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# African Women Organizing: Four Ways of Seeing

Marla J. Solomon

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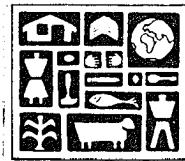
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**African Women Organizing:  
Four Ways of Seeing**

by  
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## Preface

### **Why I see what I see: a personal statement of purpose**

My personal life, intellectual interests, and work have always been closely connected. As a college student, my interest in cultures and social problems led me to look at conflict among cultures in my own country, and to study the history and movements of Black Americans, particularly women. My honors thesis, on Black women's clubs in Chicago, brought together the main branches of my subsequent development: Africans (in Africa and the diaspora), women, groups, social change, education. Six years later, composing essays for admission to graduate school, I would look up in surprise at how clearly the words I was writing showed the steady growth of those branches.

After college, I went to Africa in the Peace Corps and taught secondary school students struggling to find their place in a system which made them marginal in two cultures. But mostly, they taught me. In Niger, for the first time I became really aware of myself as a woman, that is, as something other than a generic "person." In a sometimes frustratingly real way, I felt both the difficulties and richness of being this other. I also learned that being a woman was not the same for me as it was for my Nigerien friends and neighbors.

When I returned to the States, I wanted to work more on understanding and acting on issues surrounding women, particularly in Africa. I worked at one of the few "private voluntary organizations" whose mission explicitly concerns the development and nonformal education of women. Yet my vision of what the organization's work was supposed to be about became increasingly distant from the reality of how we carried out that work. We were supposed to be advocates of empowering the poorest of the world's poor: low-income Third World women. Yet we spent enormous sums of money sending consultants to develop programs that never came to fruition, or to create women's centers that just fell apart when the two years of U.S. government funding ended, leaving stranded the women they had "helped." I learned about the contradictions inherent in international women-and-development work. The dynamics of economics, power, and position contrasted with my expectations that this organization would be different because we were women working for women. Our belief in the "empowered grassroots woman" sometimes conflicted with our

self-image as "professional women." Ironically, my growth as a professional woman was stunted in this women's organization and I had to leave in order to develop further.

I went to graduate school to develop professionally and ended up gaining an intellectual depth to my commitment. Ideas in critical theory and education, feminist theory and practice, anthropology, sociology, organizational behavior, and development all influenced my work. Feminist social science theory, combined with learnings from my own practice and that of friends and colleagues, has given me a new understanding of the connection between my intellectual interests, my personal work in the world, and the creative energy that is the driving force behind my work and interests. When I read the writings of Sylvia Ashton-Warner, I instantly understood what she felt when she infused her work with an artist's sense. *Art is life and work*, thus artists take for granted their own commitment and subjectivity. Like Ashton-Warner, my life and work have always been parts of a whole. The contradictions faced in my line of work make objectivity impossible and commitment essential.

Through my work and study of the last four years, I have grounded my feeling that intellectual and professional rigor need not, indeed cannot, be separated from personal commitment. I hope to carry this understanding into one of the most problematic and important areas of women's studies: women and development in the Third World. This area is problematic because it demands that we look beyond our commonality with other women to see the complexity of women's different situations in the world. It brings us face to face with dilemmas which challenge the goals and methods of feminist research. It compels us to look at the immediacy of women's needs and thus to focus our research toward change. The area is important because now, more than ever before, Third World women are speaking out with their own visions of feminist alternatives which address issues of race, class, and culture. We First World women need to listen to their voices, to look both at women from other cultures and at ourselves as we are reflected in their eyes.

As a First World woman doing research and working with Third World women, I want to help bring their voices to other First World people, to live out my commitment to linking theory with practice, to linking lives with other lives.

## **Focusing**

### **High hopes for women's groups: but why?**

In a new feminist view of women and development, women play a key role in creating and implementing alternative visions and strategies for development in the Third World. "Because women's organizations are central to these strategies, a more thorough examination of methods for their empowerment is necessary" (Sen and Grown, 1987:89). Even education and development circles that do not use a feminist frame of reference consider women's organizations essential catalysts to women's involvement in the processes of social change. Most external assistance agencies working with women proceed via some kind of women's group, be it a national party-affiliated women's organization or a local women's cooperative.

But this high expectation of women's groups' potential is founded on superficial understanding. Common development agency knowledge about these groups is limited or distorted by cultural assumptions, and efforts to work with existing groups are fraught with miscommunication and cross-purposes. Neither have feminists given much consideration to the complexities of women's organizations, their purposes, problems, and meanings. Do we really understand these organizations well enough to pin so much hope for development on them, at both national and grass roots levels? What does it mean to work with these organizations from the outside? What is going on with them on the inside? Researchers, development practitioners, and women's organization members themselves have barely begun to pose such questions.

### **Toward a better understanding of women's organizations**

This study is an effort to add to these questions and to seek a deeper understanding of women's organizations in Africa, with the belief that understanding informs action. This search proceeds through several phases. First, I discuss how the way we "see" organizations influences how we work with them and create them. Starting with that idea, I develop a rationale for trying to view women's organizations from *multiple* perspectives, just as we increase our understanding of a sculpture by viewing it from various angles and in various lights. Second, I delineate four broad and interconnected ways of seeing women in society, evident in literature relevant to studying African women.

These ways of seeing are:

- **woman's sphere and woman's power**
  - **gender-class relationships**
  - **ideology and consciousness**
    - **women's voices.**

For each way of seeing, I evaluate what it contributes to understanding African women's experience, and discuss the implications it holds for analyzing women's organizations. Finally, I discuss what insights the four ways of seeing might offer to those who work with women's organizations.

## **A feminist agenda**

A key belief underlies this paper. At its core, feminism is:

a worldwide movement for the redefinition and redistribution of power. Feminism is: (a) a belief that women universally face some form of oppression or exploitation; (b) a commitment to uncover and understand what causes and sustains oppression, in all its forms and (c) a commitment to work individually and collectively in everyday life to end all forms of oppression (Maguire, 1987:96).

This definition acknowledges that women's experiences of oppression may differ according to their class, race, ethnicity, or other determinants. But it poses as central the question of gender in working out oppression, and in learning how imbalances of power are sustained.

Steady's (1987) work on what she calls African feminism supports this definition. She believes that "an African feminism that encompasses freedom from the complex configurations created by multiple oppression is necessary and urgent" (1987:4). African feminism, in which women are viewed first as humans, not as sexual beings, is defined as: "an ideology which encompasses freedom from oppression based on the political, economic, social, and cultural manifestations of racial, cultural, sexual, and class biases" (1987:4). More inclusive than other feminisms, it is the product of conflicts from the worst forms of



human suffering experienced by Africans throughout the world. It is a "moral and political statement for human survival and well-being" (1987:5).

In looking at women's organizations, and at the frameworks that help us understand them, I am seeking ways of seeing and knowing that move forward a feminist agenda defined in these terms, and celebrate the experiences of being a woman in all their variety.



## Four Ways of Seeing

### Thought and action in organizational life

Practice is never theory-free, for it is always guided by an image of what one is trying to do. The real issue is whether or not we are aware of the theory guiding our action (Morgan, 1986:336).

A discussion of paradigms, or ways of seeing the world, dominates much current social science literature, and well it should, particularly when applied to the complex realities of the Third World. What we see is shaped by the lens through which we see it. The way we define a problem influences how we attempt to solve it. Our theories of what the world is, that is, our ideas and images, guide -- and sometimes limit -- how we act in the world.

This connection between thought and action is related to the concept of praxis, discussed by Karl Marx and Paulo Freire, which I loosely interpret here. Praxis is a process of reflection and action which is also a process of change. We act in the world that exists, and we also reflect on the effects and meaning of our actions. By reflecting, we see how we should change our actions and our world.

...men's [*sic*] activity consists of action and reflection: it is praxis; it is transformation of the world. And as praxis, it requires theory to illuminate it. Men's activity is theory and practice; it is reflection and action (Freire, 1970:119).

As we engage more and more consciously in this process, the breadth of our perception increases, and we are able to "see" what we did not see before.

An understanding of the link between ideas and action is especially important when trying to understand organizations. Organizations are an enactment of how we view the world; they are literally how we "organize" -- or make sense of -- the world. The way we view organizations is both descriptive and *prescriptive*.

... the way we "read" organizations influences how we produce them. Images and metaphors are not just interpretive constructs used in the task of analysis. They are central to the process of **imaginization** through which people enact or "write" the character of organizational life (Morgan, 1986:344).

Like the difference in depth of vision between seeing with only one eye and seeing with two eyes, "new insights about a situation emerge as one reads a situation from new angles, and ... a wide and varied reading can create a wide and varied range of action

possibilities" (Morgan, 1986:336). In other words, the theory which will best illuminate our praxis is many theories. Unfortunately, we are often unaware of the assumptions we are making, and this lack of awareness prevents us from considering alternative theories and perhaps acting in alternative ways.

