

African Women and Ageing: Nairobi, Beijing, and the Implications for African Gender Scholarship

This reflection on the Nairobi forward looking strategies and the Beijing platform for action is not primarily concerned with appraising the degree to which their main objectives have been achieved in Africa. Rather, it seeks to examine the content of both agendas, and the ensuing implications for African Gender Scholarship, from the perspective of a distinct and emerging body of discourse on the continent's development: the research and policy debate on ageing in Africa.

This debate has gained increasing currency in recent years, both at the political level – as exemplified in the African Union's and several member states' initiatives on formulating policy frameworks on ageing (though little action has ensued); and within the social science community – as reflected by CODESRIA's engagement in the coordination of an African Research on Ageing Network (see Apt 1997; Aboderin 2005; Ferreira 2005; AU/HAI 2003; AFRAN 2006).

The ageing debate takes its departure from the fact that Africa's populations – although they remain the youngest in the world – are growing older. The population share of older people (aged 60 years or over)¹ is expected to double from the present 5 per cent to 10 per cent by 2050. Their absolute number, meanwhile, is already extremely large and will grow more rapidly than for any other age group: 47.7 million (of which the majority are women) are alive on the continent today, rising to 85 million by 2025 and 193 million by 2050 (UN 2006).

Contrary to common misconceptions based on the low life expectancy at birth in Africa (which reflects persistent high infant, child and 'premature' adult² mortality rates), older Africans at age 60 can expect to live many more years. Their life expectancy (currently 16 years) does not dramatically differ from that in other developing world or even developed world regions (UN 2002).

However, all indications are that older people's lives are often marked by inadequate family support, the threat of acute

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or chronic poverty, ill-health, and disproportionate marginalisation from health services (see Aboderin 2006; Barrientos & Lloyd-Sherlock 2002; McIntyre 2004). In addition, poor older men or women can face the risk of abuse – for example due to witchcraft accusations (Daichman 2005). At the same time, and often at great cost to themselves, older persons make critical contributions to the welfare of their families and thus societies. This is most palpable in the context of HIV/AIDS, where they commonly act as the sole caregivers for their children dying of the disease, and for their grandchildren left orphaned by it (HAI 2003; WHO 2002; UNICEF 2003).

Against this background, the importance of addressing the issue of ageing and older people in Africa arises on two inter-related levels. At the analytical level, the challenge is to understand how social and economic change have shaped the situation, roles and inter-generational relationships of older people in Africa; and how, in turn, these transformations and progressive population ageing will impact on societies' institutions, orientations and development prospects. At the policy level, the task is to clarify the need for policy action, and to identify appropriate strategies to ensure the well-being not only of present, but also of future cohorts of older persons.

In looking back at Nairobi and Beijing, therefore, I wish to examine the extent and ways in which issues of ageing and older women were addressed in both agendas, and their implications for subsequent policy development.

In the light of this, and looking to the future – and clear that much remains to be accomplished in realising the conferences' goals (Annan-Yao 2005; Tamale, 2005; Obbo 2005; Gouws 2005) – I then

reflect on emerging challenges for African Gender Scholarship.

Looking back: Ageing and older women in the Nairobi and Beijing agendas

The key rationale for pursuing women's 'advancement' in both agendas was, of course, its centrality to achieving sustainable development and the associated goals of social justice and equity. This was underpinned by an explicit valuation of women's contributions to families, communities and society.

Within this framework, the Nairobi and Beijing deliberations – the former more patently than the latter – clearly considered older women, designating them as one of a number of especially 'vulnerable' groups who required 'special attention'.³ The Nairobi declaration dedicated a separate section to 'elderly women', in the chapter 'Areas of Special Concern', which followed the main corpus of forward-looking strategies on 'equality, development and peace'.

Citing the 1982 UN International Plan of Action on Ageing, which had been ratified at the first UN World Assembly on Ageing in Vienna (UN 1982) and clearly echoing the Plan's developed world 'centrism', the Nairobi agenda specifically called for policies to provide social insurance for older women, encourage their participation in 'social and recreational activities', and enable them to lead as meaningful a life as possible, in 'their own home and family and the community' (as opposed to an institution).

The Beijing platform, meanwhile, considered 'older women' in relation to the need for anti-poverty programmes directed towards the 'poorest and most disadvantaged' groups of women; and for health services to tackle age-related chronic conditions such as cardiovascular disease, osteoporosis and related disabilities.

Beyond this, however, and despite nominal references to women 'of all ages', the tenor that unmistakably, albeit implicitly, emerges from both Nairobi and Beijing is a principal concern with women in their

(re)productive years, and the girl child. This emerges, perhaps most poignantly, in the key aim to raise life expectancy to 65 years, but also in other objectives and lines of reasoning, including:

(i) The central objective to raise education and abolish illiteracy among women, in great part because of its close link to child survival and child spacing.

(ii) The case made around women's contributions, which homes in on their reproductive and productive roles in the bearing and rearing of children and work, and their care-giving for other family members such as the 'sick and the elderly'.

(iii) The limited consideration of a woman's life course expressed in the Beijing platform as 'the girl child of today is the woman of tomorrow' (paragraph 39) – seemingly overlooking her further transition to an older woman 'the day after'.

