

Female « autonomy » in two African capital cities The cases of Dakar and Lomé

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In Africa, marriage remains a quasi-universal rule. Social maturity for both men and women comes necessarily through marriage and the building-up of a line of descent. Women, in particular, cannot be acknowledged by the community besides the status of spouse and mother. In many cases, marriage puts the woman under her husband's guardianship on a residential level due to the widespread practice of virilocal residence, but also on an economic level as the obligations to assume the household's basic needs are often allotted to the husband. In such conditions, female autonomy which, in the present article, implies absence of marriage and support of housing expenses testifies to a situation out of the common.

Nevertheless, previous research reported the growing number of cases of female head-of-households in sub-Saharan Africa (Bisilliat, 1996, Pilon, 1996, Pilon *et al.*, 1997, Tichit, 2002). Who are these women who are bestowed a title normally ascribed to men? Is their existence related to a depreciation of the institution of marriage? Does this status imply social and economic autonomy of women? Would these women be leaders in a change of value often ascribed to the status of wife? In societies where marriage has such an importance, what sociological reality can be drawn from the situation of women identified as head-of household?

In Africa, the urban context favours rapid social change which contributes to the rise of new female statuses (Antoine et Nanitelamio, 1990). The crisis of cash-crop economies in the post-independence period led to a decline of the standard of living in African cities and to a redefinition of gender roles within households (Locoh, 1996). The decrease of employment opportunities in the urban formal sector, the difficulties in finding a job that can generate sufficient income in the informal sector, and the fall in purchasing power are realities which drove breadwinners into hard times. Though men are usually head of household, they are increasingly compelled to give up this position to their wives. Standard surveys and censuses based on men's reports do not allow us to bring out the extent of this phenomenon. However in a great number of cities, the increasing role of women as breadwinners is observed in everyday life (Rondeau, 1996). In Dakar in particular, women play an increasingly significant role in contributing to the household income than a simple complement to daily petty expenditures (Adjamagbo *et al.*, 2004). The growing female contribution in the household income accounts for the numerous "*micro-level strategies of demo-economic adaptation*" (Coussy, 1996) implemented by African families. The consequences of those changes on the ways power and responsibilities are shared among individuals and, in particular between men and women, are far from being all identified. Female autonomy which seems to go against customs is related to these changes. The purpose of this study is to shed light on innovations under way in contemporary urban societies.

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The present research deals with the specific situation of unmarried women (i.e. single, divorced or widowed) who are tenant or home-owner in two African cities, Dakar in Senegal and Lomé in Togo. These women are defined as “autonomous”, given that they are independent at marital and residential levels. They live outside of the marriage bond, pay a rent, are home-owner or live with their employer³. What is the frequency and duration of this situation in the two capital cities? What is the occupational profile of these women? The present article will address those issues. Our contribution does not claim to account for all the dimensions covered by female autonomy in the two capital cities. Our purpose is to describe an uncommon and relatively untypical status among women, as an expression of important structural changes under way in African families.

Our study is based on two biographical surveys carried out in Lomé (2000) and in Dakar (2001) among a sample respectively of 2,536 and 1,290 individuals⁴. Each of these two surveys reports the residential, professional, and marital life of respondents. This study was conducted in two West African capital cities who are hard hit by recession. They are important West African harbours, but of different size. The population of Lomé is estimated at about one million inhabitants while Dakar largely exceeds 2.2 million inhabitants. Both cities account for about one fourth of the country's total population. The economy of these two countries has been under adjustment programs for about twenty years. The 1994 CFA franc devaluation has hit Togo and Senegal head-on. In terms of employment, the main sectors are administration, services, harbour activities and trading (both wholesale and retail). There are more differences than similarities between the two capital cities. The political context is very dissimilar. Senegal has experienced a democratic transition and benefits from international sponsors' favour whereas Togo has been blacklisted by the international community for about ten years. The geographical environment also differs. Senegal is a Sahelian country with low-productive agricultural activities unlike Togo who shows potentialities for agricultural production. The cultural environment of the first is characterised by a Muslim society where males are relatively dominant and where it is frowned upon for women to work. The second, on the contrary, is characterised by a society marked by Christian and Animist religions, also dominated by a patriarchal system but where women occupy an important and long-standing place in the economy⁵.

