The RoSa-factsheets aim to familiarise you with the scope of equal opportunities in Flanders. Each factsheet probes the situation in a specific area. Broad themes as well as specific ones are put into the spotlight, depending on the relevance and/or availability of information and numerical data. We do not intend to offer exhaustive information, our primary aim is to sketch the position of women in Flanders in a surveyable and accessible way. Since its founding in 1978, RoSa is the place in Flanders to look for information and documentation about equal opportunities, emancipation policy and women’s studies.

Nr. 34 • Jul 2004

African feminism

After WWII the world was no longer the same. It was the dawn of many newly emerging states, and new economic principles started playing the world’s fore-field. This climate of change gave an impulse to women’s activism all over the globe. A number of factors played here. The new states’ nationalism went hand in hand with a fair amount of activism. Their renewed “élan” saw some major day dreaming about women’s independence. Another important factor is capitalism and the emergence of a global economy. The surge of (or brake on) women’s employment determines the emergence of women’s activism and women’s rights. Remarkably women’s activism is usually connected to the emergence of larger movements. All over the globe women’s activism rises in the wake of nationalist or class struggle, the struggle for democracy, or for human rights or peace. Finally, it is also the worldwide backlash against feminism (in whatever form or name) that gives a permanent feed to women’s activism. Feminist ideas have, throughout history, been the subject of attack from most religions and political ideologies.

Women’s movements worldwide seem to concern themselves with the same grand themes; These are, roughly speaking: women’s legal and political rights; violence, reproductive rights and abortion, sexual liberty, employment and discrimination, political participation and representation. However, we see great differences in the focus and implication of these themes.

Aside from the above-mentioned likenesses, there some growing differences. The most remarkable difference is the growing gap between North and South. Women from the North (Europe, North-America, Japan and North Asia) are harvesting the fruits of capitalism and global economy, whereas the women from the South (Central-America, Africa, the East) are all too often confronted with poverty, terrible labour conditions, faulty education and health care. The differences in living conditions result in growing differences in women’s activism. Often, differences are seen from a class perspective: the dominance of (western) middle class feminism. Non-western feminist have been looking for an authentic activism, without adopting the values of western middle class feminism. Differences in colour, race, and
ethnicity are often the inspiration for specific forms of women’s activism. The Black Women Movement has been very important to the evolution of feminism in the West. Race and ethnicity have also given rise (and still do) to serious conflicts that can prove devastating in women’s lives and to women’s rights.

Lastly, women’s activists may take quite varying stances towards sexuality. Women worldwide, in past and present, may take wholly different stands on abortion, genital mutilation, infanticide, women’s seclusion, polygamy and homosexuality.

**Feminism in Africa**

In this first part we will look at women’s activism in Africa. Other fact sheets will further explore feminism in the Middle and Far East, and in Central and South America.

Generally speaking, the African women’s movement has been strongly influenced and shaped by the activism against colonial rule and racist ideologies. African women’s activism cannot be seen separately from the larger context of repression and exploitation of both men and women. This has given rise to a feminism and activism primarily aimed at changing social and humanitarian conditions. African feminists have to a lesser extent aimed their arrows at personal and sexist conditions (contrary to Western feminists). Of course Africa too knows a broad spectrum of feminism. In this fact sheet we will focus primarily on the situation in Central Africa (south of the Sahara). The Islamic stronghold makes the situation in North Africa quite different from it. The position of North African women has much more in common with that of women from the Middle East. We will consider that in another fact sheet. This fact sheet will however touch briefly upon the African Diaspora and Black Feminism.