In the study of women's organizations in Africa, the idea of multiple perspectives is extremely important. The literature that informs this study is literature about women's position in society, describing from particular points of view. In seeking deeper understandings of women's organizations, the literature helps us go beyond superficial assumptions or no thought at all. But it can also hinder if we are not aware of the lenses used to show us the meaning of women's lives. Many constructs, taken in isolation, prove to be too narrow for the complex realities of women's and men's lives. Moreover, because most of the studies considered are cross-cultural (that is, the researcher is from a different culture from the one studied) or concern cross-culturally applied theory, the limitations of the viewpoints are even more vivid. That is, they are not only limited, but also "outside." Researchers often impose external constructs which lead to misinterpretation of women's activities.

In order to create a deeper understanding of women's organizations in Africa, we must first become aware of how they are "seen" now, the sometimes taken-for-granted theories which underlie action and research. By looking at the various ways of seeing, and sifting out how they interact, we can see what they illuminate and what they hide.

## **I. Woman's sphere and woman's power: Debates on the public/private dichotomy**

### **This way of seeing**

The first way of seeing asks the question: what do public and private "spheres" mean for women's position in society? At its core are the question of how power is defined and the determination of who has "real" power in society. Within this perspective, debates evolve to form a cogent view of women in relation to power.

The debate began with the formulation of the "public/private dichotomy" by Rosaldo and Lamphere in their 1974 collection of anthropological studies of women, *Woman, Culture and Society*. Rosaldo's original theoretical construct relates "universal asymmetries

in the actual activities and cultural evaluations of men and women to a universal, structural opposition between domestic and public spheres" (Rosaldo & Lamphere, 1974:41). Women's oppression varies according to the extent to which they are confined to the domestic sphere, cut off from other women, and denied access to the public world of men and power. "Real" power is associated with legitimate authority, in the Weberian sense of this concept, and with "public" institutions dominated by men in most societies. "Public" and "private" are dichotomized to define male and female experiences.

Other authors (*e.g.*, S. Rogers, 1975, 1978; Stamm & Ryff, 1984) explore a second stream of this viewpoint which challenges the first. They examine the definition of power and the public/private split to draw different conclusions. Accepting that women do in fact inhabit a separate domestic sphere, they argue that this sphere is of central importance in many societies. The over-valuing of the public sphere continues the biases of male-dominated anthropological and social science research and leaves no room for more private and personal types of power and activity common to women's lives. Women have special modes of power, different from but not inferior to the power men wield. Influence on the decisions of others is taken to be a form of power.

A third strand of this perspective questions the validity of the public/private construct from top to bottom, aside from the question of which domain is more highly prized. The question becomes: does this "universal opposition" really exist? Or is it an ideological construct which continues to reinforce limited ways of thinking? Rosaldo (1980) herself is among those to re-evaluate and critique the public/private dichotomy, on several grounds. First, she claims that the construct implies the search for origins and universal explanations for women's subordination, a kind of research activity adopted from the traditions of positivist social science and perhaps of little relevance to women's lives. By asking universalizing questions, the public/private construct can make sexual asymmetry seem inevitable, rather than opening women to the possibility of change. Second, she argues that the dichotomy is subtly used to reinforce beliefs tying women to their biology. Victorian thought and the opposition between nature and culture are at the basis of the public/private dichotomy. Our reliance on the dichotomy (and its Victorian underpinnings) shows that we still think that "social being is derived from essences that stand outside of social process" (1980:404-05). This link ties social institutions dangerously to biological needs and resources, and fails to understand how beliefs help to shape social life. She says

we must look at not only what women do but also at the beliefs and expectations that shape the actual realities of their lives. In fact, the opposition between public and private is entirely social in nature and therefore susceptible to change.

Rosaldo's third critique is that the duality causes us to think "we know the 'core' of what quite different gender systems share, to think of sexual hierarchies primarily in functional and psychological terms, and thus, to minimize such sociological considerations as inequality and power" (1980:400). The duality prevents us from taking into account variations across cultures and various interrelated forces working in society. She suggests, instead, that we must link women's lives to social inequalities of all sorts, such as racism and social class. Public and private do have meaning as constructs, but not as universal opposites.

Pateman (1987) takes Rosaldo's critiques to a new level, showing the interrelationship of public and private rather than their opposition or separation. According to Pateman, the opposition of public and private fits the western liberal tradition based on fixed ideals of male and female:

The family is based on natural ties of sentiment and blood and on the sexually ascribed status of wife and husband (mother and father). Participation in the public sphere is governed by universal, impersonal and conventional criteria of achievement, interests, rights, equality and property - liberal criteria, applicable only to men (1987:106).

She claims that 'nature' also has a social meaning and agrees with Rosaldo that we cannot understand the complexities of women's devaluation by looking for universal answers. The public and the private are inextricably intertwined. In her explicitly feminist view, all power is political. Feminism seeks to develop a non-dichotomous theory of power and social practice, and is "grounded in the interrelationship of the individual to collective life, or personal to political life, instead of their separation and opposition" (1987:121).

Elshtain (1974) provides an articulate history of the idea of "moral woman and immoral man" that underlies the liberal tradition Pateman describes. She traces what she calls the Aristotelian-power politics paradigm to concepts outlined in Aristotle's *Politics*. The *polis* was the perfect association which realized the highest good in society. Only men participated in the polis; women, slaves, and others did not take part, but were rather part of the "naturally ruled." Power required goodness. Citizens were integral parts of the state; women and slaves were only necessary conditions. The concept of *entelechy* reinforced this

initial division between public and private. Entelechy meant "in simplest terms, what is is what **ought to be** because whatever **ought to be** has been actualized, that is, **is**" (1974:457). This concept was used to justify slavery, the subordination of the underclasses, and other practices.

Machiavellian concepts added another twist to Aristotelian ideas. With Machiavelli, power became associated with force alone rather than with being "good," and divorced politics from moral considerations. Good and bad were no longer universals; rules of conduct were different for public and private spheres. Men acted in both spheres, but were judged differently in each. Women acted only in the private sphere and were judged by private moral standards even when they attempted to "go public." Public (im)morality was counterposed to private morality and women were considered "morally 'superior' **because** they [were] publicly 'inferior'" (1974:461, emphasis mine). Power in the non-political women's sphere was only "power as covert manipulation, deceit, and cunning" (1974:461). It was a realm of irrational feeling.

From the time of the synthesis of these ideas into Aristotelian-power politics, they were used to control and set norms for society. The paradigm, if accepted, ensures several results: the continued dominance of public life by men who are not held responsible for their unintended power over women, the exclusive availability of legally upheld privileges to those who act publicly (privileges in the private realm are revocable), political discussion limited to issues not threatening to dominant groups, and moral values remaining trivialized and private.

. . . the Aristotelian-power politics paradigm serves to perpetuate an arbitrary bifurcation between that which is politics and that which is not and to promote an ideology which severs politics from coherent moral consideration and moral issues from that which is explicitly political (public). Implicit within the paradigm is a concept of persons which admits into the privileges of full personhood -- the notion of an individual who is rational, responsible, makes choices, and is judged according to a known set of rules and standards -- only those individuals who hold dual statuses as both public and private persons and denies such personhood to those individuals with a single private status (Elshtain, 1974:472-73).

In this way, Elshtain recognizes the dangers of researchers who study women accepting the public/private dichotomy without seeing its ideological, normative roots. At the same time, her conclusion is that woman's "power" in the private sphere, as publicly conceived, is not enough to make her powerful. Rather we must reconceive public and

private and focus on their interrelationship to truly critique and change the binding ideology which has justified their hierarchical separation.

### **What it offers to understanding African women's lives**

In this third stream, the "woman's sphere and woman's power" way of seeing offers several important insights into the understanding of women's lives in Africa. It recognizes the ethnocentric bias of the public/private dichotomy, acknowledged even by its original conceiver, Rosaldo. It seeks not to totally disband the theory, but to broaden it and recognize its limitations and the subtleties of its relation to the realities of women's lives in different cultures.

Certainly in Africa, public and private do not have the same meaning or separation as they might have in the west. Even in modern African state societies, the family is still the core of almost every aspect of public life. For example, public political systems are often based on kinship and shaped by women's control over marriage-making. Networks in the migration process are almost invariably based on kinship. The idea that females control the domestic domain and males the political is untenable and ignores the interrelationships between these two aspects of life (Raphael, 1975:111).

The appropriateness of the dichotomy must also be examined on the conceptual level. Even if we see public and private as significant, they may be elements of an imposed framework, not reflecting African concepts any more than they reflect African material reality. Sudarkasa (1987) maintains, for example, that male and female are not unitary categories in pre-colonial African thinking (1987:27) and that African women's economic roles are at once public and private (1987:34). Steady (1987) argues that in African life and thinking there is an overlap, rather than opposition, between public and private realms. The bias that values the public world of men does not fit the world of Africa, since Africans explicitly value the power of women.

