1 Introduction

This paper is a preliminary examination of the meanings associated with women's groups in sub-Saharan Africa and - by implication - their role in poverty alleviation policy. The gender blindness of the New Poverty Agenda has been increasingly noted (e.g. Jackson 1996). Jackson points out that the focus on female headed households directs attention away from the difficult area of intra-household poverty. Others (eg Lipton and Maxwell 1992) note that a strategy of labour intensive growth may disregard the gender division of labour and make unwarranted assumptions about the availability of women's time. In all cases, the problem is that when consideration is given to gendered impacts of strategies, women continued to be viewed in isolation from men - for 'gender' read 'women'. One largely unexplored aspect of this is the support for women's clubs as vehicles for poverty alleviation. There is a tendency to focus on these as an important means towards poverty alleviation with little or no consideration of the gendered dynamics surrounding, and indeed within, them.

My concern arises from an observation that being a woman is not necessarily an important criterion for membership of groups in sub-Saharan Africa. Men are active participants too. The focus in this paper is on those groups which are, or would like to be, recipients of donor funds. I am not directly concerned here with feminist 'grass roots' organisations although there are many overlaps and hence dilemmas in distinguishing one variety of group from the other. The significance of this is most pertinent when questions are raised about the sort of group donors support.

I argue that in many cases, but especially when promoted from outside, donor-supported groups (often called clubs) illustrate local internalisations of a range of values whose connection to gender identity is neither obvious or straightforward. Values which signal prevailing ideas associated with development such as the acceptance of 'modernity' and the rejection of 'tradition' may be of particular importance. These are likely to be closely allied with material considerations such as the role of outsiders in providing access to resources. The formation and development of women's groups and the presence of men within
them, may thus be seen as illustrating as much a response to external agendas as a manifestation of solidarity on gender grounds. On the other hand, there are problems in attributing simple intentionality and strategic manoeuvring; the meaning of male and female roles in 'women's groups' cannot be easily extrapolated from the 'facts'. I present no easy solution to what is essentially a problem of interpretation – I merely raise questions about what has been taken for granted.

The paper is preliminary because much of the evidence for a central tenet – that the presence of men in many of these groups undermines simplifying assumptions about purpose and hence outcomes – is still anecdotal. However, I draw on the limited existing written evidence, and my own knowledge from rural Zambia, to suggest the need for more detailed research.

2 Why Women's Groups?

For international donors, women's groups of various kinds are a favourite focus for the dispersal of certain types of aid (Wamalwa 1991). In particular, women's groups are seen as efficient vehicles for smaller scale and project-based attempts at poverty alleviation. They are thought to be particularly good at reaching 'vulnerable groups' – among which women are persistently included. The World Bank, for example, stresses the importance of women's groups as being especially effective for the delivery of 'extension messages' (IBRD 1990: 21). In the World Bank Participation Sourcebook it suggested not only that among the poor, women are overrepresented but... 'Over and over in our examples, we find that women's groups have proven to be one of the most effective entry points for initiating activities and reaching poor households' (IBRD 1995: 141).

Thus, while macro-level sectoral reform has often been blind to its gendered effects, remedial and direct measures are specifically targeted at women and women's groups¹. Associated with this is a widespread assumption that women have a particular proclivity to work collectively, while men are more individualistic. In recent years, the focus on women's groups has shifted from an early concern with welfare to the objective of increasing the price and productivity of women's labour in the short term as a means towards alleviating poverty (Buvinic 1989). This has involved vocational training, credit for micro-enterprises, and income generation for women who otherwise worked outside of the cash economy. This instrumental objective is often combined, in name at least, with more nebulous ones concerned with 'empowerment'.

This tendency to work with groups has come under scrutiny. On the one hand, there are questions about the effectiveness of working with localised groups whose achievements are necessarily on a small scale and which are often riven by dispute and mismanagement. For example, Pickering et al. (1996) note for Uganda that individual women entrepreneurs were more successful in their income generation than groups. The authors blame the need to observe bureaucratic procedure and maintain a wide range of relationships. On the other hand, the empowerment achievements of even apparently successful and widespread attempts to work with groups of women are doubtful. Goetz and Sen Gupta (1995) have shown with a range of group-based approaches to credit in Bangladesh that high rates of loan repayment may disguise considerable male control over these loans. What lies behind this is hard to determine: in some cases it may represent a conjugal strategy to make the best of the money available; in others it may be about perpetuation of female subordination. Overall, there is clearly more to high levels of women's repayment than meets the eye.

