

# The Power Within

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## Decolonising Women's Economic Narratives By Nicole Mumala Maloba

Given the traditional expectations placed on women as carers and their prevalence in the casual labour industries, it is evident that women are disproportionately susceptible to greater economic, social, and political shortcomings; this was particularly pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, as it amplified pre-existing gender disparities magnifying inequalities in society. Additionally, the pandemic showed us that crises provide opportunities to revisit previously overlooked possibilities for development in Africa, A chance to thoroughly reassess the fundamental tenets and conceptual frameworks that form the basis of the economic advancement of women, both in policy and reality. As a result, the urgency of arguments around the decolonisation of colonialist and capitalist-oriented programmes for growth and development has escalated significantly. Some of these thoughts can be embraced in the global South to incorporate cross-cultural ideas, practices, and trends, hence fostering the development of epistemologies from the global South as the norm.

Decolonisation necessitates the deliberate incorporation of doctrines of knowledge, methods of understanding, and real-life events that have been historically disregarded or marginalised.<sup>1</sup> This prompts us to think critically about the correlation between one's origin and sense of self. So how can we transition from a dominant or occidental view of women's economic empowerment tied to traditions that have their roots in imperialism in Africa to a system that is more comprehensive and encompassing? One that acknowledges, safeguards, and enhances the rights and agency of African women, embracing their various identities and experiences.

Scholars like Sylvia Tamale have raised concerns regarding the tendency to treat women as homogenous entities, devoid of agency, and as objects or subjects within the framework of Western academic discourse. According to Tamale, the vitality of decolonisation and the pursuit of decolonial activism for Africans necessitate multifaceted endeavours. These encompass the re-establishment of our autonomy, the deconstruction of both the tangible and intangible pillars upon which the colonial capitalist state was built, the rectification of historical injustices through reparations, the displacement of Western dominance in the realms of knowledge and cultural paradigms about race, gender, and sexuality, and the embracement of the Ubuntu philosophy.

Other postcolonial feminist scholars propose a critical reassessment of Western feminist theories, specifically about their epistemological foundations shaped by the dominant power dynamics and privileges prevalent in the Western context. Ajayi-Soyinka shares her emphasis that in addition to the fundamental shared goals of feminism, which aim to fight patriarchy and eradicate the subjugation, disempowerment and exploitation of women, it is imperative for each feminist to individually recognise, articulate, and implement specific strategies of resistance within the cultural boundaries of a society. As the world's financial and capitalist systems have taken root in Africa, there has been a significant increase in inequalities between different groups. Employment opportunities and financial resources have trickled down to certain people, whilst others, namely African women and girls, have seen their wealth eroded and their voices silenced.

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<sup>1</sup> See Bouka, Y. (2021). Women, Colonial Resistance, and Decolonization: Challenging African Histories. In: Yacob-Haliso, O., Falola, T. (eds) *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies*. Palgrave Macmillan; Ruíz, Elena (2022). Postcolonial and Decolonial Feminisms. In *The Oxford Handbook of Feminist Philosophy and Sylvia Tamale, Decolonization and Afro-Feminism* (Daraja Press, Ottawa 2020)

[Naila Kabeer](#) defines women's empowerment as the transformative process by which individuals deprived of the capacity to make significant life decisions gain the capability to do so.<sup>2</sup> [Yilikal Engida](#) states, "Women's empowerment refers to the process of improving women's economic, economic, cultural and political status within society, which has traditionally been oppressed and ignored."<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, I am aware of criticisms regarding the blanket utilisation of the phrase 'empowerment' concerning women and the labour and employment spheres. Not only does this create unnecessary uncertainty or isolate other contributory dimensions, but it also inaccurately implies the existence of a solution or a rapid outcome to deeply ingrained gender disparities. It can be argued that the term "economic empowerment" has its limitations as it focuses on small-scale policy measures that fail to address the broader economic changes required to achieve comprehensive and inclusive gender equality. As empowerment becomes more widely accepted, a growing disparity exists between its theoretical and implementation concepts. Therefore, it is crucial to acknowledge the significance of language and terminology in this process. It is also critical to emphasise the integration of legal concepts of standards of non-discrimination, substantive equality, and state obligations into the concept of women's economic empowerment. Duty bearers and policymakers should prioritise addressing the structural and systemic obstacles that hinder the realisation of Naila Kabeer's definition and go beyond solely concentrating on micro-level solutions to macro-level remedies.



<sup>2</sup>Kabeer, N. (1999), Resources, Agency, Achievements: Reflections on the Measurement of Women's Empowerment, *Development and Change*, 30: 435-464.

