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Women and the Local: Promotion or New Confinement in African Cities?

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Although this article is inspired by a study of West African capital cities, its intention is to contribute more generally to debates concerning gender-based territorial issues and spatial politics. In cities undergoing metropolisation, in Mali and Ghana in particular, gender-based issues are found first in land management analyses which, already from the beginning of the 1990s, highlight a breakthrough for women applying for building lots in certain land segments and through specific land access networks. These analyses also confirmed the increasing importance of women in urban politics during Africa's democratic transitions (Bertrand, 2001). At the same time, increasing residential mobility marked the integration and jeopardising of women per se, and in their relations to men. The influx of "young girls" observed in Bamako, seems to be linked to domestic employment and to the employment of their elders in urban areas. Almost a decade later, an analysis of residential practices within the Greater Accra Region highlighted the fact that adults had managed to secure land and housing markets (Bertrand, 2004)[1].

Today, women's empowerment (i.e. freedom of choice and action according to the World Bank) is geographically related for several reasons. It concerns first of all the impact of gender studies in the general problematic of development, particularly in Sub-Saharan Africa (UNDP, 2003; Imam, *et al.*, 2004), which refers to an older and more structured tradition in Anglophone academic circles[2]. Secondly, with the generalisation of structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s, their subsequent criticism and the definition of the Millennium Development Goals, international donors for development re-assessed the issue of poverty and set out targets for its reduction (World Bank, 2001)[3]. Thirdly, with a view to meeting or in anticipation of such programmes and objectives, civil societies in developing countries have expressed a desire to be recognised, particularly women. This often widespread pressure came from NGOs, community-based associations and various forms of decentralised co-operation.

This article examines the concomitant promotion of women and the local in development issues, and questions the political meaning of refocusing on women. According to which models of citizen participation does development appear fairer? Couldn't it lead to new instances of spatial injustice when it creates confinements under the appearance or within the limits of promotion? In Sub-Saharan Africa, of importance in this regard is the "Project" principle which is now dominant in urban development, and in the formulation of urban management standards. Concerning conditions, women's capacities for appropriation and exploitation justify more analyses, but these are beyond the scope of this article. Among the three elements referred to above, we will focus on the second, i.e. policy formulation, before considering how it interferes with the differentiated trajectories of local political space construction.

1. New Development Idealities and Conditionalities

[1] Bertrand, 2004; also Bertrand Monique, "L'insertion des femmes chefs de ménage dans la région du Grand Accra, Ghana. Ménages, couples, individuation", Journée d'étude Genre, Inégalités et Territoire, 24 May 2002, Bordeaux, Regards-CNRS and IFAID-Aquitaine.

[2] The crossing of colonial histories and women's history gives rise to different orientations in particular (Bulbeck, 1998; Hugon, 2004).

[3] The third of the eight MDGs endeavours to promote gender equality and women's autonomisation, while the fifth is more classically dedicated to the improvement of maternal health.

Since the 1990s, structural adjustment programmes aimed at the economies of the South have given way to new discourses and credit systems. International donors promote the "social dimension of development" and "fight against poverty". This change is reflected in the diagnosis of the risks associated with poverty (Lachaud, 1997 and 1999). Development results which were previously reported to national accounting, are now also evaluated by the yardstick of household living conditions before being set against a multidimensional approach of vulnerability (Rakodi, 1995; Chambers, 1995)[4]. The impact of the informal sector on survival strategies is now the focus of attention. In this regard, we are looking into women's contribution to home economics and low wage employment: food production and trade, exchanges and donations as well as therapy businesses. Indeed, in urban areas in particular, households have shown to hold out against the depreciation of their purchasing power through the increasing involvement of youth and women in small commercial activities. This affects the way relationships between generations and genders are structured (Adjamagbo, *et al.*, 2009).
Expert studies dedicated to poverty advocate moral requirements in particular. But, as the need for in-depth analyses of the problem is being felt, e.g. as regards the more equitable access of producers and users to land resources, their implementation in the Poverty Reduction Strategies and in targeted projects, in fact, comes down to the compartmentalised management of the poor. In addition, the World Bank often refers to women through what is supposed to be promoted as a collective subject – *The voices of the poor – "crying out for change"* (Narayan, *et al.*, 2000 and 2002; Blackden and Bhanu, 1999).

