Women and Community Development: Issues and Challenges

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Abstract

The question of women participation in community development has been widely debated since 1975 when the United Nations organized the first women’s conference in Mexico. This was aimed at giving women equal opportunities with men to spur community development. UN has further come up with programs promoting women in community development as women fight for their space in male dominated community. This is evidenced in Beijing Action. In Kenya, transformative conference was done in 1992 at a National Women’s Convention under the theme: Women’s Agenda for a Democratic Kenya, over 2,000 women representatives from across the whole country demanded that the democratization be engendered; an overhaul of legal policy framework, to remove all forms of discrimination against women in access to decision-making positions, in employment and community development. Despite progress UN has achieved towards gender equality, women have continued to suffer discrimination all over the world. My paper therefore will focus on forms of discrimination meted against women with special reference to women in Kenya where the gender equality has remained a mystery. The study was guided by empowerment theory, feminism theory and Revolution Theory by Carl marx. According to Ledwith (2005) “Empowerment is not an alternative solution to the redistribution of unequally divided resources”. Empowerment is more than providing the resources for one to help them out of poverty, it is an act of providing the necessary tools to shape the whole person and promote a critical way of thinking and consciousness. This theory can be applied to development work through the action of going to a community rather than waiting on the outside to be invited in. My argument is that to attain gender equality will need goodwill from all actors or else it remains paper work and far from reality. Failure to address this inequality may lead to revolutions similar to the ones witnessed in political spheres to bring change. This paper will shed more light on the little recognized roles women can perform to develop the society hence accelerated community development. Therefore, the role of women in community development is significant.

Key Words:

1.0 Background Information

Community development is such a varied practice that it is difficult to establish either a single history or approach. It is practiced around the world, in both the global north and the global south. It can be be practiced as a generalized approach as it is often in the third world that includes the empowerment of community members, the creation of basic infrastructures like water and electricity and the development of housing and commerce(Kenny 2002) or it can be practiced as a highly specialized approach as it is with the United States where a non-profit community development corporation may focus on rehabilitating housing in one neighborhood while another community development corporation concentrates on small business development in another neighborhood(Stoecker 1997). Some community development is practiced as top down elite controlled service provision in poor communities while other community development focuses much more on the building of the capacity of community residents to define their own issues, gather the resources to address those issues, and go to work on solving them(Kenny & Clarke 2010). This latter form of community development brings in the question of community organizing which will be discussed later in another forum.

It is also important to understand that community development is not simply about building things. Safe drinking water, schools, houses and other physical things are of course important. But even more important
is building the capacity of the community members to organize them so that they can set and achieve their own community goals. In other words, it is about both building the house and building the capacity of the people to build houses and control them.

The origin of community development can be traced to a number of sources in the U.S.A, Britain and one former British colonial territory, India. Its origins in British colonial territories in Africa do not appear closely related to the noted sources as well as to the efforts of universities and international institutions. This paper traces the origins and growth of community development as a profession and shows the likely connection between the various sources of its origin which include agricultural extension work in the U.S.A and Britain (PSICS 2011).

The fourth world conference on women held in Beijing in September 1995 raised hopes of a substantial improvement in women’s condition across the world and particularly in Africa. The Beijing Declaration and program of action considered by the United Nations secretary General to be ‘one of the most remarkable documents ever produced by an intergovernmental conference”, commits states to taking concrete action in twelve priority areas in relation to women’s autonomy. Ten years after the Beijing and on the heels of the seventh regional conference in Addis Ababa, African women and girls had not really made remarkable gains in such essential areas like fighting poverty (Pambazuka news 2004).

It is important to note that women constitute the majority of electorate yet they are the most underrepresented in decision making fora. The existing legal statutes and widely held traditional beliefs in our patriarchal systems place them in a very subordinate position. It has been pointed out by researchers such as Bookman (1973), Abbott (1977), and Feldman (1982) that although women are judicially equal to men before the law, their legal status is in many respects characterized by assumptions of dependence on men. These are expressed in marriage and divorce laws and access to land rights. These structural barriers are clear manifestations that the gender relations and ideology legitimizing it continue to prevent women from moving into profitable opportunities in the economy. The current debate that aims at facilitating or affording women a share of representation in political parties or institutions is a process in the right direction. In fact the political parties act that has been enacted by parliament affirms the principle of women’s participation in party structures. Mainstream political parties are using the women inclusion issue as a major rallying point to muster the vast women vote.

