

## Women and Housing in Sub-Saharan Africa

BY DIANA LEE-SMITH

**T**his article looks at some of the housing problems women face in a number of sub-Saharan African countries. Although women experience cultural problems in the process of modernization, the main problems they face result from poverty. Their poverty relative to men's is a worldwide phenomenon, but in Africa it has some specific dimensions. Data from Africa show that women usually have lower incomes, are less educated than men, and predominate more among the self-employed than the wage employed. They often work in or near the home to earn a living, because of their child care and other home maintenance duties, which frequently include the growing as well as the processing and cooking of household food, and the collection of fuel and water. Whatever land and property rights they may have had under traditional systems of tenure are generally eroded with the formalization of titles, when male inheritance is reinforced. Thus women are caught in an increasing downward spiral of trying to produce subsistence from a rapidly disappearing resource base.

### House Form and the Family

The form and location of housing is a reflection of social and cultural organization in any setting. This includes the division of labour between women and men. In times of rapid economic change, both the social and cultural organization on the one hand, and the form and location of housing on the other hand, change in a chaotic and little understood way, causing hardship to the people involved. Such is the case in sub-Saharan Africa.

Traditional African housing is based on a family homestead — an outdoor space containing a number of separately roofed structures, or "huts," which are used by different family members. The



position, orientation and appearance of each hut has a strict meaning particular to the social group. For example, the layout of a typical Luo and a typical Kikuyu homestead in Kenya are shown in Figures One and Two. In both these agricultural communities, the first wife's hut faces the entrance, and succeeding wives build on alternate sides of her house. In the Luo home, sons build houses opposite their mothers; in the Kikuyu home, they build behind their mothers. The small structures marked with a cross are grain stores, one for each wife and one for the husband. The Luo husband's hut faces the first wife's while the Kikuyu husband's hut, call *thingirs*, is to the right (seen from the gate) and always next to the youngest wife's hut. In Kamba tradition, the husband has no hut but just an outdoor fenced space (*thome*) with a fireplace and a few chairs for family and visitors.

A study done in Kenya in the 1970s documents many more local variations and points out some of the complications that occur when families urbanize and attempt to adapt to western style housing. Anita Larsson documented a similar transition from outdoor to indoor living in Botswana in the 1980s.

A study of middle-income housing in Nairobi, Kenya, also showed the problems of urban African households in adjusting to life in three-bedroom dwellings under a single roof. As in Botswana, households respond by building extra structures or by having various members of the household living in different places. Extra structures are particularly needed for teenage sons and for parents and other relatives who cannot sleep "under the same roof." Urban households accommodate a constant stream of extended family visitors and this creates particular problems associated with the need for sex and age group separation. In both Kenya and Botswana, the house and its various structures are

used either for different household members to live in, or for income from tenants, according to household economic priorities. In either case, people prefer rooms or groups of rooms each with separate access to enclosed outdoor courtyards.

A major practical problem was pointed out in the study of middle-income housing design in Nairobi. This was the failure to design for the main cooking fuel, charcoal. Access to an outdoor cooking space is essential, plus a hard floor and proper ventilation for the indoor cooking space, not to mention fuel storage space. Western-type kitchen designs are inadequate.

### Women's Economic Role

For low-income women the problems are much more severe. African households' use of space is influenced not only by traditional economic roles and behaviours, but by the pressures of poverty. In particular, women's economic role in this changing situation needs to be understood. This is for two reasons, as clearly articulated by Moser and Peake: first, so that it can be adequately designed and planned for, thus alleviating daily hardship; and second, so that women can understand and change it, thus avoiding the social and economic stress it places upon them.

All over the world, women have the traditional household responsibility for child care. Women who are poor not only have to seek work which enables them to earn a living in or near the home, but they also perform less competitively on the wage labour markets as a result. This basic division of labour is at the root of

discrimination against women in industrial and industrializing societies.

It is compounded in developing societies in several ways. There is not only a lack of child care facilities, but the laws restricting small-scale commerce and industry in residential areas create problems for women trying to earn a living in the informal sector, where they predominate. Further, the lack of urban services in low-income housing areas means women have to spend enormous amounts of labour on their traditional tasks of fetching water and fuel, as well as growing food on urban land to offset their low incomes. The increasing number of female-headed households in Africa is inevitably related to the nucleation of polygamous households.