<sup>3</sup> Engida, Y.M. (2021). The Three Dimensional Role of Education for Women Empowerment. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 17(1), pp.32-38.



The labour force in Sub-Saharan Africa is predominantly composed of informal workers, with women making up the majority, totaling over 90% (Worldbank).



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Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, countless African women tragically perished from the aftershocks of the pandemic due to pre-existing hardships and challenges that African women encounter. One sector drastically affected was the informal economy. The labour force in Sub-Saharan Africa is predominantly composed of informal workers, with women making up the majority, totaling over 90% (Worldbank). On the other hand, Empirical data indicated that [Africa](#) accounted for the largest proportion (33%) of global cases of Intimate Partner Violence;<sup>4</sup> a study conducted in [Southern Ethiopia](#) found that most of the female victims of intimate partner violence were economically poor.<sup>5</sup> According to the UNFPA(2021a,2021b,2021c), the pandemic saw a rise in unintended pregnancies in Sub-Saharan Africa, which was a result of the interruption of services related to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) as well as the closure of schools. The causes of adolescent pregnancy encompass factors such as insufficient awareness about contraception, restricted availability of SRHR services, heightened levels of violence, poverty, living in rural areas, and early marriages. These issues include but are not limited to inadequate infrastructure such as WASH and transportation, the impact of the pandemic on their sources of income, and the growing burden of unpaid care work, among other barriers. It remains evident that African women have faced and continue to face substantial obstacles to exercising and enjoying their economic rights.

The pathway to achieving women's economic empowerment commences with establishing equitable access to high-quality education for girls. The issue of girls' and women's education is a matter of considerable importance. Worryingly, it is projected that it will take another 286 years to narrow some of the existing gender disparities based on the current rate of progress. According to UN Women, attaining universal, high-quality education for all girls is still unattainable (UN Women 2022). Conversely, having ownership and authority over land and productive resources that generate revenue are fundamental to women's economic empowerment and their capacity to contribute to economies. According to former Special Rapporteur on the right to food, enhancing women's ability to obtain land and other natural assets and their involvement in agricultural value chains can significantly benefit women's autonomy, earnings and overall food sovereignty. Given the context mentioned above, this article adopts a decolonial perspective and a rights-based framework to examine the twin benefits of the two important avenues through which African women might exercise their economic rights by ensuring equal access to land rights and education.

<sup>4</sup> Tadesse, A. W., Tarekegn, S. M., Wagaw, G. B., Muluneh, M. D., & Kassa, A. M. (2022). Prevalence and Associated Factors of Intimate Partner Violence Among Married Women During COVID-19 Pandemic Restrictions: A Community-Based Study. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(11-12).

<sup>5</sup> Shitu, S., Yeshaneh, A. and Abebe, H. (2021). Intimate partner violence and associated factors among reproductive age women during COVID-19 pandemic in Southern Ethiopia, 2020. *Reproductive Health*, 18(1).

## Is Education rooted in inequality?

Education is an essential right that may provide individuals with the necessary information, abilities, and resources to question established social standards, defend their rights as citizens, and engage effectively in economic, social, and political domains. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) incorporate gender equality and high-quality education as distinct goals. SDG 5 seeks to attain gender parity and enhance the empowerment of women and girls, whereas SDG 4 concentrates on guaranteeing inclusive and fair access to high-quality education for all individuals. Education has a crucial role in enhancing the quality of life for women. Not educating women has several drawbacks, such as reduced employment opportunities, decreased revenue from families, increased vulnerability to oppression, and overall hindered economic growth of a state.<sup>6</sup> Understanding the interdependence of these objectives is essential for developing comprehensive approaches that concurrently tackle gender inequality and education.

Political discourse, culture and history are inseparable parts of the educational tale. Infractions committed in the past directly impact the educational disparities that exist now. The recurring theme across educational programmes we see today in most African countries all had one overarching goal: to inculcate in the colonised a sense of superiority towards the coloniser and all of his associated ideologies, dialect and ways of knowing. Tamale outlines coloniality as a notion that encompasses more than only the acquisition and governmental control of another country, extending to the broader implications of colonialism. It elucidates the enduring power dynamics that arose from European colonialism, encompassing the generation of knowledge and the formation of social hierarchies.<sup>7</sup> The process of colonialism remains firmly ingrained in formerly colonised nations, even long after achieving nominal political autonomy. Decolonising education for the economic empowerment of African women necessitates questioning and reshaping the current educational system to ensure it is inclusive, representative, and aligned with African women's specific needs and ambitions. In the African continent, the advancement of the right to education, particularly by international entities, has primarily revolved around enhancing the availability and accessibility of educational opportunities, with African traditional epistemologies seldom included or erased from this process.<sup>8</sup> This approach aims to reverse the consequences of colonialism, which often sustained disparities and marginalised traditional knowledge and cultural expertise.

