



Global  
Wo.Men Hub

# THE IMPACT(S) OF COLONIALISM ON TRADITIONAL GENDER IDENTITIES IN SUB- SAHARAN AFRICA

**Internship Supervisor:** Prof. Benoît Rihoux, University of  
Louvain (UCLouvain) and Global Wo.Men Hub

**Research Intern:** Yanne Manuela Banyu Otseng

**Table of Contents**

**INTRODUCTION** ..... 1

**1. Historical Context**..... 2

**1.1 Traditional Gender Roles** ..... 3

**1.2 Colonialism and Gender Identities in Sub-Saharan Africa** ..... 4

**1.3 Post-Colonialism and Gender Identities in Sub-Saharan Africa** ..... 5

**2. Intersectionality of Gender with Other Identity Markers** ..... 6

**2.1 Gender Identity and Ethnicity** ..... 7

**2.2 Gender Identity and Religion** ..... 8

**2.3 Gender Identity and Sexuality** ..... 9

**3. Women in Sustainable Development** ..... 10

**CONCLUSION** ..... 11

**REFERENCES** ..... i

## INTRODUCTION

Colonialism deeply impacted traditional gender identities and roles that existed in Africa before colonial inception, and the colonialists classified traditional gender identities and roles in the Sub-Saharan region as primitive, resulting in new policies enacted to change and control gendered norms and sexual cultures of the region (Berger, 2003). Therefore, this research aims to discover the influence of colonialism on the traditional gender identities in Sub-Saharan Africa. It argues that the contemporary gender roles in the region include pre-colonial and colonial norms. Moreover, gender norms are being questioned by growing modernization and education, which is encouraging acceptance of non-binary identities. The paper explains the evolution of gender identity in a historical context through traditional gender roles, colonialism, and postcolonialism. It also analyses the connection between gender identity and ethnicity, religion, and sexuality since these traditions either uphold traditional gender roles or advocate for gender equality.

The main claim of this paper is that traditional gender norms in Sub-Saharan Africa have been influenced by colonial and post-colonial factors, that have contributed to the solidification of binary gender roles and marginalization of non-binary identities. These factors have merged with pre-colonial factors to shape contemporary understandings of gender in Sub-Saharan Africa. The qualitative content analysis method will be employed during this research including a literature review to answer our research question. This approach indicates that our research will involve analysing perspectives from existing literature regarding gender in the region. Including a literature review in this research helps to provide a comprehensive understanding of existing scholarly literature, and also to identify the research gaps and areas that need to be addressed.

The research will be approached through the lens of the non-binary gender identities theoretical framework. However, different theoretical frameworks have been identified by scholars as being at the root of gender inequality in Africa. Most theories establish that contemporary African societies cannot be viewed outside the context of European colonialism, as it is through this lens that the oppression and marginalization of women in Africa can be understood (Bertolt, 2018). Besides, non-binary people may identify as an intermediate or separate third gender, identify with more than one gender, or no gender, or have a fluctuating gender identity (Bosson et al., 2018).

To proceed, it is important to cite the limitations of this research. First, the scope of the literature review is limited due to insufficient data, especially regarding non-binary gender identities in the region. Secondly, the research can also be considered limited because the perspectives presented in the selected literature, may not fully represent the diversity of viewpoints within Sub-Saharan Africa.

## 1. Historical Context

The historical background of gender identities in Sub-Saharan Africa is complex and diverse, reflecting the region's many cultures, languages, and societies. Thus, gender identities in the region have evolved through distinct phases of human history, resulting in varied gender roles and identities changing over time. Moreover, gender identity has been influenced by several factors, including colonialism, religion, and modernization. Thus, several scholars in African history, like Johnson-Odim (2007) and Saidi et al. (2021), claimed that gender identities in Sub-Saharan Africa were influenced and defined by events that happened at different eras in history, before and after colonialism. Therefore, the changing nature of gender roles across different historical periods represents the diversity of gender experiences and contributions within Sub-Saharan African cultural contexts.

African societies had different perceptions of gender identity, with varied interpretations and implementations of gender roles that could favour women or could be regarded as flexible, while others could be deemed harsh. However, the traditional roles in sub-Saharan Africa could vary depending on the ethnic groups, cultures, and regions, a diversity that limits our generalization. For instance, Amadiume (1987) contends that gender roles across many Sub-Saharan African societies were distinct but not necessarily rigid or hierarchical because women often played significant roles in the economy, politics, and religion. In support of her argument, Amadiume gives an example of the fluidity of gender roles among the Igbo people in Nigeria, where women could take on roles typically ascribed to men and vice versa. However, assigned roles in most pre-colonial Sub-Saharan cultures are dictated by the expectations, behaviours, and responsibilities associated with being male or female.