In sub-Saharan Africa, an interest in women's groups has also been widespread and has a long history. In the 1960s and 1970s their focus was on 'traditional' skills and handicrafts, while more recently this has broadened to include projects for agricultural production (Pickering et al. 1996). Despite doubts about effectiveness, this interest has grown – in parallel with economic liberalisation and support to non governmental organisations in general. The kind of groups with which donors work varies in form and purpose. Some, such as the women's self-help group movement in Kenya, are part of a wide alleviation programmes (M.Lockwood, pers.comm.).

¹ Although in practice, while women are named as the most vulnerable, they may be overlooked in the poverty
network, established for decades (Kabira 1993; Karega 1996). The combined membership of Kenya's 20,000 or so organised women's groups accounts for more than 10 per cent of the country's adult population (Kane et al. 1991). Others, such as a number of groups in Zambia, are of more recent origin, and not apparently linked into a larger structure. In all cases, the assumption that groups are the natural medium through which to work with women has widespread currency.

While various assessments have been made of the measurable achievements of such women's groups, far less attention has been paid — not so much to what they do — as to the meanings associated with the groups for those involved. Why are they formed as women's groups rather than because of any other possible organisational identity? This question is pertinent because the groups under discussion are not those which are formed for explicitly feminist reasons. Feminist groups operate with an awareness of differing gender interests and a sense that through organising together women can redress power imbalances. They have a clearly political project. Gendered interests are more significant, at least within the context of the group, than other aspects of differentiation such as class or ethnicity. Of course, no feminist women's group transcends the other differences contributing to identity, but there is a prioritisation in principal. This is not necessarily the case with the kind of groups which are the subject of this paper.

Women's groups must thus be viewed within the wider social and cultural context in which they are created. As von Bulow (1995) argues, the donor interest in women's groups rests on simplified images of these groups and insufficient knowledge of women's own motives for forming them. The same might be said of other types of group (farmers' collectives, bee-keeping societies, credit associations). However, women's groups are special in that a particular characteristic (sex) is prescribed in advance as a basis for all the other things that the group might do. Understanding the nature of women's motives for forming them is therefore important. To discover this requires not only noting what people claim but their practices. For example, is there any evidence of productive benefit? However, there is more to it than this; it is important to examine a number of other, related, questions.

First, who are in the groups and on what terms? A limited number of studies have examined the role of 'elite' women in women's groups in sub-Saharan Africa (for example Buvinic 1989; Sorensen 1990; Touwen 1990; Sylvester 1995; von Bulow 1995). They tend to argue that elite women construct alliances to gain access to material and symbolic resources, but that shared gender identity is seldom an important basis for such alliances. Dorthe von Bulow, in a study of women's groups in Kilimanjaro, Tanzania (1995), argues that modern, income-generating women's groups may contain elements of empowerment and solidarity, but within many, the dominant feature is that a few women use the groups as part of personal strategies to obtain access to power, prestige and economic resources. The women who do this tend to be building on existing positions of prestige and respectability. Similarly, in Uganda, whatever the stated poverty aims of groups, there are intangible barriers to the poorest, based on status and skills (Pickering et al. 1996). In the case of Kilimanjaro, the influence of Christianity is important; WaChagga women use women's groups to signal modernity and development-mindedness at the same time as maintaining the image of good Christian wives and mothers.

Hence ideologies about female and maleness...can also be used by women to enhance their position in society. However, it is a strategy which is only open to a minority of women, whose position in society depends on the fact that prevailing patriarchal gender relations are continued. (von Bulow 1995: 13)

In contrast to the work on elite women in women's groups, there is far less evidence or discussion regarding how men fit into this as husbands and even as group members. The fact that women's groups have only women in them is virtually taken for granted. It does however, need to be scrutinised. If there are male members, the need to question why the official identity is that of 'women's group' rather than any other appears to be more acute.