This argument often uses as fuel the continuity in modern Africa of dual-sex systems<sup>1</sup>, in which women hold sway in certain realms (including rules that men too must obey) and men prevail in others. This complementary system is seen to ensure and maintain women's power. Whether or not we accept this explanation of dual-sex systems,

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<sup>1</sup> The term - *dual-sex system* - refers to a system of parallel social structures organized along lines of gender, found in a variety of forms in some African cultures.



their existence pushes us to think beyond the opposition of public and private, to see their interrelationship and women's complex role in influencing community and national life.

### **Implications for analyzing women's organizations**

The three streams of this viewpoint hold slightly different implications for viewing women's organizations. In all three, the light focused on women's organizations illuminates the issue of power and how it manifests itself in organizations.

The first stream, believing that the public/private opposition exists universally and that the public is universally more valued, tries to decipher to what extent women's organizations bring women into the public realm. According to Sanday (1974), an important indicator of women's status in a society is the presence or absence of female "solidarity" groups, which she defines as females grouping together "in some regular way to protect or represent their interests, and ... recognized and effectual in this activity" (Sanday, 1974:192). What kinds of organizations give women more public power, and therefore change the balance of power within society? Such organizations might be any that enhance women's status, by increasing their material control, the demand for the products of female labor, or female political participation, and ranging from Yoruba women's trade and marketing guilds to Samoan women's councils parallel to men's councils.

Other authors also discuss how women's organizations relate to public power. Njoku (1980) examines how market women's associations give women political power. Steady (1976) asserts that women's church associations serve to maintain their relative lack of power and status and a standard of Christian marriage that is based on their economic dependence. Jules-Rosette (1987) studies women in new African churches to determine if their power in these frames gives them real political authority or only ceremonial power. She determines that women in church leadership positions exercise influence through spiritual authority and suggestion, but fail to institutionalize women's leadership roles or change the status quo, even actively reinforcing women's economic roles and dependency.

A slightly different light is cast on women's organizations by the authors in the second stream of this way of seeing. These believe that the public/private split is real, but that the private realm is just as important as the public. One of the primary justifications these authors make is that women's power is multi-faceted and operates outside of formal, societally defined authority structures (Stamm & Ryff, 1984:3). Stamm

and Ryff focus on the manifestations of women's personal power and emphasize the importance of looking at organizations, sanctioned implicitly rather than formally, which function in the personal, or private, domain. In this examination, they merge the ideas of influence and control into their definition of power, "the ability of an individual to influence or exert control over resources, actions, or social relationships which are valued by the community or group in which she/he participates" (1984:3-4). The blurring of these two ideas makes their examination of the private realm problematic. To what extent do informal organizations really improve women's position or simply reinforce it?

In spite of this difficulty, their primary argument that women are in a more powerful position than we realize when we look only at "public" organizations also has some strengths. For example, it begins to allow for differences across cultures and claims that we need to be aware of the Western lenses we may be using to view women around the world. Stamm and Ryff examine how women's personal connections, based primarily on the family unit, affect the public life of a community. They argue that these personal networks are at the basis of most economic, social and political transactions, and emphasize their control over the pattern of social networks, as in Tunisia, where women are the arbiters of marriage.

To reinforce their point, Stamm and Ryff describe three means by which women's networks are a source of power. First, women provide each other assistance through exchange of labor and resources. Second, women's "gossip" is the primary communication system in the community and has implications for social control of behavior through public opinion. Third, because family and individual reputations are important for social and economic transactions, women's influence through opinion-making translates into some control over those transactions (1984:30).

Susan Rogers (1975) follows similar lines in applying ideas about women's power to the domain of women's organizations. She differentiates between power and authority, and claims that autonomy is not a useful measure of power in societies where mutual dependence between clearly differentiated gender roles is evident (1975:730). She analyzes the organizations in peasant societies where the domestic unit is the most important political, economic and social unit. Women's power in this sphere, implicitly acknowledged, extends outward to the community, and is most important in societies where this family sphere is most important. She looks at women's informal groups, such as inter-household

communication networks, and examines their important functions. Among these functions are communication, since the division of labor brings women from more heterogeneous backgrounds together more readily than men, even including more communication outside the community in cases where women have contact with the outside as servants or market women. Kin and neighborhood ties cross-cut generations and include both farm and factory households in her study of a European peasant community. These informal "institutions" are most important in communities like these where real formal power lies entirely outside the peasant community. "There are few extra-domestic decisions of importance to community life which are within the power of peasants to make" (1975:746).

One of the foibles of this way of thinking is that positions of weakness may be taken for positions of power. Gomm's (1975) study of spirit possession groups among the Digo of the south Kenya coast underlines this point. Possessed women, in exorcism ceremonies, make demands which men have to fulfill in order to have their wives return to normal. Although this is certainly a way for women to influence social processes, and in fact gives them some control over resources (men often have to buy things for the possessing spirit, for example), the ultimate result of the process is to reinforce, rather than change, women's powerlessness in the community. It shifts the focus from the causes of their distress to their possession. They are *granted* privileges (by men) only temporarily, specifically on the basis of their inferior position (1975:534).

Although Rogers, like Gomm, starts to see the difficulties of the public/private dichotomy, she ultimately falls back into the Victorian trap of seeing women as somehow superior, their relationships purer and more moral than those of the competitive world of men. Only the third stream of the "woman's sphere and woman's power" perspective rises out of that trap and questions the validity of the public/private construct and its applicability to real life, particularly in the African context. Within the framework of this stream of argument, women's organizations do not fall neatly into public and private categories because life does not.

This is true in Africa particularly from a historical perspective. For example, pre-colonial Igbo women's "meetings" or *mikiri*, market networks, and age-set gatherings within kinship groups crossed any possible line of demarcation between public and private. In Igbo tradition, political power was diffuse and decisions were made by mutual agreement. *Mikiri*, women's associations based on residence (by marriage), rather than kinship, served

to regulate the major activity of women, trading. This domain was certainly "public," but with clear relations to private and subsistence life. Van Allen (1972) claims that the colonial and missionary influence imposed a public/private view on women's affairs. By imposing political structures which ignored women and educating girls in Victorian values, this influence diminished women's role and power in Igbo life.

Okonjo (1976) also reveals the power-gender relations among the Igbo and the form they take in organizations. Traditional dual-sex organizations made questions of public and private irrelevant. Within this system, women had their own interests and domains which were certainly not relegated to the domestic sphere. These interests were actively represented at all levels by parallel councils. The female *omu*, parallel to the *obi*, or king, was not related to the king and although she presided primarily over women's affairs, was the acknowledged mother of the entire community. The *omu* and her cabinet had both economic and religious power through their control of market activities and their role in judging disputes and performing religious rites. The distribution of authority was complex, being dispersed along lines of sex, lineage and kinship institutions, age grades, secret and title societies, oracle diviners, and other professional groups. Although colonialism disrupted this system of shared power, the *omu* has regained some power and status since independence, and her organizations have reinitiated some former practices with new twists, including self-help activities, working with the government and the police, handling minor judicial cases, and overseeing market activities. Here too, however, the colonial legacy of "single sex politics" is difficult to overcome, especially on a national level (1976:58).

Hoffer (1972, 1975) explores the intricacies of women's role among the Mende and Sherbro in Sierra Leone and how they are played out in women's organizations. Among these people, the Bundu women's initiation society holds powerful sway both among women and in the larger society, even in post-independence times. In 1975, about 95% of women in Sierra Leone were Bundu members. Although Bundu assures respect for women as wives, procreators and rearers of children, this respect gives them access to public roles and responsibilities. By age group, girls form strong ties during the weeks or months they spend isolated for training at puberty. Subsequently, these women help each other at childbirth and in future initiation groups. These bonds, and the power they engender, are based on a woman's own descent group, not her husband's. Bundu is infused with religious power which controls aspects of political life, functioning, along with the men's Poro society,

to counterbalance the chief's secular power. Through this group, women acquire political skills and exercise authority to enforce Bundu laws and taboos, especially interdictions against male voyeurism and abuse by husbands.

These networks of personal loyalty are active forces for female political candidates seeking office. During elections, their solidarity transfers into a voting bloc. Within this society, motherhood goes along with chiefly status, rather than against it, and thus shows how the domestic/public split is untenable. Being a chief is viewed as being like a mother to a whole chiefdom. Prominent Bundu leaders, who sometimes become chiefs, extend their influence by raising young wards from prominent Bundu families and marrying them off to make political alliances.

