"Compétence Égale, Chance Égale" ("Equal Ability, Equal Opportunity")

Problems encountered when attempting to change the status of women in West Africa

by Erin Patrick

SAIS STUDIES ON SENEGAL
JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY
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"No society can be free and democratic if it does not treat all of its citizens on an equal footing regardless of gender and give them the same opportunities in all spheres of life, because human dignity is indivisible and, therefore, should transcend gender differences."

A great deal of the preliminary work for this paper was done in my apartment in Dakar, Senegal. I sat on the couch or at the kitchen table, reading articles and government publications, transcribing interviews, setting up meetings... The whole time I watched as our housekeeper cooked lunch, washed clothes by hand in a little plastic bucket and, doubled over at the waist, used a heavy metal iron to press our shirts, pants, pajamas – everything – on the floor. The housekeeper, Khady, was abandoned over five years ago by her husband in favor of his other three wives.

Technically, his abandonment, along with the fact that he does not provide her with money or any other form of support, give Khady the right to divorce. But in Muslim West Africa, the stigma of being a single or divorced woman is much more difficult to bear than the cost of single-handedly supporting herself and her children. So, the children were given to others in the hopes that they would have better chances in life, and Khady works two jobs in order to make ends meet.

I was in Senegal to research the many non-governmental organizations there that deal with women's issues. But the more time I spent talking with Khady, with friends, or even just wandering around observing daily life made me realize that the issues themselves, not just the organizations working on those issues, should be the main focus of this paper. Questions rolled around in my head day after day: Can the status of women in developing countries such as Senegal be improved without causing harmful disequilibria in society? Or without disrupting social harmony? But what is social harmony, and does it even exist (especially for women) in the first place? And further: if the status of women is to change, what aspect of society needs to change first? Should women first be educated, in order to give them a better chance at finding jobs? Or must they begin working first, even lacking education, in order to liberate themselves economically, and move on from there?

There are no easy nor foolproof answers to these questions. After talking with women from various non-governmental, governmental, and private organizations, however, I believe there are distinct ways of approaching these problems; ways of answering the questions without alienating the one-half of West African society that controls fully all of the population: men. In this paper I will strive to address the questions mentioned above. But to do this, I must first put them in a broader context – namely, the context of feminism in the developing world.

Feminism in Developing Countries:

There has for nearly two decades been a sociological debate surrounding the relevance of "western" feminism in developing countries. The argument is as follows: feminism is an ideology advanced by educated, white, middle-class women in the industrialized world and as such is formulated to fit their particular needs – needs which are not shared
by the vast majority of women in developing countries. This "western" style feminism is ill-suited to women from the developing world because it emphasizes the struggle as a fight against men and men only. Women in developing countries have far broader and more basic needs than those of the ideological leaders of the feminist movement in the United States and Europe. Why struggle for "equal pay for equal work" when women can’t even work for pay in the first place? Why paint solely men as the enemy when the reality is that women in developing countries are repressed not only by the patriarchal authority inherent in their cultures, but as a result of colonialism and north-south exploitation and dependency?

The debate has historical precedence. Leaders first of revolutionary movements and then of the newly independent African states stressed the need for women to be part of the collective struggle – that is, against colonial and western oppression, and that any struggle for women’s rights was not only unnecessary, but actually worked against what the revolutions were trying to achieve. Further, many in the developing world believe "Third World feminists," as they are often called, have been co-opted by western powers – that their views are inherently western, not African, or Asian, or Latin American, as they case may be, and these feminists therefore quickly become the enemy.

In many cases, they may be right. The main priorities of the feminist movement in the United States are not the same as the priorities for women’s rights advocates in Africa. Feminism in Africa is necessarily much more layered and as such must move more slowly that it has in the western world. However, because it is different does not mean it has no place. Rather, I would argue that the condition of women in much of Africa means a strong, locally and regionally-based, autonomous women’s movement in Africa is even more needed than in industrialized countries.

Why? In most industrialized countries, though by no means are they yet equal, women’s rights are considered to be human rights. That is, women are entitled by law to enjoy the same fundamental rights as any other member of society, male or female – the right to vote, the right to own property, the right to physical integrity, etc.. Unfortunately, this is not the case in many developing countries. Women, in fact, are often legally considered children – or property. First they "belong" to their fathers, and then as soon as they are married, to their husbands. They do not enjoy citizenship rights, the right to own, inherit, or transmit property, and in extreme cases a woman may suffer harsh punishment or even death for such transgressions as refusing to marry the man chosen for her or the very vaguely defined "dishonoring" the family name. This of course is not to suggest that feminism has no longer has a place in the industrialized world. Rather, American and European feminists have succeeded in a relatively short period of time in bringing women’s concerns closer to the forefront of public policy, and have made great strides in closing the gender gap that has existed for centuries. More work in these areas can only achieve even greater positive changes. However, the feminist path in developing countries has yet even to be paved. Feminists in Senegal, for example, must first ensure that women are guaranteed basic human rights. Only after society as a whole accepts that women are and should be full and participating members of society can work begin on the "details" such as equal pay for equal work.

