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SOUTH-SOUTH COLLABORATIVE PROGRAMME

OCCASIONAL PAPER SERIES

**Regionalism, Citizenship
and Gender in Africa:
A Feminist Perspective**

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The South-South Tri-continental Programme is a scholarly collaboration for Research, Training, Publishing, and Dissemination, between the Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa (**CODESRIA**); the Asian Political and International Studies Association (**APISA**); and the Latin American Council of Social Science (**CLACSO**). The Programme was established as a reaction to the need, identified by scholars in the South, to reorient theoretical and methodological frameworks of the dominant development discourses; and to improve the organization of Southern research infrastructures. The Programme aims at reviving cooperation and collaboration among scholars of the global South working in the broad field of the social sciences. The collaboration was entered into with the specific aim of sustaining knowledge exchange between scholars on the three continents as a long-term initiative. At the core of this collaboration are the objectives of

- deepening intra-South networking

- contributing a South perspective towards the transformation of the Social Sciences on a global scale

- producing alternative theoretical and methodological approaches of knowledge building

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Introduction

This paper aims to critically analyse the impact of regionalism on African women's citizenship, in order to identify key questions that need to be addressed for a deeper understanding of potential implications and consequences of existing regionalisation policies and processes on gender relations and women's rights in the continent.


The first section discusses the methodological and conceptual issues raised by the mainstream theories and frameworks for a gender analysis of both regionalism and citizenship in Africa. The second section deals with some conceptual issues that characterise the policy framework within which regional integration policies are being formulated and implemented. The third section focuses on the potential impact of hegemonic regional integration schemes such as the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) driven by the EU on women's rights and gender relations in the case of ECOWAS.

1. Theories and Frameworks

For regionalism and citizenship alike, the research field is characterised by the hegemony of Western theories. While the conceptualisations and instruments for the study of Europe - which is still largely seen as the model for regional integration for the rest of the world - currently dominate in the area of regionalism, the mainstream definition and theoretical framework of citizenship relies on the Western liberal tradition.

1.1. Citizenship

The most recent literature on gender and citizenship in Africa points to critical issues of definition. Chief among these is the distinction that ought to be made between « formal citizenship », which is about rights and obligations between state and citizen as enshrined in formal law, and « substantive citizenship », which encompasses 'the economic, social and political relationship between social groups and structures of power that mediate the standing of individuals in the polity' (McEwan 2001:51). This distinction implies that "entitling all citizens to the same rights does not necessarily promote equitable outcomes and formal rights do not ensure substantive equality or agency" (Mukhopadhyay 2007).



Feminists researchers and activists have challenged the liberal view based on a universal conception of citizenship on the grounds that while its rights standards do not recognise difference and hence are seemingly gender neutral « [they] are, in reality, standards built with elite males in a given society as the norm » (Mukhopadhyay 2007). In particular, this dominant conception of citizenship is not adequate for the African postcolonial context where many women's citizenship is still largely defined by ascribed social relations of subordination, and their relations with the state are mediated by men, kin or communities.

As feminist authors have underlined, it is even more inadequate in the context of globalization where an “internal patriarchal ‘closing of ranks’” occurs as subgroups/communities strive for their specific interests and rights in relation to the broader national community (Menon 1998; Kabeer 2002; cited in Goetz 2007). In such a context, “to struggle for their community's interests implies acceptance of women's ascribed subordinate status, because that subordination has come to define community culture and values” (Goetz 2007). This is compounded by the prolonged crisis of many nation-states in the Africa region, where women are particularly affected by the exclusions resulting from their fragmentation and capture by both national elites and external forces (Gouws; Taylor).

The global restructuring processes in the cultural, economic, political and social areas have also led to re-thinking citizenship in light of the changes in global governance, whereby the actors are no longer limited to the State or civil and political society, but also include global actors who have the power to influence governance institutions according to their own imperatives. In this context, women in the global South appear to be part of those groups of people who are harmed by such changes, but cannot rely on a single centre of authority to address their concerns and needs (Mukhopadhyay 2007).