March and Taqqu (1986) provide the most in-depth analysis of women's associations in the context of the question of kinds of power and public and private domains. These authors differentiate between power and authority, and further describe the intricacies of defining "public." They claim that "public" does not mean just one thing, as defined by western legal-rational systems. The word, public, means both "collectivity" and "out in the open." In societies where state structures are not well developed, informal structures exercise more authority, including women's informal associations. Formal and informal do not coincide with public and private in this case. March and Taqqu emphasize the connection between personal and political, clarifying that the dichotomy does not hold in many societies. Even the formal/informal distinction among organizations does not define opposites. Purposes of organizations may change according to need or history. They echo the importance given by other authors to the informal associations of women, for their extension of family networks into the community, communication, mutual assistance, and political influence. Even in societies where men's and women's space is clearly marked, women's space--such as fields and markets--is often no less public than men's. "Cross-culturally, both the line between public and private domains and the consequent definition of those domains are much more flexible than western experience would suggest" (March & Taqqu, 1986:19). Depending on how widely accepted they are as legitimate, women's associations' power and potential impact may be more or less broad.

March and Taqqu further outline three sources of "solidarity" among women in different cultures: kinship, work, and residence (this latter often determined by marriage). These bases are widely recognized as principles for association, and this fact gives

associations of these types potential for political action and effect, regardless of their formal or informal nature (1986:25). They wish to measure the effectiveness of organizations in providing women a basis for social and political power.

To determine the effectiveness of the association as a basis for social and political power, it is essential to explore the several bases of association and solidarity; to consider how strong these ties remain or become over a woman's life span; to evaluate how widely the collective sanction of these bases legitimates women's informal associations; to explore the full balance of rights, resources, and obligations conferred by these associations; and to determine where, as a result, the relative strengths of men and women lie (1986:26).

In their study, they proceed to delineate some criteria for measuring the effectiveness of women's associations. Using these criteria, they study women's informal organizations including: shared labor arrangements, rotating labor and credit groups, women's ritual and religious associations, patron-client relationships, market groups. They suggest that development efforts should replicate, rather than reform, informal associational structures for the most success.

Ironically, in some ways, their final arguments reinforce the opposition between public and private that their book has sought to tear down. They end up sounding as if all "traditional" organizations are informal simply because they are not part of modern state structures. And by ignoring women's "formal" associations, they deny the ways in which even these organizations may be linked to indigenous patterns of organizing.

Acknowledgement of the importance of women's organizations of all types in our understanding of how women react to and transform their world is a major contribution of this third stream of this way of seeing. The most important conclusion is that each culture must be examined not for what it has in common with others, but for what is unique about the different levels and patterns of interaction among women and men. Researchers must be cautious so as not to apply constructs which do not reflect the internal realities of the organizations studied. The question of how a given culture defines power and of how women may define power differently than men is accorded central importance. A point is made for studying the relationship between people's concepts of power (as ideology) and the actual use of power to act in society, so that we do not take symbols for reality or vice versa, but understand that power is created through the interaction of the two. Finally, the

viewpoint gets us to look beyond national women's organizations as the only women's groups around.

Thus this way of seeing - "woman's sphere and woman's power", is most usefully applicable to the study of women's organizations in its most developed form, recognizing public and private as concepts and reality, but emphasizing their interrelationship rather than their dichotomization. This way of seeing prompts us to ask relevant questions about women's organizations in Africa. What kind(s) of power is the organization exercising? To what extent is its power base recognized or acknowledged? How does the group itself define power? Do they envision themselves as active agents of change or maintainers of the status quo or reactors to emergency conditions? What kind(s) of ideas do they have around the public/private question? What identity do they have in regard to public and private roles and their interconnection? In what domain do they act? Do their actions reinforce limits or expand possibilities for women?

The lens of public/private helps us to understand aspects of power in women's organizations. It also hides other aspects. It implies the importance of, but fails to focus adequately on, the relationship between divisions of power among men and women and other divisions of power in society. It does not offer any explanation for *why* power is divided as it is in many societies, or for *why* ideology is often used to maintain hierarchies. To get some possible answers to these questions, we must put on different glasses.

## **II. Gender-class relationships: Conflict and compromise**

### **This way of seeing**

The full development of the "woman's sphere" perspective begins to go beyond limiting dichotomies to a broader view of gender and its relationship to other definers of social identity, power, status, and material conditions. The second way of seeing--the relationship between gender and class--dominates much of the literature about women in Africa and has important implications for the collective efforts of women. The nuances within this perspective are, if anything, more subtle than those within the woman's sphere and woman's power viewpoint. It builds on this first viewpoint, in its essence using the complex relationships between gender and class as the primary analytic tool for understanding women in society.

Rejecting the idea that capitalism is liberating, the gender-class way of seeing posits that "capitalism does not everywhere have the same effects for women" (Bujra, 1986:117). Neither are "women's issues" the same for women across classes.

From this perspective, women cannot be thought of as a single category, even though there are important and occasionally unifying struggles in which they may engage. At the same time women cannot be simply analyzed 'as men': gender is almost invariably a relevant social category. The point is that gender differences find differential expression at different class levels -- gender is qualified by the places women occupy in newly emergent classes (Bujra, 1986:118).

Two questions run through this framework. One is: Do women identify more with their class interests or their gender interests? The second is: Do women participate in the class status of related males or find their class status defined more fundamentally by their gender? The answer to both questions is "Well, both, depending..." Central to this way of seeing are concepts of relations of production originating with and adapted from Marxian thought. Heavy emphasis is laid on economic factors as determinants of social and cultural aspects of life, as well as on the historical context of current societal conditions.

One aspect of this viewpoint focuses on how colonialism and the development of capitalism have affected women's role in production. According to this view, even though pre-colonial African societies were not necessarily egalitarian, women's place in them was generally stronger than that they hold in capitalist society today (Etienne & Leacock, 1980; Robertson, 1983). Much of this strength was due to their important role, complementary to men's, in economic production, reinforced by parallel social structures organized by gender which allowed women a certain autonomy and status in their own realm. As discussed above, women's and men's institutions were considered interrelated rather than hierarchical and cut across both private and public sectors of life. The phenomena of cash cropping, taxes, wage labor, and migration, as well as European ideas about women's place, caused women to lose political power, become more burdened with the work of survival, and more alienated from production.

Throughout Africa, the interaction between pre-capitalist and capitalist modes of production takes distinct forms. For example, in some areas the proletarianization of men's labor, *i.e.*, "the creation of a working class with no choice but to sell its capacity to labor" (Bujra, 1986:117), does not necessarily privatize women's domestic labor, but rather draws women more heavily into petty commodity production and commerce. Neither does men's



entrance into wage labor benefit the family because of women's major role in agricultural production. Rather, women's agricultural and domestic work contributes to the cheap cost of men's wage labor. In addition, because migration has so often been an element of male wage labor, and cash is not always sent home or is too little to do any good, women are forced into more commerce and for-market production to survive in the newly developed cash economy (Bujra, 1986).

Patterns of land ownership also vary. As ownership of land becomes privatized, women's access to land (or lack thereof) takes on critical importance in understanding gender relations. But because land ownership is still often largely communal in some parts of Africa, control and use of resources need to be emphasized over ownership of resources when analyzing these relations (Robertson & Berger, 1986:22).

A lucid example of this viewpoint is Mona Etienne's "Women and Men, Cloth and Colonization: The transformation of production-distribution relations among the Baule" (in Etienne & Leacock, 1980). She carefully describes the mutually interdependent conjugal relations of the Baule before European conquest, based on the production of yams and cloth. In a marriage, the individual who began the production process "owned" its products (that is, had the right to distribute them), even if the spouse should contribute his or her labor to the final product. In this case, women had the right to intercrop cotton between their husbands' yam plants and thus begin the cloth production process. They picked and spun the cotton into thread and, even though their husbands (or potentially some other male relation) weaved the thread into cloth, women retained control over its distribution.

In this production/distribution process, some potential existed for disrupting the balance toward men's control of the product. But this disruption did not occur to any extent until the advent of colonial penetration, particularly the building of a textile factory in 1923 by R. Gonfreville. A weaver (a man) could then purchase thread from the Gonfreville factory with cash, freeing him from dependence on his wife's thread.

At the same time, a shortage of homespun thread forced men to purchase thread from the factory. Analyzing this shortage reveals additional insights into changing patterns of production relations. Cotton production became largely a cash crop operation in the colonial period, since European demand was high. Eventually, it was grown not by intercropping but as an unmixed crop. This large scale of production, with its high density of plants, forced farmers into pesticide use (high density of cotton plants invites parasites).

External technical assistance was required to obtain high yields, and this European technical assistance focused on men as agricultural producers. Inside Baule society, the new start of cotton production on second year yam fields transferred the rights of distribution to men, since men prepared these fields, even though second year yam field cultivation had traditionally been the woman's right. The colonial head tax encouraged men to produce cotton since cotton production was one of the few ways to get cash.<sup>2</sup> Other cash crops, such as cocoa and coffee, compounded the alienation of women's right to land use because these latter were perennial rather than annual crops.

