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## **Gender: A Systems View: A Concept Revisit and Commentary**

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*This article was written by the Author and appeared in 'Africa Link' two decades ago. The author revisits this article with the benefit of hind sight. Has much changed since then for the women of Africa and the world?*

### **Thesis**

*There is a great struggle among policy-makers, professionals and academics to understand the concept of 'gender'. This struggle is characterised by generic confusion between the biological make up of humans and the roles that they play in their societies. Roles in society seem to be sex based, thus cooking in the kitchen may be seen as being strictly a woman's role, while leadership may be seen to be a man's role, though neither were biologically made to suit the roles. Both can handle any of these tasks given the chance. This sex based definition of gender roles affects power relations between the sexes. This is so because the definition allows greater access to resources and situations that allow one specie to, dominate and subdue another, sometimes in perpetuity, hence, opportunities for discrimination and oppression. The oppressed sex will soon seek freedom and demand equality in*

*power sharing. The above has become an important and difficult issue of our time because it will have critical bearing on the way society will look like and function in the future, and deserves all due attention. Here, I argue that oppressive power relations between the sexes is perpetuated and reinforced by universal systems of power and social control. I also explore what needs to be achieved in order to change the power relations and introduce aspects of equal advantages.*

## **The Gender Concept**

The old adage that what is good for the goose is good for the gander emphasises the fact that gender is neither female nor male. Biologically, the female entity is clear and its functions based on this biology are also distinct. The same goes for the male. These sex or biological functions however, do not define social roles for either the man or the woman.

The concept of gender thus has little to do with the sex or the biological make up of a human being. The concept has to do with the way society perceives the biological human being and the perception of one's role in society in relation to this perception. This is where the problem of gender discrimination and oppression stems from. This is because, society perceives one as a biological being and assigns and perpetuates both power and social roles on this basis.

## **The Systems Concept and Hierarchy**

A system is a set of interdependent elements, so dependent that it is almost impossible to happen to one without it happening to the other. The terminology system is familiar enough. For example, there are all sorts of systems in life. These can be large or small systems. A human being is a System made up of several small systems such as the alimentation and cardinal systems. Society is itself a giant and domineering system towering over and determining the future of all humans. It has subsystems such as the economic system.

Looking at life, it is easy to appreciate the fact that it is a conglomeration of millions of systems living side by side in perpetual relativity and shaping and influencing one another. It is this relativity of systems that defines who we are and how we are defined by society and with what consequences. The systems ensure that definitions stay unless disturbed by forces either inherent in the systems themselves or emanating from outside the systems.

The analysis of systems in terms of *both information and energy* is an important one in helping us understand power, sex and gender relations in society. There is an argument somewhere in the works of the famous structural functionalist, *Talcott Parsons* (1952) that stipulates that, if two systems coexist side by side, then the system that is high on information and low on energy will tend to control the system that is high on energy and low on information.

## **The Systems and Gender Roles**

The Social system is the most closely linked to the issue of gender. In the first place, it is the one that defines and interprets traditional wisdom and defines that once born a woman, certain attributes are hers and on the basis of these one will perform tasks in the society that are based on one's sex. This is in addition to the biological role for which one has no choice to perform.

The same system determines that a biological entity called man is a superior being here to rule by the mere fact that one is a man and not a woman. This system ascertains that this state of affairs is carefully recorded in the archival minds of the members of society and is carried forward from generation to generation without change forever. It codifies this way of life so that at all times it stands. The exercise of power in the Vatican is a good example of this.

The social system further goes on to ensure that other systems that enforce this state of affairs are in place and that they do their work to make this state work. The political system is evolved and empowered to bring its will and force on the creations of the social systems. The political system ensures that power relations between systems remain at variance with one another, and that the subjugation of one system by another is total and everlasting.

Thus, if change is ever to happen in the relations between systems, both big and small, generic and fundamental changes must occur in the definitions that are appendaged to the human by the social system, and in the reinforcing agent of this system, i.e. the political system.

## **Woman-The System**

The woman is a system. Not a single celled creature wandering aimlessly on the face of the earth, for the pleasure of man, without beginning, direction or destiny. This realisation forms the basis for gender freedom.

As a system, there is evidence that a woman is born with as great intelligence as the man. In fact, from the deitical beginnings, the woman was endowed with such intelligence as to overshadow and indeed overcome the physical endowment of the man. In this story, it took only a bite of this fruit to overcome the great knot of life and set us all on the road to endless suffering as humans, without end. It did not

take enormous strength for Delilah to overcome the super strength of the Nazarene, Samson. These are the acts and achievements of a system that to our detriment we characterise and treat as weak in modern times.

In our attempt to create a gender that functions for both man and woman, it is important to accommodate, even at the risk of losing some pride, the idea that a woman is a system that is endowed with as great an intelligence as the male system if not greater. The ability to see a woman in society first as a woman and then as a system will go a long way in aiding society come into grips with full meaning of gender that recognizes the existence of both woman and man systems in their own rights.

The cultural system defines woman as a valuable piece of property that is bought and owned through exchange. In some places, woman is or was exchanged for cows or goats. Marriage was institutionalised as a way of affirming this ownership of one human being by another. It was not a consensus-based act that took into consideration the wishes and the rights of both the man and the woman. Although the main *raison d'être* for the institution of marriage is the procreation and the continuation of the human species, with all due respect to it the it has been used by society to subordinate one of the partners and to immortalise her suffering in the pursuit of the noble goal and duty of procreation.

