

All women, no gender

Mary Kanu highlights the misconceptions that inform gender politics, particularly in Africa, stressing the need for gender and development approaches that involve both women and men.

In preparation for this write-up, I asked a few colleagues, friends and family of African origin what they understood by 'gender' in practical terms. Their responses ranged from the dismal to the comical: programmes and activities aimed at giving support to poor, exploited, oppressed, perennially pregnant, abused, illiterate and HIV infected African women with crying babies on their backs, water pots on their heads, trekking along drought-stricken farmlands. Women that fight for their rights, scream for justice, equity and representation. One contributor put it this way, 'Gender is very serious and very dangerous, and those gender women are just men trapped in women's bodies, you can see how they behave. Very aggressive people'. When a few years ago a female vice president of Uganda divorced her husband because of domestic violence, he complained that his wife was a good woman until she started associating with 'those gender women'. But as far as the vice president was concerned, 'you cannot slap the vice president'.

Some years ago, I was at an international conference on African women. At one of the forums, one of the participants complained that the administrative office of her country's Ministry of Gender Affairs was headed by a man. Even though she conceded that the minister was a woman, she insisted that she was just a political appointee. 'Gender', she said, 'is all about women, a man has no business running it'. It was apparent that this participant perceived gender from the perspectives of the Women In Development (WID) theory which advocates that in 'bridging the gap', 'catching-up' and 'bringing women into the mainstream' to address underdevelopment in especially 'third world' countries, international and national intervention programmes must put policies and programmes in place that work exclusively with women and for women. However, despite the fact that in development circles WID has since given way to GAD (Gender and Development) – a remarkable improvement – the confusion and misunderstandings persist.

In theory, current development approaches that seek to address underdevelopment world-wide are based on the GAD approach. GAD seeks to address the historical and social constructs of the relationship between women and men in patriarchal societies, and how these unequal relations have made men the 'mainstream' and women the 'marginal' on fundamental development issues such as decision-making and political powers, opportunities for

participation, and access to economic resources. A GAD approach will seek to understand the intrinsic power retention patterns and socially ascribed roles that favour and enhance the status of men, and in the process marginalise and dispossess women. It will plan intervention programmes that mainstream both the discourse and the activities that aim to address the issue. It will ensure that both women and men have opportunities to understand that structures and attitudes that marginalise a significant proportion of any population can be catastrophic for meaningful development.

In practice however, international funding agencies, national governments, voluntary organisations and community-based groups are still fixated on the WID approach. Little wonder then that gender is still a misunderstood concept, and as a tool for redressing gender imbalances, it has failed to convince, change perceptions and make the desired development impact.

You will agree that most gender funding and work is focused on women. The word 'gender' is increasingly used to describe policies, programmes and activities that seek to

redress the injustices and marginalisation that women suffer. More often, when you hear 'gender mainstreaming', it obviously equates to marginal attempts at 'women mainstreaming'. But this is dangerous and has implications for fundamental development issues,

especially for African women, men and their future. A few examples will suffice.

Women's wings of political parties on the African continent end up as marginal forums, where women organise to wield their own power. They remind me of Nigeria in the 1990s when a debate was raging because women were clamouring for a ministry. The debate in many circles then was on the need or otherwise for a Ministry of Women or Gender Affairs. One man's intervention was: 'For God's sake give them a ministry so that we can concentrate on pressing state matters'. It was not surprising that when the ministry was eventually 'given' it was the Ministry of Women and Children's Affairs. But then part of its vision is to 'build a Nigerian society devoid of gender discrimination' and its mission, 'to further the interests of women and children', further evidence that the line between gender and women's affairs is blurred.

Uganda prides itself as the country in sub-Saharan Africa that set the pace for gender mainstreaming in political representation and development issues. Yet the objectives of

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the Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development are more of labour and social development and little of gender. In fact, gender has disappeared. Liberia's Ministry of Gender and Development recently celebrated a donation of \$500,000 from the United Nations to support gender equality. This ministry is being closely watched to see if they will move beyond 'women organising' to gender mainstreaming work in the country.

In response to the HIV pandemic there are so many 'negotiating safer sex workshops' exclusively for women but they have not been matched by 'responsible sex' workshops exclusively for men. Yet these women go home to men who may end up battering them for daring to have condoms in their handbags. Most work (including my organisation's) on the practice of female genital mutilation targets women who have little power to stop the practice. Yet a pilot project that we organised to work with men on the issue revealed the silent suffering of a majority of men whose social lives have been significantly damaged by the practice. Now, imagine what would have happened if we had thought about involving them in the campaign to stop the practice.

The challenge for Development Education practitioners is to take us back to the original concepts that promoted gender analysis as a development tool. They should remind all, especially policy-makers, funders and programme intervention planners, that gender is all about balance. Balance would guarantee that women and men would have opportunities of understanding and applying gender mainstreaming in the personal and public spheres of their lives. It would enable those at the community level to critically analyse the cultural forces that ascribe unequal roles that either oppress women or put unnecessary pressures on men. This is because while ensuring that women do not remain disadvantaged and marginalised, it will also benefit men who are under immense pressures from such roles as 'bread winners' and 'real men' in most communities. It will educate men and women within family settings to discourage socialisation processes that promote male superiority. When this starts to happen, it will enable governments, funders and programme intervention planners to have the desired development effects.

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NEW FROM TRENTHAM

COMBATING GENDER VIOLENCE IN AND AROUND SCHOOLS

edited by Fiona Leach and Claudia Mitchell

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Claudia Mitchell is professor of education at McGill University and the author of numerous books on youth, gender, gender violence, and girlhood and popular culture, including *Researching Children's Popular Culture: Cultural spaces of childhood* (with J. Reid-Walsh) and *That's Funny You Don't Look like a Teacher: Interrogating images of identity in popular culture* (with S. Weber).

Fiona Leach is senior lecturer in international education at the University of Sussex and has done extensive research in the area of gender violence in schools in Africa. She is the author of *Practising Gender Analysis in Education* and co-editor of *Education, Cultures and Economics: dilemmas for development* (with A. Little).

November 2006, ISBN-10: 1 85856 388 7

ISBN-13: 978 185856 388 6

262 pages, 244 x 170mm, Price £19.99



Trentham Books Limited

Westview House, 734 London Road
Oakhill, Stoke-on-Trent, Staffordshire
England ST4 5NP
www.trentham-books.co.uk