**Central Africa**

Over the past decades the population of Central Africa has been confronted with a succession of crises: the failure of male multiparty politics or state nationalism after the independence, coups and military dictatorships, economic instability, the pushing of western-steered development programs and pressure to install democracy, rethinking geographical borders as they were put up during colonial reign, pressure from the technologically advanced West and the development of new states in a global world (economy). Women especially have been paying the price for this. The consequences are clearly visible in the living conditions of African women today. Generally, they have a lower level of education and are primarily active in agricultural or other rural activities. A large number of women suffer from malnutrition, mortality rate of infants and children is very high. Because of these pitiful living conditions for women, the West has lately exerted more pressure to increase women’s participation in more areas - this is often done by stating it as a condition for investments or development aid. The effect is two-faced. On the one hand it creates an opportunity for women to be on the decision making side when new states and institutions are being organised and structured. On the other hand, this western pressure is greatly resisted by those in power. The participation of women is experienced as being ‘imposed by the West’ and not stemming from own culture or experience. African activists are constantly performing a wire act between devoting themselves to women’s rights and supporting the right of African states to make autonomous decisions. They are faced with the difficult task of finding an activism that turns the existing gender hierarchy into something that is at the same time liberating for women, and offers a valid political alternative.

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1. This part is based on the introductory essay from Mikkel Gwendolyn, African Feminism, the politics of survival in Sub-Saharan Africa, p 1-50
Feminism in Central Africa grew from a very different dynamic than in the West. In the first place has been shaped by the resistance of African women against western rule. Moreover, African women have a different starting point. African women’s roles grew from a long tradition of female integration in collective structures. This is completely different from the West, where feminism grew from middle class individualism and the patriarchal structure in a (post)industrial society.²

These differences have in past and present caused much friction between Western and African actors. African and western women’s movements often have a wide gap to bridge. For instance on the subject of genital mutilation. Until very recently the African women’s movement was quite averse towards the Western feminist attack on genital mutilation. Now there is a growing conviction that genital mutilation is indeed in breach of human rights and needs to be curbed. Western and African actors on the political level usually disagree about the implementation of a policy to improve the situation of women. Western and African NGO’s tend to find it difficult to cooperate with one another for the same reasons. Generally speaking Western activists take women’s autonomy as their starting point, whereas African feminist start out from culturally linked forms of participation. The main differences can be traced back to differing outlooks on private-public-debate.

THE PRIVATE-PUBLIC DIVIDE IN AFRICA

The private-public debate³ (and the nature-culture divide as well) is very present in feminist theory as an explanation for certain gender roles. Traditionally women are more associated with the private spheres (children, home, …), whereas men are more seen in connection with public life en the ensuing social roles.⁴

The lesson learnt by western feminists from the African situation is that private-public does not necessarily hold a contradiction. The separation between both worlds is not universal. Moreover, the African situation shows that the acceptance of certain social roles (whether or not resulting from the biological differences between men and women) does not necessarily include the subjection of women. For African women the acceptance of a certain social role does not exclude a rejection of women’s oppression. Africans do not start out from the nature-culture divide. The two are linked and hold no conflict. This link structures the roles of men and women both domestically and in politics and economy. This point of view brought to life a feminism completely different from the western version. The biggest differences are the importance that African feminists attach to the reproductive role of women and the tendency to put the community before the individual.

1. WOMEN’S REPRODUCTIVE ROLE
Reproductive tasks are very important to African women and they are never inferior to any other role. To African women motherhood is an inherent aspect of womanhood and should not be questioned. Being a woman implies being a mother. Since 1970 the average number of children per African woman has stagnated at about six. Generally such birth figures are linked to numerous factors: level of education, economic position, demographic policy, availability of anti-conception, etc… Many of these factors have changed in Africa and in spite of predictions the birth figure per woman has not changed for the majority of African women. This does not stop them, however, from striving to play active roles economically. For African women the reproductive and economic roles can go together without conflict.

2. COMMUNITY OVER INDIVIDUAL
In African models of society, the emphasis is usually more on the community than on the individual. From this perspective, there are many overlapping elements in domestic, economic and political roles. In general the biological role of women is not perceived

² For more about Western feminism, see fact sheet 14 Feminism and feminist factions
³ For a definition of this and other terms, see fact sheet 17 Gender terminology
⁴ see fact sheet n°14 on Feminism
as being in conflict with taking up political or economic responsibilities. African women traditionally fulfil a greater multitude of roles than women in other continents do. Apart from the care for their children, women are also responsible for the care of the community. Care in the broadest meaning of the word. No wonder that African men and women often have complementary and often even parallel responsibilities. (Women's) roles are determined by membership of a collective group (family or tribe). As a member of certain families, men and women get certain responsibilities and privileges. Economic and political relations are therefore collective and not individual. This makes for African women's important role in, for instance, trade relations.