This priority focus on younger-age groups, of course, fitted squarely (and still fits) with the dominant international 'population and development' thinking – expressed, for example, by the UN World population conferences 1974, 1984 and 1994, and echoed in the Millennium Development Goals (UN 2000). Central to this thinking is an emphasis on the need for fertility reduction and the capacity development of children and younger adults – so as to enable nations to harness the 'demographic dividend' of a large working-age population (and small 'dependent' older and child population) and, in so doing, to accelerate economic growth and poverty reduction (UN ECOSOC 2005). An underlying premise, evidently, is the assumption of older people's 'un-productivity' (Lloyd-Sherlock 2004; Harper 2006).

Given Africa's mainstream pursuance of development in line with chief international agendas, the context of severely constrained public resources, and older women's limited political weight (for example in terms of vote share), it is clear (and not surprising) that the Nairobi and Beijing calls for consideration of this group would not have elicited much, if any, response.

Looking forward

Not for this reason alone, I would contend, is a continued 'compartmentalisation' of older women as a 'vulnerable' group vis-à-vis younger-age females an ultimately limited approach, both theoretically and

in terms of practice. The goal of such practice – in the spirit of Nairobi and Beijing – has to be to confront women's inequality or disadvantage at whatever stage of their life. And ascertaining the relative extent and nature of women's vulnerability at different ages, in individual local contexts, remains an essential task for empirical analysis.

Herein, in my view, lies a challenge for African Gender Scholarship, in its undertaking to examine the evolving situation of women and, in the light of this, to appraise and promote efforts to achieve the broad aims of Nairobi and Beijing.

So far, this body of work, just as broader research on globalisation and gender (Moghadam 2000; Mittelman & Tambe 2000), has paid surprisingly little attention to the issue of old age or ageing – which has, in a sense, remained a blind spot. (This contrasts with the centrality of gender as a crucial analytic category in the discourse on ageing (Aboderin 2005; Estes 2005; Calasanti 2004; Knodel and Ofstedal 2003.)

There is a need for African gender analysis to critically consider and integrate age – appropriately defined, for example, chronologically, or in terms of physical, social or family transitions – as a determinant that, in intersection with gender (as well as class, ethnicity, race and sexuality), will shape the experience, agendas and opportunities of women over the life cycle (Manuh 2005; Harper 2006).

This should be accompanied by a life course perspective (Elder et al. 2003), which, holistically, focuses on pathways and transitions over a person's life. It sees outcomes at any particular stage of life as shaped not only by current conditions but also by exposures and relationships in earlier life phases, while recognising the importance of the particular prevailing socio-historical and structural context in shaping these phases.

Taking account of age and life course will not only sharpen gender analyses' grasp of the multilayered patterns and determinants of women's conditions in the context of social change. It could also allow a more incisive identification of policy needs and options, including, potentially, more forward-looking approaches that ensure a better old age for the girl child or young woman of today.

On an advocacy level, moreover, in the present context of HIV/AIDS, such analyses may serve to strengthen the case for the indispensability of women's input to national development by highlighting the absolutely critical contributions, especially of grandmothers, in raising tomorrow's generation of adults.

Finally, an age and life course lens – bringing with it considerations of 'generation' and the inter-generational transmission of values (McDaniel 2004) – might enrich gender (and other) scholarship in contributing to the 'rethinking' of African development more generally (Mama 2005). In particular, it may prove germane to debates on the scope for an 'African rebirth', especially regarding the feasibility, desirability and appropriateness of forging a historical perspective and revisiting 'indigenous' African ideologies as a basis for shaping the future (Manuh 2005; Zounmenou 2005; Maloka 2001).

Notes

1. The standard definition of 'old age' used by the UN is 60-plus years. This definition is becoming increasingly entrenched in the international discourse – among others intended for the ease of comparative analyses. However it is crucial to bear in mind – and continue to analytically address – the many limitations and questions that exist regarding the local appropriateness of such a chronological definition of 'old age', or the specific age of 60.
2. Defined as mortality between the ages of 15 and 60 (see WHO 2004).
3. Other (evidently overlapping) groups categorised as particularly vulnerable included 'rural and indigenous women', female heads of households, young women, refugees and migrant women, women with disabilities and, specifically mentioned in the Nairobi agenda, 'urban poor women', 'abused women', 'deserted women', women victims of trafficking and in involuntary prostitution, women deprived of their traditional means of livelihood and 'women in detention'.

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Série sur le Genre du CODESRIA Volume 5



2005, 188 pages
ISBN 2-86978-141-5
Africa: CFA 6000;
non-CFA zone: \$12;
Elsewhere: £10.95 / \$15.95

Les rapports sociaux de genre connaissent depuis quelques années des mutations significatives en Afrique et dans le monde. En effet, la vague de démocratisation qui souffle sur le continent depuis le début des années quatre-vingts et les transitions politiques qui en découlent engendrent une participation croissante des femmes dans la sphère publique. Sur le plan économique, les femmes déploient de nombreuses stratégies afin de s'assurer une certaine autonomie financière et, partant une capacité à s'affirmer au sein du ménage qui relèverait du domaine privé. Mais en même temps, les rapports sociaux de genre dans les sphères publique et privée restent encore marquées par la discrimination, l'inégalité, et la violence dont la majorité des victimes seraient des femmes.