I. How old are women when they reach autonomy?

Biographical data collection makes possible the reconstruction of the chain of marital, professional and residential lives from birth until the time of the survey. Changes can affect women's status throughout time. In order to highlight women's autonomy as defined previously, we used two indicators. The first, an instantaneous indicator, calculates the proportion of autonomous women at a given age. The second is a cumulated indicator which

³ Women who work as maids or apprentices and who live with their employer are excluded from the sample. Moreover, periods of autonomy below 6 months duration (closed interval) are not taken into account.

⁴ The survey in Lomé was carried out by URD (Research Unit on Demography, Lomé University) with the financial support of the African Development Bank (ADB) (URD-DGSCN, 2002). The survey in Dakar was conducted by the JEREMI team with researchers from IRD in partnership with the University of Cheikh Anta Diop with funding from CODESRIA (Antoine, Fall, 2002). The comparative study of the two cities received financial support from the demographic network of the Francophonie University Agency.

⁵ All else constant, there is a high prevalence of polygamy in the two cities.

accounts for previous situations of autonomy and estimates the proportion of women at each age who have already experienced a situation of autonomy. The generations under study are aged 45-59 at the time of the survey⁶.

In Dakar, both indicators show that very few women were autonomous before 33 years of age (Figure 1). However, 10% of women experienced residential and marital autonomy at a quite early age of around 22 years. The trend rises again around 33 years and then around the age of 45. Between 33 and 45 years, the proportion rises from 13% to 19%. From ages 45 to 54, the proportion of autonomous women increases more rapidly from 22% to 57%. Thus, it seems that the situation of young women, who live outside of marriage and cover their housing costs, corresponds to a transitory period in which women do not stay long. In spite of the delay of age at first marriage in Dakar, autonomy of young and single women as a preliminary to marital life remains a rare phenomenon. However, women over age 33 who reach this status seem to adopt it for longer periods of time. From 45 years onward, there is a surge in the proportion of women who experienced a period of autonomy. In Dakar, 57% of women aged 55 years were in this situation for some time in the past.

⁶ As the transition to autonomy is relatively late, it was not worth building the same figures for the youngest generations.