Meanwhile, Oyèwùmí (1997) speculates that colonialism systematically altered gender identities in Sub-Saharan Africa due to the imposition of colonizers' gender norms on the people. This imposition disrupted existing gender relations and roles established by societies. Similarly, Sheldon (2017) asserted that 'colonialism' helped to enforce Western gender norms across the globe, particularly in Africa, which are still being implemented after several decades. Although a traditional gender identity predated colonialism, colonialism diminished the conventional provision for gender identity, contributing to the contemporary post-colonial concept of gender roles in Sub-Saharan Africa. Also, Tamale (2011) underlined the adverse effect of colonialism on African societies, such as the disruption of traditional values, norms, and identities and the imposition of new social, economic, and political structures alien to the people, many of which had significant implications for gender roles and identities.

In another suggestion, some historians and scholars concurred that the spread of Christian and Islamic religions in Sub-Saharan Africa contributed to the distortion of the region's gender identities. They argued that the introduction of Christianity and Islam in Sub-Saharan Africa was a prelude to colonialism and greatly influenced gender identities in many African societies (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991). These religions often promoted more rigid and patriarchal gender roles compared to Indigenous African religious traditions. Besides, the Christian doctrine contradicts African culture and traditional practices; this conflict in norms and values of both sides influenced gender and social structures in colonial Sub-Saharan countries. On the other hand, the colonialization of African traditional values and norms, which affected their

true gender identities, witnessed opposition from African women and men, who actively negotiated and resisted these changes in several ways (Mama, 1989).

Musisi et al. (2002) disclosed that the struggle for gender equality has continued, with many women participating actively in nationalist movements and later in contemporary politics. The gains have been uneven, and challenges remain, especially in the face of economic and political instability. Furthermore, Sheldon (2017) reiterated that the impact of colonialism manifested in the post-colonial era in most African societies due to the transformation of the economic structure that altered the gender arrangement in place, leading to the marginalization of women as colonial economies disrupted traditional agricultural practices that were central to women's economic power. Besides, the post-colonial era evolved into the modernization and globalization period, influencing gender identities immensely. According to Tamale (2011), modernization and globalization have further complicated gender identities in Sub-Saharan Africa, introducing new challenges and opportunities due to economic changes, urbanization, and education have transformed traditional gender roles,

Overall, pre-colonial diversity, colonial disruptions, and post-colonial transformations shape the gender identity history of Sub-Saharan Africa. This complex history, enriched by the resistance and agency of African individuals, requires an understanding of the varied gender roles across the region. In this contemporary era, gender status is transforming Sub-Saharan Africa, influenced by the colonial legacy. Understanding this history requires an objective approach that recognizes the diversity and dynamism of gender roles and identities across the region.

### **1.1 Traditional Gender Roles**

Traditional gender roles are inherent in Sub-Saharan African history, which vary significantly across different societies and cultures. Thus, historians and experts acknowledged that there are some common characteristics among African countries that distinguish and help identify gender roles in various societies, which have been practised for centuries. However, it is essential to note that gender roles in the Sub-Sahara region have been influenced and often changed by factors such as colonization, modernization, and global socioeconomic transformation. For instance, McIntosh (2009) points out the traditional arrangement of labour, with a clear division of labour based on gender in many Sub-Saharan African societies. For instance, men were typically responsible for activities like hunting, herding, and heavy farming, while women were primarily involved in crop cultivation, food processing, and household management (Saidi, 2020).

However, the role of each gender in political and social authority in traditional African societies is well defined. In support of this notion, Steady (2006), Allman (1991), and Oppong (1981), in their separate submission, agreed that men predominantly held political and social authority in traditional Sub-Sahara. However, there are exceptional cases of notable female leadership. They posited that some communities allowed women to hold significant positions that influence social and religious affairs. Moreover, Oppong discusses the matrilineal and patrilineal practices in Sub-Sahara societies, which determine inheritance and lineage, citing the example

of the Akan ethnic group in Ghana, which practices the matrilineal inheritance and lineage system (inheritance through the female line), instead of the patrilineal which is common many societies (Oppong, 1981).

Though, several scholars recognized the input of women in agricultural production in many Sub-Saharan African societies, their roles are restricted to growing, harvesting, and selling agricultural products, not the tillage, falling trees, and cutting grass aspect of it (Boserup, 1970; Steady, 2006; Smith, 2004). In a different context, Berger and White (1999) explore the gender roles in traditional Sub-Saharan Africa from the spiritual and religious perspective, they conclude that women were not isolated as they often had significant roles in spiritual and religious practices. In some cultures, women were custodians of certain rituals and could hold positions as religious leaders. Allman (1991) reemphasized that the introduction of colonial rule and subsequent modernization significantly altered traditional gender roles in many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and encouraged patriarchal norms.

