in order to promote maternal and child health. In addition, a number of sociocultural and spiritual constraints in Senegalese society contributed in that country's efforts at combating HIV/AIDS. These include the cultural norms related to universality of marriage; the rapid remarriage of widows(ers) and divorcees; extended networks of family members who serve to control irresponsible sexual behavior and the fear of dishonoring relatives due to inappropriate practices (Singhal & Rogers (2003:218). The social prohibitions related to sexuality when nurtured and engaged may contribute to more harmonious co-existence between males and females as well as the empowerment of women. As the dominant partners during sexual intercourse and the principal initiators of sexual encounters, many men demand '*ngozi kwa ngozi*' (skin to skin) encounters. They put pleasure and excitement before respect and protection. Widespread stereotypical notions of 'masculinity' and what it means to be a 'real man' encourage disrespect and male dominance over women in matters of sexual encounters. A deliberate deconstruction and reconstruction of masculinity as a fluid and constantly changing notion may contribute in stemming the *tsunami* of HIV/AIDS in the Great Lakes region. The tsunami cannot be tamed without the systematic and deliberate involvement of men. Cultural beliefs that showed men as protectors of communities might have to re-invoked, without, of course, the paternalism that goes with the belief. This can be done through media interventions by radio or folk culture. According to *The Pulse of Africa*, a 2004 BBC study, most Africans get their information from the local media, especially radio, at 85% of those interviewed. These avenues could be used to increase male participation and involvement in matters of women's health.

By the end of 2002, an estimated 58 million people had acquired HIV infection worldwide. Of these about 22 million had died (Helen Jackson 2002:9). In sub-Saharan Africa, 3.4 million new infections were reported in 2001, compared to 3.8 million in 2000 and 4.0 million in 1999. The situation remains serious and precarious. Also in Africa, 54% of adult infections by 2002 were women. Moreover, women are in general infected at a younger age than men. And they die younger, because AIDS related deaths in women in sub-Saharan Africa peak in women in their 20s, whereas the deaths peak in men in their 30s and 40s. The early infection of women is partly attributed to cultural practices that deny women the right to make decisions related to their bodies.

The practices of *levirate* (inheritance of a wife by the deceased husband's brother); polygamy; dry sex in which women are expected to use herbs, barks, powders, cotton wool and so on to dry the vagina; the suppression of sexual expression among women; female genital cutting; and so on require re-evaluation so that the damaging elements in them are eradicated. In Zambia sexual cleansing for widows is being replaced with non-sexual rituals so that the overall ceremony continues and retain its value, and the same participants remain involved, but sex no longer takes place (Helen Jackson 2002:137).

Violence against women caused by, among other things, economic inequality between the genders, the acceptance of physical violence to resolve conflicts, low female autonomy and control of decision making in household affairs and legal restrictions against divorce for women has been on the increase. Whenever women are in abusive relationships, they find it difficult to move out due to attitudes associated with divorce. However, that was not always the case. In Northern Namibia / Southern Angola, women

in the Ovambo communities used to be fairly independent. Matrimonial relations could be easily separated unilaterally by the woman, without negative consequences. This changed with the coming of Christianity which stigmatized divorce and made it difficult for women to opt out.

But women are still able to share their frustrations and pains through cultural spaces. In Durban, South Africa, women were fearful of talking openly about their suffering but through the Siyazana Project they were given resources to undertake artesian activities and an opportunity for voicing their concerns. During beadwork and basketry sessions in which the women were required to pay very close attention to their work, they could talk about very personal matters without making eye contact. This provided a safe haven for the women. Certain communities also make needlepoint 'memory cloths' as a means of reflecting upon violence in their lives (Allen Roberts, 2004 Personal communication). These cultural productions and spaces are replicable. Many women are involved in beadwork, weaving, water fetching, wood harvesting and other activities and these spaces could be used to empower them.