Statistics available in third world countries indicate that women constitute nearly two thirds of the rural population. Studies by authors such as (Boserup1970, Palmer1975, Denis1976, Moser1993 and Sall 2000) among others demonstrate that women are the majority of the small scale farmers in the rural areas. They are also the custodians of family life. In Kenya women have a long tradition of participation in community and national development. It should be noted that during colonial days, women were encouraged and also mobilized their energies for community development.

It is important to note that the Government of Kenya has on its part recognized women as vulnerable group and targeted its development efforts towards meeting women’s needs. Evidence of these efforts is reflected in the formation of the women’s Bureau in 1975, to coordinate women activities. The abortive marriage between the national Maendeleo ya Wanawake organization and then ruling party, KANU, during the one party system in the late 1980s was a testimony to such efforts. In the recent past, police focus has been on the affirmative action to integrate women into the mainstream development process. This has been through the appointment of women to key positions in decision making organs. The government is also addressing this by reservation of a third of any appointments to women. There is also the National committee on the status of women (NCSW) supported by the government among other efforts. Currently the Government
has set up a women development find with an initial budgetary allocation of Ksh. 2 billion. This indicates its commitment towards the challenges facing women in the development process.

Statement of the problem
Women are making large but frequently “invisible” economic contribution, particularly in agriculture and the informal business sector while men tend to dominate the formal sector. More than 75 per cent of women live in rural areas (ILO 2004), where they dominate the agricultural sector (floriculture, tea, coffee, vegetables, cereals, poultry, mangoes and oranges). Women work for longer hours due to their dual role of production and reproduction as compared to men. On average women work for 12.9 hours as compared with 8.2 hours for men, yet women earn less because more of these hours are not remunerated (Saito, Mekonnen, and Sparling 1994). According to World Bank Report (2004), women face more severe legal, regulatory and administrative barriers to starting and running business than do their male counterparts. This constituted a gap that this paper intended to address. The purpose of this paper was to re-examine issues and challenges facing women in community development with specific reference to Kenya.

Assumptions of community development
The theoretical concepts and practice of community development is based on a number of assumptions and principles. However, in this study we will deal with assumptions though sometimes assumptions and principles are rarely distinguished. Community development as a process may be based on some assumptions which may include but not limited to the following:

1. It is assumed that the society is democratic enough and all members of a democratic society need to have access to both social and physical science knowledge to help them improve their lives. The underlying notion emphasized is that local people (Target beneficiaries) have to assume responsibility for improving their well being development.

2. It is assumed that community development will develop or strengthen local organizations and groups and to ensure coordination of their activities. Local leadership of these organizations and other formal and informal leadership within the community have to be identified and developed through relevant training which increases the ability problems, plan solutions, implementations and manage the activities.

3. It is assumed that there are adequate resources to implement the community development strategies. The community mobilizes and uses its own material and monetary resources. Members of the community have to work with the community development worker in determining the resources that are locally available and how they can be used. They have also to determine resources that are locally available and how they can be used. They have also to determine the resources that have to be imported.

4. It is assumed that community development work has to be entrusted to trained professionals who knows what needs to be done and who have the skills for doing it. The reason is that social science knowledge is much difficult to apply in view of the changing nature of social science relationship. Individuals have also to choose to make use of the knowledge.
From the aforementioned assumptions, it is evident that women have continued to be marginalized in community development due to patriarchal nature of the society. Democracy, economic leadership, property and land ownership and education is dominated by men and therefore even assumptions of community development are engendered.

**Methodology**

The study was guided by empowerment theory, feminism theory and Revolution theory. According to Ledwith (2005), "Empowerment is not an alternative solution to the redistribution of unequally divided resources". Empowerment is more than providing the resources for one to help them out of poverty, it is an act of providing the necessary tools to shape the whole person and promote a critical way of thinking and consciousness. This theory can be applied to development work through the action of going to a community and waiting on the outside to be invited in. The idea of “trading lightly” is to work along individuals and not possess an overarching power. Action need to be taken through advocating for change on both an individual, community and policy level. Empowerment can be obtained through working together and forming a collective state of consciousness that promotes and encourages change.