Some feasible considerations for governments include creating an all-encompassing curriculum that guarantees incorporating varied views in educational resources, including African viewpoints, women's contributions, and indigenous knowledge. African culture is a rich tapestry woven from thousands of distinct ethnic groups, languages, traditions, and histories. Contrary to the often static portrayal of cultures, African culture is dynamic and ever-evolving. This can complement educational programmes accurately representing African communities' specific contexts. It offers all individuals in all their diversity, particularly girls and women, a more relevant, decolonial and powerful learning experience. It is also imperative for governments to address cultural aspects that have negative impacts on education and implement effective curriculum policies for teachers and students. These measures will help shift people's unproductive perception of reality towards a more inclusive and advanced one. Relying solely on securing funding for education programs would not suffice but only yield graduates who adhere to neoliberal ideology.

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<sup>6</sup> Engida, Y.M. (2021). The Three Dimensional Role of Education for Women Empowerment. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 17(1), pp.32–38.

<sup>7</sup> Tamale, S. (2020). *Decolonization and afro-feminism*. Ottawa: Daraja Press. pg xiii.

<sup>8</sup> Adebisi, F.I. (2016). *Decolonising Education in Africa: Implementing the Right to Education by Re-Appropriating Culture and Indigeneity*.pg434.

Thirdly, duty bearers can promote the development of cognitive abilities that foster inquiry and analysis of data and knowledge while equipping women to question prevailing conventions and actively participate in economic discourse, especially at the macroeconomic level. In addition, states can also provide comprehensive training to educators to develop cultural proficiency, enabling them to appreciate and respect the varied cultures of students and integrate this awareness into their instructional approaches. It is imperative to consistently evaluate educational programmes' efficacy for teachers and students by adapting techniques using decolonial, intersectional, and gender-transformative perspectives. According to Bell Hooks in *Teaching to Transgress*, it is necessary to reconsider teaching methods in the current era of diversity to address prejudice and bias within the classroom and the curriculum. Hooks argues that both the transmission and acceptance of homogeneity should be avoided in educational institutions. Educators ought to accommodate their students by comprehending their levels, encompassing not only academic aptitude but also cultural awareness; this could largely benefit all and aid in closing the gender gap in education, thus advancing women's economic rights.



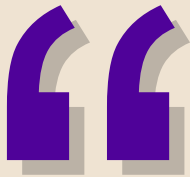
*Beyond getting girls to school, educational programs that change the perception about women's role in society have the potential to improve human capital outcomes and change negative gender norms. Negative perceptions about girls' mathematical abilities persist and are perpetuated by negative gender stereotypes in teaching and learning materials. Educational projects in Nigeria, Sao Tome and Principe, Tanzania, and Angola are supporting teacher training programs to reduce gender bias in classrooms and promoting girls' clubs in schools. Furthermore, projects in Chad, Cabo Verde, and the Central Africa Republic are addressing gender stereotypes by introducing gender-sensitive reading materials, including positive role models for girls, and integrating **curriculum that promotes inclusion and gender equality.***

— Jaime Saavedra & Hana Brix



## Rethinking Women's Land Rights

The problem of land and property rights has been a long-standing obstacle in several African nations, influenced by enduring historical and colonial influences that have shaped the present situation. The inequitable allocation of land and property has extensive ramifications, particularly for women who often experience marginalisation and disempowerment. The land tenure systems in several African countries were significantly influenced by colonialism, resulting in enduring effects. The imposition of arbitrary boundaries, often biased towards elite coloniser men, resulted in the displacement of indigenous populations and the exclusion of women from mainstream society. In the early 1900s, European countries mapped out their territories via boundary commissions, enabling them to achieve complete control over various colonies. By mainly prioritising land control, they neglected to consider the consequences of dividing ethnic communities. During the postcolonial period, these inequitable mechanisms continued to exist, hence sustaining gender disparities in the acquisition and possession of land and property. To enhance women's economic empowerment, it is essential to confront the historical injustices deeply ingrained throughout these structures.