Rhetoric Chain of Poverty Reduction Strategies
During the last two decades, the terms of reference have been expanding and those involved in poverty reduction have been arguing for some form of intrinsic process, while frequently referring to previous and later terms of reference, listed as follows (as if to obtain credits by following a compulsory set of steps): adjusting the offer of commercial services to the solvability of the demand, ensuring stabilised partnership between public and private actors, providing a security net mechanism for the destitute, imperatively ensuring good governance (rolling back the state, decentralisation, participation), managing natural resources sustainably, promoting women and, finally, developing cultural heritage.
In addition to balanced national accounting, new requirements have been imposed upon states and organisations requesting loans, often echoing UN conferences. Yet, with agendas renewed on an international scale, organisations benefitting from loans appear to be divided up into broad categories: young/old, migrant/indigenous, active/idle etc. Poverty figures are treated independently from one another and from an analysis of wealth: unemployed graduates, volunteers agreeing to take pre-retirement, economic micro-operators, women heading households affected by droughts, war etc. Cities are also carved into poverty-solving labels ready for financial support: high-intensity labour projects, land servicing, community rehabilitation, alternative offers of service and opening up, etc.
In this adjustment of displays and actions, the 'gender dimension' appears to be set in many development-related themes. Combining the theme of women with concerns of land management, purification, out-of-season market gardening, basic health and the repatriation of international migration savings, amongst others. Country by country, the increasing number of seminars dealing with and recycling these themes cannot be understood without this overall rhetorical refocusing: once the state rigidities have been stigmatised by structural adjustment, development strategies race out of control by mutually reinforcing one another.

[4] For a sectorial application involving the gender-related dimension of poverty, see Booth, *et al.*, 2000; Turner and Fouracre, 1995.

Engendering Development – Women and the Local: A Virtuous Pair

Among redundant paired relations, the gender-based and local development relation is particularly promising. In the middle of the 2000s, the World Bank's website *PovertyNet* promoted the reinforcement of women's capacities, by referring to the keywords: 'participation', 'community development' and 'environment'. The 'gender' page of the UNDP is also linked to the pages on 'poverty', the 'environment' and 'governance'. It is in this context of the wide-ranging promotion of civil society that the 'women' subject emerges, sometimes as an obvious actor to be developed, sometimes as a potential to be revealed.

Yet, for over two decades now, these themes have also been promoting another redundancy effect internationally, concerning "the local". Just as the Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995[5] had an impact, the institutional reforms of decentralisation justify the attention paid by donors to the 'social dimension of the adjustment'. They also justify that the 'women component' of local development, confers upon the basic referent of geographic space real virtues to fight against the general impoverishment process in the South: solidarity versus exclusion, mobilisation versus abdication and abstention, democracy versus vote-catching. Formulated in community or municipal terms[6], this territorial refocusing is associated with primary sociability and basic economic solidarity.

However, the geographic referent remains vague, variable and not fully delimited. "The local" is sometimes used to describe the position of a metropolitan district in relation to the regional or national environment, sometimes pieces of a town: deprived suburbs, ethnic enclaves or islands of poverty in a truly mixed urban network. Just as in rural areas where sometimes it refers to a set of village communities having decided on a common county-town, sometimes it only concerns an association of producers within a restricted land. This vagueness is claimed indeed, unlike administrative strictness, as a condition for regulation or even for an end to financial or environmental crises which would be inherent to proximity spaces.

It is in this uncertainty that women are increasingly representing a source of inspiration for "thinking globally / acting locally". Such a bottom-up refocusing implies first of all that sub-groups need to be isolated so as to define the potential targets of predetermined programmes, i.e. "women in search of micro-credit", "women responsible for food-producing businesses", "migrant girls oriented towards domestic work" and other "new types of entrepreneurship". The adopted methodology to isolate sub-groups often refrains from making comparisons, all things being otherwise equal, between these categories in their different contexts. Nonetheless, women as "head of households" are certainly catching the attention of donors (Lockwood and Whitehead, 1999). With these female-headed households as the 'poorest of the poor', what is emphasised is the fact that, first, women must not be considered only as individuals, and secondly that they are especially "embedded in family and community structures which play a large role in determining their behaviour and possibilities" (Chant, 2003: 41). Women's responsibility with regard to development is then associated with the trust values and consensus of *tontine* funds and community-based groupings. Their sociability, often seen through rosy lenses, is immensely popular with funding agencies.