On the other hand, one cannot talk of women without feminism. According to Tuyizire (2007), women and men are made rather than born, thereby defining as a socially learned behavior. Tamale (1999) challenges the dominant position taken by men in almost all aspects of life, and stresses that women have started defying custom, culture discrimination and marginalization to join politics. Feminism therefore is an important theoretical and ideological tool that provides women with an instrument for challenging gender-based oppression and advocates for a more inclusive socio-economic and political agenda. It also has the ability to accommodate women’s social diversities and identities which should be accorded space and voice to engage in social development and political change. Based on this argument, the study found out barriers women encounter on pathway to community development.

Revolution theory explains that systems of exploitation inevitably lead to some form of revolution, whether violent or non-violent. Some conditions leading to revolution include: widespread grievances, rising expectations, blockage of change of legitimacy of government, military breakdown or politicalization and class coalitions like peoples power. When women rise up and compete for space with men, it is obvious that the donkey is tired and further pressure on it will just worsen the situation. Women can no longer keep quite in matters of community development.

Similarly, the expectations society has of women in community development are informed by the same patriarchal values. Women are expected to carry the burden of production and reproduction in all social welfare needs, including the women’s and children’s agendas and all disadvantaged peoples. At the same time, they are expected to maintain higher ethical, aesthetic and moral standards than their male counterparts. This amounts to unfair treatment of women.

**The place of women in community development**

Women place in the context of African culture has moved from the kitchen to the market place. Women today play a crucial role in the development of any society. It thus becomes impossible to talk of community development without articulating the role of women (Masinde 1987).

The approaches to women issues in development have evolved over time. In the 1950s and early 1960s, the strategies adopted mostly focused on welfare where women were viewed as victims of underdevelopment and thus needed assistance. However, from the 1970s, there was a paradigm shift in the ways in which women issues in development were approached. From 1970s, when the women decade was declared, and after meetings in Mexico in 1975, Copenhagen in 1990, and Nairobi in 1985, there was emphasis on the
equity and anti-poverty approaches. The focus was to give women opportunities to enhance their status and productivity especially in agriculture. However, these approaches did not seem to realize the desired results until the Beijing women’s conference of 1995. In this conference, there was worldwide adoption of the efficiency and empowerment approaches.

At this point in time, women were perceived as a resource for development. This era was characterized by issues of affirmative action, reservation and inclusiveness in all spheres of life in society. Women’s role in development should therefore be understood within this context of changing development approaches. In Kenya today, there is encouragement of women to actively participate in politics in order to entrench themselves in the decision making process. Evidence of this is the emergence of women’s lobby groups, to engage established traditions (Masinde 2002).

Women are a disadvantaged group when it comes to planning environments despite various policy pronouncements (Muuzale and Leonard 1982) have also indicated that women’s groups activities are further constrained by seasonal labour demands on their individual family holdings. When it reaches its peak, the poorer women who cannot afford hired labor tend to drop out from collective group activities. Apparently, these are the times when groups engaged in agricultural related activities which need women’s labor. This directly contributes to underdevelopment in part of women.

**Challenges facing women in community development**

Every country in the world wants to rank top on the list of most developed nations in the world. Development is not that easy to achieve especially if there is less production, a country economy is stagnant or there are hindering factors such as gender inequality which is a core issue which has been highlighted. Gender disparity or discrimination poses immense impact on development that every nation should be well versed with.

Discrimination is another challenge faced by women. It is based on sex, tribe, caste, racial or ones language. Where discrimination against women exist, definitely it will result in underdevelopment. As mentioned before, women constitute half of the world population. When they are marginalized, then half of the world is left out of production and therefore a country or community production is cut by half. In Kenya specifically, discrimination is evident in areas of land ownership. We cannot talk of community development without land being one of the factors of production. Women property rights are property and inheritance rights enjoyed by all women as a category within a society at any point in time. The patterns and rights of property ownership vary between societies. The lack of control over the productive and non-productive resources that is apparent in both rural and urban settings places women at a reduced level of advantage in areas of security of home, maintaining a basis for survival and accessing economic opportunities (Steinzor, Nadia 2003).

