

Which Way Forward? Gender Theories, Debates and Practice after the Nairobi and Beijing Conferences

This article looks at the history behind the events leading to the Nairobi and Beijing conferences, at the gender themes, the theoretical perspectives guiding intervention and considers some present challenges.

When the United Nations was formed, its charter affirmed faith in fundamental human rights as early as 1945. In 1947, the UN Commission on the Status of Women (UNCSW), a subsidiary body to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), was formed. The UN General Assembly proclaimed 1975 as the international year of women. The World Conference in Mexico City in that year was attended by delegates from over a hundred countries. Several goals were to be achieved in a series of five-year plans in the areas of literacy, equal access to education, increased employment, and equal eligibility to vote, among other matters. The decade 1975–1985 was earmarked for women. A mid-decade conference was also proposed for Copenhagen in 1980, which when held noted considerable efforts on gender, but insufficient progress in bringing about the desired changes in the status of women. Rural women and other disadvantaged groups were mentioned for special attention. Another conference was planned for Nairobi in 1985. The Nairobi conference was to review achievements made and obstacles encountered in the following areas:

- Water, food and agriculture;
- Health and population;
- Education, training and employment;
- Women in development, income generating;
- Energy, environment, science and technology;

The Nairobi Conference noted that little in the way of progress had been made in all these areas. Other conferences followed, with the most important one being the Beijing Conference held after the end of the second decade for women in 1995. The Beijing platform themes were:

- Women and poverty;
- Education and training;
- Women and health;

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- Women and the economy;
- Women, power and decision-making;
- Women and media;
- Girl children.

By 2006, these themes are still recurring issues for most of Africa. What went wrong? The situation seems worse given the new challenges of HIV/AIDS, Information Technology and multiparty politics. It behoves us to re-examine the perspectives that underpinned intervention measures to see if the scholarship on gender issues had weaknesses. What were these perspectives that informed intervention measures?

Theoretical perspectives

In the 1970s, the ‘deficit’ approach to gender advocated by Robin Lakoff, a feminist linguist, enjoyed a great following. Women were seen as deficient and invisible in many areas of development. The Women in Development (WID) strategy advanced at the Mexico conference was in line with this thinking. Studies showed African women as part and parcel of the culture of poverty, as beasts of burden, and as passive creatures unwilling or unable to modernise and engage in productive activities. They were to blame for their plight.

The ‘deficit’ perspective contained many flaws. Some researchers, for example Mwangi (1985), began to become concerned about the lack of headway made in programmes for development using the deficit approach. It was argued that looking at women’s problems through ‘deficit’ lenses was to hold the stick at the wrong end. Seeing women as deficient and portraying them as victims meant, for instance, that their involvement in the wars of liberation in the 1950 and 1960s went unrecognised.

The whole question of ‘integrating’ women was suspect. Women have been and still are fully involved in the productive labour that forms the basis of African

economies, but even the textbooks in such subjects as agriculture completely sidelined the role of women and girls – despite their predominance in the agricultural sector in most African countries (Obura 1986).

The ‘deficit perspective’ affirmed the stereotypes of female characteristics and capabilities and was in direct opposition to pre-colonial norms regarding women who, as heads of households, were daily managers and the guardians of family property. The idea of a ‘deficit’ gave these ideas and stereotypes material reality. Land was title-deeded to the man (this started during the colonial period when men were established as the owners and managers of private property). This title-deeding contributed indirectly to confirm and legitimise perceptions that males are superior to females. In most countries in Africa the son inherits this title-deed, not the daughter. Also, the man had the job and kept the money – unlike the olden days where the woman had managed the produce in her granaries.

Men’s authority and prestige were maintained not only by economic structures and at times by physical force, but also by the ideology and gender perspectives inherent in the scholarship of the time. Women were accused of behaving in a manly way when they engaged in large-scale money-making ventures. Under the WID approach, they were encouraged to engage in small women’s projects. Few if any such women’s groups became national or even international businesses. What stopped governments from recognising the strength of the woman in agriculture and helping them get global markets? Was it not this ‘deficit’ perspective? Women’s movements too were hindered by the stereotypes which saw a woman unaccompanied by a male as having loose morals. Sadly, some women tend to internalise ideas and beliefs about male superiority and female inferiority and are cowed by them. No wonder that twenty years after these important conferences, gender issues remain very much alive.