Feminism in developing countries is also exponentially more difficult to begin and sustain than it has been in the industrialized world. Not only is the patriarchal authority structure firmly and deeply entrenched (as it is throughout the world), but, using Senegal as an example, it is entrenched within a religiously conservative, poverty-stricken, post-colonialist society. All three variables are all equally important when attempting to fully depict the upward struggle that women in these conditions face. Too many people, however well-intending they may be, are too quick to judge religion as the main constraint on Muslim women fighting for equality in developing countries. Without a deeper understanding of the roles of many different forces affecting women’s rights and development in Muslim West Africa, it is too easy to look at a woman wearing a head-covering or married to a man with more than one wife and jump to the conclusion that she is oppressed solely by her religion. As I will argue in this paper, the situation is far more complex. Religion, in fact, is arguably not even the single biggest player in the oppression of women in Senegal (and, by extension, the rest of Muslim West Africa, except perhaps Northern Nigeria). As mentioned above, a myriad of other factors including high rates of poverty, unemployment, lack of education, and societal as well as institutional favoritism of men have all blended together to form the obstacles faced by feminists today.

Institutional Factors Inhibiting Positive Change: Politics/Law, Representation in Non-Governmental Organizations Religion Societal Forces: Culture and Tradition
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Education

Economics

I. Politics/Law, Representation in Non-Governmental Organizations.

The profound lack of general education of women in West Africa (the female illiteracy rate in Senegal is currently 73%) makes it difficult, if not impossible, for women to even understand the very laws that they need to work to change in order to improve their situation. Further, legal text is difficult even for literate women to interpret and to explain, in turn, to others. These factors mean that there is immense pressure and time constraints on the few women that have the ability to read and interpret legal texts (in Senegal, for example, the Family Code of Law). Nearly every organization with whom I spoke listed time pressures as one of the biggest obstacles they face as a women’s organization. This is easy to understand: time is scarce for political and non-governmental organizations throughout the world – nearly everyone with whom one talks on any given day will mention how busy they are or how little time they have to get everything done. Now put this in the context of an educated feminist in a developing country. Her number is small to begin with, yet the task ahead is huge and her responsibilities, therefore, are great. Like any other involved feminist, she must run an organization, recruit members, go to conferences, and write papers. On top of this, however, she faces the extra tasks of explaining relatively basic legal principles to other women in her country, interpreting legal texts already heavily stilted against her, designing programs that can be adapted for those that are illiterate, and fighting for her government to recognize that women share basic human rights, all while single-handedly raising her children and taking care of her home and her husband.

Women throughout the world face an uphill battle for equality. Yet women in developing countries must struggle just to reach the base of that hill. Their representation in government is minimal at best – African women only average 10% of legislative bodies and a much lower percentage of ministerial positions. As Coudou Bop of the African Association for Women in Research and Development (AAWORD/AFARD) mentioned, “Women are a priority for governments only in talk, not in action.” Politicians may briefly mention the need for an improvement in women’s rights during an election or in order to ensure the delivery of development aid, yet once in office, or upon receipt of the aid package, women’s issues are quickly forgotten.

Women’s issues are rarely discussed in legislative bodies largely because there are so few women in those bodies to begin with. Women cannot rely on their male counterparts to press for government recognition and support of their struggle; they must do it on their own. Yet, in order to make a real and tangible difference within political and legal circles, women themselves must become active members of legislative bodies, a task that is by no means easy:

"It is said that sometimes women are reluctant to present themselves as candidates; men are reluctant to support female candidates; some women are unwilling to support fellow women candidates; men take advantage of lack of solidarity among women to subdivide them; the potential support of rural grassroots women is usually forgotten and much concentration tends to focus on urban and elite women; women who come to positions of power through the back door become instruments of male domination and oppression of women – and therefore women must reject all back door and token offers for leadership positions."

Complicating the problem even more is the fact that of the small number of women in political office, many are hesitant to champion women’s rights as part of official work for fear of alienating the very men that "allowed" them to take office in the first place: "...women in positions of power do not vigorously bring up gender issues primarily because men have appointed most of them. They therefore acquiesce to men’s wishes or remain passive."

II. Religion.
Religion will not be able to bring about the emancipation of women as long as the exegesis of the text continues to belong to men’s domain and as long as [women’s] subordination is believed to have a religious basis and men and women are not considered as equal partners.

As I mentioned earlier, it is unfortunately too easy for non-Muslims, particularly western non-Muslims, to see Islam as overly morally strict, particularly in its physical and emotional oppression of women. We see images of Afghan women covered from head to toe in burqas and hear that Saudi women are not allowed to drive cars and quickly come to the conclusion, based on our own beliefs about freedom and propriety, that all Muslim women must be weak, unhappy, and too repressed to do anything about it. Of course this is no more the truth than the belief that all Catholics go to Confession every week. And further, it is based on the false belief that Christianity, the main "western" religion, does not oppress women. Rather, there are plenty of Muslim women that have decided based on their own beliefs to wear veils or head scarves and plenty of others that are pious Muslims despite the fact that they are successful professionals or do not wear traditional clothing.