Second, to what extent do the form and structure of women's groups reflect prevailing social organisation? This question is closely related to the first. It arises from the presumption that the highly formal bureaucratic structure of many women's groups is
partly the product of the legacy of donor (and probably colonial) intervention, and may have less to do with other modes of social organisation with which it co-exists. March and Taqqu, for example, suggest that the widespread attention of donors towards cooperatives and groups in their support for development is 'based on a rationalist western model of political decision making which is not uniformly intelligible throughout the world' (1986: 106). This, they argue, is vulnerable to appropriation by those segments of a population who know about and want such forms of organisation.

A distinction between rationalist western models of decision-making and pre- or non-rational non-western types is highly questionable, but a distinction between more and less bureaucratised and hierarchical arrangements is plausible. Whether this process of appropriation should be seen as conscious manipulation or the internalisation of external values is a moot point, depending on the stance taken on intentionality and the capacity for agency. Recent work on 'resistance' has taken exception to writings that portray 'local people' as passive, powerless, subjugated and repressed. They argue that in different ways people resist and that the 'powerful' are not always in complete control. James Scott's work on 'everyday forms of peasant resistance' (1985) is an important example of this kind of critique. However, a sharp division between those who resist and those who are resisted is not always tenable; relations of domination and subordination are not so fixed.

Internalisation implies passive and responsive individuals. Conversely, to suggest that what is taking place is resistance or manipulation may overstate the amount of intention involved. Oppressed groups may often take on and develop the language and values of others or apparently invent their own. To label these a 'strategy' may not accurately reflect the intentionality and conscious choice involved. An alternative approach is to suggest that while individuals are differently constrained by their structural position, including their access to resources, each makes their choices within these constraints, and the nature of the choices needs to be understood. Clearly structural considerations influence which voices gain ascendancy. In the case of women's groups, we need to look at how social position, religion, education and, paradoxically, gender, interplay in their formation and functioning.

3 Case Study: The Growth of Groups in Luapula Province, Zambia.

In 1991 and 1992, I undertook research based in two villages of Luapula Province in north eastern Zambia. The primary aim of the research was policy oriented; the ODA had commissioned research to look at the supposed 'failure' of small scale rural fish farming in sub-Saharan Africa. It was hosted by a regional project supported by the FAO, Aquaculture for Local Community Development (ALCOM), of which the Luapula pilot project was one component. However, in order to explore what was going on with fish farming, a broader and deeper view of social relations within the two villages was obviously critical. It is through this that issues relating to group formation, and particularly women's groups, arise. An important aspect of this contextualisation is the historical legacy from which people's actions and motives are inseparable.

In Luapula province, from the days of colonial rule through to the 1990s, there has been a profusion of schemes and projects which have striven to enhance the well-being of the population and to ensure sustainable development. Their effects have been profound, if not entirely as expected. Many early rural development schemes suffered from inadequate resourcing and their aims were poorly aligned with the economic and political realities of the rural population. For example, the Intensive Rural Development Scheme of 1957-61, which was marketed as a new approach to rural development, involving the mobilisation of the initiative and resources of 'progressive Africans', was a 'dismal failure' (Gould 1989: 147). The scheme nevertheless had lasting effects: 'It made legitimate both the expectation that the central government had a responsibility to assist in the development of the rural areas, and the complaint of neglect' (Baylies 1984: 168).

From 1964, rural development in Luapula has been

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2 For example, Chambers (1994); Escobar (1995); Scoones and Thomson (1993).
closely associated with foreign assistance. Large bilateral donors have combined with smaller NGOs and sector-specific projects in a range of schemes. There have been some sizable capital investments (roads, maize mills) and the devotion of agricultural research and extension to the production of maize. In 1992, a wide range of donor funded projects was operating in the Province. The biggest of these (financially) was funded by the Finnish Aid Agency, FINNIDA. Other donors active in the province included the Swedish International Development Authority (SIDA), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the Dutch Development Organisation, SNV, the German Development Organisation, GTZ, and the FAO. Non-governmental organisations working in Luapula included World Vision, Water Wells Trust (UK), and the World Wildlife Fund. Lastly, volunteer agencies from Finland, UK, Denmark, Norway, Belgium, Japan and Germany all had personnel working in the province.