### **The Female Creature and the Societal Systems**

The systems of society have only dealt with the human being known as woman, as a female creature and not as a System. This has allowed the systems to define the creature and to forcefully determine an identity for it. This identity suppresses the total phenomenon that the woman is. This is the only way it can be taken advantage of - Outside this, the man creature is quite incapable of dealing with woman as a system. This is due to both its pervasive intelligence and capabilities unrecognised by the social systems.

I am tempted to contend that one of the most effective ways of keeping women in their places if there are such a places is by making sure that they are forever tied and committed to the creed and practice of reproduction, multiplying for and on behalf of humankind or mankind.

Producing children is a full time job. The woman doing it has no chance whatsoever of doing much else with her life. The cultural system ensures that this is so and

remains unchanged. The marriages of yesteryears seemed to survive at all times and in all circumstances because they were not based on the equality of man and woman. The marriages were based on the subjugation of one human being by another and the total slavery of that one human being - the woman. Because of this slavery, the man had no reason and still has no reason for seriously wishing to change the status of woman. Seen from this perspective, the woman, in her quest to fulfil her biological role is transformed through the institution of marriage into a social slave. The performance of the biological role even in the animal kingdom does not entail the enslavement of the performer.

The definition of woman is however wider than the biological role. It is extended by the cultural system to other roles that ensure her total serfdom. The woman in marriage is also an economic beast of burden. She produces children and thereafter she is entitled to fend and look after them. Looking after children means that one has to feed them. To feed children means one has to till the land. The woman tills the land. The food that the woman tills is not eaten raw. It is cooked. To cook it the woman needs energy.

The woman must know where this energy comes from and get it herself. Woman has to get this energy from the natural system. The same thing with the food that humankind eats. This natural System sometimes called land, is owned by another creature known as man. And man makes sure that it is well looked after by the creature known as woman. Although this may be argued not to be typical for all women, the sub-ordination of women even in modern economic times entails the same predicament and sometimes worse.

The political system ensures that woman does not lead. Not being in a position to lead means that power and the means to power are in the hands of the master forever. In short, the entire constellation of systems are galvanised to empower the man, so that the power of the man over the woman is forever Supreme. *Man often argues that woman is happy under these conditions and needs no respite. Woman, it is argued has power because she can cook whatever she wants, till what piece of land she wants, decide what the family can eat, lead other women in a monogamous marriage, and even advise the man on how to rule. But she cannot have the power to make these things happen. It belongs to the man. The man as in the traditional caricature is like a person who sits on One's back, choking life out of the person*

*and at the same time assuring the person that he would like to do everything in his power to lighten one's burden, except get off their back!*

The product of this state of affairs is a psychological subsystem that is unsure of itself and its place in society. It is an abused subsystem without confidence or hope in either life or the society of which it is a product. The misery of this subsystem however is a reflection of our entire society and the beasts we are. *For a society that allows its women to live in decadence and self-pity, deserves greater sympathy than those it degrades. A society that produces a dignified woman dignifies itself and approaches a pinnacle of moral purity that it is only too capable of but lacks moral strength and political will to try.*

### **Whence Thou Woman**

There is great urgency in our times to recognise two facts that have a critical bearing on our lives. The first is that we are all biological entities. As such, we have biological roles that are natural and are meant to ensure the survival of species. But this is as far as it goes. It does not imply that there are things in society that we must do just because we are biological entities.

Secondly it is to be realised that it is the social systems that define the roles that man and woman must perform in society. The systems must hence be prevented from harming themselves and their members by appending these roles to the biological being. The question that needs to be raised and answered is not where to woman, but rather where to man and woman? In this regard, it must be recognised by society, that both men and women, besides being the biological entities that they are, and having roles in that respect, that they have performed marvellously well, are both important social systems, no lesser or greater than the other.

In this recognition one sees a gender system in which power relations are determined by the equity of social roles. In this gender system, the man/woman system moves forward to recast the major social systems so that they recognise the supremacy of this new human system known as society with all their wisdom. *Tradition must be rocked and reshaped. And if it cannot be reshaped, discarded. In its place a new gender reality must be instituted. Such a system will recognise and end gender oppression in all its ramifications. A society that has lost itself through the oppression of one of its kind, woman, will thus find itself again."*

**About Authors**

**Prof. Timothy Gatara** is a Social Scientist specialized in research and Demography. He graduated from the University of Nairobi with a BA Honors, Sociology and a Masters in Development Sociology. He went on to take a position as a Research Officer with the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations Population Programmes in Kenya. He served the Flying Doctors and the African Medical and Research Foundation (AMREF) as a Senior Field Officer. He studied Population Dynamics at the Johns Hopkins University of Baltimore USA, and proceeded to the Centre for the Study of Population at the Florida State University Tallahassee, where he obtained a Ph.D in Sociology majoring in Demography.

He taught Population Dynamics and advanced Demographic Techniques at the Population Studies and Research Institute (PSRI) at the University of Nairobi for 7 years. He joined the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF, Africa Region) and served for 15 years in various senior capacities in the region and internationally, focusing mainly on programme development, institutional dynamics, strategic planning and management of donor funds. He has had extensive consulting experience with international, government and private organizations throughout the world. Prof Gatara is the author of 3 books: *Research Methodology; The Poverty of Mind and Statistical Techniques*. This is in addition to numerous articles and research and consulting reports.

On leaving IPPF, he joined the Nairobi Evangelical Graduate School of Theology (NEGST) now Africa International University, as the Director of the Institute of African Realities (ISAR). He served as the Deputy Vice Chancellor for Administration and Finance, of the Presbyterian University of East Africa. He now serves as the Senior Researcher at the International Peace Support and Training Centre (IPSTC).