With the new dominance of cash crops, women continued to assist their husbands in agricultural tasks, but became dependent on men's generosity to provide their share of the product. Women no longer had time to do their own agricultural production, nor to spin cotton--thus the shortage of homespun thread and increasing demand for factory thread.

A further result was that women ended up being alienated not only from agricultural production but also from cloth production, for homespun cloth no longer had subsistence value (this having been replaced by factory cloth) but had much prestige value. It has become art separated from life, and valued as such, removed completely from women's control.

Baule cloth has long been appreciated for its beauty and variety, but, as long as it was also an everyday necessity, this dissociation could not occur. Because art and life were one and because woman's labor was the indispensable origin of the production process, the considerable skill or "art" required of the weaver could not radically affect her control of the product. Thus, we see that at the same time that art tends to emerge as a separate domain--distinct from everyday life and reflecting the generalized subordination of Baule society to the colonizer's commodity economy--it emerges as a male-controlled domain, reflecting the generalized subordination of women to men (Etienne & Leacock, 1980:229).

Gifts of cloth from men to women are now an intrinsic part of male-female relations and are used even for political purposes. Dependency has replaced interdependency.

Etienne clearly bases her analysis on Marxian economic concepts, and tells her story from both an historical and an anthropological perspective. She epitomizes the exploration of Marxian concepts for the description of women's lives typical of this construct. Another

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<sup>2</sup> Men were also responsible for their wives' tax.

branch of this way of seeing focuses less narrowly on economics and brings into the picture the ideology which accompanied capitalist transformation. The relationship between formal education and class formation, and the accompanying changes in the status of women, is central.

This stream of the viewpoint claims that women in the upper classes of a more solidified class structure begin to identify more with their class than with their gender, and that in fact the situation of women in the lower classes is shaped in part by women of the upper classes. Women of the petty bourgeoisie, either working outside the home or not, usually hire other women as servants. Women of this class are more interested in recreating and preserving their own class privilege than in recognizing their links with other women. And in fact, these links are feeble, their economic situation being quite different from that of lower class women. The formers' ability to enter into wage labor depends in part upon "the organization of **other** unpaid female labor to shoulder domestic burdens" (Bujra, 1975:128).

Still, while Western education and the move into wage labor increase female dependency and the tendency to identify and move with husbands, women's position is not the same as their mates'. Claire Robertson (1986) clearly outlines this line of thinking in her essay, "Women's Education and Class Formation in Africa." She argues that both women's presence and women's absence from schools influence their position. Women's absence from schools puts them at a disadvantage in relation to men in the wage job market. But their presence in schools takes them out of the labor force as children and adults and promotes their dependence on men. Thus, formal education helps promote "gender-specific class formation" which leaves women underprivileged.

Studying women with primary education, Robertson finds several reasons for their economically disadvantaged status. First, "the labor value of women is higher without primary education" than with it due to the availability and orientation of education (1986:108). Schools have expanded rapidly, but the economies that take in school-produced laborers have not grown at the same rate. Within these economies, there is both discrimination in hiring and lack of access for women to higher levels of education for various cultural and economic reasons. With only primary level skills, which are totally impractical for wage work, women cannot compete adequately with more highly schooled men. There is virtually no agricultural education for women, even though in many areas

women do much of the agricultural work. Thus, primary-educated women are likely to marry and be economically dependent on men, since wage work is preferable in terms of status and expectations than returning to some other kind of less prestigious work.

In the end, although primary-educated women are dependent and disadvantaged compared to men, they are also more likely to identify with and in some way function as members of their husband's class since they no longer have control over separate means of production. Within this view, women have few choices. They can either

stay illiterate and keep earning an independent income at a very low level; get a primary education and become a hairdresser, a seamstress, or a petty bureaucrat (if you have the capital for training or equipment and earn enough to afford child care); or remain unemployed and dependent on irregular earnings from men in various relationships. Many women will do all of these things in their lifetimes in the struggle to stay afloat (Robertson, 1986:112).

MacGaffey's (1986) study of women entrepreneurs in Kisangani, Zaire, reinforces the idea that class cross-cuts gender in the development of stratified systems. The success of women entrepreneurs in Kisangani does little to improve the position of women in general. Women become part of the petty bourgeoisie, but in the informal sector outside the state controls of formal capitalism which support male control over women. The presence of women in this "second economy" reflects Zaire's position in a system of dependent capitalism. In spite of any "success," ultimate control rests outside the country.<sup>3</sup>

So while women move forward on the basis of class rather than gender, class formation is also gender-specific in that certain roles are open to women, certain historical circumstances have affected them differently than men, and they use tools such as sexuality in a way that men do not in order to advance. Although women's solidarity is cross-cut by class, women within each class are worse off in relation to men of that class. "While class position mediates the experience of gender, gender is an important determinant of class position" (Robertson & Berger, 1986:14). Women are defined both within classes and as a class, making their relationship to the issues of class, production and reproduction complex and essential to understand.

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<sup>3</sup> See also Cutrufelli, 1983, for further discussion of the impact on women of Africa's peripheral position in the international economic system.

## **What it offers to understanding African women's lives**

This way of seeing provides some important insights into African women's lives and leaves some glaring gaps as well. It provides us first with a lens to see African women's relationship to economic forces on a world scale. Clearly, their situation is profoundly affected by the position of Africa in the international economic order; without an understanding of these effects it would be impossible to have a full view of their position. Second, it begins to address the relationship of power defined by gender to power defined by other categories: in this case, class. It goes beyond addressing women as members of an undifferentiated group. Third, the framework provides us with an historical view of African women's situation, key in Marxian analysis, and important to understanding ideologies and their interaction with economic realities. It appropriately addresses the important colonial experience of Africa and tries to explain its effect on women in the breakdown of women's autonomy, the increased isolation of households, women's double day, and the break up of collective social forms. All of these are realities of contemporary African women's lives; the important way colonialism changes women's lives becomes clearer within this framework. With modernization efforts of the 20th century, the framework continues to illuminate aspects of socio-economic change and its different impact on women and men.

However, the gender-class way of seeing perhaps does not go far enough. It considers class, but not other divisions and identities in society. What about race, for example? It has a tendency to generalize about the economic dynamics of Africa as a whole, and of African women, whereas traditional economies and social structures vary greatly within one African country, and even more so from the east to the west of the continent. And though it acknowledges the role of ideology in history and society, it tends to imply that people are passive in the face of both ideology and larger economic forces. In fact, if we are to understand women's lives on a more intimate level, we must look not only at how they are determined by these forces, but how they act to change them and what meaning they give to their actions.

## **Implications for analyzing women's organizations**

In spite of its limitations, this perspective has important implications for studying women's groups. The gender-class perspective focuses on the breakdown of indigenous

patterns of women's solidarity based on kinship and age, the privatization of female life in the privileged classes and its effect on gender consciousness and solidarity, and rural/urban transitions and their influence on how women organize. Discussion of women's organizations is often explicit within this framework, which makes the need to read between the lines for what it helps us see and what it hides even more important.

This perspective illuminates how economic changes affect women's associative tendencies across socio-economic strata. For most African women, rather than binding them to the home, men's entrance into wage labor intensifies their activities in petty commodity production and commerce, the survival sector. It makes cooperation in labor more difficult, and solidarity less sanctioned, and less secure. For women in the wage job market, the structure of most wage jobs makes women's traditional cooperation in child care harder to achieve (you can't take your baby with you to the workplace).

The privatization of women's labor is a more typical result for upper class African women, and formal education in the European mold reinforces their subordination and isolation within the nuclear family. Thus, female solidarity seems to decline with higher class position, partly due to increased individualism and dependence on men, but also linked to decreased interest in change among the privileged.

The viewpoint is particularly useful in looking at formal women's organizations, organized around some visible interest. Many of the authors writing from this perspective analyze women's organizations to determine whether their ideas and activities reinforce gender solidarity or class solidarity. Staudt asks the question, "How do women act politically to alleviate, acquiesce to, or transform stratification?" (1986:198). Her 1980 study of the Umoja federation highlights their "cooptation" into class structures, limiting their ability to truly represent women's interests.<sup>4</sup> Johnson (1986) presents case studies of three women's organizations in Nigeria to show that women's precolonial collective action and solidarity were the most effective tools to protect their interests, that women challenged their loss of power and status from both class and gender positions, that colonial patriarchy on top of indigenous male domination turned the sexual division of labor into economic ghetto-ization of women, and that class formation and the increased nationalism of the 1950's eroded women's solidarity and hid its class/gender consciousness. Women's

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<sup>4</sup> See also Wipper, 1971 and 1975, for similar studies of the Maendaleo Ya Wanawake in Kenya.

organizations born out of nationalist movements "tend to stake claims that reflect the position of compromise and insecurity of African women" (Cutrufelli, 1983:172). Moreover, the dependency of their nations influences how they define their own struggle.

