
Associates

Women's Legal Rights Organizing and Political Participation in Africa*

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Introduction

During the last decade, improving women's legal rights has become a priority of women's organizations in Africa. Until recent years, most legal rights initiatives have concentrated on changing laws, and many significant gains have been achieved. Nevertheless, discriminatory attitudes and deeply rooted cultural practices continue to maintain women in an inferior role and limit basic freedoms and access to decision making in the family, community and at the national level. In order for positive laws to have a more practical impact on the day-to-day lives of women, legal rights programs have begun to concentrate on changing attitudes through legal education.

With more and more experience working with grassroots women, legal rights groups have recognized that legal education is not merely the provision of information about the law. Many women do not know their rights, but even those who do, lack the self-confidence and support to exercise them in the face of social and family pressures. Moreover, women meet the same negative cultural biases in dealing with the courts, police and governmental agencies which define and implement policy. Although a growing number of legal aid schemes for women in African countries have increased women's access to fair legal remedies, the full exercise of rights is too large a task for a one-on-one approach to handle completely. In order to address cultural and other obstacles to women's rights adequately, groups have seen that legal education must combine information with consciousness-raising and community organization to encourage collective action and mutual support at the local level. This is a challenge not only at the grassroots level, but also at the national level in the media and policy-making circles, where tradition is consistently upheld as the foundation of stability, unity and national identity.

Improving legal programs for women and making a visible impact on women's situation is a slow and delicate process. Most legal education programs are fairly sporadic and not well-suited to reach the intended audience. Frequently, legal information is offered in lecture style to women who lack the confidence and resources to use it. Competition and conflicts within and between women's groups often contribute to their ineffectiveness. There is a gap between urban-based professional women who run legal rights programs and "grassroots" women. This situation breeds disunity and the absence of a common vision for women, which is a requirement for influencing the policymaking arena.

Furthermore, challenging cultural attitudes is a highly sensitive political matter. Because of the general unresponsiveness and inaccessibility of most African states, most women's rights groups have tended to avoid direct political confrontation at the local and national levels, opting for more circuitous strategies to affect change. It has been argued that these indirect routes represent risk calculations that anticipate limited success because of authoritarian governments (Parpart & Staudt,

1989). However, this ingrained cautiousness limits the ability of women's rights groups to develop and implement effective strategies, and undermines the impact of their efforts.

Despite these problems and difficulties, women's rights efforts are making significant strides forward. Some groups are evaluating and refining their approach and networking, on the national and regional levels, has strengthened the impact of individual initiatives. The political changes occurring throughout Africa provide an important stimulus and an opening for more political women's rights strategies.

Growing discontent with the failure of independent African governments to achieve economic stability and a measure of accountability, as well as pressures from donors and international agencies, have generated demands for more participation in decision making by all sectors. Efforts toward democratization in several countries have carved out new opportunities for women's groups to forge both a national agenda, and stimulate grassroots participation through legal education and organizing. Taking advantage of these opportunities will necessitate stronger, more accountable organizations and leadership, comprehensive legal strategies, and more direct political action. The fundamental task of changing attitudes underscores the importance of effective legal education.

* The complete article can be found in *Legal Literacy: A Tool for Women's Empowerment*. Margaret Schuler & Sakuntala Kadirgamar-Rajasingham (eds.) 1992.