Women's **ownership of agricultural land** across African countries appears extremely limited in a context where agriculture remains central to many African economies. At the continental level, 49% of the labour force and 51% of working women are employed in agriculture. Over 60% of women are employed in the agricultural sector in certain sub-regions, such as Central Africa or East Africa. Yet, although women account for 45% of the agricultural workforce on the continent, their ownership of agricultural land remains much lower than men's. Women account for only 12% of agricultural landowners at the continental level. Even in East Africa and Southern Africa, where the share of women among agricultural landowners is highest, the proportion only reaches 18% and 25%, respectively. The situation is particularly critical in Central Africa where women comprise 53% of the agricultural workforce but only account for 9% of agricultural landowners.

— Jaime Saavedra & Hana Bixi



Cultural norms are believed to provide some of the biggest challenges to achieving gender equality. The vast majority of individuals in a typical African nation carry out their daily lives in line with and to the extent permitted by their country's system of customary law. Some of its standards are at odds with human rights norms ensuring equality between men and women. Human rights standards typically require treaty-signing states to uphold human rights and take all necessary steps to eradicate discrimination against women. However, African law places a greater emphasis on ownership within the framework of the community and familial rights and obligations of people to their communities rooted in the ideological principle of Ubuntu because of the predominant victim narrative surrounding African women and their culture. Historically, women in Africa have been considered bearers of cultural oppression, which has led the global North human rights movement to undervalue African women's capacity to reform cultural policies within their society. Leaving legal matters to community councils or other forms of customary governance exacerbates the imbalance women experience in societies where norms are determined by tradition rather than legislation.

Lyn Ossome highlights this in [Can the Law Secure Women's Rights to Land in Africa? Revisiting Tensions Between Culture and Land Commercialization](#)<sup>9</sup>, several African governments have increasingly legitimised traditional land tenure and the organisations responsible for managing it. However, Ossome argues that there is a need for customary law to be harmonised with the constitutional ideal of equality, which, as some academics have argued, helps shift the focus of discussion away from the contradiction between "good" contemporary law and "bad" tradition. Using the example of the Gold Coast as a result of the colonial codification of marriage under customary law, all married women, regardless of their prior social standing, were relegated to the same legal and social status. While financial commodities like cocoa were considered gender-neutral before colonisation, they were later categorised as male crops under customary law in the Gold Coast (Ossome 2014).

In contrast, crops utilised largely for household consumption were assigned the female code. By giving the fruits of the land only to the males for commercial purposes, customary law cut off women's opportunities for economic advancement. This is still seen today in some indigenous African communities.

In time, women have worked to change or circumvent the limitations of customary law. Ossome shows us how, in comparison to domestic law, customary law may provide a more promising alternative to help women reclaim their property rights in a capitalist economy. This is seen in Ghana, where men often give their wives and children shares of the family farm instead of the traditional matrilineal inheritance system to show their appreciation for their hard work, which is evidence of the value placed on family labour. The question is, since the law is supposed to function for both sexes equally, how can African women have the same protections and benefits as males regarding land ownership? Historically, both before, during and after colonisation, sexuality in most of Africa was and, to a certain extent, still is a male-benefitting affair. Even though there has been substantial development in African women's activism and the rise to liberation, the law can be seen to remain persistent and gendered, privileging men. Classens and Mnisi believe that legal methods to improve women's land rights should put a premium on adapting to the new realities. They argue that this requires questioning the traditional policy approaches to women's land rights in Africa, which are based on formalist assumptions. Going beyond statutory law change and registered co-ownership rights, which concentrate on the challenges women face as spouses, is necessary.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Ossome, L. (2014). Can the Law Secure Women's Rights to Land in Africa? Revisiting Tensions Between Culture and Land Commercialization. *Feminist Economics*, 20(1), 155-177.

<sup>10</sup> Mnisi, S. and Claassens, A. (2009). Rural women redefining land rights in the context of living customary law. *South African Journal on Human Rights*, 25(3), pp.491-516.

It is more important to call attention to the shifts happening outside the realm of statutory law, where women play a crucial role in negotiating the substance of customs and rights.

Customary law was conceived on the twin pillars of the durability of long-standing "customs" and the efficacy of "law" in establishing and preserving social order.<sup>11</sup> By establishing its legal framework, customary law has created an environment where essential safeguards for women's human rights are ignored, and discrimination is tolerated. The growing gender changes call for the need to have cross-cultural discussions to rethink and reform customary law that continues to perpetuate the discrimination of African women. Land is not just a tangible resource; it symbolises financial stability, social status, and cultural heritage and provides a sense of belonging. Granting African women the right to own property can disrupt the long-standing pattern of inequality and enhance their economic autonomy and the capacity to make meaningful contributions to regional and national economies. Adopting a holistic and intersectional strategy that includes the legal, cultural, economic, and social aspects is necessary to decolonise women's economic empowerment concerning land and property rights. Duty bearers must establish and uphold legislation that ensures equitable land rights for women. This encompasses acknowledging and safeguarding women's entitlement to own, inherit, and exercise authority over land. Engaging the community and promoting awareness programmes are also crucial to disrupt conventional gender norms and enable women to claim their land rights. These activities should include cooperation with local leaders, civil society organisations, and educational institutions to foster a transformation in social perspectives about gender equality in land ownership.

