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Gender and Cultural Discrimination in Kenya: The Plight of the Small Farmer

Kenya currently faces many challenges. Poverty and HIV run rampant, tormenting Africans. Although their crops are bountiful some years, the land on which to grow them with is not. Farmers don't have the resources needed to make enough profit to support them, and many are even ashamed of their profession. When interviewing Kenyan farmers about the problems they face while trying to produce crops and livestock, extension personnel, including agricultural missionaries, commonly find that Kenyan farmers are near the point of despair. Drought and soil degradation commonly lowers crop yields (Sorley 3). Due in large part to deforestation, weather patterns have changed, to the point that farmers are not sure when to plant their crops. As recently as three decades ago, farmers could mark on their calendars when the rainy season would begin with accuracy. They could plant seed with assurance that rains would come, and seed would germinate. Today, the rains may come, and then stop for two to three weeks. Newly germinated seed dies in the sun, and farmers must replant expensive seed. Farming strategies and crop varieties better suited for large farms are implanted by small farmers, in hopes of increasing farm productivity. Unfortunately, in many cases, such techniques are not appropriate for small farmers, and crop yields are disappointing at best and a total failure at worst. To make matters worse, the men must often leave the farm work in the hands of their wives and seek work in towns in order to support their family. Women are then faced with the task of managing the farm, plus taking care of children and elderly relatives, gathering firewood, hauling water, and cooking. Parents encourage children to go to school so they don't end up as poor farmers themselves (Sorley 4). Consequently, poor families are commonly on the brink of beggary. Frustration levels are at all time highs; however, there are many problems that can be solved.

Kenya, Africa lies on the equator. It is a very diverse country, with several different geographical regions. These include the narrow coastal strip, bush-covered plains, high-lying scrublands, and the west which includes the Great Rift Valley, Mt. Kenya, and the Tana and Athi Rivers. Agriculture remains the most important economic activity in Kenya, although less than 8% of the land is used for crop and feed production. Less than 20% of the land is suitable for cultivation, of which only 12% is classified as high potential agricultural land (receives adequate rainfall), and about 8% is considered medium potential land. The rest of the country is arid or semiarid ("Encyclopedia of the Nations").

About 80% of the work force is employed in agriculture or food processing. Farming in Kenya is typically carried out by small producers who usually cultivate no more than two hectares (about five acres) using hand tools. These small farms, operated by about three million farming families, account for 75% of all agricultural production. Although there are still important European-owned coffee, tea, and sisal plantations, an increasing number of poor peasant farmers grow cash crops. Kenya's agriculture is sufficiently diversified to produce nearly all of the nation's basic foodstuffs. To some extent, Kenya also helps feed neighboring countries ("Encyclopedia of the Nations").

Tea, coffee, corn, wheat and sugarcane are major crops. Kenya is Africa's leading tea producer, and is number in the world in 1999, behind India, China, and Sri Lanka. Black tea is Kenya's leading agricultural foreign exchange earner. In 1999 production reached 220,000 tons. Tea exports were valued at \$404.1 million in 2001, or nearly 18% of total exports. The tea industry is divided between small farms and large estates. The small-scale sector, with more than 260,000 farmers, is controlled by the Kenya Tea Development Authority. The estates consist of 60–75 private companies that operate on their own. Coffee is Kenya's third leading foreign exchange earner, after tourism and tea. In 2001, coffee earnings totaled

\$91.8 million. Production in 2001/02 amounted to 52,140 tons. Similar to the tea sector, coffee is produced on many small farms and a few large estates. All coffee is marketed through the Coffee Board of Kenya.

Kenyan horticulture has become prominent in recent years, and is now the third leading agricultural export, after tea and coffee. Fresh produce accounted for about 30% of horticultural exports, and included green beans, onions, cabbages, snow peas, avocados, mangoes, and passion fruit. Flowers exported include roses, carnations, statice, astromeria, and lilies. Kenya is the world's largest producer and exporter of pyrethrum, a flower that contains a substance used in pesticides. The pyrethrum extract, known as pyrethrin, is derived from the flower's petals. A drop in production during the mid-1990s was due to increasing production costs, disease damage, and slow payment by the Pyrethrum Board of Kenya. The growing demand for "organic" and "natural" pesticides has increased international demand for pyrethrin, despite the existence of synthetic chemical substitutes. Kenya also produces sisal, tobacco, and bixa annatto (a natural food coloring agent) for export. Other important crops in 1999 were sugarcane at 5,200,000 tons; corn at 2,110,000 tons; wheat at 135,000 tons; rice at 40,000 tons; and cotton at 5,000 tons. Smallholders grow most of the corn and also produce significant quantities of potatoes, beans, peas, sorghum, sweet potatoes, cassava, bananas, and oilseeds. Dairy products, beef, pork, poultry and eggs are also commonly raised.