This “crisis in the control of the world order” (Sen 1997), combined with the negative effects of the neo-liberal development model on peoples' lives - especially women as evidenced in the literature on SAPs and globalisation - , also accounts for the emergence of the global justice movements in the 90s. Women's movements play an important role in this phenomenon that challenges “the concept of citizenship and rights as being narrowly defined as a 'given' set of entitlements or rights, by virtue of living within or belonging to a territory or a nation” (Mukhopadhyay 2007).

1.2. Regionalism

The innumerable studies on regionalism in Europe and other parts of the world share common features that are relevant to this paper:


- Most of them are characterised by a narrow focus on the methodology of regionalism and regionalization;
- They do not pay enough attention to historical and social contexts;
- They are closed to other disciplines that can potentially contribute to a better understanding of their subject matter.

With regard to the studies of regionalism in Africa, some authors predict “a convergence of attention on African regionalism” (Tavares 2004). They contend that while Africa has been a laboratory of both the “old regionalism” - as represented by the creation of regional organisations such as the OAU - and the “new regionalism” - as represented by the establishment of regional economic communities (RECs) and the transformation of the OAU into the African Union (Tavares 2004) -, several mainstream studies on regionalism overlook the impact of the regionalization of security and economy in the continent (Mansfield and Milner, 1997; Adler and Barnett, 1998; Fawcett and Hurrell, 1997; Mattli, 1999).

Of note is the hotly debated issue of “open regionalism” and the related regional inside/outside mechanisms, in particular the factors of inclusion/exclusion which make one an insider or an outsider. Among such factors, gender, class and ethnicity have been identified as “triggering factors of exclusion” (Tavares 2004). How both the mechanisms of exclusion and inclusion actually work and what their constitutive elements are still remain outstanding questions.

It also remains to be seen if the view of theorists that are critical of the ideas of exclusion and particularism attached to the notions of sovereignty and nation-state (Linklater, 1998; Smith, 1999:104), and see “ regional formations as an intermediary step towards an emancipatory world order predicated on the individual ” (Tavares 2004), is valid in the African context, especially in relation to the emancipation of women as full citizens.

Other authors have pointed to the exclusive focus of most studies on macro-regions and inter-state frameworks (Soderbaum and Taylor



2004). They also underscore that much of this work is centred on the State, and often overlooks what was actually happening, as opposed to what States were supposed to do according to their explicit agendas. These authors rightly point to the need to focus on micro-regionalism in order “to make sense of the ways in which Africans encounter (and shape) regional dynamics and how various forces, be they based on ethnicity, gender, identity or occupation, influence Africa’s encounter with regionalism” (Soderbaum and Taylor 2004: 4).

While such studies on micro-regionalism have contributed to shift the focus from the State-centric regionalization onto the informal processes initiated by people, and to recognise African agency, they also raise critical gender issues related to the emergence of sub-political collectivities. No matter if these are formal or informal, these new structures are an additional layer in political governance within which the available evidence shows that women are largely marginalized.


2. The Policy Framework of Regional Integration in Africa

2.1. Conceptual issues

In Africa, the ups and downs in the history of regional integration since its inception in the 1960s, has resulted in the proliferation of overlapping Regional Economic Communities (RECs) with varied levels of advancement in the integration process. This situation which requires the rationalization of these RECs has contributed to the overwhelming focus on the

definition of technical modalities, institutional structures and mechanisms, and timetables for enhancing economic cooperation between neighbouring countries.

Because regional integration has come to be identified with the objectives of increased trade and stronger economic linkages between countries, the socio-economic impacts of regional integration economic policy on the region’s peoples, especially the working population, have been largely overlooked (Bourenane 1997, Robert 2004), including « the potential negative impact that economic liberalization has on employment and on a region’s



capacity to dampen this impact. Regional agreements invariably include commitments for lowering trade barriers between member states, raising concerns that jobs will be diverted to markets with lower labour costs and that existing labour standards will erode » (Robert 2004 : 1).


Whatever the mixed record of integration in the continent, there is clear evidence that African leaders have placed regional integration high on their agenda. The downside of such high-level and top-down approach is the lack of effective implementation of regional treaties and protocols at both the sub-regional and national levels. This situation shows the limits of current models that are divorced from the historical, cultural and social realities of the different contexts. The mainstream model of regional integration has been conceived of primarily as a framework of harmonized policies to facilitate a market-driven concept of regional integration, at the expense of a people-centred process of community building.