African women are traditionally responsible for providing water, food and fuel to their families. This can become virtually impossible in overcrowded urban settlements lacking water supply and land that can be used for subsistence production of food and fuel. Such unplanned and unserved settlements are occupied by 40 per cent to 80 per cent of the residents in many African towns.

African urban areas are only just beginning to reflect a conscious planning for urban agriculture as an intrinsic part of the urban food supply, as in the planning of the Green Zones surrounding Maputo, Mozambique. In Kenya, about 57 per cent of the urban population of the country cannot afford to feed itself at present levels of income, while 64 per cent engage in subsistence agriculture, either in rural or urban areas. Twenty nine per cent of urban residents practise farming in town. The majority of urban farmers in Kenya are women, and many also keep livestock in town, as a way of getting protein in their families' diets. High and middle-income urban residents can easily engage in crop and livestock production in their backyards, but the urban poor, living at much higher densities, can only farm on public land, unassisted by urban planning or extension services, and at worst harassed by the urban authorities.

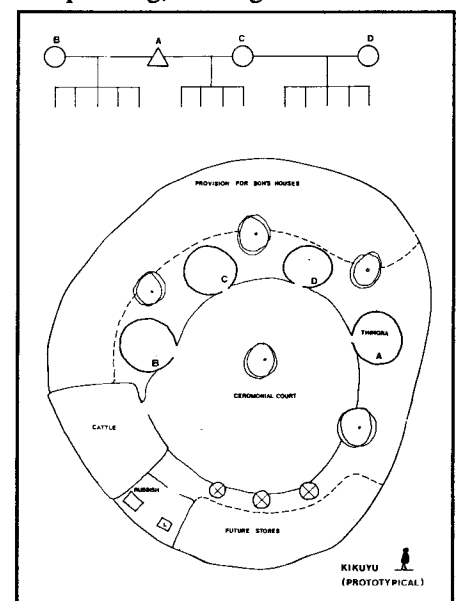
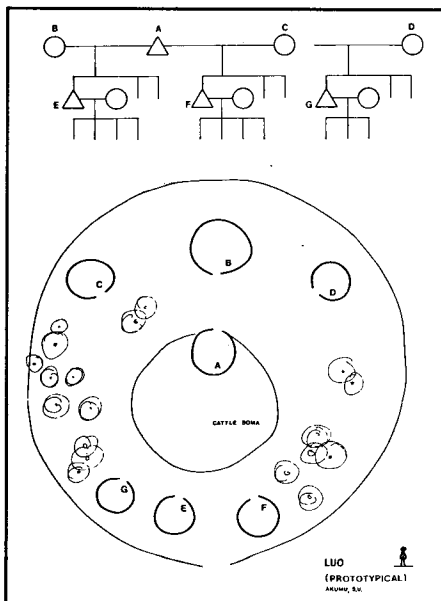
### Women and Housing Legislation

The debate on urban construction standards has been going on for some time in Africa, though relaxation and legislative revision are slow. The debate has special

implications for women, because, due to their relative poverty, they predominate among the populations living in illegal settlements, with little chance of getting access to higher incomes because of their lack of skills and time, and thus less chance than men of raising loans to build to required standards. It is quite possible that these disadvantages contribute to the downward spiral of female poverty and ever-increasing numbers of poor, female-headed households living in unplanned areas. Zoning legislation causes hardship to women in urban areas, because they are harassed when trying to earn a living at the same time as carrying out child care and other domestic tasks.

This type of legislation, born of the era of public health urban reform after the industrial revolution, is unrealistic in cities in developing countries where women survive economically on petty commodity production and trade in neighbourhoods. Their income levels are insufficient to support commercial as well as residential premises, or licence fees based on high levels of infrastructure development.

Poor women also have less chance of participating in self-help schemes that rely on modern construction methods, as they are rarely trained in such methods, while the traditional building construction with which they are familiar is generally illegal in urban areas, and cannot be used for loan collateral. Like food and fuel production, traditional building materials which women used to gather free in Africa are not included in modern land use planning, causing economic stress



and extra labour for women.

Similarly, the failure of urban authorities to plan and deliver water supply to unplanned low-income areas means extra labour for women. Most low-income women would prefer an affordable communal water supply, yet urban planning law may insist on individual connections which make billing easier, but condemn low-income women to moving out or to staying in illegal areas with no supply at all, because they cannot afford the planned standards.