The historical evolution of women's roles in Central Africa

1. Traditional African models: gender, society, state

Politics is the ultimate public sphere, and nowhere in the world have women played as many and varied political roles as in Africa. The explanation lies in the fact that traditional African models of society have been determined by gender. Women's explicit roles as members of a community have played to their advantage. On the other hand, and just like in the West, a gender-biased social network has a negative impact on women's political participation.

The community: woman as member of a family, clan or tribe

The community has determined traditional African cultures. A network of relationships mutually connects people. In the first place, these bring about the harmony and well being of the community. This focus on the community is prevalent in all African societies, but the extent of it and the roles of women therein may vary.

In most cultures the organisation of society is at some point strictly separated from family ties. This separation has never been realised in African states. The emphasis on family ties had resulted in unique political possibilities for women. Women became political actors based on their membership of an important clan. Although it must be said that, within the clan, privileges were larger for the men. Africa has a long and unique tradition of female leaders: queens, chiefs, and religious leaders – from Hatchepsut in Egypt to queen Njinga in Angola. Female leadership however, does not necessarily bring about an egalitarian or feminist society, and certainly not a matriarchate. Women, like men, gained these positions because of their status as member of a certain dynasty. 'Ordinary' women only obtained equal rights and power after their reproductive years were over, or by obtaining leadership positions within their family units or in certain women's organisations (see 2.).

Double gender organisation: women as member of an organisation.

Many (though not all) African cultures have a certain tradition of double gender organisation: women were able to participate as members of a ritual or professional organisation, a peer group or a gender-specific organisation. Men dominated most spheres of society, but the double gender and community organisation created a façade of equality by letting women participate politically. Women were political actors speaking on behalf of a group and not in their own name. This made them usually unwilling to go against interests of family or group, when faced with political decisions. They were sensitive to and prepared for action when their interests as a (woman's) group (sisters, wives, peddlers, professional women,...) were threatened. The ultimate form of double gender organisation is the dual monarchy, which was customary in certain African tribes. We have to stress, however, that the existence of female leadership does not imply that individual ordinary women had equal rights.
A GENDER-PREJUDICED SOCIAL PACT

As the African states arranged themselves, with that organisation came a gender-prejudiced social pact, gradually gnawing at the power of female leaders. We learn from oral traditions that many female leaders guided their states through periods of crises, but when they started bearing children, they were often overshadowed by their sons or husbands. Women's political inheritance rights became more and more restricted, and the system of double gender organisation shrank away. The final blow in terms of women’s political rights came through the introduction of mythical and ritual taboos based on physical traits, e.g. menstruation. Especially in areas exposed to Islam, women’s power was diminished. However, women often continued to play an important role in the religious and ritual sphere. They thus held on to a share of power through their status as healers or priestesses.

2. COLONISATION AND ITS IMPACT ON (ROLES OF) WOMEN

In Africa, the main disruptive effect on women’s roles is the colonisation process, which started in the 19th century, either by instituting western and Christian models, either by radicalising traditional and Islamic structures through resistance. The three influential colonial spheres (church/mission, governance and trade) each had their own disruptive influence on traditional power and gender roles. Four factors were detrimental in the institution of a new gender inequality. Firstly Catholicism with the introduction of monogamy, “woman’s place is in the home’ attitude and the suppression of women; secondly western education giving more opportunities to men; thirdly western marital law according rights of ownership to women which the traditional rituals could not guarantee so that traditional matters of ascendancy were threatened; and lastly the new legal systems which recognised the independence of African women (in theory).