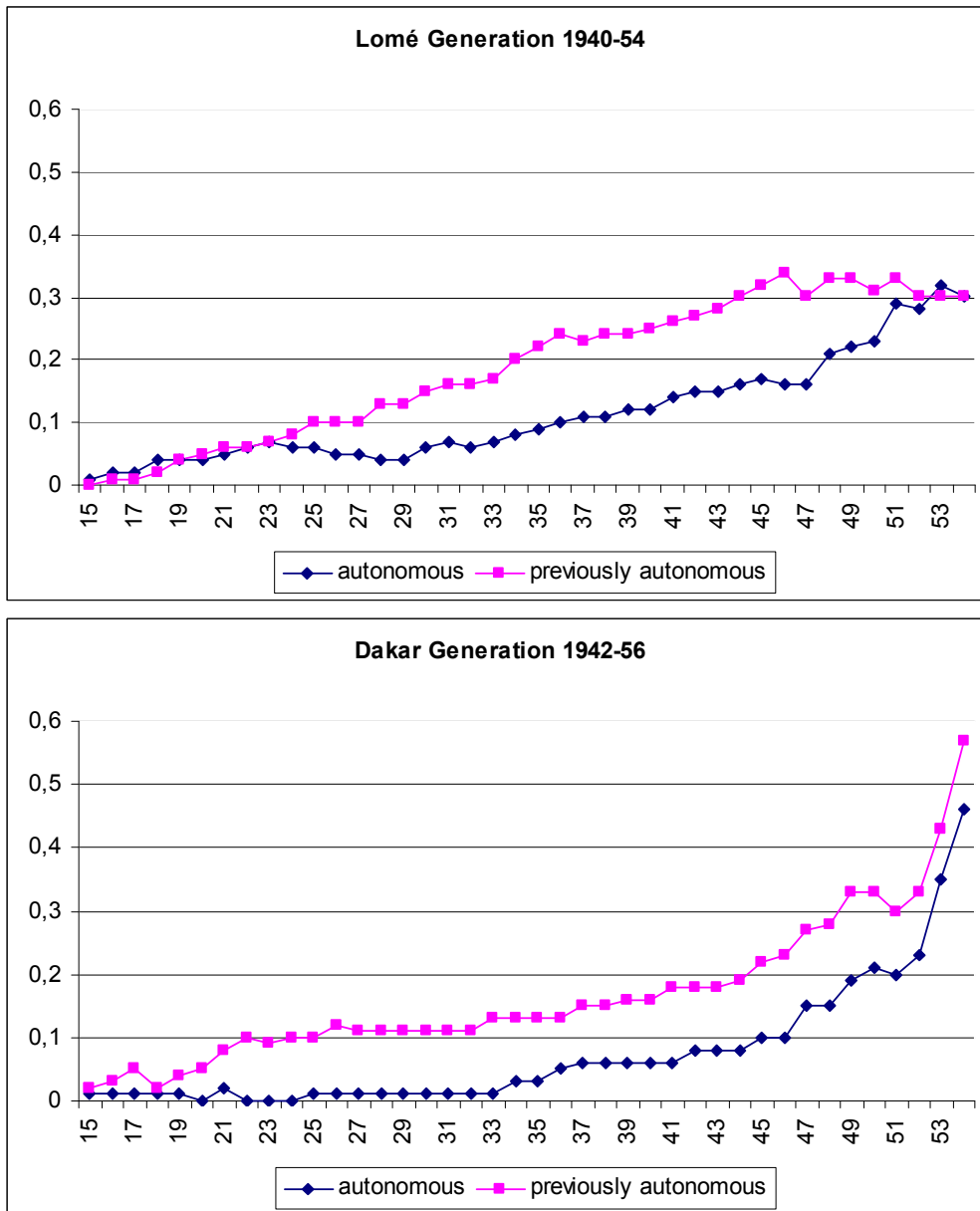


Figure 1. Proportion of autonomous or previously autonomous women in Dakar and Lomé

There are much more women before age 25 who experienced marital and residential autonomy in Lomé than in Dakar. There are about 7 % of autonomous women at age 23 in Lomé against 1% in Dakar at the same age. However, we do not observe in Lomé the marked rise of this phenomenon for the oldest age groups. The proportion grows regularly up to age 48. This characteristic confirms the difference between the two capital cities. In Dakar, female autonomy affects more women at older ages whereas it concerns both younger and older women in Lomé.

II. Youth and autonomy

In Lomé, among the youngest generation (1965-1974), 20% of women experienced a period of autonomy by age 25 compared to 4% in Dakar (for the 1967-1976 generation) (Table 1). For the intermediate generation, there is a marked difference between the two cities with 16% in Lomé (1975-1984 generation) against only 7% in Dakar (1977-1986 generation). About 10% of women in Dakar among the oldest generation (1942-1956) experienced a period of autonomy by age 25. This situation is probably due to an earlier marriage for the oldest generation at greater risk of experiencing divorce and a period of forced autonomy.

Table 1. Proportions (%) of autonomous or previously autonomous women at age 25, by generation, in Dakar and in Lomé

Generation	Dakar		Lomé	
	Autonomous	Previously autonomous	Autonomous	Previously autonomous
Oldest	1	10	6	10
Intermediate	2	7	5	16
Youngest	2	4	8	20

Thus, only 1% of the oldest generation of women was autonomous at age 25 in Dakar. This share is slightly higher among the following generations. Autonomy is not very compatible with youth in Dakar. By contrast, in Lomé the share of women at age 25 who is unmarried and paying housing costs is the largest among the three generations. For the oldest generation, 6% of women are autonomous at age 25. This figure reaches 8% for the youngest generation.

