

INTEGRATING THE **GENDER** DIMENSION
INTO RESEARCH
IN WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA

**ADJUSTING SUPPORT FOR SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH
TO THE REALITIES OF WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA:
RECOMMENDATIONS BY THE REGIONAL ADVISORS OF WARO**

CHOSEN FOR THEIR BROAD VISION OF DEVELOPMENT AND RESEARCH ISSUES IN AFRICA, THE TEN ADVISORS OF THE REGIONAL OFFICE OF IDRC FOR WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICA (WARO) SUPPORT THE CENTRE IN ITS REFLECTION ON NEW RESEARCH PROBLEMS. THEY HELP IT DEFINE RELEVANT RESEARCH TOPICS THAT CORRESPOND TO THE REALITIES OF THE WEST AND CENTRAL AFRICAN REGION IN KEEPING WITH THE GENERAL GUIDELINES LAID OUT BY IDRC IN ITS 2005-2010 PROGRAMME FRAMEWORK : (www.idrc.ca/fr/ev-10509-201-1-DO_TOPIC.html).

THE TOPICS DEBATED BY THE REGIONAL ADVISORS CONCERN EVERY IDRC PROGRAMME, WITH A VIEW TO ACHIEVING A BETTER GRASP OF THE NEEDS OF THE REGION THROUGH A MULTIDISCIPLINARY VISION.

THE ADVISORY COUNCIL MEETS TWICE A YEAR ON DIFFERENT SUBJECTS DURING NATIONAL WORKSHOPS: THE RECOMMENDATIONS THAT FOLLOW ARE THE PRODUCT OF DISCUSSIONS THAT TOOK PLACE IN BAMAKO, MALI, ON 10 FEBRUARY 2006.

In 2006, the Liberian people elected a woman, Ellen Johnson-Sirleaf, to lead their country. At that time, according to UNESCO, the African continent had the highest number of out-of-school girls: 23 million. Between the exceptional figure of Ms Johnson-Sirleaf and the more common pattern of African girls weighed down by domestic chores that handicap their future, there is a veritable chasm. And yet, in the area of research, that gap should serve as a stimulant. First of all, because it reveals that decades of struggle for women's emancipation in Africa have produced some progress. But also because, alongside the relative evolution in the context and mentalities, the issue of the persistence of certain problems of inequality and marginalization becomes even more acute. The gender dimension is an integral part of all research problems focusing on development, and as such, it applies to all the initiatives of the IDRC programme. The following seven research avenues were proposed to the Centre by the Regional Advisors during the meeting of 10 February 2006, in Bamako.

1 Women's access to justice and equality in terms of justice

- › Teaching women to know their rights
- › How do women understand and accept the legislation that applies to them?
- › Do the contents of the legislation fit with the priority needs of women in light of their specific status?

In West and Central Africa, despite the fact that legal foundations now recognize the rights of women, there is a persistent gap between what is laid out by the law and the realities actually experienced by women. It is essential to achieve a better understanding of the obstacles that keep all those promises from being translated into action and because of which women still suffer from legal inequalities in areas such as land, housing, credit, employment, justice, education and training.

Cases of sexual violence and abuse of women and girls are treated at arm's length by the judicial milieu, which hesitates to take the defence of women. In most cases, such discriminatory practices finally induce women to give up on legal action. Furthermore, such obstacles to

the recognition of their rights are not limited to that area alone and women generally lack access to justice and have a low level of awareness of the laws that apply to them.

Naturally, equal justice cannot disregard the issue of women's access to justice. However, this fundamental issue should be addressed while taking into consideration the fact that many women, both rural and urban, are unaware of their rights and the legislation that affects them. In addition, they may be subjected to certain traditional laws (Levirate and Sororate marriage practices) and certain inheritance systems that deprive them of their basic rights, and also of legal recourse.

2 Migratory phenomena and their consequences on women

- › What is the link between trafficking and exodus of women in general and rural exodus in particular?
- › What are the economic and social dimensions of such trafficking?
- › What are its consequences?
- › What is the status of women heads of families?

Today, migratory movements and exodus, whether voluntary or due to armed conflicts or political instability, strongly affect the lives of many populations in West and Central Africa. However, the economic and social dimensions and consequences of these movements are still largely unknown.

There is a need to improve our knowledge of certain phenomena whose current scope is a direct consequence of these migratory movements. These include women heads of families, trafficking of women and an increase in prostitution.

Due to male emigration, many women have become de facto heads of families. These women often live in uncer-

tainty, lacking the necessary resources to support the dependents left in their care, and without all the rights linked to their status as heads of families. And yet, aside from these observations, we still know far too little about these women and how they experience their situation.

Trafficking in femmes and prostitution are two problems that have grown in importance in recent years due to the armed conflicts and political instability in the region (particularly in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Côte d'Ivoire and the Democratic Republic of Congo). While these practices continue to grow, we observe that they are not the focus of sufficient attention from the public authorities, or even researchers, who have devoted very few studies to them so far.

Women's health

- › Is there a link between male migration and the expansion of HIV/AIDS in women?
- › What is the state of women's mental health as a result of the difficult situations they experience and their marginalization?