In Sub-Saharan Africa, the women-local link moved from the countryside to the cities at the same time as donors were recognising the unavoidable or even beneficial nature of the urban

[5] Many NGOs took part in the 1995 Conference on Women and contributed to making their rights and needs more legible in their respective countries.

[6] Creation of new *communes* in Mali, institutional reinforcement of districts in Ghana. Both countries are designated as being exemplary by their donors in the decentralisation process currently taking place in Africa.

phenomenon[7]. During the last decade, urban projects mentioning women and promoting their involvement have abounded and been characterised by proximity solutions: neighbourhood interaction, suburb mobilisation, micro-lending or even, as in the North of Mali which is affected by the Tuareg crisis, the pacification of inter-ethnic relations. All these put together seem to guarantee greater efficiency and 'fairness'. The fact that town planning is decentralised in this manner in a few informal neighbourhoods and 'pilot communities' (Bertrand, 2002-a)[8], does not fail to remind us of those domestic and merchant needs managed by women living in cities (access to drinking water, reproductive health and children's health), around basic equipment and in favour of better cost recovery.

In the end, the lack of geographical precision of 'the local' which boasts the participation of urban women, makes it possible to envisage women as a collective figure confronted with the authorities and on the margins of the actions of men, and as a coherent political subject "at the local level and in the environmental domain" (Hainard and Verschuur, 2001, 2002, 2004 and 2006). Because women are to be found side by side with men at this level, it is seen as the level at which women should be granted citizenship. Admittedly, ambiguities abound around these issues, and hopes are not always followed by the expected effects. But it is no accident that space is being thought along the lines of "small is better" just as development is being reformulated in feminine terms. In the end, whatever the origin of urban dysfunctions and, more generally, of the crises affecting economies and societies, which neoliberal interpretations as well Keynesian orientations have failed to account for, the idea is to remain pragmatic and assist basic solidarities to counter the risks of social exclusion and costs. In this regard, various initiatives are given as examples: intra-urban food production, drainage of private savings in favour of water points and garbage collection, exploitation of municipal showers or public toilets in markets. The 'women' dimension and the local development dimension have jointly become part of an argument which has been interiorised by city-dwellers to gain access to credit.

The importance given to gender is clearly growing in poverty reduction operations, and in relation to decentralisation. In this regard, things are becoming increasingly efficient as far as the action programmes of multilateral and bilateral co-operation initiatives are concerned. The same goes for the many instances of civil society in which the role of women appears *de facto* to concern local intervention scales, while any decentralisation measure is inevitably accompanied by "gender empowerment"[9].

Geographic Issue, Political Category

In rhetorical shifts between North and South, the issue of women is ascribed a "local" geographic dimension while, at the same time, space is conferred a political dimension, i.e.

[7] The international conference of Addis Abeba held from 28 April to 1 May 1998 on "African Women and Economic Development: Investing in our Future", organised by the UN's Economic Commission for Africa, African Centre for Women, developed the "self-management of neighbourhoods on a domestic and familial basis" in a mainly rural environment. Focused on cities, the MOST-UNESCO Project entitled "Cities, the Environment and Social Relations between Men and Women", closely follows the points of convergence between Africa, Latin America and Switzerland (references mentioned hereunder).

[8] The third Urban Project in Mali, which is completed today, supported the programme entitled "Let's Save our Suburb" which concerned 25 suburbs of Bamako in the middle of the 1990s (Diallo A., Vaa M., 2000, "The Urban Poor, Gender and the Fight Against Poverty. The Case of Mali", International Conference on Urban Futures, Witwatersrand University, 10-14 July 2000, Working group on Gender and the City). Since 1997, *Urban Environmental Sanitation Project* and its extension UESP 2 support the development of poor suburbs in the Greater Accra Region.

[9] L'Afrique municipale, « Impliquer les femmes dans la gestion locale », Bulletin thématique du Programme de Développement Municipal, n° 14, 2000.

women's participation. And so we might ask: what does the association of territoriality and the gender variable consist in?