In contrast to Lomé where the proportion of autonomous women grows from one generation to the next, there are less and less women who experienced a period of autonomy before age 25 in Dakar. Despite the differences, few women are still autonomous at age 25, regardless of the city. If autonomy and youth do not go together, then who are these autonomous women?

III. Who are these autonomous women?

To underscore the marital status and the evolution of the occupational status of autonomous women, we build up by age, the marital status - mainly divorced or widowed- of the oldest generation, and distinguish active from non-active women (Figure 2).

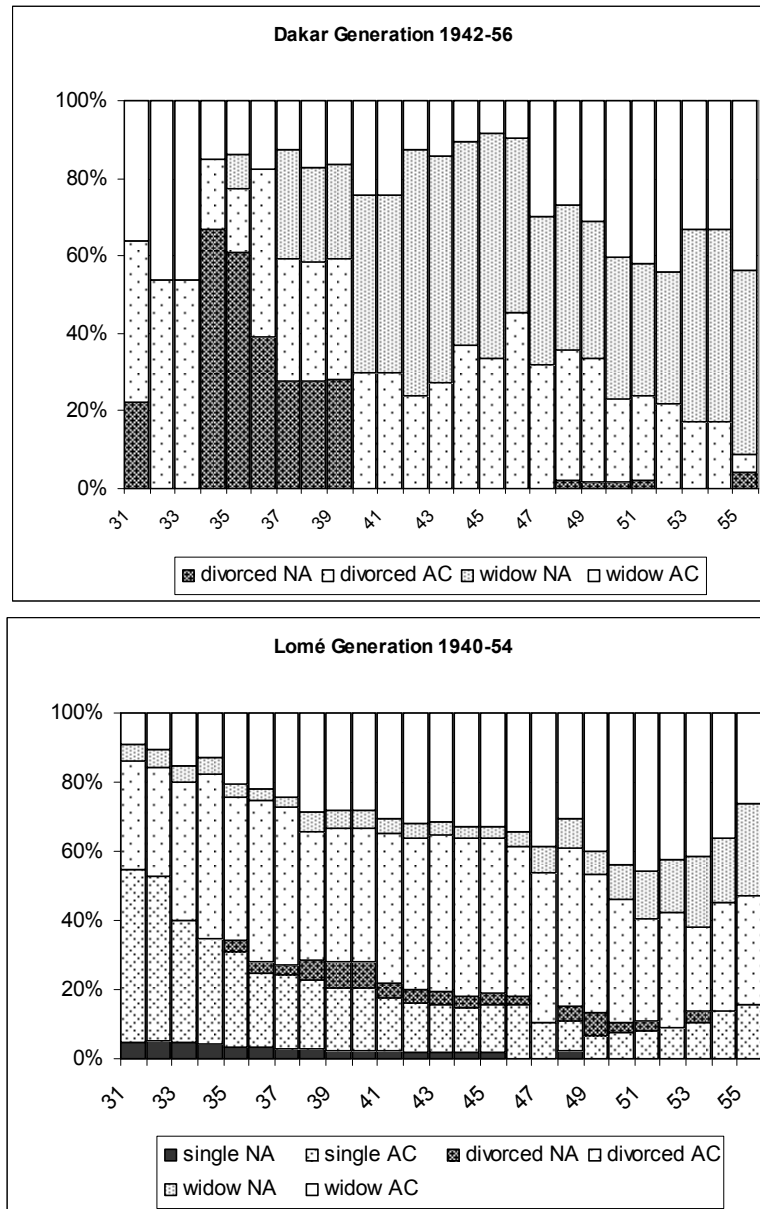


Figure 2. Distribution of widows, and divorced or single women, by age and occupational status⁷ among autonomous women for the oldest generation beyond age 30 in Dakar and Lomé

Considering the marital status of autonomous women beyond age 30 in Dakar, it clearly appears that autonomous women up to age 40 are mostly divorced. On the other hand, beyond age 40, women are mainly widows. After age 30, single autonomous women are nonexistent.