Overall, traditional gender roles in Sub-Saharan Africa were diverse and deeply embedded in the social, economic, and cultural fabrics of societies. These roles have evolved and have been influenced by various external and internal factors. Understanding these roles requires a detailed approach considering different African societies' historical backgrounds and cultural and socioeconomic development.

## **1.2 Colonialism and Gender Identities in Sub-Saharan Africa**

Colonialism reinforced and reshaped established gender norms rooted in Sub-Saharan African tradition, resulting in gender inequality now prevalent in the view. It is important to note that although colonialism significantly disrupted gender norms, some dynamics predated colonialism.

The introduction of the patriarchal system into African society by the colonizers exacerbated gender inequality in the continent since the pre-colonial economic, cultural, and political systems existing in the region have been altered (Bertolt, 2018). However, a look at Hunt (2015) claims showed that the primary factor responsible for gender inequalities in Africa, encompassing disparities in politics, education, and economics between men and women, have their roots in slavery and the colonial era. In essence, the disruption of traditional African gender roles results in the description of indigenous practices as inferior, as well as the criminalization of some of the standing norms. With empirical evidence, colonialism had a profound impact on gender identities in Sub-Saharan Africa, often reshaping traditional roles and relations in significant ways.

Meanwhile, data released by the Global Gender Gap Index report of 2018 indicates that closing the gender gap in Sub-Saharan Africa would require 135 years, while in the North of Africa, it will take about 153 years (WEF, 2018). Although the broader impacts of colonialism on African populations are widely recognized, its specific effects on women remain less explored. Still, Hunt (2015) reiterates his point that slavery and colonialism are pivotal in the genesis of gender inequality on the continent, in which, under colonial rule, many African women experienced a significant diminishment of the traditional rights and status that previously afforded them

equality and respect. Consequently, Stilwell (2013) opinion is not distinct from Hunt's view, he stressed that in pre-colonial Africa, women often occupied powerful and influential roles within their societies, the opposite was the situation in the colonial era.

However, the post-colonial era ushered in new forms of gender inequality, undermining many cultural foundations of African societies. The damage inflicted during this period has proven difficult to repair, leaving a lasting imprint on the gender identities of contemporary African communities. According to Boserup (1970), the reconfiguration of gender roles in African societies through colonialism created gender confusion among the people due to the imposition of European gender norms that promote patriarchal compared to indigenous norms. This included the promotion of the nuclear family model and the marginalization of women in public life. In the economic aspect, colonial policy altered the existing order to the detriment of women due to the introduction of cash economies, which disrupted traditional gender roles, particularly in agriculture. Men were often recruited for wage labour, while women remained in subsistence farming, altering their economic and social statuses (Berger & White, 1999).

Moreover, scholars like Hay (1976) and Wipper (1986) expressed their view on the colonial impact on the existing legal and political systems by enacting the laws to correspond with their codified customary laws. The practice by the colonial authorities to set aside traditional laws and practices and enforce theirs sometimes led to the entrenchment of gender inequalities. In addition, the process of codification frequently involved interpretations of customs that favoured patriarchal structures and further entrenched gender hierarchies. In his assessment, Ukpokolo (2016) opined that aside from the disruption of the traditional legal and political structure in most Sub-Sahara Africa by the colonial authority, they introduced formal education, coupled with the existing missionary activities, which further helped them to consolidate and impose their norms on the people. According to Allman (1991), colonial education systems were designed to provide different types of education for boys and girls, reinforcing gender stereotypes. Education for girls was frequently focused on domestic skills, while that of boys was focused on professional skills.

Thus, colonialism significantly impacted gender identities in Sub-Saharan Africa, often reinforcing patriarchal structures and reshaping traditional gender roles and relations. This period saw the imposition of European gender norms and economic and legal changes that affected societal gender roles. The legacies of these changes continue to influence gender identities and relations in contemporary Sub-Saharan Africa.

### **1.3 Post-Colonialism and Gender Identities in Sub-Saharan Africa**

Events in the post-colonial era in Sub-Saharan Africa significantly impacted gender identities, leading to both continuities and changes from the colonial period. This era is marked by efforts to redefine and renegotiate gender roles and relations in the context of newfound political independence and socioeconomic transformations (Ukpokolo, 2016). However, in their analysis, Lamoureaux and Rottenburg, (2021) asserted that similar historical events that occurred across the Sub-Sahara region contribute to specific patterns of gender politics today. Moreover, Bertolt (2018) submitted that gender studies in Africa had demonstrated the potential

to overcome the imperial, colonial past and embrace nation-building projects to align with recent neoliberal capitalist and development paradigms, which enable gender norms to feature within the scope of both modernity and tradition and intersect with related patterns such as rural and urban, class and ethnic divisions, and education and livelihoods.