Women's relationship to space is not only expressed in terms of places and movements which are either over-invested or forbidden, or according to co-presence or specific geographic distributions (Bard, 2004). It also has to do with choices locating analyses and actions at the smallest territorial level. "Poor among the poor", but also fully-fledged actors of economic adjustment, women appear to be no longer defined by a space delineated only by a scale defining their roles and expressions. As privileged actors of development policies whether concerning land, urban neighbourhoods or administrative hierarchies, women confer upon local instances the positivity of their growing visibility on public issues.

While women's participation appears more constrained spatially than men's, women have definitely developed an ideal relation to space, beyond any topological reasoning on localisation. This territoriality is not just a concern with material layout or appropriation, socialisation, consumption or mobility practices. It also gives political meaning to gender relations, which brings us to a somewhat less classic geographic issue: the mode of territorial focus in which women could run the risk of being confined again, for in discourses at least, their promotion on the development scene is explicitly focused on situating and managing problems. Women's potential or actual initiatives are referred to a space characterised by a scale of analysis, i.e. a true political marker.

Yet, there is nothing new about the fact that 'the local', just like other categories of cognitive division of reality, gives rise to reification. Indeed, there is nothing unusual about the existing confusion between an object of study or institutional measurement, and one of its approaches: it occurs in discourses on decentralisation, in the North as in the South, or in engaged research. "The local", as a relative element of appreciation, among other things, of a complex geographic reality, becomes THE prototypical spatial category through which gender issues are addressed. The methodological efforts deployed to categorise data on poverty according to gender, and the institutional endeavour to involve women in managing their needs, are thus brought down to the 'local' paradigm. This is used to justify a downsizing of the credits allocated to development, while development is supposed to become more humane and sustainable.

In the end, spaces of proximity emerge as the node of a triple regulation: a better articulation of national authorities and grass-roots social actors; the reconciliation of public missions and private commercial ventures; and more equal relations between men and women. That this spatial dimension is attributed de facto to the category of women is probably not scientifically better founded than the territorial references of a civil society into which they fit more generally. The ideological content of the guidelines – a citizenship defined by the "tool boxes" of the donors – is crucial here. The idea is to neutralise another ideological issue at the national level, women's involvement in class and economic inequality principles.

Taking city-dwelling women into consideration is indeed not new in development issues. It is the change of scale of this consideration which has been of concern to us in the last decades. In the 1970s-1980s, experiences in development would link the entry of women into modernity with national and often nationalistic construction imperatives. But the state turned out to be too unstable in many respects to carry out a global social project. Confronted with a crisis in terms of national recognition and public funding, populations are increasingly incited to take responsibility for themselves, and to take over from discredited administrative and political authorities. Women are designated as stakeholders in local governance. It is now at the level of village groupings, neighbourhoods and municipalities that the commercial and political requirements of globalisation are reformulated: switching to management without public subsidies, adjusting the price of services, integrating the poor to the free market, and ensuring free competition for procurement contracts.

With this end-of-century evolution, space can be interpreted as a gendered construction, and gender as a social relationship embodied in space. Development is no longer thought in technicist, productivist and more masculine terms, as it was during the decades of ambitious integrated projects and pioneering developments. The change in the level of intervention is striking. Not that the issue of women had not been discussed before the structural adjustment measures. But the conquest of rights was linked to public action, to the legal and planning state. Gender equality was being questioned in the very places where it was being asserted (marriage and family codes in particular) or negotiated (labour representations for example)[10]. From being the object of national measures or concerns, women are becoming a collective actor of basic regulations in the discourse of the following decade, when associations, more or less assisted by various international networks, become part of the governance problematic.

2. Interpretations of Localism

Out of realism and pragmatism, women's responsibilities and initiatives appear to be limited to 'the local': their educational and financial capital is lower than the men's; their know-how is also narrower. However, social and geographic proximity also carries the seeds of social relations based on patronage, confinement, the prospect of a relative isolation, and the risk of new forms of exploitation.