The gender-class framework helps us see many things about women's organizations. It helps us look at the meaning women's groups have in relation to class. It questions the assumption that all women's groups are moving toward change for women, showing clearly that many women's groups uphold the status quo or even participate in the worsening of their own situation. It helps us differentiate between various economic activities and to see the relationship between economics and group formation. When studying an organization, it makes us ask the questions: How are class relations reflected or expressed in this organization? Is the organization made up of women of one class or of many, and do they reflect the class structures of their society or promote some change? How do their activities relate to the economic relations of the society? Where is their place in the mode of production? What kinds of ideals do they promote and how do these relate to class formation? What forms of education do they promote and what does this say about their relationship to class? What kinds of consciousness do they have about their own work - - is it recognizably related to gender or to class? In what ways do these two kinds of consciousness interact in the ideology of the group?

Yet, in using this way of seeing African women's organizations, we might lose sight of important aspects of organizations. The framework's implicit valuing of organizations that work in the formal political domain hides the potential importance of other kinds of organizations which may in fact have more radical possibilities. Its generalizations about trends across Africa, especially on the economic plane, also has an impact on the meaning assigned to women's groups. Looking at the difference between East and West Africa, the colonial style experienced, and the history of women's collectivities, it's clear that Africa is not all the same. We should not believe, for example, that women everywhere in Africa had the parallel hierarchies described for West Africa.

Finally, the viewpoint's focus on the past is its weakness as well as its strength. It makes us remember that we must see the historical context in which an organization grew and exists. However, it sometimes leads into the deterministic feeling of much Marxian analysis -- what to do about the future? It does not lead forward to suggest hope, for example, that women's national political organizations can free themselves from cooptation.

Only with a look toward how our ideas and our actions interact to perpetuate patterns can we see how a change in those patterns might emerge. The third way of seeing begins to reveal this view.

### **III. Ideology and consciousness: The possibility of resistance**

#### **This way of seeing**

The third way of seeing women recognizes the importance of ideas in interplay with material realities in perpetuating social structures and ways of being. This perspective sees world views and social ideologies as determining factors in the maintenance of sexual hierarchy and women's position, roles, and power. The approach

gives a more central role to belief systems and world views than the other approaches to women's subordination. At the same time, it examines those belief systems in the concrete conditions of social life. This is a **grounded** concern with the meanings of sex differences for the participants in a social and political system. . . . The concrete conditions of social life, the institutional structures of society, and the context in which images are evoked are all relevant to this analysis (Bourque and Warren, 1981:77-78).

Not only do material conditions influence institutional structures, as in the gender-class perspective, but ideologies grow out of *and* reinforce institutional structures which maintain systems of differential access to resources and power. Used in this context, social ideology is a "system of ideas that deal with the politics of establishing and defining value in social and material realities," (Bourque & Warren, 1981:79) "a set of cultural beliefs that shape people's perceptions of such key dimensions of their social universe as gender, class, and race" (1981:77). Such values may both motivate and justify hierarchy.

The perspective recognizes that there may be multiple ideologies about women and their activities in a given society, and some of these ideologies may be contradictory, making the analysis of gender extremely complex. Gender, class, race, ethnicity and other categories of social identity all contribute to defining women's position.

Consciousness often reflects social ideology and is a related concept in this framework. As I use the term here, consciousness is the meaning given by an actor or actors in society to his, her, or their own actions. As implied in this definition, consciousness exists on both an individual level and a group level. Consciousness differs from social ideology in that it may or may not reflect the dominant world view of the



society in question. In other words, at the level of consciousness, there is the possibility of resistance and the formation of alternative world views.

Weiler (1988) asserts the crux of this viewpoint most explicitly. In her view, feminist reproduction theory builds on the ideas of socialist feminism and ties social reproduction (that is, the recreation of society) to economic production and work, but fails to address individual consciousness or the possibility of resistance (1988:34). Quoting Arnot, she says: "social relationships are always in process and are constructed by individual human beings within a web of power and material constraints" (1988:38). She takes into account the existence of worldviews: a dominant worldview that recreates the status quo and the possibility of building alternative world views diffused through society, what she calls critical counter-hegemony. In her view, studies of women and girls should focus on how their lives reflect forces of production and reproduction and how they experience the social world and negotiate within it (1988:44). In other words, we need to look beyond the material determinants emphasized in the gender-class perspective, toward how the meaning made of experience interacts with the material to perpetuate or change it.

Within this framework, Weiler highlights the importance of individual resistance, while at the same time warning against misinterpreting accommodation for resistance. Though accommodation may be in fact a kind of private resistance and both public and private resistance are important, public resistance is necessary for social change. Individual "resistance" remains individual within the status quo. This theme is echoed in Rayna Rapp's (1979) discussion of studies of "women's culture." Contradictions and issues arise; traditions "simultaneously give strength and provide insulation against radical revisions in women's often-contradictory position" (1979:512). To use Weiler's terminology, accommodation and resistance may be practiced in the same context, but we must be careful about identifying strength with the culture of oppression.

Yet we should not discount accommodation as insignificant. "Women employ a 'simultaneous process of accommodation and resistance' in their negotiation of social relationships" (Weiler, 1988:49, quoting Anyon, 1984). The line between these is blurred and both are important for women's experience.

The idea of varying forms of women's consciousness is developed by Keohane, Rosaldo and Gelpi (1982). They outline three kinds of women's consciousness. Feminine consciousness is the consciousness of woman as defined by man's "gaze, construct, and

desire" (1982:ix). Female consciousness is women's experience "in giving and preserving life, nurturing and sustaining. Profoundly conservative, it is also resonant with radical possibilities." Feminist consciousness is the "reflection on women's experience drawing attention to pervasive patterns of subordination, limitation, and confinement" (1982:x). Within this consciousness, alternative visions for living can develop. All three are part of thinking about women's experience, and the realization that all three, and even others, exist is the most important element of that thinking. Recognizing alternative worldviews, rather than one hegemonic view, is key to understanding women's experience.

This attention to multiple ways of thinking which help construct multiple realities is also voiced in many authors' desire to move beyond gender and class to identify the differences of race, culture, ethnicity, *etc.*, which also define women's experience. Seeing these other aspects of life, depth is added to our understanding of women.

### **What it offers to understanding African women's lives**

In the literature, this perspective is only beginning to emerge as something well-defined. Yet this way of seeing is extremely important for understanding women in Africa. One of its principal strengths is that it goes beyond gender and class. While useful, the socialist feminist theory underlying the gender-class construct needs redefinition to account for race and culture. Cultural factors, for example, make a difference in terms of how we analyze the separation of private and public spheres, the definition of the private sphere, and the family as the primary locus of gender conflict, all of which vary across cultures (Glenn, 1984:137). Because African women's experience in many parts of the world has been defined by race, this too becomes a key factor in understanding their experience. Racism has a clearly material underpinning in that it justifies certain economic arrangements; it also recreates itself through ideology. The idea that sex, race, and class oppressions are interrelated and multifaceted comes into full flower in this perspective (Hooks, 1987:75). The multiple dimensions of class, gender, race, and culture as definers of identity and ideology allow for the variation in and between African cultures and national histories.

The idea of different kinds of consciousness allows us to open our eyes to "inside" visions and meanings. Within this framework, we can more readily see and accept women's different understandings of their lives and different definitions of feminism. Especially in

studying Africa, a cultural context much different from the Western one, this is very important. "African feminism," as defined by Steady, rejects rigid dichotomies and the opposition of men to women, but recognizes gender as a determinant of human experience. It strives for the values of human totality, parallel autonomy, cooperation, self-reliance, adaptation, survival, and liberation (Steady, 1987:20). These concepts are important to the study of women in Africa, with gender always linked to liberation from other oppressions of race and class. We must always be ready to learn that our brand of feminism is not another's.

Methodologically, this kind of vision is essential because "feminist theory as a critique of ideology must also criticize itself and counter the tendency to congeal into a new ideology" (Keohane, Rosaldo, and Gelpi, 1982:ix). This way of seeing legitimates tentativeness, as the whole multiple perspective approach does. It reverberates with many of the elements of feminist study--hearing inside as well as outside views, being conscious of the lenses with which we see, and the impact of idea on action--which are at the heart of this paper. The ideology and consciousness way of seeing leads to visions of change by recognizing the possibility of individual and group action even within seemingly immovable material conditions.