While agriculture is flourishing in Kenya, poverty is thriving as well. Over the past 30 years, poverty has been on the rise. Poverty seems to be a contradiction in a country that has the best-developed economy in eastern Africa, with relatively advanced agricultural and industrial sectors, and substantial foreign exchange earnings from agricultural exports and tourism. Yet Kenya is a low-income country, with per capita income averaging about US\$360. It ranks 148th among 177 countries in the United Nations Development Programmer's human development index, which measures a country's development in terms of life expectancy, educational attainment and standard of living. More than half of the country's 31.3 million people are poor, and 7.5 million of the poor live in extreme poverty. About 80 per cent of the populations, including three out of four poor people, live in rural zones. Most Kenyans live in areas having a medium to high potential for agriculture, which use about 18 per cent of the country's territory. Population density in high-potential areas is more than six times the country's average of 55 persons per km². While the poorest of the poor are found in the sparsely populated arid zones of the country, mainly in the north, over 80 per cent of rural poor people live in higher-potential areas surrounding Lake Victoria and in the Mount Kenya region. Kenya's rural poor people include small farmers, herders, farm laborers, unskilled and semi-skilled workers, households headed by women, people with disabilities, and AIDS orphans("Rural Poverty in Kenya").

Kenya's population has tripled over the past 30 years, leading to increasing pressure on natural resources, a widening income gap and rising poverty levels that erode gains in education, health, food security, employment and incomes. The causes of rural poverty include low agricultural productivity exacerbated by land degradation and deforestation, as well as insecure land tenure, low wages, unemployment, difficulty in accessing financing for self-employment, poor governance, and bad roads, high costs of health and education, and HIV/AIDS.

HIV/AIDS is most prevalent among young and middle-aged Kenyans, the most productive segment of the population. Almost half of the people in Kenya are under 15 years of age. An estimated 700 Kenyans die daily of HIV/AIDS-related causes. HIV/AIDS leaves orphans and woman-headed households even more vulnerable to poverty. The burden of diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria and water-borne diseases weighs heavily on both the country and Kenyan families, affecting income, food security and development potential. Life expectancy is down to 46 years, from 59 years in 1989. The HIV/AIDS crisis, which is already reversing the economic gains achieved in some developing countries, affects women unequally, both as individuals and in their roles as mothers and caregivers. Over the next decade, the

epidemic is expected to spread even further in developing countries, with one in four women and one in five men becoming infected. The epidemic is fuelled by cultural stereotypes, according to which men are expected to dominate and women to be passive in making decisions about relationships. The need for women to care for sick family members, coupled with cuts in social spending, limits a woman's ability to engage in productive and income-earning activities which determine not only their families' wellbeing but also their own social and economic status. Thus HIV/AIDS is driven by gender inequality, and it also entrenches gender inequalities. Data also reveals higher HIV infection rates where gender gaps in literacy are larger ("Gender and Rural Poverty").

Women are particularly vulnerable because they do not have equal access to social and economic assets. For about 70 per cent of women, subsistence farming is the primary, and often the only, source of livelihood. Eliminating gender disparities in education is given special importance, since education is seen not only as an instrument of empowerment, but also as an indication of the value society assigns to women. However, the relevance of women's educational advancement goes beyond explicit gender-related discrimination. Meeting the targets related to nutrition; maternal, infant and child mortality; reproductive health; and HIV/AIDS, and even those related to the sustainable management of natural resources, is directly affected by women's roles as mothers, caregivers and natural resource managers (Rural Poverty Portal).

Rural Kenyan women engage in multiple economic activities that are critical to the survival of their households. Poor, rural women play an essential role in crop production and livestock care, and they provide the food, water and fuel their families need. This is particularly true among inhabitants of the poorest and most marginal areas of Kenya and is characterized by an extensive and increasing male migration away from marginal farmland. In these areas, agriculture has become increasingly feminized. In fact, in 1997, almost 70 per cent of working age women in low-income, food-deficit countries were engaged in agricultural work. At the same time, the proportion of woman-headed households continues to grow, reaching almost one third in some developing countries.

Despite the essential economic and care-giving roles they perform, women have significantly lower access to financial, physical and social assets than men, fewer opportunities to improve their education and skill levels, and less impact making public decisions. Women own less than 2 per cent of all land and receive only 5 per cent of agricultural extension services worldwide. It is estimated that women in Africa receive less than 10 per cent of all credit going to small farmers and a mere 1 per cent of the total credit going to the agricultural sector. Overall, the neglect of women's needs and rights undermines the potential of entire communities to grow and develop. Poverty is therefore deeply rooted in the glaring imbalance between what women do and what they have, in terms of both assets and civil rights.

On an optimistic note, as the societal and economic status of women increases, so do the benefits to society. Studies have shown that the major contributing factor to improved child nutrition is an increase in women's socio-economic status, particularly to increases in their educational level additionally; countries that have begun closing the gender gap in education have experienced the fastest economic growth.