The fundamental issue is one of choice. Broadly speaking, a woman can be oppressed in one of two ways. The first is if she is unable to achieve or is kept from achieving consciousness of her situation – in other words, if no choices are available to her regarding her life. In this example, the woman is oppressed because she has no option but to accept her situation, whether she likes it or not. Since she has no choices in life, and nothing against which to compare her situation, she does not even know there are other options available for her. This is an example, more than anything else, of a lack of education. From a very young age, the woman sees very little outside her direct family circle and, without any other experiences, is forced to accept her position as given. The second example is of a woman who may have, due to education, travel, other family members, etc., the consciousness to understand that there are other options available for her and wishes to pursue one or more of these options, but is forcibly kept (due to family, societal, and/or religious pressure) from pursuing these options. Though certain, particularly Islamic, women may in western eyes be considered oppressed, any woman that has chosen her life path, be it more traditional or more modern, urban or rural, (strictly) religious or not, independent or tied to a large family, professional or a full-time mother, etc., is not oppressed by virtue of the fact that she herself has chosen this course. As is becoming a common theme, though, education is key in this situation, for uneducated women are at an extreme disadvantage as far as choice is concerned, mainly due to the fact that it is nearly impossible for them to seek information and opinions outside of their social group. In other words, they are less likely to be exposed to alternate viewpoints, and therefore less likely to see or understand that there are even choices available. Uneducated women are also more likely to have their lives "directed" by men, again due to lack of choice, and often marry and begin having children at a very young age, which forces them into a particular life pattern before they are even able to understand what is happening to them.

In other words, it is a particular society’s interpretation of Islam, not Islam merely on its own, that can lead to oppression of women. Coudou Bop supported this idea when I spoke with her, saying that it is the way in which religion is socialized rather than the details of the religion itself that determine the extent of oppression. Using the difference between Senegalese Islam and Northern Nigerian Islam, she suggested that the same religion can be interpreted very differently in different contexts. Because of these differences in interpretation, she stressed that existing practices within a society or segment of society are much more important in determining the extent of female oppression than the details of Islam itself.

III. Societal forces: culture and tradition.

An authentic development policy for women should aim first and foremost to transform social relations between men and women. These relations, established in a context of domination, are inegalitarian, to the detriment of women, where certain economic, social, and cultural issues are concerned, owing to the roles and responsibilities assigned to each sex in society and especially in the roles of production and reproduction. This attribution of roles springs more from the construction of society than from biological determinism.

As I mentioned earlier, women in developing countries cannot rely on men to fight the battle for gender equality for or even with them. First of all, there is a general fear among men that improving the status of women is a zero sum
game, with an ensuing automatic loss of male power. More importantly for my purposes now, however, is the fact that there are simply too many other battles being fought in developing countries for anyone save women themselves to jump on the bandwagon of gender equality. Poverty, disease, lack of adequate health services, environmental degradation and economic exploitation, to name a few, tend to take priority. I am by no means suggesting that these battles are not important. However, improving the status of women can only have positive effects on efforts to solve the above-mentioned, and many other, problems. It should be no surprise that countries where most women do not enjoy the societal or legal right to work for pay are struggling economically: half of the potential workforce remains unrecognized and untapped.

This workforce lies untapped largely due to societal constraints on the activities of women. Societal traditions such as early marriage, polygamy, having many children, and subservience of women to men (particularly of wives to husbands) weigh heavily on any woman attempting to choose her life path. Mireille Eza of Conseil Sénégalais des Femmes (COSEF) (Senegalese Women’s Council), suggested that there is an immense social pressure on women to conform to society’s definition of what a woman “should” be. Women, according to Mireille, are handicapped by society’s definition of a “good woman,” and it is therefore difficult for women, even professionally successful women, to see themselves as free. Further, Mireille stated that the only way for women to achieve a measure of professional success in Senegal is if they are willing to challenge the very societal norms that say women cannot be educated, or become professionals, or hold government positions, etc.. Not all women, even educated women, can suffer through the repercussions and accomplish such a feat: “Les femmes ne vivent qu’à travers le regard de la société” (roughly translated, “Women live only through the eyes of society”). For her part, Mireille said she was lucky to have the support of her father, who raised her and her brothers as equals and allowed them the same opportunities. Because of this, she was able to get through school, some university courses, and land a good job doing what she likes to do – promoting the participation of women in government and in political parties – all while raising her son on her own. She admitted, however, that her case is very rare (“In Senegal,” she said, “I’m not considered very politically correct”) and that she was lucky to have such an unconventional father.

With few exceptions, however, most women striving for education and professional recognition are not so fortunate. Rather, they are denied access to education in the first place, particularly higher education. Even a woman who does manage to get to school – university in Dakar, as little as primary school in more remote villages – is often met with questions about why on earth she wants such an education, since all she’ll be in the end is a wife and mother anyway, or under who’s authority is she at school, etc., etc. Women are not considered their own persons – as in, “she’s a doctor; she’s a teacher…” but are instead identified as “the wife of…, the mother of…, the daughter of…” As Mireille put it, “Sans enfants, sans mari, tu n’es rien. Tu n’es rien” (“Without children, without a husband, you are nothing. You are nothing”).

Arguably, the need for social change eclipses all other categories – education, politics, even economics. Once individual mind-sets change, everything else will soon follow. Let me explain: what most hinders change in a racist, sexist, or classist society are racist, sexist, or classist individuals: those people who truly believe that women, blacks, or the poor have inherent traits that make them less able to be fully participating members in society. It is these individuals who write discriminatory laws, practice prejudiced hiring and employment policies, and work to exclude those with whom they disagree, or those they see as “different,” from any positions of power. Once these prejudiced mindsets are changed, possibilities open up. An African village chief, for example, may realize that women can have productive roles in society instead of merely reproductive roles, and that these productive roles, far from causing irreparable harm to village society, actually benefit everyone.