Limits of the Univocal Territoriality of Women in Civil Society

In my research on urban housing, I felt fieldwork had to take such conditions into account, in particular because all countries seemed to be echoing them, and networks were being established between them. However, what went on in the housing market necessarily led women to engage with the city generally, beyond their local neighbourhoods. Both their behaviours and representations moved between different places and levels of reference, in complex territorial webs. While urban programmes undeniably value neighbourhood associations (water conveyance and electricity supply, cleaning up and land security), their scope must still be measured in relation to external migrations and internal flows in the city, which influence inhabitants' perceived and relational space. It is also in a metropolised framework, and in the sociability relating to often complex forms of living (multi-residence, reduction of cohabitation rate between generations), that the potential for future participations in public space is being constituted. There are therefore three different ways in which the pairing of women and the local is questionable:

1. The first limit stems from the standardised character of development actions targeting women 'at the root'. An analysis of the poverty affecting them sometimes disregards their geographic mobility and sometimes interprets their vulnerability simplistically, in terms of a mobility deficit and as the result of the unequal decompartmentalisation of the relation between city dwellers and their living space (Diaz Olvera, *et al.*, 2004; Bertrand, 2010). Yet, this constrained territoriality established for the poor, and 'the poorest of the poor' in particular (households headed by single women), calls for discussion when migration and residential movements are observed in depth in the capital cities of West Africa. In this regard, the Greater Accra Region constitutes a classic example. According to a survey on "Housing Practices and Residential Mobility (2000-2001)"[11], almost 28% of households were headed by women in the Ghanaian capital city. This longitudinal survey followed the trajectories of 1 400 adults, some of whom were sedentary residents from deprived neighbourhoods and others, residents from new suburbs (they move around the most). The first type showed the lowest intra-urban mobility

[10] *Peuples méditerranéens* : « Les femmes et la modernité », n° 44-45, July-December 1998.
[11] IRD, UR 013 and University of Ghana, Legon (Bertrand and Delaunay, 2005).

rates during their lifetime, while the second ended up occupying the most valuable detached living units. A major factor of their economic success appeared to be their educational achievements, which led them to migrate towards the Ghanaian capital, and to redeploy there on a long term basis.
In this context, female household heads were clearly over-represented in poor neighbourhoods populated by "natives" (non-migrants) and eligible for a few urban rehabilitation operations. In the suburb of Teshie, which donors finally adopted at the end of the 1990s, the share of women as household heads far exceeded the urban average with 48%; they relied on family usufruct rights to avoid the financial constraint of renting, but at the price of living in highly crowded conditions in courtyards. Their activities were derived from fishing and in many respects were restricted to the neighbourhood in which they originated on the Atlantic coast. While this typical profile could well be validating the thesis according to which the poorest are relatively confined in urban space, it is nonetheless far from representing all the forms of poverty: other forms of confinement concern renting households that are not very quick to develop their environment, households in which women are not the main decision-makers or bread-winners. Furthermore, another indigenous area similar to Teshie, i.e. with usufructuary women living in mediocre and densely populated buildings, concentrates on the outskirts of the city poor people who are much more mobile. While women who head households are also more represented there than on average (42 % of households), they did not miss out on the inter- and intra-regional mobility which is strongly restructuring this area and making the mobilisation of its community uncertain in the medium term. The assumption that there is a unified perspective to be had on women in a given city was therefore challenged by this basic comparison of different areas.
2. The second limit of a development refocused on the local scale and within women's reach, lies in the fact that the urban practices studied concern a double inequality, not only between women and men but also and especially between women. In this light, the gender variable appears less discriminatory than those of intergenerational relations and economic differentiation. This is particularly the case when a market adjusted to neoliberal standards, e.g. those of building lots, becomes more selective (Bertrand, 2003). While housewives in search of land security are doing the round of town halls to plead their case with auctioneers, and are even accumulating in the process several serviced lands and rental investments, the range of market positions hardly leads to a unified feminine figure.
3. The third limit lies in the final term of the women-local combination, which would imply an increased potential for participation. On this important political ground, many studies show firstly that the grass-roots/mobilisation equation does not always function; secondly that it does not go without conflicts, diversions of meaning and interest or disputes for leadership that can inhibiting development actors (Bertrand, 1999 and 2002-b); and that, finally, the particular equation of women and local consensus is not happening as per expectations. Perhaps this is what justifies the new requirements for poverty to be appreciated within a more phenomenological framework, stressing the awareness which interested parties have of their own capacities and the manner in which they assess their limits. Their assessment goes beyond the scope of this article.