Thus, many African nations embarked on nation-building and modernization projects in the post-colonial era. These efforts often involved re-evaluating traditional gender roles, as leaders sought to balance modernity with cultural heritage so as not to worsen the situation created by the colonial legacy (Tamale, 2011). Therefore, it is important that efforts to affect gender identities positively resolve the complexities and contradictions in the post-colonial gender identity arrangement. However, one significant aspect of the post-colonial period has been the active participation of women in nationalist movements and their contributions to the struggle for independence. However, it did not necessarily translate into greater gender equality in the post-colonial period. Despite their participation, women often found themselves marginalized in the newly formed political structures (Mama, 1989).

On the same note, legal and policy frameworks establishing gender equality have also been a focal point in the post-colonial era in many countries in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, many African countries have ratified international conventions on women's rights and enacted laws to promote gender equality (UN Women Africa, n.d.). Despite these efforts, the implementation of these laws has been uneven, and many challenges remain, particularly in addressing deeply entrenched cultural norms and practices (Cole et al., 2007). Looking at the economic challenges in the post-colonial era, Steady (2006) contends that the period has further influenced gender identities due to the shift towards urbanization, and the formal economy has opened new opportunities for women but has also led to new challenges. According to her observation, such issues are economic inequality and access to education and healthcare, women in many African countries have had to navigate a complex system of opportunities and constraints.

Furthermore, McFadden (2005) examines the post-colonial era and gender identities from a different perspective, and she points out that the rise of feminist movements in Sub-Saharan Africa has become a critical aspect of the post-colonial period since African feminists have sought to address both global feminist concerns and specific local issues related to gender inequality. Besides, McFadden emphasizes that African women have been instrumental in challenging both traditional and colonial gender norms, advocating for women's rights and empowerment within the context of African cultural and social realities (McFadden, 2005).

## **2. Intersectionality of Gender with Other Identity Markers**

Intersectionality reveals how various social and identity markers, such as gender, race, class, and sexuality, interconnect and impact individuals' experiences, which is highly relevant in Sub-Saharan Africa. This region presents a complex mixture of cultures, ethnicities, and social dynamics where these intersections profoundly influence the lives of its people, particularly women. For instance, Tsikata (2009) identified status or class as a factor contributing to gender disparities in most African countries, especially in the economic aspect, due to limited opportunities for women, which greatly influenced their financial status. They are confronted



with poverty because of a lack of access to resources and power, resulting in worsening gender inequalities. This section will explore the intersectionality of gender identity from the perspectives of ethnicity, religion, and sexuality to ascertain the various markers that distinguish each of them.

## **2.1 Gender Identity and Ethnicity**

Gender identity and ethnicity issues in Sub-Saharan Africa involve entailed complex interplay between cultural, social, and economic factors. This region, known for its cultural diversity, presents unique perspectives on gender roles and ethnic identities. Despite pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial experiences, the Sub-Saharan African countries have strived to narrow gender disparity by initiating legal frameworks to enforce gender equality. According to the World Bank reports, seven Sub-Saharan African countries made constructive reforms between October 2021 and October 2022, which significantly increased the role of women in their economies (Tavares & Benetatos, 2023). In many Sub-Saharan African societies, the method of gender identity varies from one ethnicity to another and is deeply entrenched in their cultural norms; often, gender roles are used to identify the ethnicity of individuals. For instance, in most ethnicities in the region, women are responsible for household tasks and child-rearing, while men are typically seen as the breadwinners (Amadiume, 1987).

Scholars suggest the correlations between gender and ethnicity in Sub-Saharan Africa have been significantly influenced by the legacy of colonization and globalization, as well as most literature, which repeatedly depicts African women as subservient to their fathers and husbands. The reverse was the case in pre-colonial Africa; women were queen-mothers, queen-sisters, princesses, chiefs and holders of offices and villages, and occasional warriors (Sudarkasa, 1986). The start of colonialism began the gradual eradication of existing traditional laws, values, and morals, substituted by colonial laws and regulations which limited women's access to land and other possessions, resulting in their separation from their traditional roles in society, taking away their status and restraining them from active labour and be recipients of support (Oluwole, 1997).