The problem, though, is that though a change in sexist mindsets may be the most direct way of improving the status of women, it is also the slowest and the most difficult. Traditions are just that – traditions – because of the fact that they have necessarily been around for a long, long time and are highly resistant to change. It is for this reason that I believe both better education and an increase in women’s economic power must come before any profound change in society can be expected to take place. In fact, changes for the better in both of the former domains will necessarily help to affect change in the latter: the more “normal” it becomes to see women who are literate, well-educated, working outside the home, and becoming openly and visibly involved in community and political activities, the more
mentality will adjust to accept and, eventually, welcome such a change. But work must being sooner, and primary schools – as will be discussed in Section IV – are the place to start.

IIIa. Societal Change: The FGC Issue as an Example.

Any approach to eradication [of excision] must not only be multidisciplinary but also culturally sensitive. Previous legislation has been ineffective because it has been perceived as being introduced under Western coercion; legislation enacted in consultation with some of the women’s organizations in the respective countries may fare better. It may not propose the drastic changes that some of us in the West desire, but it may be more acceptable to the indigenous people and therefore have a greater probability of success.

There is often an outcry from many different sectors of society when any group, particularly one that is not from the same state or region, attempts to change or stop a traditional cultural practice. In no case has this been more evident than in the debate over female genital cutting (FGC). Without getting into the details of the procedure, suffice it to say that it is something that has been done for centuries and is not performed solely among Muslim populations. Its history, in fact, predates the Islamic conversion of West Africa and exists among many non-Muslim African ethnic groups.

FGC’s most vocal critics are women from industrialized countries, who understandably portray the practice as barbaric, inhumane, degrading, and potentially life-threatening to women. Their arguments are often true: FGC has claimed many women’s lives, and has caused countless other women years of pain, disease, and difficult childbirth. Yet many African women, including most of the women with whom I spoke, resent efforts undertaken by these western women to put an end to excision. Why? The most superficial answer is that these women feel it is part of their tradition and wish to maintain it. There are of course many people who feel this way, but the main reason I heard as to why Africans resent the international publicity given to those attempting to halt FGC is that "they don’t understand our culture." Most of these women are themselves strongly against the practice, and work to end it. Excision is tradition, yes, but as Urdang writes, there is a "bold line between those customs that enhance the culture of a population and those that provide only negative influence." It is not useful for women not personally accustomed to the practice to attempt to stir up world resentment of the issue. Not only will the women most affected by FGC likely not hear nor understand the clamor, but those with control over the issue in the countries and villages themselves are likely to become even stronger advocates of excision so as not to, yet again, capitulate to western demands. As Kassamali quotes in her article, "Westemers have no understanding of the cultural nuances... we do not believe that force changes traditional habits and practices. Superior Western attitudes do not enhance dialogue or equal exchange of ideas. FG[C] does not exist in a vacuum but as part of a social fabric."

It is a classic scenario that is played out both in daily life as well as in international relations: one party has dominated the second for a long period of time, imposing its will as it pleases. Party #1 now turns to a highly personal or cultural issue, something held close to the hearts of Party #2, and demands that they change. Not only is Party #2 unwilling to change their belief or practice, but they are likely to support it even more in the face of external aggression. Such has been the story of FGC in Africa. The only way to truly put an end to this damaging practice is to raise support and awareness from within, particularly from other women personally affected by excision. Only they can fully understand not only what they are up against culturally and traditionally, but how those affected by and those in charge of the issue think and feel, and not cause resentment and an entrenchment of the practice in the process: "Let the indigenous people fight it according to their own traditions. It will die faster than if others tell us what to do."

Senegal is an interesting example to use when discussing FGC. The Senegalese government outlawed the procedure in January of 1999 due to what most of the women with whom I spoke described as a combination of internal and external pressures. The actual number of cuttings, however, is not believed to have slowed and may have even increased in some of the smaller villages. The most probable reasons for the lack of legislative success, as mentioned above, were a lack of public awareness as well as a profound lack of public will to ensure cooperation with the new law. FGC, in other words, is not a legislative issue. It is a cultural will not cease to exist overnight simply because a new law was passed or because women thousands of miles away in the United States are speaking out against it.
Coudou Bop provided interesting insight on the process of ending FGC. Not long after the law banning excision was passed, she undertook a study in several different regions of Senegal aimed at determining where and why the practice continued. She found that in zones where there had been consciousness-raising done before the law was passed, most people had discontinued the procedure. Citizens in these areas were actually happy with the law, which they saw as protective. In areas where there had not been any type of consciousness-raising or efforts at improving public awareness of the risks and consequences, however, excision continued as if there were no law at all. In these areas, Ms. Bop probed further to determine specific reasons as to why the practice continued. The answer she always received was “because it’s tradition.” As Kassamali mentions in her article on FGC, most ethnic groups that practice FGC cannot even remember why they do it in the first place. There are various theories, yet any discussion inevitably refocuses first on the role of FGC in men’s sexual domination of women, and then on the fact that it has always been done, and therefore it must continue to be done. The strength of these beliefs, and therefore the huge amount of work needed to change them, is palpable. One of the ideas Ms. Bop discussed with her focus groups – particularly those in villages continuing to practice FGC - was the issue of an individual’s right to personal integrity. Most people initially responded that this right was a western concept, alien to them. Once she explained it more specifically, however, it was easier to understand: “Do I have a right to expect that no one should cut off my arm?” The answer was “Yes, of course no one can cut off your arm.” No one has the right to deprive another of his or her physical “property.” However, when excision was then brought into the discussion as an example of the involuntary deprivation of the right of baby girls and young women to physical integrity, the connection was lost. This is an attitude that cannot be overcome by a law. It requires flexible, culturally appropriate consciousness-raising efforts. Those working to raise awareness of the risks and negative consequences associated with FGC must be adaptable; able to change tactics once it becomes obvious the first may not be working. There are many angles from which one can approach the issue of excision, depending on the concerns of the individual audience: the health risks; the loss of sexual pleasure for women and, therefore, their partners; women’s legal rights; women’s empowerment; the importance of women (and mothers of baby girls) making their own decisions, etc.. Once a connection with the audience is reached, the task becomes easier, consciousness is raised, and excision rates drop.