Two Registers of Local Legitimisation

Refocusing development from the bottom-up is not a novelty. In many respects it constitutes the new version – in the South as in the North – of a localism already proposed as a way to resolve crises. Furthermore, there is nothing new about taking African women city-dwellers into account as a dominated as well as active category (Vidal, 1977; Copans, 1987).

Using these expressions eventually leads to the analysis of governmentality which is more varied than what appears at first. However, the trend is for national representations to be withdrawn and for state bureaucracies to shrink. General modernisation is no longer aspired to, its regulatory and political implications having been decried. The focus is on the fragmentary preservation of regulation capacities, and of short and medium term accountability. Funding choices place potential aid targets in competition with one another. The conditions imposed by international donors, in a public action reduced to pilot operations, define a narrow context in relation to decades of easy credit. Selection processes give rise to a real sense of exclusion on the part of those who do not benefit from loans. Yet, the political authorities responsible for implementing such selections no longer base them on the expression of unitary appearance that prevailed under nationalist juntas or under the monopole of one-party regimes. Today, transparent reasons justify arbitrations in a political landscape which is sometimes chaotic but which one assumes is pluralist.

In this general context, "gender empowerment" or the 'women' ramifications of sectoral programmes play an important role. But it is more a question of legitimising those political authorities responsible for implementing operations than promoting real social change. There are two interpretations of this politically correct link between women and the local in the currently globalised understanding of development.

1. The first interpretation follows from a community perspective. The women's promotion model shifted from national public issues – linked to state controls and legislation – to a specific expression of citizenship in local action systems[12].

Indeed, many studies insist on the bottleneck – and consequently the potential for empowerment – represented by the recognition of land rights when going from the private expression of women's problems (physical and economic violence, excessive domestic work), to a public expression[13]. In a perspective that emphasises roots in a community of origin, family status and belonging based on geographic proximity appear crucial to the evolution of women's contribution to development. As such, the analyses and recommendations particularly reflect the precariousness generated by the unequal distribution of land, customary rules on land use and the protection of land tenure. Urban areas are also affected by this type of perspective, as shown by the survey of the Greater Accra Region: in 2000, 53 % of households headed by women were housed in usufruct or were occupying an inherited family dwelling for free, whereas only 30% of households headed by men benefitting from of shared property rights. During surveys conducted prior to urban rehabilitation operations, it was essential to hold group discussions with women's representatives in order to show good territorial cohesion.

However, concerning markers of lineage and community, conquered rights or standards claimed locally by women, political cultures diverge in Anglophone and Francophone Africa, and from the coast to the Sudano-Sahelian interior. In Mali for example, Islamic law ensures that heiresses are demoted in favour of heirs, and inheritance practices often push them aside from estates. Moreover, the Republican tradition inherited from French colonisation made a long-lasting mark on the land development legal system. State-owned property occupies a central place in land use requisitions, redistributions and conversions. The national development imperative prevails over customary interests. In town, administered estates, which constitute a reference even for

[12] "One of the strengths of the participatory empowerment approach to development has been its focus on the local and its belief that even the poorest communities can understand and solve their own developmental problem." (Parpart J.L., "Rethinking Participatory Empowerment, Gender and Development in a Global/Local World", Montreal: MacGill University, Centre for Developing-Area Studies, 67-74, 2003).

[13] The influence of Hernando de Soto's theses on the recommendations of the World Bank as regards "Making Markets' Work Better for the Poor" is obvious: small entrepreneurship is erected as a vulnerability exit model by securing land rights.

informal settlements, continue to influence the rehabilitation of deprived suburbs. Therefore, it is in reference to public power and its political expression – based on patronage in particular – that women are gaining ground as far as their residential positions are concerned, including in informal settlements and in favour of land regularisations, but not as regards community frameworks.