In contemporary times, different emerging advocacy campaigns and movements for gender equality in Sub-Saharan Africa are challenging traditional norms and advocating for women's rights across various ethnic groups. These movements are diverse and reflect the unique cultural contexts of different regions. For instance, women's groups in Kenya and South Africa have been at the forefront of fighting for gender equality and political representation (Tamale, 2006). However, ethnicity also plays a crucial role in shaping gender identity since different ethnic groups have distinct cultural practices and beliefs about gender, which influence individuals' experiences and identities (Falola & Amponsah, 2012). For example, in some ethnic groups, there are specific rites of passage that mark the transition into gendered adult roles (Ibid).

Besides, scholars identify another growing trend in gender and ethnicity in Sub-Sahara Africa as the politically induced gender identity, which has become a modern challenge and a new dimension to gender issues in the region. According to Green (2017), politics can influence ethnic identity, especially in the short and long term. Indeed, most Sub-Sahara political structure

is defined by ethnicity, which goes a long way to influence gender roles in politics, especially as regards beneficiaries from political positions and distribution of public goods that favour the male folks in some societies where women are restricted from holding public offices. The challenge posed by politically induced gender identity and ethnicity is attributed to entrenched patriarchal systems and the lingering effects of colonization. However, there are growing opportunities for redefining gender identities in Sub-Saharan Africa, such as increased access to education and participation in the global economy and providing women and other gender minorities with new platforms for empowerment and self-expression (Nkealah, 2006).

## **2.2 Gender Identity and Religion**

The relationship between gender identity and religion in Sub-Saharan Africa involves understanding how religious beliefs and practices intersect with gender roles and expectations. This shows that the connection is intricate and varied, influenced by various cultural settings and religious traditions. It implies that religion is particularly significant due to its historical significance in the sub-region, its difficulties during colonialism, and the explosive rise of Pentecostal Christianity and Islam in many societies (Thomas & Robert, 2011). Besides, the active resistance to both Christian and Islamic efforts in sub-Saharan Africa shows the determination of the people to prevent the exclusion of the indigenous religious traditions of Africa from legal protection. African traditional or indigenous religions are often not acknowledged as “religions” due to a lack of centralized structure and leadership. It proves the legal prejudice African religious practitioners encounter locally and internationally (Hackett, 2016).

However, in Sub-Saharan Africa, major religions like Christianity and Islam significantly influence gender roles and identities. For example, in many Islamic communities in the region, gender roles are guided by interpretations of the Quran and Hadith, often emphasizing traditional roles for women and men (Mbiti, 1990). Similarly, Christian denominations, influenced by local culture and global religious movements, have varying impacts on gender norms, with some advocating for traditional gender roles and others promoting gender equality (Phiri & Nadar, 2012). Likewise, Indigenous African religions and belief systems also play a critical role in shaping gender identities. These belief systems often have their unique understandings of gender, which may differ significantly from those in Abrahamic religions. For instance, some indigenous beliefs incorporate more fluid and flexible notions of gender, which can contrast with the more binary gender perceptions found in Christianity and Islam (Kalu, 2008).

Scholars also point out that the interaction between religion and gender in Sub-Saharan Africa is not static and has been subject to change and reinterpretation over time. Religious movements and leaders have been influential in reinforcing and challenging traditional gender norms. For example, various Christian and Islamic reform movements have addressed issues of gender inequality, with some advocating for greater women’s rights and participation within religious institutions (Adogame, 2013). Similarly, the interpretation of religious texts plays a critical role in how gender is understood and practised. Different communities and leaders often interpret the same texts differently, leading to varying implications for gender identity (Berger, 2003).

### **2.3 Gender Identity and Sexuality**

Gender identity and sexuality in Sub-Saharan Africa are intricate and diverse subjects, deeply influenced by a mix of cultural, religious, and social factors. The approach to gender sexuality in the sub-region is connected to traditional beliefs. Still, there is also a growing discourse and movement towards understanding and acceptance of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. For instance, the UNDP Strategic Framework 2020 reports that the various African languages have diverse terminology that indicates the long-standing presence of diversity in sexuality, gender identity, expression, and sex traits. Evidence showed that numerous African civilizations, including cultural norms and behaviours, acknowledged and celebrated such diversity. These activities were frequently backed by customs of individual dignity, preservation, and communal protection. However, the colonial imposition of religious and legal standards profoundly changed African identities and practices, which is why people and others who are viewed as sexually or gender non-conforming are now widely hated and marginalized (UNDP, 2020).

In many Sub-Saharan African societies, traditional norms have long defined gender and sexuality within binary and heteronormative frameworks. These norms are often rooted in historical and cultural practices, where roles and expectations are delineated based on gender (Amadiume, 1987). Thus, the legacy of colonialism significantly impacted the perceptions and laws regarding gender and sexuality in Sub-Saharan Africa. Many anti-LGBTQ laws in the region today can be traced back to colonial-era legislation, which introduced punitive measures against non-heteronormative behaviours (Epprecht, 2004). Also, religion plays a pivotal role in shaping attitudes towards gender and sexuality. Both Christianity and Islam, the predominant religions in the region, promote traditional gender roles and often condemn homosexual acts, influencing societal attitudes and legal frameworks (van Klinken & Chitando, 2016).