No conclusions are drawn about the impact of this plethora of aid agencies in Luapula in terms of their own objectives: strengthened rural livelihoods, improved health standards and so on. Nor is it suggested that such a diversity and quantity of assistance is unusual. A glance at the numbers of donors active in other provinces in Zambia, and other countries in sub-Saharan Africa, tells a similar story. However, the fact that development activities are not introduced into a vacuum into communities which have been isolated from external influences, means that the memory of previous interventions, whether colonial or government or donor supported development projects, has a profound influence on the way that local people respond to the latest one.

Stacy Leigh Pigg (1992) argues that in Nepal the concept of bikas or ‘development’ has been internalised and appropriated by local people, so that its meaning may differ but is not separate from that promulgated in international institutions: ‘There are Nepalis who lay claim to development’s vision of society. Nepalis do not perceive the ideology of development to be culturally foreign: they come to know it through specific social relationships’ (Leigh Pigg 1992: 495).

In the process of coming to know the ideology of development, people learn to make certain associations and contrasts. Thus, a number of material things are important: new breeds of goat, water pumps, electricity. In addition though, the use of many English words and phrases characterises the discourse of development, and people are keen to adopt the polarity bikas/village in order to orient themselves in national society. What is at stake in the adoption of these terms is potential sources of wealth, power, and upward mobility ‘...Everyone wants a piece of the development pie’ (Leigh Pigg 1992: 511).

These arguments echo observations from Luapula where certain farmers wish to be associated with development and progressiveness. Moore and Vaughan (1994) note for neighbouring Northern Province that letters from aspiring ‘progressive farmers’ in the 1940s show the way a discourse of development had become a shared discourse between colonial officials and certain groups of African men. They argue that: ‘It should not surprise us then, that when people respond to new development schemes and policies, they bring their history with them (Moore and Vaughan 1994: 234).

Many people in Luapula associate external projects with the prospect of material and status improvement. Individuals have developed their own interpretations of ‘development’ and internalised those of developers. Such responses are not necessarily in line with the stated objectives of the developers. In particular, while they speak in terms of self-reliance and imparting knowledge, local people recognise projects as a source of resources to be used to meet immediate needs. They may also accurately identify where control of material assets lies and some prove themselves capable of adapting their behaviour to get a share.

Some people are included in a particular discourse of development, while others are excluded. The process of inclusion and exclusion does not follow predetermined lines, but has correlations with age, material well-being, and gender. As noted above, notions of modernity and development are an important reference point for some people in the research sites. The concepts of modernity and
tradition developed are hybrids, containing elements of beliefs and practices which are ostensibly rejected by those who use them. However, the participation in the trappings of modernity and development takes place only unevenly, and certain people are more engaged in this than others.

Bureaucratic structures are seen by many as an important aspect of modernity. Despite a general apathy towards party politics, the status of being an 'office holder' is important for some. This is indicative of a widespread bureaucratisation of village life in which the adoption of strict hierarchies is critical. As one man explained: "...it is important to have a post - like now, I am choir secretary. It is good to have a post because then you can go to meetings and be a leader. You have more respect as a top leader'.

Organisations in rural Luapula take diverse forms: from church-based working groups, to groups arising out of external assistance, to school parent teacher associations, to groups formed for mutual assistance. What they all have in common is their strict bureaucratic structure: a group must be properly constituted with elected office holders and a committee. In one village a mutual farming group had seven office holders (Chairman, vice chairman, secretary, vice secretary, treasurer, organiser, trustee) - and one member. What is interesting about this stress on the importance of bureaucratic organisation is its derivation from outside influences such as the government and aid organisations, and the fact that it has now been internalised as a key part of village life - for some.

The office holders in one group often appear as office holders in another - and all of them identify themselves with modernity and 'being developed'. They tend to have other characteristics in common, which in various ways are associated with being developed. Thus, farmers who are members of externally induced groups also tend to grow maize with fertiliser, to market 'European' vegetables, to speak English, to be in their thirties, and to be men, or sometimes their wives. These characteristics interact with and reinforce one another.