### Women's Access to Housing

Modern laws in Africa usually give women equal rights with men to own land and property (it is only in the Republic of South Africa and a few other places that they are still legally classed as minors). However, they are often unable to exercise these rights because they are poorer, or because customs of male inheritance prevail. Customary behaviours prevail more in rural areas, where it is uncommon to find women owning land and property, although they frequently do in urban areas, provided they can afford it.

On the other hand, Achola Pala has shown that customary land systems allowed both women and men rights of land use, without any legal ownership; both she and Barbara Rogers show that, whatever land and property rights rural women have had under traditional systems of tenure, they are generally eroded with the formalization of titles, which favours men.

About half the applicants for new plots in low-income site and service schemes in several African countries including Botswana, Kenya, Lesotho and Zambia were women. The reason for this is the number of single or separated women with children, who predominate among the poorer income groups in urban areas because they have lower skills and employment opportunities than men.

However, women have been found to be less able than men to hold onto these plots. This is again because of poverty and their difficulty in meeting repayments as well as other child support expenses. Studies in Lusaka, Zambia, show that women are better able to participate in squatter upgrading than site and service schemes. This is because site and service schemes are designed around the average income whereas women mostly fall in the

lower 20 per cent of income earners. In squatter upgrading, on the other hand, poor women are able to benefit from improved community services like roads, water points, schools and health centres, without being immediately forced into a long-term financial commitment to a new house.

A profile of a low-income urban population in Nairobi showed that almost one-half were female-headed households, and more than one-third, self-employed households; this is probably consistent for other low-income urban areas. What is important about this particular set of data, which was collected over time in a site and service area, is that it reveals the movements — implying the strategies and stresses — of this population. The poorer, self-employed, women-headed households could not live on their plots initially, preferring to rent them for profit. Others sold their plots. However, within six years, the demographic profile of the main plot occupants was again 49 per cent female-headed households and 34 per cent self-employed household heads. This demonstrates that site and service housing is capable of reaching the low-income group with these characteristics, although the stress of the construction period is severe.

Data and case studies from a later phase of the same project showed that poorer, mostly female-headed households had greater difficulty in building and staying in their homes, due to increases in building costs, but more importantly, because of competition from an increasing proportion of higher income neighbours. This was due to some corrupt relocation of plots, which led to more rooming houses and bars being built in the area by absentee landlords. This also created an uncongenial environment for the poorer women trying to bring up their children in a mixed neighbourhood. Phase Two became more of a dormitory town for single male workers living in rooming houses. It appears that mixed-income housing developments where private sector development is promoted will tend to produce such a housing environment. Yet the community development approach of Phase One actively and successfully supported the housing strategies for the poor, female-headed households, including providing them with soft loans.

### Summary and Conclusions

Urban housing planning and policy in developing countries has only recently begun to take account of the specific requirements of women, or indeed of the specific requirements of all members of the typical household in transition from traditional rural to modern urban life, within the constraints of current economic realities.

More research and analysis is needed on these questions, particularly the needs of the growing numbers of poor female-headed households, as well as a faster policy response. It has been shown that women benefit more from squatter upgrading schemes than from site and service schemes, due to their poverty, as well as their lack of time and skills. It has also been shown that women can benefit from site and service schemes, provided they are supported by an adequate program of credit and community development. In contrast, land and housing development through the private sector, as promoted by the large urban donors in the 1980s, is likely to increase the segregation of poor women into illegal settlements at the expense of providing entrepreneur-built rental housing for male wage workers.

Some urban planning legislation discriminates against women by restricting their right to work in or near the home, to grow food and keep small livestock. Some building legislation discriminates against women by not permitting dwellings built of traditional materials which they can afford, with communal services they can afford. Urban planning fails to take account of women's needs by not including planned space for urban crops and livestock, wood fuel or alternative fuel production, conservation or production of traditional building materials.

This is part of a wider syndrome of official land use planning for capitalist development which incorporates commercial land uses but infringes on the "invisible" land uses of women which are part of the unplanned, unofficial, but life-sustaining subsistence sector.

*Diana Lee-Smith is the editor of SINA (Settlements Information Network Africa) Newsletter, published by the Mazingira Institute in Nairobi, Kenya; she co-ordinates the Women and Shelter Network of Habitat International Coalition; and she has researched and published in the areas of development, human settlements and environment.*