Culture also serves no good in community development. A good reference here is China. China may be a major power now but it was the world’s most developed country in the middle ages and stagnated or went backwards for centuries. Part of this was cultural, pride and sense of self sufficiency that led to a closing of China’s borders. “China seems to have long been stationary”. “A country which neglects or despises foreign commerce cannot transact the same quantity of business which it might do with different laws and institutions (Smith, 1776). However that has changed but nationalism, suspicion, or radical philosophy still has some countries closed down to outside involvement on ground of communism in North Korea or extremist Islam in Taliban Afghanistan locking countries out of development. This can be inferred to exclusion of women in community development.
Women’s access to finances is another challenge. Land and property ownership rights have often restricted their access to formal financing mechanisms and decreases their contribution to Kenya’s economic growth due to discriminatory African customary laws which tend to favor men. This is made worse in event that the husband dies and the man’s community takes over the deceased property. This is due to the prevalence of a collateral based banking system and lack of credit bureau that could capture women’s excellent repayments rates in microfinance are key constraints (Besley, T 1995).

The assumption that community development work has to be entrusted to trained professionals who knows what needs to be done and who have the skills for doing it poses another challenge of inequalities in access of education. The cost of education is the most common cause for girls dropping out of school (Government of Kenya 2002) In general, when the cost of education increases at the household level, households, families tend to prefer schooling for boys. Factors such as teenage and early marriages also lead to lower transition rates to secondary and tertiary education for girls who are potential(Kimalu et al.2002).Women’s lower education levels results in their lower labor force participation, as well as higher fertility and lower levels for skills for women entrepreneurs. A growing body of macroeconomic evidence shows that gender inequalities in access to schooling constrain productivity and output.Klasen uses education spending as a share of GDP, initial fertility levels, and changes in these as instruments for levels of, and changes in, the female-to-male ratio of years of education. He concludes that gender inequalities have a significant and adverse impact on economic growth rates (Klasen 1999).

HIV/AIDS and gender related violence are of paramount importance in this study. The increasing number of widows and orphans resulting from a high number of HIV/AIDS cases have significantly increased women’s workload and their financial responsibilities (USAID 2002).This has caused changes in land use, household labor and financial standing because of loss of financial assets, increased costs of living, increased burdens of care giving and orphan fostering and general disintegration of family ties. All these factors negatively impacts on women participation in development. On the other hand, physical and sexual violence meted against women and girls are on the increase. This is because the patriarchal society still holds belief that women are part of their property and therefore what a woman produces belongs to her husband. This is evident in African customary laws regarding land and property ownership. For instance, under customary law, there is a general principle that a husband should manage his wife’s property, whether acquired before or during marriage. Thus a married woman may use matrimonial property, but she cannot dispose of it without her husbands consent. This amounts to gender violence. Further, under customary law, a man beating his wife can be considered reasonable chastisement and may therefore take place with impunity. Gender based violence clearly inhibits women’s ability to participate actively in public and economic life (World Bank 2004).

**Emerging issues in community development**

Community development cannot be exhausted without special mention to the emerging issues. Much attention has been given to matters of sustainability and globalization at the expense of of regionalism, technology, the housing crisis and local food systems. These issues count most in community development. The concept of regionalism has received attention on and off during the past half century especially in the field of housing and education. The central idea of regionalism is that the economic, environmental and social issues facing the communities transcend political boundaries (Dreier, Mollenkopf, & Swanstrom, 2004). Further, the importance of regionalism in community development can be understood in the contexts of economic markets and the environment.

Economic markets are not limited geographically to local communities. It is imperative to note that today people live in one place, work in another and consume in yet another place. This has created a challenge to community development practitioners. Jobs created in one community may benefit workers from another community. The local government in which workers live may not see increases in tax returns because employer is located elsewhere. And many of the costs of providing education and infrastructure may be
borne by other communities not benefiting from the job creation. It is on this ground that regional approaches to community development have attempted to provide innovative tax structures that spread the benefits of economic development across all the communities in the region.

Another illustration of regionalism may be understood in the environment. Many times the source of environmental problem may not be in the community that is being affected, but in neighboring localities. In the case of water pollution, farmers upstream may contribute to the problems in lakes and rivers downstream. Watersheds cross political boundaries and can make it difficult to regulate or to develop collaborative solutions. These two examples demonstrate how many of the issues facing communities are regional in nature.

Today one cannot continue living in denial that the world we live in is a global village. This villaginization of the world is made possible through informatics. Community informatics refers to the growing practice of using information and communication technology within communities to promote interaction and collaboration (Gurstein, 2007). Community informatics and community development have essentially the same goals-to enhance community processes and self-development. Community informatics emphasizes dispersed network structures that permit autonomous (almost individualized) action. The concept of the community tends to stress the importance of common values and norms that are the basis of collective action. The two concepts potentially overlap in the field of community development.