An example from a UNICEF-supported vegetable growing group illustrates these tendencies. UNICEF's official target for members of the group was the 'poorest' people in a selected area, Monga, about 30km from the provincial capital. The group was to be given seed, fertiliser, and advice on marketing. However, the eventual membership of the group did not reflect initial objectives:

They made a census and then they fed the names into the computer. But the original people selected did not respond. They were suspicious. They did not know why their names were picked and anyway old people were mainly selected and they were not interested. So out of 24, only eight responded. So the gaps were filled by the available people who were chosen by the agricultural assistant.

Those who filled the gaps included teachers, and others who had a high profile in the area. The executive consisted of: chairman (also vice chairman of the fish farming group and headman); secretary (also contact farmer for the FAO, member of fish farming group, and trials farmer for the Adaptive Research Planning Team); treasurer (a woman, also secretary of the women's group and wife of the fish farming group vice treasurer); and vice-treasurer (wife of the chairman, and daughter of one of the few tractor owners in the area). Of the original people chosen for membership, none were involved in the executive, with its direct access to UNICEF funds and resources.

4 Women's Groups and Men

Most donors have had a special interest in women's groups. For the reasons discussed above, there is a willingness to devote resources to these as a principal means of 'dealing with the issue of gender' - as well as poverty alleviation. But the 'target groups' themselves may also manipulate the inputs of projects. Olivier de Sardan (1988) has argued that the symbolic as well as material and economic benefits of projects are the subject of tension, manoeuvring, and competition. In Luapula, there are

that the land needs to be 'caressed' and 'spoken to'.

This is in addition to the staple cassava, and is invariably sold rather than consumed at home.

3 Escobar (1995) uses the notion of 'hybridisation' with reference to Afro-Colombian peasants. He argues that while they have adapted an imported language of 'efficiency', they retain former concepts, such as the idea that the land needs to be 'caressed' and 'spoken to'.

4 This is in addition to the staple cassava, and is invariably sold rather than consumed at home.
indications that both women and men have internalised the possible importance to them of adopting a gender agenda that has filtered down to them through the promotion of women's and other groups.

This promotion permeates into 'village' understandings of developers' priorities in diverse ways. On the one hand there are the regular (often expatriate) visitors from development organisations. They are apparently interested in talking primarily to women, and may bring promises of resources, particularly when women show an ability to work together. As groups are recognised by many as a means of access to development assistance, it is not surprising that women's groups are popular. In one village, which had received at least four researchers asking questions about women (including me), the ALCOM information officer taking photographs of women, a German-funded nutrition project for women, a Swedish-funded health clinic with a focus on women and children, a Danish-supported sewing project, and an ALCOM-supported 'mutual feeding centre', women come together as groups at the least encouragement (see Harrison 1995). On my arrival in this village, I was immediately greeted by a group of women, asking me to 'register' them as a club. I asked them what they meant and one explained: 'We are women. We have dug ponds. We must be a club now. We need to be registered.' They said that they had received many visitors who had promised them a club but still nothing had happened. I tried to probe what the value of being part of a club was. The women were perplexed. They said, 'but you want us to have women's clubs'. But why women's clubs? Again, 'that is what you want'.

In addition though, local-level bureaucrats who are the 'frontline' representatives of these development organisations convey models about village gender relations - models which may reflect reality only remotely, but which are replicated by some members of rural communities. An aspect of this is the connected ideas that women are weak, that they need men, and that they need to work together. The source of these ideas is uncertain. It is at least partly influenced by the fact that applications for agricultural loans by women must be guaranteed by their husbands. This is turn reflects a legacy of colonial, development donor, and government attitudes in which women are seen as marginal and secondary to men. At a seminar for 'fish scouts' (extensionists) organised by ALCOM, one scout explained: 'Traditionally, women are known to be weak to men. This therefore puts them off most of the activities, for instance, fish farming. In short, inferiority complex is a big hindrance to women.'

In Luapula, there is considerable female autonomy in specific aspects of decision-making, particularly related to farming. Married women and men often have separate fields, and control the products from these separately. Nonetheless, the idea of female powerlessness, and related to this the need for women to work together, is partially adopted within rural communities - by both women and men.