⁷ NA, non active ; AC, active.

This predominance of widows amongst autonomous women is a new phenomenon in Dakar. This is partly explained by the important age gap between spouses (about 10 years), but also because many widows put off remarriage and become head of household after their husband's death. In the past, widows sought refuge with their kin when they did not remarry. This seems less the case now.

These findings confirm that women's access to autonomy in Dakar must happen through marriage. Women often become autonomous at the end of a marital union. In Dakar, women stay autonomous for longer periods when this autonomy follows the death of their spouse. The social primacy of marriage in Dakar supersedes any interest young women may have in autonomy that is characterized by not being under the guardianship of a husband and covering her own housing costs. This situation, perceived in reality as a social failure, is bearable for the individual, the family and social circle only if the woman has previously conformed to the customs.

There are much more single independent women in Lomé, although this situation is not the most frequent. Female autonomy is also enhanced by divorce but the role of widowhood is less important than in Dakar. There are slight differences between Togolese and Senegalese women relatively to the value ascribed to the status of married women. Indeed, marriage is very important for Togolese women in terms of social acknowledgment. However, since the 1980s, there have been changes in the patterns of marital unions' formation with a move towards broader female autonomy. In particular, the spread of consensual unions without cohabitation constitutes one of the key changes affecting marriage practices in Togo (Thiriart, 1998). While women remarry quickly after the dissolution of their first union, their second union presents specificities closely linked to female autonomy. Indeed, the second union is more often consensual and more subject to non-cohabitation of spouses.

The rise of informal unions in Lomé must be linked to women's economic dynamism. Trading, the favourite activity sector of women in Lomé, often entails travelling constraints which are hardly compatible with a couple's life. Women's working activity requires (and confers) a relative independence which also contributes to make unions more vulnerable. Although marriage is not put into question in Togo, changes affecting the marriage institution in Lomé suggest that the importance of the economic activity aims at superseding the symbolic and social importance of marriage. Furthermore this hierarchy of priorities, which moves towards more female autonomy, will strengthen as economic uncertainties persist.

IV. Economic autonomy: a large difference between women in Dakar and in Lomé

One cannot conclude on women's economic dependence or independence by only taking into account the marital and residential statuses. Besides the payment of the house rent, women can depend upon a man for any other household expenditure. No survey has collected data on income or on household expenses. Nevertheless, the occupational status offers a more substantial picture of women's autonomy. Indeed, one can contend that an unmarried working woman who covers her own housing costs is more autonomous than a woman who meets all these conditions except the one of having a job. In the latter case, the lack of activity suggests that women have at their disposal another source of income which implies some dependence.

There is a big occupational difference among the generation of women born in the 1940s between the two capital cities (Figure 2). For all ages, nearly half of autonomous women of the oldest generation are non-active in Dakar. This is particularly true for widows. By contrast, in Lomé, active women widely prevail. In particular, the relative frequency of

young, single and active women who cover their own housing costs is specific of the Togolese capital in comparison to Dakar where this category is non-existent beyond age 30. Nevertheless, these differences are hardly surprising since female occupational rates in the Togolese capital are markedly higher than in Dakar. Women in Dakar – autonomous or not – participate less in the labour force than women in Lomé.

To illustrate this aspect, we singled out three large activity groups among the female labour force: skilled employees (a group which includes managers and paid employees with specific skills), paid lower-level employees (mainly, in charge with administrative tasks, saleswomen in the modern sector, and domestic employees) and self-employed (mostly tradeswomen). The extent of inactive women in Dakar made us keep this group as a fourth category (Table 2). The oldest generation of women (1942-1956 for Dakar and 1940-1954 for Lomé) is analysed for three different ages.

