

## Trotter Review

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Volume 12  
Issue 1 *Women of Color and Economic  
Development*

Article 11

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January 2000

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#### Recommended Citation

Gathuo, Anne (2000) "Kenyan Women and the Harambee: Community Development or Unpaid Work?," *Trotter Review*. Vol. 12: Iss. 1, Article 11.

Available at: [https://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter\\_review/vol12/iss1/11](https://scholarworks.umb.edu/trotter_review/vol12/iss1/11)

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# Kenyan Women and the Harambee: Community Development or Unpaid Work?

By Anne Gathuo

## Introduction

Since gaining independence from Britain in 1963, the Kenyan government has encouraged self-help activity, known as “harambee” which is aimed at supplementing government efforts in the provision of social services.<sup>1</sup> The term harambee conjures positive images of community spirit and people pooling together for a common cause. Indeed, the term is synonymous to community development. The United Nations Report on Community Development and Economic Development defines community development as the process by which the efforts of the people themselves are combined with those of governmental authorities to improve the economic, social and cultural conditions of communities, to integrate these communities into the life of the nation, and to enable them to contribute fully to national progress.<sup>2</sup> Many development projects including water and power supply, schools, health centers and others in Kenya and other developing countries have typically been based, at least partly, on the concept of self-help.

In the last two decades, however, ‘self-help for development’ has been replaced by ‘self-help for survival.’ Poor governance coupled with the implementation of World Bank and International Monetary Fund sponsored Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) has resulted in the cut of government funding for many basic social services programs which has necessitated communities to devise means of providing themselves with these services. The harambee concept, originally meant as a strategy for supplementing government effort, has now shifted its orientation to replacing the government altogether in social services provision and economic development. This essay explores the impact that SAPs have had on women in Kenya as they ‘pool together’ and attempt to fill the gaps left by the government.

## The Role of Women in the Harambee Movement

Harambee, the concept of pooling together, has its roots in traditional society. Women, who traditionally were responsible for cultivating the land, would get together and do it collectively.<sup>3</sup> They would also collaborate in times of need, for example, after childbirth a woman would get help from groups of other women while she was indisposed. In modern times, the ‘harambee’ is not just an abstract concept describing community spirit. It refers to all the activities that relate to community development such as physically building a school or laying piping for water, as well as the accompanying formal fundraising event. It is important to point out that while the spirit of the harambee is volunteerism, in practice there is little choice as to whether to participate or not. Fear of being ostracized by the community ensures that individual households participate in community projects.<sup>4</sup> Women have continued to be the cornerstone of the harambee movement while men have been only marginally involved. The greater role that women play in self-help and community development projects may be understood by examining the various forms and roles of the harambee.

The most visible and formal manifestation of the harambee involves individuals in the community donating their time and money to public development projects such as day care and nursery schools, health centers, water development and the development of other amenities. Often, these projects are mainly funded by the government or non-government organizations and the community is required to supplement the efforts of the government. In a rural location, the government might, for example, donate the land on which a nursery school is to be built but the community is expected to raise money to build the school. Once the money is raised, it might be used to buy the building materials and pay the skilled labor. Community residents donate the non-skilled labor. Often, these community residents are women. Women are the natural choice to donate their free services for two reasons. First, women are most often the ones who do not have paid work outside the home and are therefore perceived to be available for community development activities. In the common but fading set-up where the woman lives in the rural areas with the children while the husband lives in a urban locality where he works, the woman is the only choice. Secondly, many self-help community projects such as the provision of water and power supply are directly related to reducing women’s burden.<sup>5</sup> For this reason, women unlike men, have vested interest in community projects and therefore voluntarily donate their services.