In practice colonial magistrates usually treated women as legal minors needing a man’s guidance. Continuous support of patriarchy and individualism created new economic opportunities but also seriously disrupted the existing gender relations. This resulted in a division of labour according to gender, and a further separation of men and women within the community, factors that would take their toll until well after WWII. The colonial structures and capitalist economic principles were institutionalized in religious, economic, legal, bureaucratic and educational structures. Gradually, this led to a new social order in which African women not belonging to the upper few had very little rights. As a result the economic and legal position of women was changed drastically.

NEW ECONOMIC ROLE

Colonial rulers were very oblivious of the economic role granted to women within traditional cultures. They systematically overlooked women by always noting down men as the ‘owners’ of farms or land. Colonial rulers in particular did not validate women’s central role in producing commodities such as cotton, tea, coffee and cacao. Through western emphasis on individual (and male) property rights, plus the fact that the colonial rulers dominated both export and the processing of these commodities, the traditional economic complementarily of men and women was lost. Colonial rulers were seeing women as responsible for gathering food and looking after the family. The colonial employment of African men heightened the work pressure for African women to a large extent. Especially in those areas where men migrated because of these jobs (either to mining areas or the city), the work pressure on the women who stayed behind was very high. The usually stayed in the rural areas to keep the farm operative and hold the property stakes of their men. The consequences of this evolution are felt unto this day.

NEW LEGAL POSITION

The introduction of western legal institutions had far reaching consequences, especially, in the areas of property right and marital law. The western emphasis on individual property clashed with the traditional emphasis on communal property. Women lost
several rights because in general men were being marked down as proprietors. On the other hand, the new laws created extra possibilities for women to rebel against inequality. The introduction of marital law, e.g., gave women a chance to claim certain properties in case of death or divorce. These ‘advantages’ brought a quicker acceptance of the western style marriage over traditional customs. Although the western style marriage held certain rights for women, they were from now on considered as ‘wife of’ and lost the (legal) protection of the traditional community or clan.

3. INDEPENDENCE, NOT FOR WOMEN?

Although women and women's organisations were highly implicated in the struggle for independence, their efforts were usually not rewarded in the shape of more rights for women. When the new states were declared, there was apparently no need for a separate women's agenda, since the ideal state was to bring freedom and improvement for men and women alike. The traditional double gender structures were largely lost because of this.

EDUCATION

The extent of women's literacy varies greatly from area to area. In the former British colonies greater efforts had usually been made to get women access to education. In the former French colonies this evolution came about much slower, partly because of the growing impact of Islam in certain parts. The South African apartheid had disastrous consequences for women's education, and in the Portuguese speaking areas not much effort was made.

POLITICAL PARTICIPATION

Not withstanding an exception here or there, African women were not rewarded for their help in bringing about the independence of their country. After the struggle for independence, women leaders were encouraged to participate in the redevelopment from a subservient position vis-à-vis men. Few women were granted central roles within the new political party strongholds. Even fewer were accorded politically responsible positions in the new governments.

ECONOMIC POSITION

The socio-economic position of African women after the independence has of course been strongly influenced by the unstable economy of the newly emerged states and the political, economic and ecological challenges that they face. The extensive government control of trade prices and wages during the unstable '70's and '80's have led to many protests from merchant women all over Africa. The protest mostly met with a repressive government attitude. After the independence, more and more African women moved to the cities. There are great differences though, between the different areas. The eastern part of Africa sees a very slow urbanisation, whereas in West Africa more and more women seek their fortune in the city. The lack of economic niches for women within said cities, pushes large numbers of women into prostitution. In some countries women have attained positions in the service-sector, but find themselves confronted with a difficult combination of work and care.