However, despite legal and societal challenges, there are emerging LGBTQ movements and advocacy groups across Sub-Saharan Africa. These movements are working towards greater recognition, rights, and acceptance of LGBTQ individuals, often facing considerable opposition and risk (Nyeck & Epprecht, 2013). Moreover, the experiences of individuals regarding gender identity and sexuality are also influenced by other social factors such as ethnicity, religion, and economic status. Intersectionality plays a crucial role in understanding the varying experiences and challenges faced by individuals in the region (Tamale, 2011).

Human Rights Watch (2021) identifies legal and social challenges responsible for gender and sexuality in many Sub-Saharan African countries. For instance, homosexuality remains illegal and socially stigmatized, and the legal and social environment poses significant challenges for LGBTQ individuals, impacting their rights, health, and well-being. Nevertheless, there is a gradual shift in some urban and younger populations towards a more open and accepting view of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations. This shift is part of a broader global conversation on gender and sexual rights (Weiss & Bosia, 2013).

### **3. Women in Sustainable Development**

Sub-Saharan Africa is characterized by great diversity in family forms, in which marriage remains an integral part of the societies as both women and men are expected to start a family at the appropriate time, although the timeframe varies from one ethnic to another. Therefore, women's participation and empowerment are vital for achieving this goal, as well as sustainable development in Sub-Saharan Africa. Hence, proffering solutions to gender inequalities, improving access to resources, and involving women in decision-making are critical steps towards a more sustainable and equitable future. Given the current development in the region, some young women are starting to delay marriage and childbearing, with a small percentage opting not to marry. However, birth rates are very high, particularly among lower-income groups (UN Women, 2019). These are evolving challenges in the region due to several factors, including poverty, gender inequality, desertification, deforestation, and climate change.

Moreover, women in Sub-Saharan Africa play a crucial role in agriculture, critical to sustainable development. They contribute significantly to food production and the rural economy, often working as smallholder farmers, traders, and entrepreneurs (FAO, 2011). Nevertheless, the major challenges for sustainable development range from Women, including grandmothers and older female siblings, taking on the vast majority of unpaid care and domestic work, with long-term care responsibilities for a growing older population continuing to fall on their shoulders (UN Women, 2019). Also, women often face substantial challenges, including limited access to land, credit, and agricultural inputs. Gender inequality, deeply rooted in social and cultural norms, further hampers their economic empowerment (World Bank, 2019).

Besides, scholars stressed that women are agents of environmental sustainability despite their limitations. Women are key players not only in agriculture, but also in natural resource management and environmental sustainability. Their traditional knowledge and practices are invaluable for resource conservation and sustainable use (UNEP, 2016). Similarly, educating and empowering women has positively impacted sustainable development outcomes. Thus, educated women are more likely to engage in sustainable practices, ensure food security for their families, and invest in their children's education (UNDP, 2015). According to the African Development Bank (2021) report, increasing women's participation in decision-making processes at the local and national levels is crucial for sustainable development. Their involvement ensures that development policies and initiatives are inclusive and address gender-specific needs.

Moreover, Sub-Saharan women encounter genuine, ingrained, and systemic obstacles when attempting to obtain positions in both public and private society (Tamale, 2006). To remove these obstacles, a multifaceted, strategic approach is needed. The Sustainable Development Goals and efforts to achieve sustainable socioeconomic progress will be impacted by the representation of women in public governance (Tavares and Benetatos, 2023). However, the evolving trends in the world, like modernization and technology, have created opportunities for women and limited women's empowerment in attaining sustainable development goals. For instance, women in Sub-Saharan Africa are disproportionately affected by climate change, given their dependence on natural resources for livelihood, enhancing their resilience to climate impacts is essential for sustainable development in the region (IPCC, 2014). Additionally,

several women in the Sub-Saharan region are faced with the challenge of social exclusion and human rights violations, making them vulnerable to societal ills despite efforts by several associations and groups to advocate for their rights.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the analytical research concerning colonialism's impacts on the traditional gender identities in Sub-Saharan Africa shows that the evolution of gender identities in Sub-Saharan Africa is a multifaceted and changing process connected to the region's history, culture, and religious background. In justifying the main argument, the research identified and underlined the pivotal role colonialism played in reshaping traditional gender norms. The colonial era marked a significant transformation in gender roles and relations, with the imposition of new economic, legal, and social norms.