A second form of the harambee is a situation where individuals pool their resources together for a joint economic project, typically a cooperative society. The primary goal of many grassroots women groups is economic. It is easy to see why women are attracted to this type of economic grouping. Individually, many women are unable to venture into income generating activities because of lack of capital. Business loans no matter how small require some form of collateral. In Kenya, collateral is typically land. Although women provide 70 to 80 percent of the agricultural labor, traditionally they are not landowners. Despite the law of succession passed in the 1990s requiring that all children regardless of marital status or gender inherit property equally from their parents if their parents die intestate, few women have titles to land that they can use to access credit. One way of getting over this hurdle is to get together as a group and obtain a business loan from the various non-governmental organizations that extend credit to such groups. The Kenya Women Finance Trust for example is a major women's bank that extends business loans and gives training to women groups. The desire to put money in group funds can be seen as an attempt by women to take control of their earnings. While as pointed out earlier, rural women do most of the work on the land for example, the men as landowners, control the earnings. Working women in urban areas may also have no control over their earnings.<sup>6</sup> Putting money in group funds therefore is not only an attempt for women to protect their fragile incomes; it is also a strategy of preventing appropriation by husbands. Patricia Stamp, in a research report on self-help groups in Kenya writes:

At the economic level, the element of sex-gender subsidy remains and has in fact been increased. Women are expected to produce to support their husbands as before, but in addition, they are expected to produce the petty commodity surplus which their husbands then appropriate.<sup>7</sup>

Another form of harambee, one that has gained notoriety among Kenyans, involves private pooling of resources for a private cause. The array of 'causes' for which fundraising events in the name of harambee are held illustrates the notoriety. Victims of catastrophes such as house fires or floods may and often do raise funds from the community. People may also raise funds for hospital bills, school fees and other basic needs. Fundraising for education, including attendance to col-

lege, is common. Private social events too, weddings, funerals, and even birthdays are deemed causes for fundraising. Again, with this form of harambee, women play the major role. In case of emergencies, women are the most affected since they lack savings to tide them over such events. Women also enjoy participating in fundraising for social events because the gathering is an acceptable 'legitimate' form of leisure where women can establish friendships and networks. Despite this positive attribute of the harambee in enhancing women's social lives, a lot of women are sacrificing their own personal growth and economic well being as they spend an increasing amount of their time and other resources on community projects. The implementation of the IMF and World Bank's Structural Adjustment Programs has only made matters worse.

### **Structural Adjustment Programs**

During the 1980s, Kenya along with several other developing countries undertook the implementation of Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs). The SAPs were aimed at addressing distortions such as overvalued exchange rates, high current account and fiscal deficits, low factor mobility, restrictions on domestic and foreign trade, distorted pricing for tradables, and inefficient public services.<sup>8</sup> There are different schools of thought regarding the appropriateness of SAPs as a prescription for what ails African and other developing countries. The World Bank and the IMF maintain that those countries such as Ghana and Tanzania which have pursued adjustment programs in a consistent and sustained manner have shown resurgence in growth.<sup>9</sup> Another school of thought is that the SAPs could work as intended but developing countries lack the leadership to insure their success. Yet others feel that SAPs are the wrong solution to the problems of the developing world. Such critics argue that the programs are designed to meet the needs of the industrialized countries by ensuring that debt is repaid and encouraging developing countries to export cheap raw materials; and have in fact deteriorated the Third World economies.<sup>10</sup> African governments pay out four times more in debt service than they spend on health and education. (Kenya's external debt in January 1999 was 46.3% of Gross Domestic Product).<sup>11</sup>

Whatever the case might be, it is clear that the process of structural adjustment is a slow and painful one for those who have to live with the day-to-day reality of the results of the implementation of the programs. This

is particularly true for women who have experienced more hardships as a result of SAPs than any other group.<sup>12</sup> The adjustments have translated to among other things increased food prices resulting from the removal of government subsidies, cut in social and educational services, and the laying off of government workers. All these changes have affected women adversely. Because women are the ones responsible for paying for the food in most households, the increased food prices have meant that women are spending a huge portion of their wages on food. This leaves them with little capacity for saving, which in turn means that their potential to uplift themselves economically is greatly reduced. Further, families are having to do with less food in terms of both quantity and quality. This is likely to have an impact on women's health who in times of food shortages give priority to their husbands and children. In the rural areas too, the increased prices of food has particularly affected female-headed households.

The cut in government healthcare spending has had far-reaching effects on women and girls. The incidence of malnutrition and diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis has increased, eroding the progress that had been made in many developing countries during the 1960s and the 1970s. The fact that there are increased fees in hospital services that were previously free means that not only do women not seek primary health care (or even emergency) services, they are also increasingly called upon to care for the sick at home. This prevents them from engaging in income generating activities. Similarly, girls who often are the secondary nurturers are prevented from attending school. The imposition of SAPs has resulted in a drop in governmental health care spending.