This is primarily a governance question about who participates in the definition of the regional integration agenda and who stands to benefit from it. It is also about whether regional institutions have the mandate and power to address social concerns, and if so, how they are in fact addressing them. In Africa for example, an increasing number of regional structures are expected to promote gender equality in the formulation of regional policies.

2.2. Which kind of regional integration ?

Current regional integration initiatives do not happen in a vacuum. They are taking place in the context of the re-configuration of production structures and labour relations on a global scale, along with the crisis and consequent re-definition of the whole development project itself. In particular, this re-definition has been concretised by the narrowing down of the international development agenda to a single focus on poverty reduction, notably through the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs), which have replaced *de facto* the national development plans of indebted African countries. This has been accompanied by an increased privatisation of public utilities and social services, along with the “marketisation of governance” (Taylor 2000)

Therefore, the analysis of the costs and benefits of regional integration that accrue to different actors should be done against




the background of contemporary globalisation processes, which require social policies on both national and transnational levels (Yeates and Irving, 2005, cited in Yeates and Deacon 2006), given the absence of a social clause in the global economic and financial policies that are imposed on African countries, and the divergence in the international community as to how reconcile economic openness with social standards.

In addition, there is growing popular demand for regional institutions to address issues of poverty reduction, HIV/AIDS, human rights, education, health and social security. These demands which reflect the challenges raised by globalisation should raise awareness among the promoters and architects of regional integration about the urgent and unavoidable need for a regional commitment to take into account the social content of regional integration in order to respond to the real effects that economic integration has on people.

In this context, there are two overarching issues that have critical implications from a gender perspective. The first issue relates to the conception of current regional policies: the prevailing approach sees regional integration as a mechanism/instrument of trade liberalization, based on the theory of comparative advantage in international trade. Thus, regional formations mostly exist primarily as trade (or political) agreements of various kinds, and their purpose is not primarily a social developmental one (Robert 2004). As such, they tend to downplay the social policy and social equity dimensions, even more so gender equity.

Furthermore, the effectiveness of the related policies is hindered by the lack of coherence and complementarity to one another, coupled with the lack of supranational-level political authority that is necessary for a coherent, binding and effective regional social policy (Yeates and Deacon 2006).

The second issue pertains to the governance of current regional formations, notably the modes of democratic representation in these regional formations and the related trans-regional structures and processes. In this regard, it is important to acknowledge the patriarchal legacy that plagues many of the existing regional structures and processes. In the case of Africa, there is a consensus on the recognition that regional integration has for too long been the business of governments alone, with very little participation of women, and on « the importance of gender equity and women's empowerment and representation in all aspects of the process



establishing the African Union, in its representative institutions, and in its programmes. » (UNECA 2004)

3. Implications of the new European Commission trade strategy for ECOWAS: A Feminist Analysis

3.1. The conceptual framework of the new EC trade strategy

The conceptual framework of the new trade strategy that guides the European Commission (EC) in the negotiations of an Economic Partnership Agreement with ECOWAS, ignores the lessons learnt from as well as the developmental and gendered impacts of two decades of trade liberalization on job creation and growth in developing countries, including ECOWAS. As an illustration of these impacts, in the garment industry where the majority of workers are women, 8 million jobs had been lost as a result of high tariffs in the EU (IMF/World Bank 2002: 43)

The EC strategy is most likely to have a negative impact on the terms of trade of ECOWAS countries, which already face increased trade deficits and balance of payment (BOP) problems leading to increased indebtedness with its detrimental impacts on poor people, most of whom are women. Moreover, it emphasises competition over cooperation, and corporate-driven growth over public policy and the role of the State, which are crucial for ensuring gender equality in both the EU and ECOWAS countries.

The emphasis of the EC strategy on investment liberalization potentially increases capital flight from ECOWAS countries to the detriment of States' revenue, national economies and local businesses. It also heightens the risk of financial instability and crises, which has proved to have greater impact on women than men.