As seen previously, the proportion of autonomous women at age 35 is negligible in the two capital cities (Figure 1) and concerns, at age 45, 10% of women in Dakar and 15% in Lomé. But towards age 55, there is a big shift; nearly half of women in Dakar and one third of women in Lomé are autonomous. In Dakar, more non-autonomous women have a work than autonomous women. This suggests that this latter group benefit from an income other than from work or receive remittances. Whatever the status (autonomous or not), there is an increasing number of women who work as self-employed as they get older. The scenario is very different in Lomé where a large number of autonomous and non-autonomous women work; though a significant proportion of women have a skilled job, they are often self-employed. Lastly, unlike the situation in Dakar, the proportion of working women declines as women get older.

Table 2. Socio-professional categories of autonomous and non-autonomous women at different ages in Dakar and Lomé (Generations born between 1940 and 1956)

DAKAR		Autonomous				Non autonomous			
Age	Skilled employee	Lower-level employee	Self-employed	Inactive	Skilled employee	Lower-level Employee	Self-employed	Inactive	
35 years	16,23	0	13,99	69,78	11,96	10,9	45,07	32,07	
45 years	13,26	0	28,72	58,02	9,52	9,6	50,67	30,21	
55 years	0	0	48,2	51,8	5,5	2,66	56,76	35,08	
LOME		Autonomous				Non autonomous			
Age	Skilled employee	Lower-level employee	Self-employed	Inactive	Skilled employee	Lower-level Employee	Self-employed	Inactive	
35 years	27,59	13,79	55,18	3,45	10,64	3,55	79,43	6,38	
45 years	15,52	8,62	67,24	8,62	9,89	3,89	74,9	11,3	
55 years	10,53	10,53	52,63	26,32	10,26	2,56	61,53	25,64	

These results highlight again the singularity of women's experience of autonomy in the two capital cities. In Dakar, autonomous women work relatively less than their non-autonomous counterparts. This suggests the existence of autonomy due to private means, or conceals on the contrary, situations of dependence. The latter case includes widows who live on their husband's inheritance in the marital house which they are now responsible for, but whose survival partly depends on outside support. The increase of self-employed jobs as women get older brings to light the survival strategies of quite a number of women who are confronted with uncertainties once they are out of the social framework of marriage and

marital guardianship. In Lomé, uncertainties hang over women as well, including at older ages. But one might think that a higher intensity of work during lifetime will more easily allow a retirement in the old age.

Conclusion

Intense urbanisation, population growth, unemployment, economic crisis have induced important disruption in urban households. Amongst current changes, women's growing participation in income-generating activities is the most fraught with consequences in terms of gender relations. If women's work in Africa is far from being a new phenomenon, there is considerable diversification of their areas of interest. The comparison of two capital cities with different socio-cultural characteristics, but subjected to similar economic uncertainties allows us to show the similarity of issues at stake, while stressing the specificity of processes under way.

The new pattern of gender economic roles in urban households goes through a growing independence of women. But this asset does not take on the same realities everywhere. Female autonomy, which is characterized by the fact that unmarried women live either in their own house or pay their rent, is a situation socially badly tolerated in Dakar. Few women long for, or dare long for, this way of life which threatens the foundation of patriarchy. Stigmatization of this particular form of autonomy is much related to the high social and moral value ascribed to marriage and more generally to women's place in society.

Above all, the socially valued female model in Dakar remains the model of the married well-off woman who benefits from her husband's generosity allowing her to use her income to satisfy her own needs rather than for daily expenditures (Adjamagbo et al., 2004). The representation of conjugal roles, which women subscribe to, sets the wife's dependence vis-à-vis her husband up as an inviolable conjugal value. This is a social obviousness which is not in the least degrading. As Jeanne Nanitelamio puts it: "*Women in Dakar are steeped in "the housewife" ideal; the necessity to work arises only when family or conjugal support is difficult or impossible*" (Nanitelamio, 1995:284). Unlike the situation in Lomé, the prevailing norm in Dakar is an opposition between marriage and work among women. This ideal is inevitably threatened by the long-standing economic crisis which plagues Senegal and gives way to men's growing withdrawal from their family responsibilities.

