

AFRICAN WOMEN 427

Dr. Clark
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The remarkably active roles that African women play in their communities bring them respect, but also heavy responsibilities. This course follows the themes of autonomy and control of resources, considering both economic resources, such as land, labor, income and cattle, and social resources, such as education, religion and political power. The degree and kind of independence they enjoy has changed radically in specific societies from pre-colonial to contemporary times, while their responsibilities continue to multiply. Critical discussions of these alternatives and changes for women will include their relevance to African and US development policy and to our own personal options.

From cities to nomadic tribes, African women usually have independent incomes and statuses, but limited access to major resources. Women farmers grow 90% of Africa's food, but often without controlling their crops and land. Economic changes, from cash crops to apartheid, eroded women's traditional rights in marriage and property. Female leaders and groups, represented in many local political hierarchies, were restricted or dropped under colonial rule. The powerful contribution women made to many independence struggles rarely translated into significant power in national governments, or consideration in education, legal or economic policies. Indigenous religions that give prominent places to female gods, ancestors and priests have also yielded prestige to Islam and Christianity, although women retain influence in syncretic cults. Recent crises related to drought, war and economic collapse further endanger women and their families, by increasing their responsibilities while attacking their social and ecological resource base. Examples of development policies and projects show that women need both autonomy and adequate resources to reverse the downward spiral of economic degeneration.