### **Implications for analyzing women's organizations**

In terms of women's organizations, this way of seeing is particularly important as a synthesis of important elements of the other two perspectives and a way of linking them to the concrete ways women organize. In particular, it poses these questions: What are the spoken and unspoken purposes of women's organizations? What kinds of consciousness do women have about their identity and the identity of their organizations? Do they emphasize strategic or practical interests in organizational activity (Antrobus, 1988)? How are organizations used for change or maintenance of the status quo in regard to structures of inequality? How do the dominant social values of a cultural group influence how and why women associate? How do the meanings women and society give their collective actions relate to the material realities of their lives?

In the context of an organization, the interaction among social ideology, consciousness, and action is complex. For example, in the case of a national women's organization, the social ideology surrounding its activities may be contradictory. On the one

hand, the sloganism of nationalism may encourage these women to fight for a change in their position from what was true under the colonial regime. They may be verbally and visibly absorbed into a party in order to carry out this goal. On the other hand, the rewards they receive from those in power may influence them to act on women's behalf only when women's interests coincide with the party's interests. The ideology of change contradicts the ideology of nationalist unity and maintenance of a power elite.

Women in the organization may absorb one or another of these ideologies unconsciously or consciously, but they may also have their own consciousness about their actions. For instance, they may first and foremost identify with their birthright as women to protect their families or ensure their own physical safety and security, expressing a "female consciousness" through their actions around practical interests. Moreover, different echelons of women within the organization may have varying kinds of consciousness about the activity of the organization which influence that activity and the ability of the group to act for change.

These different kinds of consciousness are not mutually exclusive and in fact may work together. Kaplan (1982) argues that female consciousness has the potential to politicize everyday networks and motivate female mass action. The meaning that is made of this action, from both outside and inside views, is a key element in the exploration of its impact.

Kaplan's study of women's action in Barcelona between 1910 and 1918 addresses the issue of resistance and accommodation, by looking at the extent to which resistance within "female consciousness" can have "feminist" implications. "Female consciousness centers upon the rights of gender, on social concerns, on survival" (1982:55). It accepts the expectations of women according to their class, culture, and historical period, and instills a sense of rights and obligations in regard to those expectations. "But, accepting this task, women with female consciousness demand the rights that their obligations entail. The collective drive to secure those rights that result from the division of labor sometimes has revolutionary consequences insofar as it politicizes the networks of everyday life" (1982:55). This consciousness brings the private into the public domain, putting human life and need and social cohesion over individual rights and institutional power in the political arena.

In some cases, female consciousness may carry stronger implications for collective action and solidarity among women than feminist consciousness, which looks for rights and

power within the dominant system and negates the division of labor by sex. Female consciousness is built on this division, and shared work routines and places bind women together within classes and neighborhoods (Kaplan, 1982:57). Within this consciousness,

cultural traditions, within their own networks and institutions, also enable women of the popular classes to mobilize against oppressors and work toward an alternative society, the conception of which is well articulated and widely shared. Consciousness appears as the expression of communal traditions altered in response to economic developments and political conflict. Culture, in this case, emerges as solidarity built around networks -- a form of solidarity that carries out the division of labor by sex. . . . Consciousness emerges as women reflect upon culture and work -- two aspects of the division of labor (1982:60).

In this context, based on a tradition of communal work, consciousness is a process rather than a product.

Since this kind of collective work is more common among women in lower socio-economic classes, looking at alternative kinds of consciousness is especially important when deciphering women's activities among these classes. Women who pay others to go to the well see less of other women and share fewer of the common tasks of work. Thus limiting studies of collective action among women to formal unions or women in political parties minimizes the importance of "women's culture as it extends itself through networks" (Kaplan, 1982:60). The women in political parties demonstrate class consciousness; studying only them puts all other forms of collective action into a "prepolitical" category and ignores changes that come from developing consciousness.

Revolutionary consequences are possible from women's defense of their rights according to the sexual division of labor. During the Barcelona women's struggle, ". . . women's consciousness of broader political issues emerged in their defense of rights due them according to the division of labor" (1982:61). "In defending the notion of separate rights based on separate work, women violated the self-same notion. They beseeched and then confronted government officials in the urban plazas and offices that were symbolic of the political and commercial power men wield" (1982:74). Kaplan concludes that incorporating female consciousness into feminism could lead to the demand that the state place life above other goals -- using women's most conservative self-image in fact to create a broad social movement putting resources into things that women have learned to do (1982:76).

Lewis (1976) takes the idea of ethnic dimensions of identity and meaning which is another part of this way of seeing and applies them to her study of market women's associations in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. Trying to see why they "failed," she compares them to associations outside of markets which have patterns particular to different ethnic groups' social values. Different understandings women may have of organizational activity are founded on these ethnically based values, and can lead to miscommunication and breakdown of action. For example, among the Dioula, a strict rotation principle is always applied in credit associations and each gets back what she puts in. Among southerners in Côte d'Ivoire, however, members of such associations receive money according to need and using the funds for personal gain is looked down upon. This difference causes conflict in multi-ethnic market women's associations. Lewis concludes that groups must have some basis of shared identity and common understanding of the reasons for and expected results of organizational activity. This, coupled with environmental conditions that favor group action and cohesiveness, helps to determine the effectiveness of group activity.

Strobel (1976) also looks at the cultural dimension of meaning highlighted by this way of seeing. She analyzes the significance of women's group activity in Mombasa as a reflection and reinforcement of ethnic tensions and rivalries, giving a different meaning to what at first glance looks like progressive action on the basis of women's solidarity. In her study, women formed associations along ethnic lines which, on the surface, promoted women's interests and brought women into the political arena, but whose strongly voiced concerns about ethnic pride and progress brought to light the more important purpose of their organizations. Within an atmosphere of competition among cultural groups, women's activities served to perpetuate status hierarchies.

Steady (1976) looks at the relationship between social ideology and change among Freetown Krio women's Christian groups, finding that these groups promote conservative ideology about women's roles and monogamous marriage. Within the organizations, "solidarity" among women emphasizes the common goals of women and a female ideology. Yet "through this ideology women manipulate each other to conserve, promote, and conform to society's values and standards" (1976:235). The ideology of monogamous marriage and women's fidelity serves to defend women's interests within their position of economic vulnerability, since most women find themselves without access to independent

means of obtaining income. "The fact that these values . . . may endorse institutions that do not recognize women's needs or potentials is often overlooked" (1976:235).

The ideology and consciousness way of seeing offers to our understanding of women's organizations an important blending of ideas from the other perspectives about power and resources.

The linking of sex role stereotypes, however conceived, to differential access to resources and reality-defining institutions transforms sexual contrasts into sexual hierarchies. The result is an uneven distribution of power -- as manifested in the control of social institutions, cultural attitudes and values - - which further reinforces the structural subordination of women to men (Bourque & Warren, 1981:79-80).

Further, the view of multiple ideologies this perspective proposes reveals the complexity of men's and women's roles and lives. Patterns of behavior often have multiple meanings, and interact in multiple ways with institutional structures and material conditions to perpetuate or change social realities. Often these multiple meanings are contradictory; it's in understanding the multiplicity and the contradictions that true understanding lies.

The idea of multiple worldviews also makes us see the possibility of multiple purposes of organizations. Women's organizations form one of the important ways in which women participate in social life and institutional structures, both materially and symbolically. The meaning of women's place in society is often acted out and represented through their organizational activity. The meaning of the organization on the outside may be very different from what it is to women on the inside, or even to individual women within the organization. Through this perspective, we can look at women's group activities on several levels, striving to see whether and in what way they fulfill expectations along lines of female, feminine, or feminist consciousness and the areas between. We can see beyond the material, to the relationship between idea and action, and between individual and group. And most important, we can begin to see women's own views of their organizational activity, and how those views influence the shape that activity takes and its effect on their lives.

#### **IV. Women's voices: Their own visions**

This way of seeing is not a separate viewpoint so much as a direct outgrowth of the implications of the ideology and consciousness way of seeing. In much of the literature

reviewed for this paper, the viewpoint that is left largely unexplored is the viewpoint of women themselves. Researchers see meaning in their actions and collectivities, but what meaning do women themselves see? This meaning hasn't been explored much for two reasons. Most obvious, it is difficult for outsiders to "see" how women are seeing. But more telling, how women see has typically been considered unimportant.<sup>5</sup> Yet if we believe the premise of this paper--that the meaning we read into organizations helps determine their shape and purpose--discovering African women's meanings becomes essential.

Women's own view of their experiences of organization is especially important because organization is a link between theory and practice (Davies, 1987). In organization, people act out and reinforce social values. But social values are not static. Through organization, people often work together for change. Women's accounts of their experiences can provide valuable understandings for other women's groups and a tool for self-reflection by the women themselves. By opening another way of seeing, women's voices can enhance outsiders' ability to work with women's groups with deeper understanding.

Hearing from women themselves is also one of the ideals of feminist research. When the issues are cross-cultural and cross-class, this ideal is even more important. Women here are not the same as women there. Only by hearing "their" views can our views become whole.