IV. Education.

"A successful woman is one who has recognized her own autonomy and has the power to make decisions regarding her life."

As I mentioned before, choice is the most important variable in determining whether or not a woman is oppressed. Broadly speaking, if she has freely chosen her life path, then she is not oppressed. If she has not been able to make her own decisions, however, she is not living a chosen life path and as such is much more likely to be oppressed.

Education is the most direct way for women anywhere, but particularly in West African society, to gain the skills and self-confidence necessary to make life choices. Most fundamentally, literate women are automatically less dependent on others – especially men – to read and interpret things for them. Being able to read (provided one has access to books or magazines) broadens one’s horizons beyond the constraints, for example, of village life. A woman in a small, remote village may know of little beyond her daily life – the ability to read can show her what other options and ways of life exist, and that she may choose to explore these other options if she so desires. Further, even the most basic education gives women valuable, non-domestic job skills that in an ideal situation they may use to support themselves and/or their families. While the formal labor market is extremely difficult for women to enter (this will be discussed shortly), without job skills they cannot even make the attempt.

But why is it so important for women to work in the formal economy, for pay? Clearly, nearly any person, male or female, in the developing world can benefit from a well-paid job. For women, however, the reward is infinitely greater than just the paycheck. West African women will work regardless of whether or not they are paid – in agriculture, domestically, cooking for the family or village, etc.. Participation in the formal sectors of the economy, however, gives many women a sense of confidence and self-worth that is hard to find in the work they do for their husbands or for the men of the village. Dieng Bangouna, Permanent Secretary of Information, Education and Communication for the West African Women’s Association (WAWA/FAO), argued that working in the formal economy gives women a sense of "moral stability" that they cannot find when basically working as servants to their husbands. She added that
it is necessary to recognize the psychological value inherent in both the domestic and professional aspects of one’s life.

The problem, however, is the profound lack of will within most West African societies, and throughout the developing world, for educating girls and women. It is not considered economically worthwhile to invest money in girls’ education, since they will soon be married and raising children anyway, and will “leave the father’s village for the husband’s village.” But perhaps even more important than the real money spent to educate a girl is the opportunity cost of her education. Girls are expected to help their mothers with domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, fetching food and water, and taking care of younger children from a very young age. It is not uncommon to see a girl as young as six or seven years old carrying a younger sibling on her back or even pounding grain. Though obviously not remunerated for their services, young girls provide valuable and necessary help to their mothers. If the girls are at school all day (or sent to collective boarding schools in nearby villages), the mothers then either have even more work or the work does not get done. The economic crises touched off by the IMF/World Bank structural adjustment policies in countries such as Senegal have made this burden even heavier. Since the policies took effect during the last two decades, the percentage of educated and vocationally-trained girls has actually decreased and is expected to continue this trend between 2000 and 2015. Therefore, though education will undoubtedly prepare the girl for a better future, she is hindered from achieving that future because of her tasks in the present. Looking at this a slightly different way, because of their domestic responsibilities, young girls are systematically denied the ability to gain the very education that would allow them to choose, if they wanted, a different life path for their future. There is a profound need to put an end to this pre-determination of life roles for girls.

Even if a young girl is permitted to attend school, however, her attendance does not guarantee that she will grow up free from the gender biases inherent in her daily life. Rather, it has been shown that even in school, boys and girls are socialized into "correct" gender roles from a very young age. This problem, however, presents an important opportunity for desocialization or, if you prefer, the different type of socialization mentioned in the previous section. As Coudou Bop mentioned in her discussion of her work on the female genital cutting issue, it is infinitely more difficult to change the attitudes and customs of older generations because they have been firmly ingrained in their traditional ways for many years. Young children, however, are an excellent place to begin in the construction of new traditions based on gender fairness and equal opportunities because they have not yet internalized beliefs about male domination or the supposed “proper” roles for women. Primary schools therefore provide a unique opportunity, as I discussed above, to begin new traditions where women are respected as equal economic, academic, and social partners.

V. Economics.

The sexual division of labor, as defined within the private sphere (family) and public sphere (economic and political), constitutes one of the reasons for [women’s] exploitation. It assigns to men and women “appropriate” aptitudes and tasks, and this is expressed in a series of practices which enable them to be constantly conscious not only of being “men” and “women,” but also of the sort of relationship they should establish between them. Hence, the need to develop projects and adopt development to modify such relationships.

Lack of economic power was listed by every woman and organization with whom I spoke as the most significant factor limiting women’s advancement in West Africa. Women make up a full two-thirds of the informal economy (that is, unpaid tasks such as cooking extra food to barter for needed goods, collective child care, agricultural production for the family, etc.). However, women’s participation in the formal economy is hindered by an oppressing combination of law, traditional ideas of gender roles, economic crisis, and lack of access to credit. As alluded to earlier, women are values for their reproductive roles rather than their productive roles. Because half of the potential labor force is thereby automatically excluded, however, it is society as a whole that suffers.