The increased cost of education means that girls, who traditionally have taken second place to boys in terms of educational opportunities are now even worse off. More girls are likely to be withdrawn from school or not supported in their quest for higher education. According to a United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) report entitled "Shaping A Women's Development Agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," SAPs among other things have ensure that "many of the gains made in the past cannot be maintained: women work longer hours, maintaining households on reduced resources; there are threats of increased transmission of intergenerational poverty along gender lines as girls are deprived of scarce household resources, held back from school, and expected to be the family's secondary

nurturers."<sup>13</sup>

The restructuring of the civil service has resulted in both the retrenchment of thousands of government workers as well as a hiring freeze. Again, women have been affected by this restructuring since traditionally many women have held government jobs particularly in nursing and teaching. This loss in salaried income has impoverished many women who have resorted to starting small-scale businesses in all major urban centers. The proliferation of small-scale businesses has only ensured their failure as they compete for a small market devoid of purchasing power. As the government has cut down services, the harambee has taken on an intense, even sinister, form as public institutions and individuals turn to the community (specifically women) for survival.

### **The Harambee: Bad for Women?**

Originally the harambee was regarded as a supplemental strategy for government effort. But as the government has withdrawn and disinvested itself from basic social service provision, the community has had to step in to play the roles that the government is supposed to play. Faced with survival issues for example, many public schools have resulted to forcing parents to contribute funds for capital investments such as school buildings. The volunteerism spirit of the harambee has totally been replaced by "forced harambees".<sup>14</sup> In fact, the government has abandoned some of its most fundamental roles – recently for example, groups interested in seeing a constitution review, including opposition parties and major churches, organized a harambee funds drive nationwide to raise money for the constitution review process.<sup>15</sup> The abandonment by government of its basic functions and the shift of such functions to the weakest in the community (women) is not only an untenable developmental strategy doomed to fail; it is also an unfair burden on women.

As pointed out earlier, women are the backbone of harambee efforts and they donate their time and meager resources to ensure their success. In so doing, women sacrifice their personal economic welfare. It is assumed that women, unlike men have the spare time to participate in community efforts. This is not true. Various lines of feminist critique have pointed to the considerable amount of actual production that still takes place within the home: transforming consumer goods for end-stage consumption, maintenance of consumer

durables, purchasing goods, scheduling medical appointments.<sup>16</sup> For women in developing countries such as Kenya, this unpaid work consumes a lot more time due to lack of modern conveniences. In addition, there are established norms for providing for self and family, and no laws for spousal or child support and therefore women, even those with small children have to work outside the home.<sup>17</sup>

Doing so much unpaid work both at home and in the community in the name of harambee tends to undervalue women's labor. Because of lack of training and education, women who enter the labor force are only "semi-proletarianized."<sup>18</sup> This, coupled with negative attitudes towards women has been a problem in the past with women only being viewed as secondary labor and being offered only secondary roles in the workforce. With the new burden imposed on women by the withdrawal of the government from the social services system, women have less time and money for personal development, have become less stable workers and are unable to compete effectively with men for the few high paying positions in the labor market.

## Conclusion

Although economic progress has benefited many, a fifth of the world's people today live in absolute poverty with women constituting 70 per cent of the world's 1.3 billion absolute poor. Further, women within poor countries and communities are more impoverished than men. As a result of this situation, there has been an emergence of rethinking development and articulating priorities in last few years. According to the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), there is a push for the reaffirmation of women's rights including their "personal, economic and political rights as full human persons throughout their life cycle."<sup>19</sup> The shift in developmental thinking, planning and practice emphasizes *gender equity* as the central principle of the new development process. Kenya must similarly rethink its development strategy. Development should not be left to women alone since this is not only ineffective, it interferes with women's personal economic and social rights. The Kenyan government should also rethink its responses to Structural Adjustment Programs with a view to cushioning women against resulting harsh economic realities that only aggravate the already existing gender inequalities. While the harambee works well as a supplemental strategy, it cannot and should not be expected to fill the gaps left by the government.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Patricia Stamp, "Kikuyu Women's Self-Help Groups: Toward an Understanding of the Relation Between Sex-Gender System and Mode of Production in Africa" in Claire Robertson and Iris Berger, eds., *Women and Class in Africa* (New York: Africana Publishing Company, 1986), 41.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations Report on Community Development and Economic Development in Katar Singh, *Rural Development: Principles, Policies and Management* (New Delhi, Sage Publications, 1986), 164-165.

