Women and Desertification:  
The Question of Responsibility  

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ABSTRACT: Campaigns against desertification frequently address women, who are held responsible for rapid population growth and biomass burning. It is shown here how desertification is caused by the erosion of social coherence. This diagnosis requires a fundamental change in anti-desertification policies.

According to influential international organisations, especially the World Bank, a rapid increase of the human population is responsible for the overuse of sensitive areas which results in accelerated desert expansion. Expensive family planning campaigns are launched and promoted from many sides, addressing primarily women and aiming at reduced birth rates. Another cause of desertification identified by development agencies is biomass burning as a method of land clearing and for household purposes. Improved stoves have been spread among women in many countries. However, the success of these programmes is not yet evident.

These popular examples have in common that they mainly approach women with the aim to call a halt to desertification. They address women in their roles as mothers, cooks and farmers and demand considerable changes in their habits.

But - are women responsible for desertification?

It is well-known that women in rural areas are heavily dependent on a healthy environment. As main food producers in Africa they are in danger of losing their most important means of production through desertification. As collectors of wild crops to enrich the diet and - during droughts - to replace crops which did not yield - women have a great interest in the survival of many varieties of wild plants. As collectors of fuel wood they need a sufficient supply of trees so that they can cut enough dead branches. A woman from Kutum/Sudan puts the problem as follows:

Woman: “Lack of trees promotes sand storms which carry the soil away from our fields.”
Author: “But why did the trees disappear?”
Woman: “Because there was no rain.”
Author: “Why has rain become so scarce?”
Woman: “This is the arbitrariness of nature, which lies in the hands of God.”

The words of the woman point to the vital connection between rainfall and vegetation, disturbances of which promote desertification, as soon as the cultivators do not sufficiently adapt their mode of production to the conditions of high variability of rainfall. The woman is not conscious on the fact that the micro-climate could change due to human-made activities. This is not her fault or ignorance – it is also the basic assumption of political decision-makers in most of the countries affected by desertification.

In the past social coherence and control restricted the fertility of the human and livestock populations at the fringes of deserts. Spacing between children was practised,
shifting cultivation allowed regeneration of soils during 10

to 30 years of fallow. Nomads used the sensitive soils as

pastures, in the arid areas for camels, in the semi-arid areas

for cattle. They efficiently adapted the routes of the annual

flock movements to the variations of rainfall, leaving

enough time for all species of grasses and herbs to grow

before they allowed their animals to graze on them\(^3\).

Why, then, did women obviously start to erode their own

resources of survival?

To find answers to this question a look back to history is

required. Research on reactions on the social disruptions

which occurred during pre-colonial and initial colonial

slave-raiding periods revealed a wide range of adaptive

measures applied by African refugees and migrants.

Peasants who escaped to sensitive environments
developed techniques of resource management which

included terracing, constructing of contour banks and

mounds, ridging and deep furrowing linked with

peripheral drains as well as biological conservation

measures\(^4\). In Upper Volta, for instance, peasants adapted

their rotational bush-fallow systems to the tax-enforced

introduction of groundnuts and cotton by the French

colonial rulers. IFAD\(^5\) lists about sixty farming systems

with sustainable land management and conservation

practices, which existed before colonialism in Africa.

The colonial powers, by exerting varying policies

according to area controlled and resources appropriated,

initiated contradictory processes with regard to land

management. In the so-called “settler economies” the

Europeans took the best lands and left millions of peasants

with mainly dry, hilly and thin-soiled land (eg in Algeria,

Zimbabwe, Kenya, South Africa). Where they did not

directly seize the land, they imposed poll or hut taxes on

peasants, forcing them to produce commodities for export

and monetising peasant economies, reaping the profits

thus extracted. This was the case for example in Senegal

and Sudan (ground nuts, cotton). Although forced labour

and crop deliveries had been practised already before

colonialism, a qualitatively different stage was reached by

the fact that African economies were forced under the

economic interests of outsiders and indissolubly and one-
sidedly linked to the world market through imposed

exportation of unprocessed commodities.

Not the land use practices of the colonial rulers, but the

social disruptions they caused had the strongest impact on
desertification in semi-arid areas. The main factor was the

erosion of social control through the creation of a foreign

administrative system, a process which has continued until
today\(^6\). Whereas African communities under critical

conditions like expulsion, flight or other calamities used to

develop sound modes of adaptation in their places of

refuge before, the social coherence broke down under the

colonial regimes and their formally independent

successors. Group initiative and self-reliance were victims

of the demands for labour, taxes and commercial crops,

which were permanently and everywhere called in by the

dominant groups. These measures resulted in atomising

land management and raised conflicts between merchants,
nomads and peasants over land rights\(^7\).

In the Sahel women peasants are increasingly atomised

through the monetisation of the economies. To meet those

basic needs which are not produced at home or at the farm,
every family depends on members who earn cash. Due to
the prevailing engagement of men in the monetary sector –
either locally or as migrants in agricultural schemes, urban
areas or abroad – women are frequently left alone with

their food securing work on the fields. Although as hoe

cultivators they do not damage the light soils by

mechanical ploughing, their increased work load may lead
to destructive impacts on the land. Careful land

management, which, in the Sahel, requires labour-

intensive preparations such as terracing, water harvesting,
damming up of down-hill rainwater flows etc. cannot be

performed by the women, elder people, children and a few

remaining male peasants alone. Pasturing goats and sheep
cannot be permanently supervised and shifted to remote

areas in order to preserve the vegetation near the settled

areas. Under the conditions of an eroding society women

are already forced to overcome bottlenecks of labour by

extending and intensifying their work to the limits of

physical capabilities.

At the same time, desertification together with
droughts, which are a natural component of the climate in

arid and semi-arid areas, have an increasingly threatening

impact on the survival of the inhabitants of these areas.
The report of a woman from Disa/North Darfur, whose

husband is a bedmaker and occasionally works as a casual

labourer, illustrates the work burden loaded on women

under the conditions of desertification. The

precarious existence of peasant families during droughts

and their slow recovery after a period of drought are clearly

pointed out here:

“During the rainy season I farm the field at Disa on my own.

My husband stays in Kutum\(^8\), because the children have to

go to school. The work on the field is hard, especially

weeding, because I suffer from circulatory disorders.

Sometimes I faint during the work.

In the past, we used to arrange a tawiza\(^9\) to get the

weeding done. But now we do not have anything to share.

Last year the harvest was very bad. I got only one sack. The

year before was good, I harvested 9 sacks. We ate 7 of them

gave 1/2 to the sheikh\(^10\) for zakah\(^11\). The rest we returned

to our relatives. They had provided us with millet in the

drought. Since the millet has been finished we buy the millet

per kora\(^12\) from the market. We need 10 sacks in one year. We
do not own animals, so we cannot sell any.”\(^11\)

This statement includes a pointed characterisation of
the processes of atomisation within the society. The tawiza
has become too expensive, because it requires the supply
of the whole group with food for one day. Even though it is
returned to the family during the next days, the majority of
peasants can no longer afford the expenditure.

Leaving the woman to work alone on the field with the

purpose of growing the staple crop for the family is more