Thus, it is not only women who have responded to the gender agenda. The Monga women's farming group, which was also supported by UNICEF, had a number of male members. The chair of the women's group was a man. His wife was the treasurer, and the granary for storing the maize grown by the group was kept on his land. He explained to me that he was just helping the women with contacts and collecting the various forms that they needed from town. This man was also chairman of the fish farmers' group, and contact farmer for most agencies working in the area, including FINNIDA, ARPT, and FAO. Other male members of the group were married to female members.

The participation of the men in the women's group prompted certain questions, particularly regarding how other members viewed this. Was there any sense of anomaly, or that the men were imposters? As with the fish farming 'club', why was it a women's group rather than just a farming group? Such questions were dismissed by the members as if they were irrelevant. They stressed that male membership of women's groups in the area was in no way unusual. Two messages were reiterated; that the women needed the men, and that UNICEF wanted to support women this year - why should this mean that men should not take part?

The ideas that 'men and women need to work together', and that 'women are too weak without men' were repeatedly emphasised. They are, however, not as straightforward as they appear.
noted, there is a variable separation of economic activities in Luapula; some married men and women have a wide range of autonomous activities, while other couples have much greater interdependence. Those who work together the most tend to be the resource-poorest, farming cassava and maybe groundnuts or beans and having minimal income to pool. Conversely, those with clearly separate economic activities and decision-making are also rather better off, largely arising from their more diverse sources of income — whether from vegetable growing, trading, maize farming, or brewing. In Monga, these people were also the most active members of the women’s group. Nonetheless, however separate their other activities, they were willing to articulate the externally reinforced ideology of female dependence when it came to the workings of the group.

Apparently then, the women’s group illustrated an alliance between some women and men in which aspects of an outside gender agenda were selectively internalised. This does not necessarily mean that there were substantial material benefits. The women’s group was nominally involved in a wide range of activities, from fish farming, to maize farming and vegetable growing, to training in domestic skills. They had plans to take up chicken and maybe rabbit rearing. However, the benefits derived from any of these activities — and who controlled these — were seemingly few. Meetings were held, a fish pond had been dug but not stocked, vegetables were harvested, but nobody knew who was controlling the proceeds. I found no evidence that anybody was misappropriating funds. This might have been taking place, but would not anyway repudiate the broader proposition that membership of the group was as much about the meanings associated with it as the reality of material gain — indeed the fact that this material gain is hard to identify indicates the significance of the symbolic aspects of this internalisation of ‘development’ values.

For the majority of the women in Monga area, the women’s group was an irrelevance. These women did not speak English, were not au fait with bureaucratic structures, and instead emphasised the individualistic nature of production in the area. While distribution of the product took place according to reciprocal, generally kin-based, relationships, production was invariably limited to the conjugal unit, with a degree of negotiation over the gender division of labour. For poorer women, especially those without access to male labour, the struggle to pay or ‘beg’ people to clear land for planting was not relieved by access to women’s groups — or any other kind of group. This isolation and apparent alienation from the externally induced development process was reinforced by two combined factors: the pressure of material imperatives (principally less time to attend meetings), and the more nebulous sense of consequence and social standing that members, both men and women, attributed to their own role in these groups.

The balance of factors influencing inclusion and exclusion shifted and was in a constant state of renegotiation. However, it is clear that behind the nominal women’s group, a number of complex processes were going on, in which strategic alliances between some men and some women transcended what donors assumed would be strategic alliances between women.

### 5 Implications: Men in Women’s Groups

Moore (1994) has pointed out that the assertion that the category ‘woman’ (and therefore ‘man’) is not universal is now commonplace in academic thinking. Anthropological research in particular, has been influential in drawing attention to the great variability of gender and gender roles. The assumed relationship between biological sex and gender is also questioned. Arguing that it is problematic to assume that biological sex provides the universal base for the cultural constructions of ‘male’ and ‘female’, a number of writers now explore how such categories are created, developed and sustained (e.g. Parpart and Marchand 1995). For example, Sylvester (1995) argues that gender is a historically contingent set of social assignments that we need to query in much the same way as terms like ‘development’ are queried... ‘we cannot assume a priori that people who wear skirts, bear and suckle children, carry water and so forth, are genuine women’ (1995: 184). In the context of Zimbabwe, she finds that the boundaries between ‘men’ and ‘women’ are not as fixed as they first appear.