Because the strategy builds on the premise of a linear and automatic link between increased international competitiveness, job creation and growth, it ignores a number of real-life issues resulting from the neo-liberal trade liberalization agenda:

➤ the fact that openness can lead to economic expansion for some sectors, but also to contraction for some others. In ECOWAS, studies found that it is likely to lead to a contraction of the manufacturing sector and to reinforce the process of de- industrialization in the



sub-region;

- the structural inequalities that determine the ability to survive in competitive markets and to be competitive, including income and gender inequality in both the EU and ECOWAS countries;
- the hidden costs of a competitive workforce, which include the feminization of labour in ECOWAS countries coupled with the informalization, casualization and flexibilization of work through the increase in precarious employment, the reduction of the social wage and low labour standards;
- the factors that determine the distributional effects of trade policies, which include gender, class, race, geographical location, etc.

It is interesting that social justice issues do not seem relevant to the EC beyond the confines of the EU, whereas it is prepared to intervene in the area of domestic regulation in third countries in spite of the evidence of the negative impacts on people's well-being and livelihoods.

3.2. The strategic orientations of the EC

The EC strategy focuses on the areas of intellectual property (IPR), services, and on the so-called Singapore issues (i.e. investment, public procurement and competition) which have always been rejected by developing countries and had been among the major causes of the deadlock at the WTO Conference in Cancun.

It is important to recall that the resistance to the inclusion of the Singapore issues in trade negotiations on the part of developing countries is mainly due to the potential impact of liberalization in those areas on their sovereignty and domestic regulation. Against this background, the new EC trade strategy implies further opening and deregulation abroad to promote unfettered trade and capital flows, while maintaining and refining its own trade defence instruments. It focuses on dismantling the "barriers to trade behind the border" or non-tariff barriers "such as unnecessary trade-restricting regulations and procedures" which "touch directly on domestic regulation." (EC 2007: 6).

In other words, this strategy implies further reduction of the policy space and discretion of governments to manage trade and capital




flows according to their development imperatives.

From a gender perspective, the ability of States to manage trade and foreign investment so that they support the achievement of their development goals is critical to ensuring women's well-being and gender equity. The EC strategy could also affect the ability of States to take affirmative and anti-discrimination measures for promoting gender equity (for eg: export credits and subsidies for small women producers and traders) as such measures would be considered as trade-distorting.

At the same time, the strategy emphasizes transparency, compliance with rules and standards in third countries, but says very little about corporate social responsibility, governance, ethical business standards and human rights as regards EU investors and businesses. This is despite the fact that the EC's push for deregulation implies that the compliance of foreign investors with international conventions on labor rights would be further reduced. Women who constitute the majority of the workforce in the sectors where FDI is concentrated will be negatively affected by this kind of deregulation, in a context where competition for investment is increasing in ECOWAS countries.

There is every reason to believe that the new EC trade strategy will exacerbate the negative effects of the increased competition with EU exports that have been identified by the different impact studies. It should be noted that very few among these impact studies deal specifically with the impacts on gender relations in terms of intra-household allocation of resources - including time and labour - and power relations. These negative effects include:

- Closure of local enterprises which are unable to compete and the consequent job losses;
- Loss of livelihoods, as a result of the displacement of small producers from their segments of local and regional markets;
- Declining incomes for producers;
- Increased rural/urban migration;
- Increased food insecurity;
- Reduced access to basic social services;
- Consequent increase in the exploitation of women's paid and



unpaid work as a result of all these.

Conclusion

The current trends and issues that have been examined in the previous sections point to the complexity inherent to the gender analysis of the linkages between the macro and micro level issues at the nexus of citizenship and regionalism in the context of globalization. While the inadequacy of the mainstream theories and methodologies is confirmed to a large extent, there has been little progress in the development of alternative theories and methodological approaches that can help to acquire a full and accurate understanding of regionalization processes and their gender dynamics in Africa as well as in other Southern regions.

This is a major challenge that should be taken up, if African scholars - especially African feminist researchers - are to contribute effectively to devise the kind of regionalism that would effectively support the achievement of substantive and equal citizenship for all African men and women.

In this regard, the crisis of the nation-state together with the crisis of legitimacy in the relationship between citizens and their elected representatives across the Africa region raises the crucial question about whether or not regionalism can be a political and social project that can reinvigorate the social contract between citizens and the political power.