Integrating community informatics in community development is important in two areas. One benefit is that community informatics is built from the ground up and minimizes centralized control over community processes. Much of the community development literature emphasizes the importance role that the social institution play in bringing together people to promote interaction, which ultimately facilitates trust and the flow of information (Wilkinson, 1991). However, there is a growing evidence that new technology can promote social networks (Wellman, 2001). Many people prefer to interact with others through this medium and it is possible that this interaction achieves many of the same goals that more conventional social institutions have played in the past. Community informatics can be used as part of the participatory process to engage residents who are unable to participate through other venues. Youth and the elderly may be able to use new technology to overcome barriers to participation.

In community development is the concept of housing. Housing is a “bread and butter” issue of community development practitioners. All contributors to community development need housing hence nothing is more placed than housing. To stress the importance of housing we can learn from surveys. In survey of community development corporations, housing typically is identified as the top category among the various activities in which these organizations are involved. (National Congress for Community Economic Development, 1995). The focus of most community development efforts has been on home ownership. Changes in banking regulations have made it more difficult for low income families to purchase homes. This poses a serious threat to community development. When a community lacks housing some workers may not be able to take advantage of job opportunities hence the community losing the expertise needed for community development. Therefore you one cannot delink the housing crisis and community development.

Discussion, Recommendations and Conclusions

In this chapter we have discussed women participation in community development. It is important to understand vital roles played by women. Women are underprivileged when it comes to community development as a major challenge. The paper has addressed several challenges facing women in community development specifically discrimination based on sex, tribe, caste, racial or one’s language besides cultural practices as was the case with India, land and property ownership rights, inequality in
education, inaccess to financial mechanisms, HIV/AIDS and gender related violence. From the study it was found out that there are so many emerging issues which make women not to actively participate in community development. The major one was globalization. Others are regionalism, community informatics, housing crisis and food crisis. These issues mostly affect women. This paper is not exhaustive and therefore a further research on the same is recommended. World governments and community development actors are called upon to come up with policies which shall promote women participation in community development. Further, world governments should come up with legislation which gives equal play ground between men and women in community development.

My argument is that to attain gender equality will need goodwill from all actors or else it remains paper work and far from reality. Failure to address this inequality may lead to revolutions similar to the ones witnessed in political spheres to bring change. This argument is based on conflict theory by Karl Marks (1867). The theory provides that conflict is normal and not abnormal and social change is constant and inevitable. It provides that change is exploited when low social classes overthrowing those exploiting them. According to Karl Marx, tension is the driving force behind social change. Conflict theories see society as made up of parts that are in constant state of conflict. Further, inequality is the single source of conflict in the world. This theory explains that even those believing that their problem is due to Gods will as told by their pastoral leaders/clergymen will soon fail to tolerate domination by their clergymen and soon will turn against oppressors. This is where women in community development have reached.

According to Wright mills, in every nation there are power elites—the minority controlling national affairs. These include government officials, military, business people and academicians. This minority manipulate people by misusing education. They do these by maintaining high level of adult illiteracy in terms of information accessibility thus resulting to having yes men and women. People with little or no information may lack confidence and capacity to question or make appropriate judgement on issues. This makes it easy for people to be controlled if illiteracy in terms of education is promoted. The moment people realize they are oppressed they tend to turn against their oppressors. This is indicated by the way communities elect or reject elected leaders. When this takes roots nationwide, it becomes a revolution aimed at bringing in a new regime. The reaction to oppression is a conflict to correct the situation.

After independence of many African countries, her leaders continued with the same colonial exploitation both political and economic spheres contrary to the expectations and objects of fighting for freedom. This made Africans to react to oppression through coup, tribal clashes and mass action to counter long standing regimes. This is a case in point in Africa demonstrated by Libyan, Egyptian and many of the west African states in recent years which had recorded long standing regime of oppression. Struggle in industry between labor and management to bring about more just relationship is also an example of the most popular conflicts in many economies including Kenya. Therefore, just as political oppression results in revolutions, the same can happen where economic oppression exists. Men are alive to this fact and in recent years they have started giving women chance in community development to avoid revolutions (Gitonga 2011).

References