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5 Evidence for this lies in a structured survey of 200 households combined with participant observation over a year.
Sylvester's arguments about the need to get to grips with the contextual and provisional nature of gender identity reflect a broad postmodern trend. There remains, however, a tension between the attempt to describe polysemous webs of meaning creation and difference, and a danger that this curtails the possibility of political action. However much 'women' remain in inverted commas, the focus of Sylvester's argument is the concerns and aspirations of people whom she has no problem in identifying. Indeed she concludes that: 'No-one questions gender as a meaningful identity: there are men and there are women and everyone knows who is who' (1995: 201). Despite this apparent inconsistency, the important insight of this and related work, is rather that meanings cannot necessarily be extrapolated unproblematically from labels (such as 'women's group'). The process of labelling (in development as much as anything else) reflects the position of the labeler. While for donors a 'women's group' is obviously a group of broadly similar women, organising together for a range of purposes, this is likely to mean something very different for the men and women who constitute the group.

The phenomenon of men as members of women's groups in sub-Saharan Africa is not well documented. Njonjo (1985) found that in Kenya, seven per cent of the membership of women's groups was male. Sorensen (1990) suggests that this is largely because of male skills in marketing and book-keeping, but argues that the fact that men are drawn in and that better-off and elite women, who foremost identify with their men's interests, are members, 'seriously undermines the collective potential of female solidarity across houses' (p.18). Sylvester (1995) notes that in Zimbabwe a number of women's farming groups were chaired by men and that where this was the case, women tended to 'authorise' the men in terms of their indispensability and ability in meetings. Pickering et al. (1996) for Uganda, note that the largest scale group in their study was run by a man and had three other male members. However, the reasons for the group's formation around gender is not pursued.

These findings are only indicative; much more empirical work needs to be done. In particular, longitudinal studies might show the extent to which (despite being formed for other reasons) women's groups might nonetheless succeed in meeting feminist objectives. But the findings do point to the need for greater attention to be paid to the differences as well as the similarities between women, to how gender relations are mediated by class and other aspects of stratification, and to how people selectively adopt or internalise occasionally contradictory values. In particular, the simplistic equation of women with poverty needs to be re-assessed and replaced by a more thorough analysis of how gender relations are actually played out. Certainly, many women are among the poorest, but in Luapula, poorer women apparently had few interests in common with the richer members of the groups.

Buvinic (1989) notes the donor tendency to support activities, including clubs, that increase women's status and income earning rather than changing the power relations between men and women in the family. Such an approach assumes a 'win-win' situation, where benefits for women will cost men nothing - unlikely to be the case when differentials in power are at issue. This is an important criticism, but needs to be reinforced by an attempt to understand the complex ways in which alliances between women and men are created, sustained, and undermined. Because the nature and functioning of women's groups depends on the interaction of diverse sets of interests, a simplifying categorisation of interests such as the 'practical/strategic' distinction much favoured by international donors is not tenable. As Wierenga (1994) points out, to give any meaningful content to the distinction requires bending complicated realities into a mechanistic framework.

The process of identifying and naming other people's interests is clearly political. This does not, however, fit comfortably into the neutral language of planning. Feminist groups and women's groups are not synonymous, but if donors are to examine identified as arising out of the subordinate position of women to men.

6 This distinction, made initially by Maxine Molyneux (1986), and developed by Caroline Moser (1989, 1993), suggests that practical gender needs are those which women identify as part of their socially accepted role in society, while strategic gender needs are those which are

7 This point is made forcefully by James Ferguson (1990), when he argues that the workings of aid and development can be seen as an 'anti-politics machine'.
more closely the context within which women's groups are formed, including who are members and why, there are potentially disturbing implications in terms of the acceptance or rejection of feminist agendas. These are built on explicit recognition of the circumstances in which certain women do have interests in common, arising from their subordination in relation to men within the household and in the wider institutional context.

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