<sup>3</sup> Stamp, "Kikuyu Women and Self-Help Groups," 40.

<sup>4</sup> Harriette McAdoo and Miriam Were, "Extended Family Involvement of Urban Kenya Professional Women" in Rosalyn Terborg-Penn et al., eds., *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora* (Washington D.C.: Howard University Press, 1989), 152-154.

<sup>5</sup> Stamp, "Kikuyu Women and Self-Help Groups," 40.

<sup>6</sup> Sharon B. Stichter, "The Middle-Class Family in Kenya: Changes in Gender Relations" in Sharon B. Stichter and Jane L. Parpart, eds., "Patriarchy and Class: African Women in Home and the Workforce," Westview Press (Boulder: 1988), 41

<sup>7</sup> Stamp, "Kikuyu Women and Self-Help Groups," 38.

<sup>8</sup> Ishrat Husain, "Results of Adjustment in Africa: Selected Cases" *Finance and Development*, Vol 31 No. 2, June 1994..

<sup>9</sup> Christine Jones and Miguel A. Kiguel, "Africa's Quest for Prosperity: Has Adjustment Helped?" *Finance and Development*, June 1994 Vol. 31 No.2.

<sup>10</sup> Dorothy E. Logie and Jessica Woodroffe, "Structural Adjustment: the Wrong Prescription for Africa," *British Medical Journal*, July 3, 1993, Vol. 307, No. 6895. See also, Walden Bello and Shea Cunningham, "Reign of Error: The World Bank's Wrongs," *Dollars & Sense*, Sept-Oct 1994, No. 195.

<sup>11</sup> Wangethi Mwangi, "Aids Toll on Poor Nations," *Daily Nation*, June 28, 2000. See also, Mbatau Wa Ngai, "Kenya's Public Debt Increasing, Says Central Bank," *The East African*, April 9, 1999.

<sup>12</sup> Connexions, "Beasts of Adjustment Burden: Structural Adjustment Policy in Action," No. 44, 1994 excerpted from Marion Jaminez "Structural Adjustment Program: Its Effects on the Lives of Women," *Womennews* Vol. 10, No.s 2 and 3, April-June 1993 and July-September, 1993. See also, Shea Cunningham and Betsy Reed, "Balancing Budgets on Women's Backs: The World Bank and the 104<sup>th</sup> Congress." *Dollars & Sense*, Nov-Dec 1995 n202; and WIN, "World Bank Structural Adjustment and Gender Policies," *WIN News*, Spring 1995 Vol. 21 No. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Noleen Heyzer, *A Women's Development Agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: UNIFEM's Commitment to the World's Women*, UNIFEM. Internet, (September 14, 2000) [gopher://gopher.undp.org/00/unifem/public/devel-a%09%09%2B](http://gopher://gopher.undp.org/00/unifem/public/devel-a%09%09%2B)

<sup>14</sup> There are numerous complaints about forced harambees particularly by parents of school going children. A popular column, "The

Cutting Edge," in Kenya's major newspaper *The Daily Nation* regularly carries such complaints. On November 30, 1999 for example, a parent complained about primary school children in one school division being sent home for not paying Shs. 400 for building a secondary school. Parents were also being forced to contribute money for teachers' Christmas gifts!

<sup>15</sup> "Leaders Miss Ufungamano Drive," *The Daily Nation*, August 14, 2000.

<sup>16</sup> Stichter, "The Middle-Class Family in Kenya," 195.

<sup>17</sup> The Affiliation Bill, seeking to establish child support rights has been defeated in the mostly male parliament several times.

<sup>18</sup> Beechy Veronica "Some Notes on Female Wage Labor in the Capitalist Mode of Production," *Capital and Class*, quoted in Sharon B. Stichter and Jane L. Parpart, *Patriarchy and Class African Women in the Home and the Workforce* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1988), 8

<sup>19</sup> Heyzer, *A Women's Development Agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*

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