Migratory movements, and the trafficking in human beings and prostitution which they accentuate, are also becoming a new factor in some research on the health of African women. The study of the feminization of HIV/AIDS, for example, which continues to be a priority research topic, needs to take account of the spread of the disease through phenomena such as Levirate marriage or movements of men and women within countries,

within regions and between different regions of Africa.

Two other problems in the area of health, one persistent and the other emerging, call for research efforts in future. These are the implications of sexual violence and abuse on the health and lives of women but also on the mental health of African women, which is emerging as a new concern today.

Women's participation in decision-making bodies

- › Why do women remain outside of decision-making centres?
- › What is their involvement in the process of decentralization and local governance?
- › What is the role and impact of women's groups in reinforcing women's leadership?
- › Training of women's organizations on lobbying techniques



The effects of globalization and the changes taking place in systems and methods of production have not had the expected impact on the entry of African women into decision-making bodies. As a general rule, they continue to be excluded from political decision-making spheres and decentralization processes. This political marginalization needs to be examined more closely. It is essential that we arrive at a better understanding of why women remain on the fringes of power.

For that reason, and in-depth state of the art study on the women's involvement in decentralization and local governance processes in West and Central Africa constitutes a vital foundation for research.

For researchers, the case of Liberia represents a real source of knowledge on the conditions of change in terms of women's political participation. By choosing to

elect a female President, the Liberian people have demonstrated that significant change is possible. It would therefore be useful to conduct a thorough analysis of the causes of that change. An important dimension of that reflection would be to analyse the role and impact of the support of women's groups in the victory of Ms Johnson-Sirleaf. A study of this kind could help us better understand why women offer or refuse to offer their support to fellow female citizens who wish to obtain decision-making positions.

You will note that the subject of female leadership is a central focus of all of these questions. Because it particularly addresses the issue of prejudice against women, this topic is of considerable interest for future research. Outside of the political framework, female leadership also should be better documented in the business sphere.

5

Modes of economic emancipation of women

- › What access do women have to credit?
- › What are the terms of management of this sort of credit?
- › What assessment can be made of the various micro-credit programmes?
- › What are the impacts of those programmes on poverty reduction for women?

The lack of education and training for girls, difficult access to land, real property and resources in general, and heavy burdens of domestic work are additional factors on top of those already described which hinder women's economic emancipation, particularly in rural areas.

Micro-credit, which has long been held out as a potential solution in the fight against poverty and for the improvement of the living conditions of African women, constitutes a new research topic that warrants in-depth study. Indeed,

it has been observed that this tool can also have negative side-effects such as excessive indebtedness.

An evaluation of several micro-credit programmes set up in recent years is therefore a necessity. In addition, a state of the art study on the credit policies applied to women, the methods of management of these credits and their impact on poverty reduction for women is also a priority.

6

Status of research on women

- › What data is available?
- › What research exists and what is its impact?
- › What research structures exist?
- › Training of researchers on gender issues

What is the status of African university research on the issues of women's rights and citizenship?

One of the chief weaknesses pointed out by the Regional Advisors was the lack of reliable and up-to-date data on the status of women to serve as a foundation for theory. The fact that gender is not sufficiently addressed in African universities and particularly in their research programmes and processes is also perceived as a cause for concern.

A database of this kind would make it possible to intro-

duce gender-specific dimensions involving women into research projects, programmes and processes.

Another weakness that was pointed out relates to the level of scientific expertise relative to the methodologies and approaches that make it possible to integrate the gender dimension. Thus, there is a need for better training of both male and female researchers on these issues, which are both theoretical and methodological in scope. Ideally, discussion of these issues should form an integral part of their research training.

7

Commitment towards political, religious and community partners

- › Involvement of decision makers and stakeholders in programme planning
- › Is dissemination of research findings sufficient and does it follow appropriate channels?
- › Who are the people who can play an active role?
- › What are the existing networks?

Despite everything, we cannot expect research alone to bring about real change in the policies and practices that oppress women in West and Central Africa. Research must necessarily form alliances with its principal partners: political decision makers, religious authorities and civil society organizations.

The formation of such alliances depends of course on the sharing of research findings with these partners, with women in rural and urban areas, as well as with the population as a whole, in order to better ensure their ownership. However, additional actions, manifesting a higher degree of commitment towards the partners, would probably have better chances of arriving at concrete changes in the lives of women by responding to their real needs.

Greater involvement of decision makers and religious authorities in the planning of research projects is one such

action. Working in cooperation with women's organizations is another. Indeed, such a partnership would make it possible to develop information and communication activities that would be optimized by the contribution of research findings. It would also help the organizations strengthen their capacities in terms of lobbying and strengthen advocacy regarding the added value of gender equity for development.

Finally, the strategic role of certain men and women as motors for change should not be neglected.

Within various networks, institutes and associations with a focus on women's rights and living conditions, there are individuals who, through their attitudes, connections and skills, can play an active role in implementing change. Identifying these people and creating partnerships with them are undoubtedly avenues that should be explored.