THE CHURCHES: A NEW OPPORTUNITY FOR WOMEN

Throughout Central Africa, women increasingly play fundamental roles in the new churches. Although the initial missions primarily wanted to teach women to become good housewives, after the independence of several states they changes their tune. Both in the cities and villages women play a more and more explicit role within the religious communities, they are the ones bridging the gap between old and new, and they are also negotiators in times of social crises.
4. AFRICAN WOMEN’S MOVEMENTS TODAY

In the ‘70s and ‘80s the newly emerged African states were under enormous political and economic pressure from the west. Although the situation of African women deteriorated quickly in these years, there was hardly any fundamental criticism from within. African women and women’s movements opted for nationalism over feminism. The ensuing political crises led to more and more gender inequality. During the late ‘80s African women understood that they were paying the highest prize for the political and economic instability. The rising poverty, malnutrition, child and infant death created a new feminist conscienteness in African women. They became more and more aware of their position as women. Everywhere in Central Africa, women feel the need to unite and develop a gender approach in dealing with certain problems. In the aftermath of the UN decade of women, many Women In Development (WID)-organisations were founded in the late ‘80s, with both national and regional divisions. These careful attempts at women’s organisations met with a lot of resistance by the national states. It was not exceptional for leaders of WID to be harassed. Another tactic was to place the wives of government leaders at the head of WID’s, thus ensuring their parallel path with government policy... As the situation of African women grew more dramatic in the ‘90s (e.g. the spreading of the HIV-virus), African women’s organisations became convinced that a separate women’s agenda is an absolute necessity.

The African Diaspora

The African Diaspora (mainly to the US) has given rise to a separate, big women’s movement: the Black Feminist movement. The present-day Black Feminism in the US grew from traditional African gender tradition such as described above. Afro-American women partly carry an African heritage. Other than their white sisters the black women (‘s movements) in the US are more collectively oriented, with relatively egalitarian relationships with black men, and a different outlook on motherhood and division of labour. Obviously the black women’s movement has been greatly influenced by the times of slavery and the ensuing black empowerment struggle. Racism and sexism are interconnected in the eyes of the black women’s movement. We can speak of an organised black women’s activism since the end of the 19th century 5, but the great breakthrough didn’t come until the ‘60s, in the wake of the civil rights movement. Black women felt passed over twice. By the black civil rights movement, which was dominated by men and mostly ignored the specific demands of black women-, and by the women’s movement, which made white middle class women the standard where women’s rights were concerned. In 1982, two prominent black feminists, Gloria T. Hull and Barbara Smith, published a book with the revealing title “All the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave”. The gap between the black women’s movement and the white one is very deep indeed, on certain subjects. The black women’s movement reproaches the white women’s movement for claiming the Equal Rights Amendment 6 during the black emancipation struggle. In their fight for equal rights, the white women’s movement often ignored black women. This left deep wounds. While the white women’s movements were immersed in the right for women to work, black women were since the 1920’s equally responsible with men for bearing the financial burdens of their families. Black women’s main objective was not the right to work, but acceptable working conditions and salary. On the subject of sexuality, there were many differences too. Black women had suffered for years the enforced sterilisation that the US put upon them, and so they were not unconditionally positive towards the pro-abortion struggle of their white sisters. Sexual violence was high on the black women’s agenda. American

5. The speech ‘Ain’t I a Woman’ by Sojourner Truth from 1851 reproaches the suffrage movement to stand up only for white women, it is historically the first time that women’s rights and the freedom of blacks in America are publicly linked into one speech, into one thought.

6. Equal Rights Amendment was one of the pillars of the black suffrage, where racial discrimination would become illegal. The women’s movement hoped to get a similar amendment based on gender
courts often dealt lightly with the rape of black women by white men, while on the other hand interracial relations between black men and white women were more often than not considered as rape. Black women have always had to fight racist stereotyping (e.g. the homely black mammy or the promiscuous half-breed). Until this day black women face great challenges in the field of health care. The health of black women in the US is in all respects not as good as that of white women. The black women's movement brought about a whole new field of academic expertise: Black Women's Studies. The insights of academics in Black Women's Studies have greatly influenced Women's and Gender Studies in general. They were a factor in bringing forth new paths of thinking within the feminist rhetoric, such as the Stand Point Theory and Identity Politics. Black feminism left its traces everywhere and has certainly diversified the feminist outlook.

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Further Reading