One area in which women have always excelled in traditional African societies is in health, especially reproductive health. Apart from being the protectors of cultural traditions, customs and beliefs, women were also the preservers of indigenous knowledge related to herbal medicine and spirituality. Women were involved in childbirth, gynecological treatments, cosmetic treatments, and massage techniques for expectant women. Midwives and birth attendants knew the right diet for pre-natal and post-natal mothers. Traditional birth attendants among the Tugen of Kenya called *mererian*, *kikob lagoi*, or *chebos*, were respected in the society. *Nkaitoyoni* is a traditional birth attendant who gives advice to pregnant women on diet, work and exercise. A *nkalopani* is a specialist who deals with gynecological problems. She monitors the position of the foetus, its movements, and general development. She prescribes medicines and delivers babies (1986, Baringo socio-cultural District profile, p.163). This was also the case among the Luhya and other communities in East Africa where old women knew methods for fertility, including the types of herbs to give to women to avoid pregnancy (1986 Bungoma socio-cultural profiles, p.59). In view of the distances to health centers and the fact that traditional birth attendants and herbalists live close to the people it makes sense for them to be equipped in order to deal with health challenges which face women. A reconfiguration of the role of traditional birth attendants, being undertaken in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda, could help reduce maternal mortality rates.

### **The expression of sexuality**

Sex taboos also played a role in preventing pregnancy and acted as fertility regulators. In many communities, heavy fines were imposed on husbands who could not show control. In extreme cases, if a man continued to commit the act of impregnating women to the seventh child, he was fined and then castrated (1986, Meru District socio-cultural profiles, p.124). Whereas one would not condone the castration of males (or FGM of women), one does appreciate the moral of this prohibition. Men were being called upon to exercise self-control and to respect women's bodies. Society put the burden on men as a way of ensuring that women remained healthy after childbirth and were involved in child rearing. Indeed, it was considered taboo for men among the Kalenjin- of Baringo, Kenya, to have sex with their wives before six or more months after

the birth of a child. The usual period of abstinence was a minimum of two to three years before a woman was expected to get pregnant again. If men contravened these prohibitions, they were physically attacked by the midwives and married women. During this prohibition period, the wife was not allowed to cook for her husband (1986, Baringo district socio-cultural profiles, p. 113).

In situations of famine, Pokot women did not conceive. Old women knew which methods to use in order to help women not to conceive. These methods were also used to avoid pre-marital pregnancies (1986, Baringo socio-cultural profiles, p.119). Also, in Pokot society, an adulterous man was tied to a tree in which stinging ants reside. As the ants attacked him, he was beaten publicly by everyone. His lover had to be present. If the man committed adultery with a married woman he had to prepare a container of honey to give to the aggrieved husband. In most communities, sex and marriage commanded respect and they were not to be abused by anyone. Among the Kamba of Kenya, if a man raped a woman, he was subjected to capital punishment. The Kamba believed that if a man raped someone's daughter, all the spirits of the dead relatives wrecked havoc on the community. In Pokot society, a rapist was required to send milk and goat meat for the girl to eat until she recovered from the ordeal. Thus sexual violence was not tolerated and was surrounded by numerous prohibitions and consequences sanctioned by communities.

In a number of African countries, the emphasis on sexual abstinence is also a challenge to notions of masculinity and self-control. The practice of *ukusoma* (a Zulu term for non-penetrative sex) in order to preserve virginity and prevent pregnancy was common in the past. In this practice, the woman keeps her thighs closely together while the man finds sexual release (Singhal & Rogers, 2003). Because the man did not want to risk isolation by the community, he controlled himself and did not demand penetration.

But the practice also existed elsewhere. Kenyatta (1978 [1938]) describes non-penetrative sex (*nguiko*) among the Gikuyu. *Nguiko* (fondling) followed a well-regulated code of convention. According to Kenyatta (1978:159) the Gikuyu man had been taught to “develop the technique of self-control in the matter of sex, which enables him to sleep in the same bed with a girl without necessarily having sexual intercourse.” He would not dare pull out a girl's garment because it was taboo (*thahu*) which could lead to a long process of purification and social stigmatization by the community and his age-mates (*riika*). In *nguiko*, the man squeezed his penis between his thighs and fondled the girl until they were both satisfied, without penetrating. The girl was also barred, by custom, to touch the man's sexual organ with her hands.

However:

“...in the case of long-standing friendship a girl may allow a boy to put his sexual organ between her thighs and hold it tight in that position without penetrating” (1978:159).

Full penetration, a rare occurrence, never took place between casual lovers because of consequences stipulated by culture. For instance, a man who attempted to loosen a girl's garment during *nguiko*, would be reported and ostracized by girls and boys alike for bringing shame to them.

The cultural stipulation against penetrative sex guarded against unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections. In view of the fact that women are most vulnerable to sexual infections in the Great Lakes region of Africa due to unequal gender relations, poverty and gender violence, a reactivation of taboos and prohibitions related to sexual behavior may pave the way for women empowerment by reducing unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections. These problems interfere with access to education, productivity and good health.