Anglophone Ghana, on the contrary, conforms to the hypothesis of persistent customary pressures and tenacious land issues in political, local and national expression. In the wake of indirect colonial rule, the land jurisdiction recognises collective family, clan and chieftainship rights. The fact that a citizen is rooted in his/her hometown, whether or not s/he resides there, as long as s/he claims a share of the land inheritance, constitutes a first step towards belonging to the Ghanaian nation. The exercise of national civil and political rights is influenced by the local definition of land rights. From this territorial attachment which is common to highly differentiated ethnic frameworks in the country, follows an implication of women in development. The classification of their commitments is linked to the varied community rules for the transmission of properties and statuses. As seen in the Ghanaian capital, the benefit of usufruct over family courtyards varies between women, those who head households in particular, according to whether they are migrants or natives, impoverished or committed to an increasing residential mobility, individualised in their initiatives or subjected to men's.

The attention paid to women, youth or customary owners in setting up projects for the rehabilitation of neighbourhoods, is not formalised in Ghana. The research consultancies in charge of proposing underprivileged communities in need of rehabilitation, usually vouch for communities that will be prompt in getting involved in focus group discussions, a technique which is valued in development expertise. These favour a collective expression of needs and commitments. By removing gender issues from participation, the approach seems to validate (better than in the Francophone environment) business solvability imperatives (i.e. ability and willingness to pay) and those of decentralised governance (i.e. demonstrations of community initiatives and cohesiveness).

Yet, even rooted as it is in political culture, this model of community solidarity relies on myth and has encountered many limitations (Mayoux, 1995; Guijt and Shah, 1998). As in rural projects, obstacles lie in the first as much as the second imperative: the lack of mobilisation and the divergence of interests does not concern women less than men; women's participation is not necessarily more exemplary or better reproducible than men's commitment when it comes co-financing local facilities for example. The categories of women, poverty and the local do not establish long-lasting practices. Neither the semantic promotion of each term nor their association can hide the theoretical poverty of the argument. Beyond the community approach, there is development make-believe: an approach by projects, not based on a broader analysis of social inequalities, a fight against vulnerability reduced to management measures, and a promotion of proximity that does away with the issue of geographic mobility.

2. The second interpretation of women's participation is sceptical as regards the current discourse on community loans. The issue of women should contribute further to the preservation of public services. The regulatory role of the state is essential as far as specific local characteristics and the market are concerned. It is apparent here in the definition of objectives and criteria of male-female parity. Concerning women, the change from domestic expression to public claims ends up being played during elections, which then puts women in competition with men. The governance concerned here is indeed national in scope. It reflects quotas of women added – whether explicitly or not – to the representation of political parties for legislative and municipal elections, and by the selection of female candidatures in primary elections. It falls to the democratic authorities to implement them at grass-roots level first of all,

as illustrated by the consecutive elections for reforms on decentralisation held in Mali from 1993 to 1996[14].
However, there were many instances of dissidence generated by imposed sponsorships, and of turmoil in a few influential towns as regards feminine promotion, which probably equals the turmoil created by rivalries between men and defined by them in the pluralist regimes or within one-party political systems. In the end, the 'voice of the poor' has natural limits: the local is not all that consensual, individual careers are advanced under the pretence of collective arguments, women remain poorly represented in elections and destitute populations remain suspicious of a state that did recover sufficient credibility with the multiparty system.
Official or unofficial quotas for women are certainly promoting their visibility at different levels of local expression, and in various institutions of social and political representation. However, the future of the promised reinforcement of women's collective capacities is still conceived of as smaller, more confined and less open than that of men, based on private and daily life: the courtyard (while men monopolise decisions in district councils), neighbourhood sociability (while men bustle about in town), and leaderships of regional county-towns (while men speak in favour of women on the governmental or international scene).

Conclusion

At the turn of the century, women's entry into the terms of reference of globalised development was played at 'the local' level. The 'gender' and 'decentralised' dimensions which many associations claim to represent, like the financial set-ups of the World Bank in favour of the poor, cannot be understood without going back two decades: a real flight of enthusiasm for developmental themes following the duller terms of structural adjustment; a close link between the epistemological promotion of gender and the pragmatic alternative (once the African state was disowned) of good practices at grass-roots level. Space and time – i.e. local space and project deadlines – are more than ever necessary to analyse the context effects which could confer truly varied political issues on the dual springboard of community and elections upon women. However, their promotion never fails to be called for, despite serious misgivings on the part of researchers and the sense that localism bears new dependencies towards external donors.

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[14] For the first elections in the series, see Bertrand, 1998.

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