The population of Kenya includes forty-two traditional ethnic groups (PBS 1994), which can be broadly divided into three groups: the Bantu, Nilotes, and Cushites. These three categories of ethnic groups are spread all over the country, and no particular group can be tied to one region. The regional boundaries do little to separate the similarity of customs and beliefs possessed by each group, owing to their common heritage and contacts over hundreds of years. Meaning, cultural traits commonly exhibited by the broad ethnic groups will be similar within the group regardless of their location within Kenya. Because of the changing social and economic environment, individual relationships have gained popularity, and marriage has ceased to represent ties between social groups; rather, it is an alliance between individuals. The non-extended family system is now widespread, with the most common form being the monogamous nuclear

family found in both urban and rural areas, and single-parent families consisting of one parent and children (common in the urban areas). Most single-parent families consist of the woman as parent, a trend increasingly emerging among urban and professional women. Many of these women view marriage as an option that is detrimental to their attempts to have careers, professional occupations, and independent lifestyles. Autonomy is first on the agenda as many single mothers choose to have children with married or younger men who will not have absolute influence or authority over them (Kilbride 1994). This suggests a redefinition, based on gender, of roles and practices, and a new form of social relationship between family members. Also, the increase in single-parent families in Kenya is attributed to high incidences of teenage pregnancy and premarital and extramarital sex. According to Andrew Ocholla-Ayayo (1997a; 1997b), a leading anthropologist in the Kenyan study of family systems, the society has devalued traditional sexual morals, and premarital and extramarital sexual relationships are gaining acceptance. Another emerging pattern is that of child-headed or youth-headed families when children are orphaned when parents die of HIV/AIDS infection (National Council for Population and Development [NCPD] 2000).

In a traditional family the girl is married to her betrothed at the start of puberty. The average number of children is four per family. That number has significantly declined from eight children in the 1980's(PBS). A typical Kenyan meal is usually a heavy staple food, such as *ugali* (potatoes), with a side of vegetables. *Ugali* is typically served on a large dish where everyone can reach (using the right hand). Fruit is usually eaten for dessert in place of sweets. *Mandazi* , a semisweet, flat doughnut, is usually eaten at breakfast with coffee and tea. *Chai* (tea) is served very milky and sweet. The tea, milk, and sugar are put into cold water and brought to a boil. Kenyans also eat *chapattis* at breakfast and usually dunk it into their coffee. Lunch is the main meal of the day. Meat such as beef, goat, or mutton (sheep) is most commonly eaten. Other dishes can include *githeri* , a mix of beans (usually red kidney beans) and corn, and *matoke* , or mashed plantains (similar to a banana). Foods served at dinner are much like what is served at lunch. Most of Kenya's rural people live on small farm settlements, raising crops and livestock for a living. Much of the food consumed by farm families is raised on the farm. However, many of these rural farm families struggle to produce enough food for their own use. Some farmers are able grow enough to offer their extra produce for sale(Food by Country). Many Kenyan farmers hold part-time jobs to add to their income. Some work as blacksmiths, carpenters, shoemakers, or tailors, or in other trades. Others work part time on large farm estates, such as coffee and tea plantations, that are owned by wealthy individuals or corporations.

Kenya's rural people value friendships in their communities. Although they must work hard to make a living, most rural Kenyans find time for regular social visits with their neighbors. Each year, many rural Kenyans move to cities and towns to find jobs. Most of the country's urban people work in stores, factories, or business or government offices. Kenyans who move to cities and large towns find they must adjust to the fast pace, regular work schedules, and impersonal relations that are typical of those urban areas. Most urban Kenyans keep close ties with their rural friends and relatives through regular visits and letters. Kenyans place much value on large families(Family Jrant). The women are kept busy with child care, and almost all Kenyan farm women take part in the planting and harvesting of crops. Some also work part time on large farm estates. Some women become educated and achieve high-paying jobs, but the vast majority are too busy with child care and farm work to advance to high positions.

Many families are on the brink of destitution and increasingly unlike the traditional Kenyan family unit. Because of the lack of large family owned farms and available farming land there is little money to be made farming. Most of the poverty-stricken are living in the regions with no available land. HIV/AIDS cause most traditional families to be diminished to single parent or orphaned families. An estimated one in four babies is born with HIV in Kenya, diminishing the population at a steady rate. However, there is hope for Kenya's future. Reforming women's' education could facilitate major improvements in the quality of life for poorer Kenyan people. Women possessing higher paying jobs can increase the total

family earning potential and bring more money home, whether alongside their husbands or in the case of a single parent unit. Establishing local markets for crops and livestock produced on small farms will allow Kenyan farmers to rely more on local profits, and the entire community will benefit in the end. Finally, even though people infected with HIV/AIDS cannot be cured, with education, many new cases may be prevented. Teaching people to limit sexual relations to husband and wife has the potential to dramatically reduce the spread of this terrible disease. By making opportunities available for women to become entrepreneurs and develop productive farmsteads, the Kenyan family can regain some or all of its original structure, and children will have opportunity to grow up without the worries of HIV, poverty, and enjoy the promise of a stable life in a beautiful country.

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