Recognising the importance of decolonising land and property rights is crucial in promoting economic empowerment for women in Africa. It entails questioning and altering established power systems and advocating for a fairer and more balanced allocation of resources and opportunities. Enhancing women's involvement in agricultural value chains and expanding their ability to obtain land and natural resources can improve women's autonomy, disposable income and profitability, fiscal responsibility, and food security.



## LAND RIGHTS OF WOMEN

<sup>11</sup> Ossome, L. (2014). Can the Law Secure Women's Rights to Land in Africa? Revisiting Tensions Between Culture and Land Commercialization. *Feminist Economics*, 20(1), 155-177.



# Towards Economic Sovereignty

## Decolonizing Legal Systems for Women

Formal law is the ultimate determinant of formal economic rights in an economy. Most of the substance of these rights can be found in international law, constitutional documents, and legislation. However, the legal system must possess efficacy for the law to be dependable. The legal domains that include a gender perspective on property rights mostly pertain to inheritance, land and family laws. However, these sectors often need more attention from policymakers when contemplating strategies to enhance the entrepreneurial environment for women. Undoubtedly, the legal system has facilitated the implementation, strengthening, and perpetuation of colonised and neoliberalist operations and initiatives, but anything built has the potential to be renovated. The power of the same law lies in its ability to liberate our nations and cultures from the shackles of colonisation. Still, for this to happen, it must completely reject the views of colonial-era laws imposed by legal systems brought to Africa without consulting African natives and cultures. This process demands establishing a novel mindset and a deeper understanding and respect for the continent and all its forms of existence.

To achieve economic empowerment for women within the law, it is necessary to confront the historical injustices and systematic prejudices deeply ingrained in legal structures through decolonising the law. Some mechanisms to advance economic autonomy for women within a legal system freed from colonial influence include eliminating legislation that imposes limitations on women's entitlement to property, inheritance, and availability of resources. It is also imperative to formulate and enforce legislation that expressly advocates for gender parity and the enhancement of women's economic sovereignty. It is important to consider the involvement of communities, particularly women, in the process of legal change to guarantee that economic laws accurately address their concerns and necessities. This entails raising awareness and providing learning on women's economic, social, and cultural rights. The goal is to enable women to actively interact with duty bearers, pursuing their economic empowerment from a rights-based perspective. Lastly, it is crucial to ensure that legislative frameworks recognize and tackle intersectionality, considering the distinct obstacles experienced by African women from diverse backgrounds.

By liberalizing women's economic justice and rights within the law, we can broaden the scope of voices that are heard. This will enable the voices, insights, and experiences of African women to transcend the narrow viewpoints influenced by universal ethnic prejudice, patriarchy, and capitalism under the guise of 'development'. I see great potential in decolonization as it paves the way for women's economic rights that challenge the inherent inequalities of modernist capitalism. It also acknowledges the existence of viable pathways towards a more desirable Africa.

## Conclusion

According to [Gisela Carrasco-Miró](#), indigeneity is not a prerequisite for decolonisation. This means we must deliberately seek, acknowledge, prioritise, validate, and respect African vantage points, ways of knowing, worldviews and narratives. Therefore, decolonisation is an endeavour that acknowledges essential distinctions in ideologies devoid of ascribing hierarchy or developmental ability. As a result, rather than constructing an economically neutral route that honours different societies, 'development' is often seen as a scheme of colonialism that exploits socioeconomic and ethnic distinctions to justify invasion and domination. Decent employment for African women can be imagined by shifting away from imperialism and capitalist financial systems and towards cooperative and solidarity-based ones. This new economic model would aim to achieve goals like ecological preservation, ubuntu, and cross-border cohesion. The economic rights of women cannot be grasped by solely focusing on the pursuit of wealth, having a job, the freedom to choose, and equality among all genders without considering the bigger picture of a financial system and a multi-level economic governance structure and women's liberation from oppression, exclusion and marginalisation within their economic rights. However, most importantly, in this quest to explore difference, reimagining and decolonisation, we must then ask African women, in all their diversity, what economic development and economic empowerment mean to them, for it is only then that the fruition of a new, legitimate epistemology of African women's economic prowess will have a solid foundation to a new beginning.

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### Aknowlegdements

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