Therefore, the contemporary gender roles in Sub-Saharan Africa represent a blend of pre-colonial diversity, colonial disruptions, and ongoing post-colonial transformations. These roles are not only a reflection of indigenous belief systems, Christianity, and Islam but also of the resistance and agency of African individuals and communities. Besides, the research shows that women's participation and empowerment, particularly, have become vital for achieving sustainable development in the region, challenging historical inequalities and colonialism's lingering effects. Furthermore, the path towards gender equality and the acceptance of LGBTQ individuals, while faced with challenges, signifies a growing movement for change, advocating for rights and recognition amidst a backdrop of traditional and religious norms.

Finally, colonialism significantly impacted traditional gender identities in Sub-Saharan Africa by imposing European norms and reinforcing patriarchal structures, thereby reshaping existing societal gender roles and relations. This period introduced profound changes, disrupting the pre-colonial diversity of gender norms and practices. In the contemporary context, gender roles in the region represent a complex blend of these historical influences, marked by the legacy of colonialism and ongoing post-colonial transformations.

## **REFERENCES**

- Adogame, A. (2013). *The African Christian Diaspora: New Currents and Emerging Trends in World Christianity*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- African Development Bank (ADB). (2021). The African Development Bank Group Gender Strategy 2021 – 2025. Retrieved from [https://www.afdb.org/sites/default/files/documents/strategy-documents/african\\_development\\_bank\\_group\\_gender\\_strategy\\_-\\_2021-2025.pdf](https://www.afdb.org/sites/default/files/documents/strategy-documents/african_development_bank_group_gender_strategy_-_2021-2025.pdf)
- Allman, J. (1991). Rethinking the Colonial Encounter: African Women and the Politics of Conquest in Southern Ghana, 1874-1900. *Journal of Women's History*.
- Amadiume, I. (1987). *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*.
- Banchoff, T., & Wuthnow, R. (2011). *Religion and the Global Politics of Human Rights*. Oxford Academic. Online Edition.
- Berger, I. (2003). African Women's History: Themes and Perspectives. *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History*, 4(1).
- Berger, I., & White, E. F. (1999). *Women in Sub-Saharan Africa: Restoring Women to History*.
- Bertolt, B. (2018). Thinking otherwise: Theorizing the colonial/modern gender system in Africa. *African Sociological Review / Revue Africaine de Sociologie*, 22(1), 2–17.
- Boserup, E. (1970). *Woman's Role in Economic Development*. London: George Allen & Unwin.
- Bosson, J. K., Vandello, J. A., & Buckner, C. E. (2018). *The Psychology of Sex and Gender*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications.
- Cole, C. M., Manuh, T., & Miescher, S. F. (Eds.). (2007). *Africa After Gender?* Indiana University Press.
- Comaroff, J., & Comaroff, J. (1991). *Of Revelation and Revolution*. The University of Chicago Press.
- Epprecht, M. (2004). *Hungochani: The History of a Dissident Sexuality in Southern Africa*. McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Falola, T., & Amponsah, N. A. (2012). *Women's Roles in Sub-Saharan Africa*. ABC-CLIO.
- Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). (2011). The role of women in agriculture. Retrieved from <https://www.fao.org/3/am307e/am307e00.pdf>
- Green, E. (2017). The politics of ethnic identity in Sub-Saharan Africa. Working Paper Series, No. 17-188. London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), Department of International Development, London. Retrieved from <https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/224814/1/wp188.pdf>
- Hackett, R. I. J. (2016). 'Traditional, African, Religious, Freedom?'. In W. F. Sullivan, E. S. Hurd, & S. Mahmood (Eds.), *Politics of Religious Freedom* (Chicago Scholarship Online).