West Africa as a whole is the poorest region of the world. Most countries have high unemployment numbers, low literacy and education rates, high birth rates, and massive public health concerns. Added to this, many of these countries, including Senegal, are in deep economic crisis - experiencing low or negative economic growth rates - as a result of the IMF/World Bank structural adjustment policies. In order to curb inflation and lower government spending,
these policies forced governments to cut many valuable public services, particularly in health care and education. Though these cuts affect all members of society, it is women that suffer the most. Many schools can now only afford to stay open if the pupils pay a small fee. Yet, as I mentioned earlier, if fathers are already hesitant economically to send their daughters to school, they will be even less likely to do so if they have to pay tuition. More economic stress on the family means the work done by girls is even more needed, and education drops lower still on the list of priorities. Further, economic crisis makes it more difficult for villages to invest in "technology" such as millet grinders and new wells. As it is women who pound the millet and fetch the water, lack of grinders and wells makes their work less productive and more time-consuming, allowing them even less time for even informal economic participation. Completing the circle, it has traditionally been through participation in the informal sector that women have been able to either offset their daughters' work and perhaps even make small amounts of money to help pay for their daughters' education or to free enough time for themselves to receive education or vocational training. If women no longer have the time for this informal economic participation – or if the money raised from this participation must now be used to feed the family – women and girls will remain largely uneducated and their future economic and political participation, in turn, will be limited. The situation is unfortunately not much better even for women with education and/or vocational training. If there is competition for employment, which there almost always is, particularly in urban areas, preference is given to men, regardless of qualification.

Further inhibiting the socio-economic advancement of West African women is the fact that nearly all of them, including those I interviewed, lead double lives: they work full days as professionals or, more commonly, as farmers - planting, tilling, harvesting, etc., and a second full day as wives, mothers, and servants to their husbands. Stephanie Urdang interviewed several women in Guinea-Bissau who clearly explained these burdens, which are particularly heavy on rural women:

"When we talk of women as providers of food, it's not simply a question of going down to the local market, buying foodstuffs ready for cooking or often precooked and coming back to do the final preparations. For the African peasant woman, it means involvement in the entire productive process, from clearing the land through harvesting, and then pounding until the rice is ready for cooking. Even at this point, it's not a case of filling a saucepan with water from the faucet, it may mean walking a few hours to collect water from a well. And then, there is no knob to turn so that a stove can provide instant heat. Rather, a fire must be built and tended, which in turn requires that wood be collected from the forest beforehand."

And later:

"...the women have to work so hard. Take for instance the time we spent in Lala. You remember the little boy who ran crying after a group of men? The men were only going to look at the fields, not to work. The women were busy doing all the necessary work, cooking and so forth, and the men were only going to drink hard and look over the fields. And even then, do you think they would take the little boy with them? The mother had to leave her work to fetch the child away from them."

"The women work like slaves, you know, for the man. They work very, very hard. But the worst is among the Fula and the Mandinga. The men sit at home and do nothing. Nothing, nothing. The women do all the work. The Fula live in a very poor area of the country. Sometimes a woman has to walk five, six hours to get manioc or something like that. And her man? He just sits at home and waits for her. When she returns he takes the best food for himself. Ah, the women have to be very servile."

Part of the reason women are forced to lead these double lives is the strong sexual division of labor prevalent throughout West Africa. There are jobs and tasks assumed to be "women's work," and others that are reserved solely for men. Therefore, even if women have achieved the skills or education necessary to successfully perform in a certain job, as will be discussed in greater detail later, they are often denied employment solely because of their gender. The counter to this is that men, no matter how strong the economic need, often refuse to perform or even help with jobs traditionally done by women – including child care, planting, farming, cooking, etc.. It is easy for even non-economists to see that the most profound result of this division is a highly inefficient economy: the female half of the workforce is overworked while the male half is often underworked, and women's skills lay idle while the economy
flounders largely due to lack of skilled workers. It makes little sense to the outside observer – myself included - why, in the poorest region of the world, faced with economic stagnation, something as trivial as gender is allowed to hinder direly-needed growth.

There is yet another cost attached to the huge amount of work done by women, a cost that remains largely hidden: having the time to pursue an education could allow women to develop leadership skills, become political, business, economic leaders, etc. and in turn force previously hidden issues of gender equality to the forefront of legislation. Similar to the problem of economic growth mentioned above, it is ironic in a sense that because socio-economic oppression makes women's lives already too full, they do not have the time to gain the skills necessary to better their situation.

Yet another problem women are faced with is that of land. Women cannot own land in much of West Africa, and are therefore also forbidden from making money off of the land they till. Rather, it is women who work the soil (save for, perhaps, a little help from men when plowing is needed), and their husbands who receive the money from that work. Concurrently, governments will provide subsidies for agricultural production – provided it is production of a cash crop such as groundnuts – and cash crops are produced only by men. Though it is women who are in charge of the agriculture that produces Senegal's food supply, this is considered "subsistence" farming by the government and as such is not eligible for any type of subsidy. Further, women's access to credit is limited at best – a mere 1% of all government agricultural loans goes to women, the percentage of loans for small business or any other entrepreneurial efforts is not much better. To make matters worse, the reasons why the government and/or banks are reluctant to offer credit to women are the very factors that make them so in need of the opportunities offered by credit in the first place: low income, socio-economic subordination, lack of guarantees on their production, heavy domestic responsibilities, lack of education, etc.. Further, women themselves tend to be fearful of the banking system, as credit transactions are most often conducted in the colonial language (most rural women speak only their indigenous language) and it is widely reputed to be "inaccessible" to the under-privileged.