In these conditions, it is not surprising that most unmarried women who live alone are widows. Although remarriage of widows is subjected to pressure, the death of a husband, an obviously endured event, is likely to erase any suspicion of having loose morals. Consequently, autonomy won this way is better tolerated by the family and social circle and more bearable for the woman. By contrast, residential independence of single young women is badly perceived especially as it can be seen as a deliberate choice, defying the norm, which challenges marriage and motherhood representing the main foundations of the family institution.

If widowhood is the pathway to autonomy in Dakar, the reality is different in Lomé. Admittedly in Lomé, marriage is an important event for women as it guarantees social respectability. However its social value is not sufficient to supersede the one given to economic activity, strongly rooted in social practices and moreover made crucial in these difficult times. Patterns of unions formation have changed while integrating this consideration; this situation certainly marks the difference between Lomé and Dakar.

In Lomé, things are set out in different terms. The social value attached to female paid jobs is more marked. This is rooted in the history of the development of trade in the country (Coquery-Vidrovitch, 1994). The fabric trade, favourite sector of women's economic success in the Togolese capital city, still constitutes today the main lever of the national economy. Furthermore, it imparts to women an unquestionable political power.

Admittedly, there is a marked hierarchy between the well-off tradeswoman, called "*nana benz*", involved in international trade and the small retailer who holds a modest stall in the local market (Cordonnier, 1987). But the trading skills of Togolese women have highly contributed to make a recognized social value of female labour. With growing female education, tradeswomen's daughters are more and more reluctant to take over their mothers; but it is not excessive to say that idleness does not really come up as a possibility for young Togolese women. Married or not, the fact that a woman works is not demeaning, quite the contrary. Moreover, in contrast to the ideal advocated in Dakar, marriage is not experienced as the way to let the husband prove alone that he is a good provider for household's needs. Women's contribution is valued and even encouraged. These forms of expression pushed to the extreme often leads to distinct separation of spouses' economic interest within unions. In these conditions, living outside marriage bonds, paying ones housing costs while having a job is a situation much easier to live with.

In these times of economic crisis and as Togo is also beset by particularly serious social troubles, the economic role of women has become more crucial than ever. If men cannot support alone family expenses anymore, women must take over. A large number of Togolese women have engaged into the informal productive economy, at a time when their husbands did well with a paid job in the still flourishing formal sector. Today, as men have lost their jobs, women are still participating in the labour force but they face increased responsibilities. By virtue of their history, women in Lomé are probably better prepared to cope with the challenges which they encounter today.

Unemployment, fall in purchasing power, general decline of living conditions in Dakar have rendered null and void the hopes of social rise which women are used to expecting from marriage. The now necessary quest for income to take over household-heads is a relatively new condition for which Dakar women are certainly less well prepared than their counterparts in Togo. A sign of women's relative vulnerability, as they are confronted with these new challenges, is seen in the way remarriage of divorced women takes place very quickly even though the cause of divorce of their previous union is the husband's financial shortcomings (Antoine and Dial, 2003). The logic is simple here: if the previous husband did not honour his commitments, the following one will probably do better (Dial, 2001). The high prevalence of divorce, which is typical of Dakar, can let us suppose that a distance is taken towards marriage and that women are getting emancipated. However, the fact that women remarry rapidly highlights the solidity of the marital institution and qualifies structural changes. Admittedly, under the pressure of economic risks, the social frameworks which define gender roles in society are weakened (Abdoul, 2001) but still remain deep-rooted; while the role of women is changing, their status is, on the other hand, making progress with difficulty.

Future changes will show how women will negotiate the transition. In Lomé, as in Dakar, the extension of women's role implies too often the support of even heavier expenses without allowing the economic and social effects to really enhance women's condition. There is no doubt that situations will vary according to factors related to social belonging, education level but also to the will of politics to advocate these changes. The pathway of autonomy is open but there is still a long way to go.

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