A later, more feminist, perspective on the issue revolved around the idea of male domination. It was argued that women were dominated by men (Thorne and Henley

1975). Policies of equal opportunity in education aimed to help solve the problem of male dominance. In some countries success as regards equality was reported in the areas of labour laws, tax relief for married women, and universal education.

The dominance perspective that encouraged equality did not find easy acceptance in most countries. Equal opportunity was associated with feminism, often seen as culturally unacceptable. It was viewed as anti-men and anti-family. Affirmative action programmes that privileged girls and women met with the disapproval of both men and women. Girls were seen as the already privileged lot! If they failed in school they only needed to look for good husbands. A boy on the other hand had to secure his future through education and career development to cater for his family. This cultural thinking is hard to discard. On other fronts, food security has become a pervasive issue. But as yet policies regarding the role of women in politics and in the economy – particularly in agriculture – remain underdeveloped.

A further relevant perspective was the argument around 'cultural differences' (Tannen 1990), in which women and men were seen as different because of belonging to divergent sub-cultures. Differences were affirmed and even celebrated. This view may seem counter to the earlier 'deficit' perspective, but the focus here was mainly on women alone. Somehow the sexes were becoming alienated from one another. Already the socio-economic processes in Africa since the 1960s had alienated the sexes, obliterating the dependence that had traditionally been the case. The struggle of women and men in the 1980s became a struggle to redefine changed roles and identities. For example, there were two different systems of law co-existing in Kenya in relation to marriage – modern and traditional – providing different systems and ideological grids in which to pose and resolve the woman question. Women and men rather needed to maximize their similarities, but the 'difference' perspective was encouraging the contrary.

The theoretical frameworks adopted in most analyses of African women and development have been either wrong or misguided. The solutions have been unrealistic and ineffective in delivering the Nairobi and Beijing action plans. Women's contributions have been overlooked. The emphasis should have been on the strengths of women and how they have managed to survive in the

face of so many odds. Their strength and achievements needed to be enumerated in order to make their projects and initiatives more viable. Although unrecorded, women kept factories supplied with coffee, tea, pyrethrum, dairy products and other products which are the mainstay of African economies. How did they do this despite lacking the modern know-how – the technology which helps farmers elsewhere? Was it the women village groups? One can only ask questions for few studies are available.

Challenges

Gender issues in Africa are complex and need to be understood from two angles: the people's side and the scholarly side. The people of Africa, their philosophies and ways of life, strengths and weakness need to be clearly explicated. The gender issues people confront are both material and ideological, and at most times are intertwined. For example, while HIV/AIDS is real medically and physically, different African groups have explained it in all kinds of cultural and religious ways. In this psyche, gender biases are so naturalised that they are not salient in people's consciousness. There are situations where gender differences are celebrated by both men and women, or are believed to be mapped onto biological sex and therefore are 'normal' and the best for everyone. When the disadvantages of such views are noted, little is done since these disadvantages are not considered to constitute major national problems. This may explain why the Nairobi and Beijing platforms for action achieved only piece-meal results.

Scholarship must show the way forward. So far, the guiding theories only looked at gender differences or domination. While there are indeed traces of difference and domination, these cannot define gender in its entirety.

The way forward

Scholarship has to lead from the front by providing perspectives that unearth the socially naturalised conventions around gender, to demystify them and to show that they are not unchangeable. Recent critical perspectives of gender as performance and gender identity as dynamic (Weedon 1997) need to be included in the debate on intervention for development in a way that is ideologically, culturally and historically suited to this region.

Through education, we need to develop as large a mass of critical thinkers as possible, who will question detrimental social practices around gender. Our cultures train children not to be questioners. Modern education also is too often merely rote learning. Sometimes even the educated do not question the prevailing social and political practices that put large numbers at a disadvantage.

The dilemma in Africa has been made intractable by the importation of gender interventions conceived in the West, and which are ideologically, culturally and historically different. What did it matter, for example, for an African woman that her title was 'ms', 'miss', or 'mrs'? Patriarchal structures dictated that she be kept out of family inheritance, excluded from education and leaving societal positions. She could not fight for equal pay when she was not even eligible for a job. Presently she cannot negotiate for safe sexual encounters with a partner who is HIV-positive.

Recognition of the constraints that women face in society through educational campaigns is not enough. There is the need to establish optional institutions for women. Where would a girl forced into marriage go should she run away? What resort has a woman when dispossessed of inheritance? There must be laws and policies to back women up. Without such reforms we end up with a population of subjugated knowers but constrained actors.

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