A list of problems will sometimes reveal an answer to those problems. Regarding women's oppression in West Africa – and I would not hesitate to expand to women's oppression in most any developing country – the single best answer is economic liberation: "Nothing is better than if women can become economically independent. We can talk about discrimination against women and about domination by men because the woman does not have economic independence, because she depends on her husband." All of the organizations with whom I spoke listed economic liberation as the first and most important step toward female empowerment, and is in fact a prerequisite to all other forms of domination. Without economic power, there not only is it difficult for women themselves to force change through political channels, there is little incentive for governments to listen to them. Looking at it bluntly, without economic power, women are not even part of the government's constituency. Once women gain economic capacity – and the education that can and must accompany it – they will gain the self-confidence necessary to lead more independent lives and have the resources to force positive political change.

The Role of Men and the Threat to Traditional Society:

The picture looks bleak, yet I came back from Senegal more inspired than I have ever been. The dozens of women I met and had the chance to interview are, to me, infinitely more inspiring than most of the "western" feminists about which we hear so much in the United States and in Europe. Knowing they face an uphill (if not completely vertical) battle, they have clearly marked their beliefs, their goals, and the paths needed to achieve them. The following is my interpretation of these ideas based on the interviews I conducted with different women and organizations:

1). Feminism is not against men.

As mentioned above, societal attitudes are harder to change than nearly any other variable. One such attitude is a feeling of superiority, accompanied by the constant fear of losing that superiority. This attitude, of course, is not constrained merely to male-female relationships, but rather to any and all relationships in which the power of one party can be sustained only through the oppression of the second. This was the case in the US throughout the at
least the 19th century, if not longer, in South Africa under apartheid, and still today in Northern Ireland, Tibet, and many other places. Most men anywhere, but particularly in developing countries, are understandably wary of feminism because it threatens to fundamentally alter the societal system from which they derive their power. Further, it is easy to forget that most African countries achieved their independence a mere 35-40 years ago. Memories of colonial oppression and the Africans’ lack of power are still clear in many minds. With colonialism such a recent memory, men today often relish whatever power they now yield, however nominal it may be, as a step away from a detested history. Feminism, then, apart from being a western movement ill-suited to the African context, is often portrayed as an attempt to encroach on what is considered by many to be the rightful political and societal position of African men.

The women with whom I talked not only anticipated such a reaction, they were well-prepared for it. Feminism is not against men, they said. It does not aim to remove men from all positions of power and systematically replace them with women. Rather, it strives for equality with men – an equality that cannot and will not be achieved at the current status quo, because “[e]ven if theoretically, the laws are intended to protect all citizens on an equal basis, they are gender biased, because they are principally determined by the needs and priorities of the dominant group, that is men.” Only if women are able to gain equal access to and equal positions in political, legal and economic circles can the status quo change for the better of society as a whole: not only for women, but not just for men, either. Mireille Eza of COSEF put it a slightly different way, stressing that women are fighting to replace patriarchal authority with parental authority, not only matriarchal authority; to share power, not to take power, and for equality, not superiority. The importance of including men in any process of change was stressed by the women with whom I talked, as was the need to bring people – both men and women – to a certain level of understanding before implementing any changes. In other words, as was mentioned in the discussion of female genital mutilation, simply passing a law without opportunity for citizen input or public education beforehand will change nothing. Placing a few token women in a political administration will not only unnecessarily anger men, but it will not bolster women’s representation either. What is needed is a clear, public discussion of women’s rights and their potential roles in government alongside continual reassurance, particularly for men in positions of power, that empowering women does not mean, nor require, the disempowerment of men. Instead, equal abilities would beget equal opportunities.

2). Feminism is a threat to traditional society.

A counterpart to the debate about the relevance of feminism in developing countries is the debate about the amount of disruption that an improvement in the status of women would cause to traditional societies such as those in much of Africa. This argument is in fact used by many (mostly) men arguing against the promotion of women’s rights. The argument is as follows: For the most part, traditional African societies are tightly-knit, family based units where everyone helps if another is in need, children are well looked-after, crime is rare, and trust is high. The society lives in harmony with itself. In Europe and America, however, as soon as women, particularly mothers, began working outside of the home in large numbers, society began deteriorating. As a result, crime rates are now sky high, children grow up unsupervised and therefore are more likely to get involved in gangs or abuse drugs, and no one trusts anyone. Strictly conservative Islamists, according to the Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD/AFARD), are likely to go a step further. Fundamentalism, they write,

…sees feminism as a subversive and dangerous ideology that undermines the basic values of our societies. Fundamentalism argues that traditional values that keep women in their “place” are to be defended and preserved because they promote order, social harmony, and respect for hierarchy. By “traditional” values, fundamentalists mean the perpetuation of the gender-based inegalitarian power structure and hierarchy that keeps women in subordinate positions. Arranged marriages, polygamy, chastity, obedience, [and] subservience to the husband are among these traditional values… Any attempt to challenge these values is considered as a threat to the whole social structure. This explains why fundamentalists see feminism as a threat to these traditional values. For instance, in Africa, even moderate family codes that recognize some basic rights for women are considered as a violation of the Islamic Law, the Sharia. Fundamentalists see feminism as a harbinger of subversion and destabilization. This is why they attribute some of the social ills of contemporary society to feminists. For instance, the rise in the number of working women is viewed apprehensively by fundamentalists who blame working mothers for any perceived instability in their families.
For many, the relationship is easy to draw: an increase in women's status, in women's rights, and in women's participation in the labor force has negative consequences for social harmony and for society as a whole. Any increase in women's rights can only be to the detriment of the rest of society, particularly the family. Why, then, should more traditional societies be so anxious to improve the status of women?