In an effort to entrench gender equality in national affairs, laws and policies are changing in order to ensure reproductive rights. The gender perspective is being used increasingly to guide sexual and reproductive health policies and programs, help advance equality and equity and ensure that women are central to health service delivery. The National Health Sector Strategic Plans are now paying particular attention to the needs of women in the implementation of structural, financial and organizational reforms (see Kenya's Ministry of Health Strategic Plan 1999-2004; Byanyima 2001).

In many African countries, orature has been used effectively for the transmission of information, passing on education and entertainment. Like all forms of art, orature has had two key functions: *utile* (education) and *dulce* (entertainment). But the power of orature resides in oracy: the skilful, confident and productive use of the spoken word (Zirimu & Bukenya, 1977). Thus, whereas orality refers to the state of oral communication, oracy is the ability to skillfully weave words towards a specific goal. In other words, productive oracy leads to power because it paves the way for self assertion, skilful negotiation in relationships and conflicts and the ability to claim rights and freedoms. Due to consolidation of patriarchy, colonialism, gender inequities, denial of opportunities and education, many women in the Great Lakes region are de-oracised and are not able to spin the spoken word for self empowerment and realization. The continued utilization of male voices to articulate truths about the world perpetuates the myth that the interpretation of the world can only be made by one sector of society. The reaffirmation of the proverb "The hen knows that dawn is here but watches the mouth of the rooster," contributes to the continued suppression of the female voice and the right to self-expression. It denies women the right to contribute significantly in their own destiny and that of the region.

Yet oracy was a major attribute of women in many African countries (Bukenya 2001). Story-telling was a woman's genre used to interweave experiences and share these with communities. The revival of story-telling and the tradition of oracy could contribute immensely in the empowerment of women. Within educational institutions girls and boys should be given equal opportunities to answer oral questions. Educational and training programs in oracy could be initiated and specifically targeted at women. The programs would give women the skills needed to articulate their positions and interpretations of the world, without waiting for any prompts from males.

The realigning and subversion of educational structures could also be undertaken by expropriating oral communication to save gender relations and encourage more cross-gender dialogues. Bukenya (2001) makes a convincing argument for the revival of productive oracy. He affirms:

"In the case of oracy, it would seem that African women could take the oral forms of communication themselves, including orature, and use them

to create and claim space for empowering oracy to assert their survival needs. This is not an entirely new strategy. African women have for centuries accepted forms of oral performance to examine, question, criticize and protest the norms and practices of their communities and kings. In Uganda, for example, story-telling, which is predominantly female art is skillfully used to point out the evils of male violence and the injustices inherent in polygamy.” (2001:36).

In the process of questioning power relations, orature has many examples of stories crafted around big animal versus small animal, the neglected wife versus favoured wife, and the benefit of loving relationships based on mutual respect and understanding.

The deliberate and systematic utilization of the techniques of story-telling and the accompanying skill of oracy can contribute in the empowerment of women in the Great Lakes region of Africa. Equally, the use of proverbs that encourage harmony and coexistence might be useful in peace building. For example, the proverb “one who does not travel may think that his/her mother is the best cook in the world” and “the roots of peace are more bitter than neem but its fruits are sweeter than honey,” are statements celebrating the value and virtue of peace and respect for others.

### **Peace building**

The Great Lakes region is beleaguered by wars and conflicts. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, women and children are under constant threat from the military and rebels and in Northern Uganda they are kidnapped and raped. The situation has not been any different in Southern Sudan and Darfur. Demilitarization and security are extremely important if women and children are to survive and realize their full potential as human beings. In the context of war, family structures are being redefined. A major social consequence of war is an increase in the number of female-headed households. After the genocide in Rwanda 34% of the households are female headed, the majority of whom are widows (World Bank, 1998).

In post-genocide Rwanda, women are taking new roles and responsibilities. Fifty seven percent (57%) of the adult working population aged 20 to 44 is female, and women produce 70% of the country’s agricultural output (Hamilton 2000). Within the social sphere women were the most affected as rape and genocide survivors, widows, heads of households, and caretakers of orphans.