- Hay, J. M. (1976). *African Women South of the Sahara*. Longman.
- Human Rights Watch. (2021). World Report 2021: Events of 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021>
- Hunt, P. (2015). Slavery. In *The Cambridge World History: Volume 4: A World with States, Empires and Networks 1200 BCE–900 CE* (pp. 76–100). Cambridge University Press.
- Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). (2014). Climate Change 2014: Impacts, Adaptation, and Vulnerability. Retrieved from [https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/WGIIAR5-FrontMatterA\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.ipcc.ch/site/assets/uploads/2018/02/WGIIAR5-FrontMatterA_FINAL.pdf)
- Johnson-Odim, C. (2007). *Women and Gender in the History of Sub-Saharan Africa*. American Historical Association Press.
- Kalu, O. (2008). *African Pentecostalism: An Introduction*. Oxford University Press.
- Lamoureaux, S., & Rottenburg, R. (2021). Doing postcolonial gender: An approach to justifying rights, resources, and recognition. *Tapuya: Latin American Science, Technology and Society*, 4(1). pp. 32-41.
- Mama, A. (1989). ‘Women in African History’, In *Beyond Images: Race, Gender and Subjectivity*. Routledge, 2002.
- Mbiti, J. S. (1990). *African Religions and Philosophy*. Heinemann Press.
- McFadden, P. (2005). *Becoming Postcolonial: African Women Changing the Meaning of Citizenship*. *Meridians*. Duke University Press 6(1), pp. 1-22.
- McIntosh, K. M. (2009). *Yoruba Women, Work, and Social Change*.
- Musisi Nakanyike et al. (2002). *Women and Power in East Africa*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press,
- Nkealah, N. (2006). Conceptualizing Feminism(s) in Africa: The Challenges Facing African Women Writers and Critics. *English Academy Review*, 23, 133.
- Nyeck, S. N., & Epprecht, M. (2013). Sexual Diversity in Africa: Politics, Theory, and Citizenship. *Sage Journal*, 18(1-2), 117-119.
- Oluwole, S. B. (1997). Culture, Gender, and Development Theories in Africa. *Africa Development / Afrique et Développement*, 22(1), 95–121.
- Oppong, C. (1981). *Middle Class African Marriage: A Family Study of Ghanaian Senior Civil Servants*.
- Oyěwùmí, O. (1997). *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*.
- Phiri, I. A., & Nadar, S. (2012). African Women, Religion, and Health: Essays in Honor of Mercy Amba Ewudziwa Oduyoye. *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, 26(2), 145–149.

- Saidi, C. (2020). Women in Precolonial Africa. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of African History*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190277734.013.259>
- Saidi, C., Fourshey, C. C., & Gonzales, R. M. (2021). *Gender, Authority, and Identity in African History*. In *The Palgrave Handbook of African Women's Studies*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Sheldon, K. (2017). *African Women Early History to the 21st Century*. Indiana University Press.
- Smith, G. B. (2004). *Women's History in Global Perspective* (Vol. 3). University of Illinois Press.
- Steady, F. C. (2006). Women and collective action in Africa: Development, democratization and empowerment. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stilwell, S. (2013). Slavery in African History. In *Slavery and Slaving in African History* (p. 38). Cambridge University Press.
- Sudarkasa, N. (1986). "The Status of Women" in Indigenous African Societies. *Feminist Studies*, 12(1), 91–103.
- Tamale, S. (2006). African Feminism: How Should We Change? *Development*, 49, 38–41. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.development.1100205>
- Tamale, S. (2011). *African Sexualities: A Reader*. Fahamu/Pambazuka.
- Tavares, P., & Benetatos, D. (2023). Gender equality gains momentum in Sub-Saharan Africa. World Bank. Retrieved from <https://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/gender-equality-gains-momentum-sub-saharan-africa>
- Tsikata, D. 2009. Gender, land and labour relations and livelihoods in Sub-Saharan Africa in the era of economic liberalisation: Toward a research agenda. *Feminist Africa*. 12 (12). 11-30.
- Ukpokolo, C. (2016). *Being and Becoming: Gender, Culture and Shifting Identity in Sub-Saharan Africa*. Spears Media Press.
- UN Women. (2019). Sub-Saharan Africa. Retrieved from <https://www.unwomen.org/sites/default/files/Headquarters/Attachments/Sections/Library/Publications/2019/POWW-2019-Fact-sheet-Sub-Saharan-Africa-en.pdf>
- UN Women Africa. (n.d.). UN Women. <https://africa.unwomen.org/en>
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2015). Advancing gender equality: Promoting sustainable development.
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). (2020). Social inclusion and human rights for sexual or gender minorities in Sub-Saharan Africa. Retrieved from <https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/africa/UNDP-social-inclusion-and-human-rights-sexual-gender-minorities.pdf>
- United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). (2016). Gender and the environment.



- Van Klinken, A., & Chitando, E. (2016). *Public Religion and the Politics of Homosexuality in Africa*. Routledge.
- Weiss, L. M., & Bosia, M. J. (2013). *Global Homophobia: States, Movements, and the Politics of Oppression*. University of Illinois Press.
- Wipper, A. (1986). Riot and rebellion among African women: Three examples of women's political clout. Office of WID, Michigan State University.
- World Bank. (2019). Gender Equality, Poverty Reduction, and Inclusive Growth in Africa. Retrieved from <https://documents.worldbank.org/en/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/820851467992505410/world-bank-group-gender-strategy-fy16-23-gender-equality-poverty-reduction-and-inclusive-growth>
- World Economic Forum. (2018). *The Global Gender Gap Report 2018*. Retrieved from [https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF\\_GGGR\\_2018.pdf](https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_GGGR_2018.pdf)