Miranda Davies (1983, 1987) has compiled one of the few collections of women's voices on their organizational activity. The voices are those of formally educated Third World women giving their own theories about their activity and their reactions to the dominance of Western views. Jou'beh discusses the necessarily political nature of women's issues for Third World women, claiming that Western women's separation of the political and the sexual is a political act in itself. An article on the African National Congress women's group reinforces Jou'beh's linking of national liberation struggles with women's struggles in the Third World. SWAPO women also write about their need to be involved in the struggle of their nation because they "bear direct and immediate witness to the reality of malnutrition, illiteracy, and unemployment of their children," and face the torture and death of their loved ones (Davies, 1987:69). Thus, women have played a central role in both political and guerilla branches of SWAPO from its outset, many women are

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<sup>5</sup> Feminist critique of traditional social science focuses extensively on why this has been so.



refugees, informers, suppliers of food, and mobilizers. These articles, however, focus on organized action in the public eye, ignoring other kinds of women's activity, since Davies' frame of reference falls largely within the gender-class perspective.

The literature of women's voices is more developed in individual life stories, including autobiographies, novels, and some research studies. The insights these life stories can provide are many. Patricia Maguire's (1987) study of battered women in Gallup, New Mexico, gives voice to their struggles with defining their own experience in light of the society's definition of them, and with changing the conditions of their lives. The words of the women appear in print, and were also used in an interactive research process to draw out their own analyses and feelings.

Many women were examining the contradictions they experienced between their society or culture's definition of women's status and their own beliefs. . . . Another Navajo woman responded: . . . ' in our Indian custom, . . . men have to be the head of the household. He's supposed to be the provider. The woman is supposed to just take care of the kids and cook and stuff. . . . I don't want to be in the corner where I think the man has to be by me all the time to pick up stuff. I don't want to be that kind of person. I want to be myself. I have to do for my children. Navajo custom is changing. A lot is changing. I hate to say this, but Navajo women are out-smarting the men I think in some certain ways. Well really, women are tougher than men. That's the way I think' (Maguire, 1987:185-86).

From their voices, it is clear that the women's images of themselves often reflect society's view of them. But their ability to recognize a deeper level of self-knowledge, conflicting with the dominant social view, helps create in them the ability to change the material conditions of their lives.

Bourque and Warren (1981) also explore women's views based on their thesis that "only through analyses of the social world views of participants in the labor force can we move from behavior to meaning, value and ideology" (1981:77). They compare Western stereotypes of Latin American peasant women's attitudes about childbirth to the reality of their lives and perceptions, finding that peasant women are much more aware of "the wider social and economic implications of their fertility" than Western stereotypes allow (1981:88). Although in this study the women's voices are sifted through Bourque and Warren's analytical framework, these voices provide a way to further develop and test the framework against reality.

Another use of, and argument for hearing, women's voices appears in recent works on the psychology of women. Two examples of such work are Carol Gilligan's *In a Different Voice* (1982) and Belenky, *et al.*, *Women's Ways of Knowing: the Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (1986). A case is made by both the authors for first recognizing different ways of knowing and acting among women and then valuing those ways for what they can offer both to our understanding of women and to society's dominant way of being. Both studies build on interviews with women to construct emergent frameworks for analysis. The interaction between the interviewees, the information they put forward, and the researchers' ideas is a process of knowledge creation. In this vital process, the researchers' own voices also become part of the work.

It was as if the voices of the women, their words on paper, and our own process of reading together and culling the interviews for meaning gradually and profoundly modified the lens we brought to the project. As we worked, we were aware of the gradual shifts in our perspectives . . . . The stories of the women drew us back into a kind of knowing that had too often been silenced by the institutions in which we grew up and of which we were a part. In the end we found that, in our attempt to bring forward the ordinary voice, that voice had educated us (Belenky, *et al.*, 1986:20).

Women's own analysis of their experiences allows us to see a fuller range of explanations of women's experiences. In studying organizations, women's voices educate us. Those voices may sometimes be difficult to hear, or we may have neither the time nor the skill to listen, but without the understanding they offer, our vision remains clouded.

### **Chance encounters with layers of meaning**

Uncovering hidden meanings requires listening to women's voices. On a recent trip to Mali, I had a chance to do that, although on a surface level. The experience reinforced for me the importance of the inner view, and at the same time assured me that lessons from the other three ways of seeing are also alive in some of the women's thoughts. Since the way I proceeded into the world of Malian women was important to how I understood that world, I will tell the story that way.

Working with a small group of Malians in a training setting, it became clear to me that they had a completely different view of what it means to be a group, with a much more highly developed sense of solidarity. It seemed that to point out any individual behavior was to break the unity of the group. They didn't seem to want to talk about such

things. They had ways of making it known that a certain behavior was not acceptable, without pointing it out in a way that isolated the person doing the behavior, *e.g.*, group joking, mediating, *etc.* Maintaining solidarity was more important than dealing with individuals and their problems.

I was introduced to a woman member of this organization, also a member of the national women's organization (*L'Union Nationale des Femmes du Mali*, UNFM). In spite of her UNFM affiliation, she had organized an independent women's neighborhood association, which subsequently built a pre-school and women's center. In my initial conversations with her, she expressed the same phenomenon that I had observed with the training group. She kept stating that outsiders don't seem to understand the relationship of the national organization to the mass of Malian women. She was a member of the national organization, but organized the neighborhood association separately because they didn't want to go through the national organization to get help to find funding. Asked why she did this, she did not respond directly but rather talked about the fact that the national organization includes all Malian women and that there is no difference between the national organization and her neighborhood organization, even though they are not formally linked: because, after all, the national union of Malian women is just that, "all Malian women." She did not see a conflict between saying that UNFM is all Malian women and her organizing a group separate from UNFM. She either didn't want to show any separation or didn't *see* the separation. Even though there are other women's groups which don't go through or even agree with UNFM, in her view, they are still all UNFM - all Malian women.

This feeling was again demonstrated when the neighborhood association president took me to meet a UNFM board member so that I would understand the situation from the UNFM point of view too. We were accompanied to the meeting by a women's group leader from another town, the woman who had started a cooperative and who doesn't seem to want to have much to do with UNFM. I was surprised that she came with us, for we had just had a long discussion about how useless the UNFM was from her point of view. This did not seem to inhibit her personal relationship with the UNFM woman we went to see, at least on the level of demonstrated friendliness. My inability to make sense of this situation, even though I was starting to see the patterns of behavior, told me how different

was their way of understanding their own actions than the way I would have understood them.

This stark difference kept me wondering about how these Malian women's way of seeing could broaden the way their organizations are understood by outsiders. And I think it was exactly this that the president of the neighborhood association was trying to get me to understand. Although the understanding I gained was superficial, the meaning they gave their actions seemed intimately tied up with acceptable standards of group behavior, leading directly to the possibility of their carrying on radical activities while conforming to those standards for the sake of outside eyes. Is this what they were really trying to say? Only longer experience could tell.

## Now What?

What we know is constrained by interpretive frameworks which, of course, limit our thinking; what we *can* know will be determined by the kinds of questions we learn to ask (Rosaldo, 1980:390).

### Action with a cyclops view

By using the four ways of seeing to describe and analyze women's collective activities, we can arrive at a deeper understanding of their strengths, problems, and significance. But what difference could this new understanding, granted that it's deeper and multi-perspective, possibly make to working with and in women's groups? From my perspective as an outsider, a United States woman who might work with women's organizations in an African country, this understanding affects action in several ways. On the level of my personal decisions, these new views influence what kinds of groups I might like to work with based on an understanding of their bases of power, their relationship to class structures, and their role in maintenance or change of dominant ideologies. From analyzing these questions, I should be able to figure out which groups might come closest to having the potential for feminist action. I might understand, if I can learn the hidden meanings, how to build rather than destroy, help rather than block. I could recognize the ways in which seemingly conservative ideas may lead to radical action. I could define what kind of development women's groups might achieve by understanding their own visions of development and what is possible in their material and ideological context. I would perhaps know how to listen better to the women I work with, and might help them hear their own voices more clearly as well as those of other women.

But most of all, I would adopt a certain approach to my work, an approach which builds on the idea of multiple ways of seeing. This approach legitimates tentativeness in a world of solid answers spouted by standard theories and common biases. It says it's okay to have different answers for the same question, that the answering process is one of blending, balancing, comparing, and connecting. For the ways of seeing are not isolated from one another, as is apparent from their overlap and the way they turn up similar ideas from different angles. They "unravel multiple patterns of significance and their interrelations" (Morgan, 1986:342). This approach, echoing the values of humanist

feminism, can help us live out an alternative feminist ideology, engaging in a reflection-action process. In working with women, with organizations, and with cultures, it is an approach built for and promising change.

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