As often happens in wars, women are targeted because of their gender, and a major weapon of war is rape. Raped women face severe psycho-social trauma and health problems and are subjected to shame, ostracism, survival guilt, infertility, pregnancy, and diseases. In the politically motivated Kenyan ethnic clashes of the 1990s in the Rift Valley and Coast Provinces women were targeted because of their gender. The wombs of expectant women were cut open and many died while others were left disabled. In many African traditional cultures, women and children are neither sexually abused nor killed during war because of the taboos associated with harming them. Among the Maasai, Gikuyu and Ameru, for example, women and children were taken captive and integrated by the capturing community. According to Kenyatta ([1938] 1978) women were rarely killed because it was a disgrace for a warrior to kill a woman unless it was unavoidable.

The prohibition against harming women during times of war has the potential to contribute in saving the lives of women. Currently, women are not spared by war as is so evident in Darfur, Northern Uganda and the Democratic Republic of Congo. They were not spared in Rwanda and Burundi.

Women are denied their right to education, labor, health and social security. They are subjected to gender-based violence – the violence that affects women because they are women or affects them disproportionately. They are subjected to forced evictions, physical harm and many deprivations of liberty. Through activities such as music, folk performances and sports, a culture of peace could be entrenched. In a brief statement on peace and children, Ann Musomba, the National Peace Education Advisor at the UNHCR, states:

“Most people marvel at how easily children make friends. It is amazing that this is mostly done through play. Two children, who have never met before and may be even of different races, can be engrossed in a cooperative game thirty minutes later.” (Peacemaker Issue No.6 Jan/March 2003:3)

The power of play as a social and cultural event for creating solidarity, harmony, cooperation and peace, is inspirational. Indeed, game theory has been used to enrich educational curricula and to understand political events. In observing children and youth sports, many opportunities for the creation of peace become evident. The inter-cultural and inter-ethnic mix as the youth play may contribute in the eradication of stereotypes, biases and discrimination. Games could also emphasize fairness and cooperative-competitiveness which can then be transferred into other domains of life. Moreover a gender mix could portray the capabilities of women and girls and debunk stereotypes.

Singhal & Rogers (2003:235) remind us that all cultures value games and sports. Cricket, football and athletics invoke huge and varied emotions among fans as do other games and sports. They bring people together and momentarily suspend differences of age, gender, religion, nationality, and ethnicity. For example in a health related soccer campaign put together by a range of partners, soccer players from Uganda, Kenya, Ethiopia, Sudan, Rwanda and Eritrea were trained in HIV prevention so that they could counsel youth in community sports camps and high schools. The youth would then learn soccer, as well as life skills. They learned about dribbling, tackling and scoring and soccer analogies such as “developing a game plan,” “using one’s head”, “knowing your opponent,” “playing safe,” “passing when in danger,” “wearing socks” were used to prepare the youth (Singhal & Rogers 2003:237). Similar cultural spaces could be utilized to prepare the youth for life challenges.

As a consequence of the wars and conflicts in the Great Lakes region, a number of meetings have been organized by women in Africa in the pursuit of peace in their communities, resulting in a certain action points. For instance, the Kampala Action Plan on Women and Peace, held in 1993 and sanctioned by Heads of States of the OAU in 1995, was an effort at looking for peace. It covered the following areas: the nature and effects of conflict and underdevelopment, women in the struggle for peace, the empowerment of women in the peace process and a culture of tolerance and violence. Similarly, the International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 and the Fourth World Conference on Women (FWCW) in Beijing in 1995 affirmed the human

rights of women in the context of sexual and reproductive health. In all cases, the inalienable link between peace, development and gender equality were reiterated.

Women are key in creating and sustaining a supportive social fabric in communities; a skill cultivated in the process of bringing up children and giving care to the sick. Their inclusion in peace-building processes is therefore, vital. In traditional Africa women were often called upon to resolve conflicts. Maasai women, *Noon'gotonye ilmuran*, (“mothers of the warriors or youths”) intervened during conflicts by running away from their homes in order for men to persuade them to return home. The women may refuse to return unless the warriors promise to keep peace. The women may also go into the battlefield and walk between the warring parties. They walk among the chiefs and other leaders. Maasai women may also remove their lower skirts (*olokesena*) or their belts to show the warring parties that they value life and peace. Also in some communities in Kenya, women may protest against any form of injustice by removing their clothes until they stand naked in the sight of men. Kenyan women did this in Uhuru Park in 1992 to protest the continued injustices and dictatorship of the KANU regime during the clamor for multi-party politics in Kenya and the release of pro-democracy politicians and activists.