Unsurprisingly, feminists in general, but particularly in developing countries, have spent large amounts of time and paper attempting to refute these beliefs. Their arguments are valid: child-rearing is a parental obligation, not something that rests solely on the mother. Therefore, if the mother is away working at any given time, the father should take care of the children and vice versa. Mothers cannot be held solely to blame for the wrong-doings of their children and certainly not for the problems of society in general. Further, there is a myriad of reasons for the increase in the crime rate, drug abuse, etc., in industrialized nations — far more than I have the time to get into here — other than the increase in women's participation in the labor force. In the end, though, feminists have striven to counter the belief that improving the status of women could only harm traditional society.

While these mainstream feminists have a strong point, it's the traditionalists who are actually right in this case: feminism is a threat to traditional society. Its goal, in fact, is to fundamentally change the very basis of that society. And why shouldn't it? If traditional society is unjust in the first place, it is certainly no better nor does it need to be maintained any more than contemporary "Western" society.

Let me elaborate. To begin a discussion of issues involving traditional society, its benefits and its faults, I often asked the women I was interviewing to define the term "social harmony." The exact words of the responses varied, but the general idea was the same from every individual woman, from every organization: "A harmonious society is one in which no group nor individual wields power over another; in which no group is oppressed; in which there is no prejudice based on gender, class, race, religion, ethnic group or age." In other words, a society in harmony is one that maintains equal power relations. Following this statement to its logical conclusion, a society that oppresses more than half of its population is nowhere near harmonious in the first place and therefore does not need be maintained in order to serve the interests of the oppressors. In fact, the only way to create a harmonious society in the first place is to go against traditional society by improving the status of women.

During my interview with her, Coudou Bop brought an interesting twist to this argument. Traditionalists, she stated, have no problem with many other contemporary or even "Western" movements and ideologies such as globalization, democratic government, etc., merely saying "Il faut qu'on s'adapte" ("We have to adapt"). Unfortunately, as soon as one brings up societal changes that may positively affect the status of women, the same people who were so quick to support adaptation to democracy or globalization suddenly begin to stress the importance of traditional society and how it will be so negatively affected by changes in the status of women. Women, in other words, are not allowed to change. The rest of society may live in the 21st century, but women are expected to remain in the 15th, she said, and this does nothing but hinder society as a whole.

It is easy to see that arguments regarding feminism’s inherent destruction of traditional society are, while not entirely incorrect, fundamentally flawed. For the most part, these arguments are put forth by men in positions of power who care much less about the preservation of traditional society than they do about preservation of their own power, particularly over the female half of society. AAWORD/AFARD writes that traditionalists "...are against women's economic and social progress because the latter threaten their own power and influence." Furthermore, as I mentioned earlier in the discussion of female genital cutting, just because an action or belief is traditional does not necessarily mean it is good — as Stephanie Urdang wrote in her book about the women's liberation struggle in Guinea-Bissau, "There is a "bold line between those customs that enhance the culture of a population and those that provide only negative influence."

Nor is there any more need to hold on to negative customs as there is to hold on to negative modern practices such as random personal violence. Oppressing half of a population may be a traditional practice, but it is one that has immeasurable negative consequences and must be abandoned.
Conclusion:

One of the questions I asked the women I interviewed was how they would define a "successful woman." I was surprised at first by how different the responses were. I was expecting most women to say something about happiness, about empowerment and about being able to make choices regarding their lives. The issue of autonomy was shared by most of the interviewees, though "being happy" was only mentioned by Mireille Eza. I even heard from one organization that "being a good wife and mother" was the best way to define a successful woman, a response I found slightly unusual from an organization promoting women's liberation. The more I have thought about this issue, though, the more I realize how many different factors must feed into the answer. I discussed several "categories" of change earlier in this paper: politics and law, religion, societal forces, education, and economics. I agree with my interviewees that economic liberation of women is the most important factor, in that it must change before change can effectively occur in the other sectors. To be "successful," however, women must feel be content in all aspects of their lives – domestically, politically, economically, socially… Looking at the issue this way provides a far more complex answer. Yes, women must achieve economic power in order to rise above patriarchal domination. But if their liberation is limited only to the economic sphere, it will be a hollow victory.

I mentioned earlier that the path ahead for African women looks bleak, and it does. There is so much work to be done, so many entrenched beliefs about gender roles, and so little institutional help, it would be easy for African feminists to take a quick look outside, see what they’re up against, and run right back inside. Yet the women I spoke with are doing exactly the opposite. They are pressing for and forcing change at a rate and dedication that belies their small numbers. Their work impressed me as much as I was stunned by their success.

As I was leaving my interview with many of the women from RAFET (Réseau Africain pour la Promotion de la Femme Travailleuse – African Network for the Promotion of the Working Woman), I watched as they said their goodbyes to each other by saying "You’re a dynamic woman! Keep on being a dynamic woman!" More dynamic women like those from RAFET, WAWA/AFAO, COSEF, AAWORD/AFARD and APROFES are exactly what all women of Africa need.