During and after armed conflicts women have been able to come together and recapture their constructive role in society and to create new networks. They have the ability to form organizations which safeguard their interests. Turn-taking by women in the performance of tasks such as in *ngwatio / gitati* among the Gikuyu; *Mwethya*, among the Kamba; *Nthngurumi*, among the Meru; *Konyruok* among the Luo; *Harambee* among the Waswahili; and *Esangara* among the Luhya; prepared the ground for collective problem-solving. In all these tasks, women take turns when working for the benefit of each member of the ‘union’. This task sharing was an aspect of communal work and points to the ability of communities to solve problems together.

The turn-taking in communal work was a strong tradition which enabled the women and men to take care of their community, as well as to improve their status. The communal sharing created solidarity, unity of purpose, collective efficacy and a sense of social support among members of the community. For example, during the Mau Mau war (1952-1960) women were able to manage their families even after their men were detained or killed. Equally, in Rwanda women have been working together to assuage the pains of the genocide.

Rosalind Boyd (2001) in a study of organizations working for peace and reconciliation in the Great Lakes region of Africa found out that women’s organizations are key to their empowerment. She says:

“Although there was an active civil society in the region before the eruption of conflict, in the transition to peace, women’s organizations have since multiplied and come to the fore. These organizations provide a forum for women to address the trauma they experienced through psychological counseling, medical assistance, and the support of the victims. Not only do they offer a network of support; these organizations also provide micro-credit initiatives, legal assistance, education programs and various forms of concrete support. In each country of the region, whose histories and experiences are distinct, they are making a lasting

contribution to women's health and well-being, and the well-being of their strategies as a whole" (2001:4).

These organizations represent efforts by women in the region to become involved in the process of peace building. Moreover, they give women the opportunity they desperately need to become economically independent, participate in political work, and entrench gender issues into the development agenda. Collective organizing, rotating contributions and loaning referred to as "Merry-Go-Round," are important for empowerment. They have their roots in collectivistic cultures.

Peace could also be enhanced through the use of symbols. Many cultures in the Great Lakes Region of Africa have symbols of power, authority, and peace. Considering the importance of peace for women, images that enhance dialogue could be quite useful. These symbols could be reactivated and enhanced. For instance, the Kuku people of Northern Uganda use the *Kuye* stick as a sign of peace. A *kuye* is a light stick found by river banks. Whenever a community conflict arose, elders would pick up the *kuye* as a gesture of peace and the need for dialogue. Community members would then sit in a circle, as a sign of togetherness and unity. The elders would allow the stick to go round the circle with each member getting an opportunity to speak while holding the *kuye*. That was how consensus was built through consultation.

## **Conclusion**

Most discussions of African cultures have paid scant attention to their positive and redeemable aspects. In this paper, we sought to show that culture can indeed be an ally to women's empowerment. There are positive attributes to the culture as well as spaces that could be re-inhabited in order to deal more deliberately with topical issues – disease, political participation, economic well being, peace and other emergent issues. These positive aspects of culture in the Great Lakes region, forgotten, suppressed or ignored, require more work and engagement. It is worth reconfiguring the negative aspects of culture, deconstructing and reconstructing them so that they can be more enhancing of humanity. For example, the alternative rites of passage that are slowly gaining presence in the Great Lakes region of Africa constitute an aspect of cultural engineering worth serious study in terms of efficacy and sustainability. Whatever the case, working through communities instead of against them is quite rewarding and this is much more so whenever cultural engineering is undertaken.

In addition, traditional communication channels could be reactivated fruitfully in enhancing self-expression and aural comprehension. Orature is rich in visual imagery, and is the basis on which learning is founded. Oral narratives, proverbs, sayings, riddles have tremendous potential for telling truth about inequality in gender relations and healthy living. Through the use of ancient wisdom, allegory, metaphor and symbolic representation of events, contemporary situations could be questioned and subverted.

Furthermore, changes to national constitutions, laws and policies to ensure that gender equality is promoted and enforced or enacted and implemented ought to be put in place. Equally, it is necessary to adopt temporary special measures that would accelerate equality between the genders; such as Affirmative Action programs. The modification of social and cultural patterns in order to achieve the elimination of prejudices and practices

against women ought to be undertaken. Deliberate efforts should be made to ensure equality in political and public life, education, employment and labor, access to health, finance and social security, as well as legal and civil spheres. The development of rural areas and the broadening of freedom enjoyed by communities are key to women's empowerment.

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