

# BAYREUTH

## Women's life worlds 'in-between'



Bayreuth African Studies Working Papers No.7



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## Bayreuth African Studies Working Papers

The "Bayreuth African Studies Working Papers" report on ongoing projects, the results of current research and matters related to the focus on African Studies at the University of Bayreuth. There are no specific requirements as to the language of publication and the length of the articles.

Contributions to this series may be submitted directly to the editors; they can also be submitted via university lecturers and professors or via the Institute of African Studies. Acceptance is decided by the editors.

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## **Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS)**

Since the year 2007, BIGSAS is part of the competitive 'Excellence Initiative' by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and the German Council of Science and Humanities (WR). The basic aims of BIGSAS are to bring together excellent young African and non-African scholars to work jointly in the field of African Studies and to offer a centre of creative and innovative PhD training and research.

Over the past 20 years Bayreuth has amassed considerable experience in co-ordinated research programmes, integrating various disciplines into a stimulating research in the field of African Studies. The Institute of African Studies (IAS) promotes 63 researchers and coordinates African studies at the University of Bayreuth in 12 subject groups distributed over four of the six faculties of the university.

BIGSAS builds on this experience and offers a multi- and interdisciplinary research environment based upon four clearly defined general Research Areas which are:

- A. Uncertainty, Innovation and the Quest for Order in Africa
- B. Culture, Concepts and Cognition in Africa: Approaches through Language, Literature and Media
- C. Concepts and Conflicts in Development Cooperation with Africa
- D. Coping with Environmental Criticality and Disasters in Africa

The Research Areas allow for challenging theoretical studies sensitive to emerging basic problems; they also take into account practical questions and problems of the African continent. Thus, the BIGSAS Research Areas encompass basic, strategic and applied research.

PhD training in BIGSAS is based on various strategies which ensure a quality in the field of African Studies: multi- and interdisciplinary research with a multidisciplinary mentorship; specialist academic

training with a cross-disciplinary focus; clearly structured Individual Research Training Plans (IRTP). Also of high importance are: the offer of employment-oriented transferable skills, individual career planning, early integration into the international academic community, shorter time-to-degree with structural and financial encouragements or specific support of female Junior Fellows.

BIGSAS also contributes to the creation of an African universities' network. It brings together African and European networks and fosters partnership not only between the University of Bayreuth and universities in Africa but also between the universities in Africa themselves. Five African Partner Universities, namely the University of Abomey-Calavi, Cotonou (Benin), Moi-University, Eldoret (Kenya), Université Mohammed V-Agdal, Rabat (Morocco), Universidade Eduardo Mondlane, Maputo (Mozambique) and the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban (South Africa), cooperate closely with BIGSAS in recruitment, selection, training and mentoring of doctoral students. Other partners are the Universities of the Africa-Europe Group for Interdisciplinary Studies, AEGIS.

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## **BIGSAS*works!***

With *BIGSASworks!* we aim at offering Junior Fellows at the Graduate School of African Studies a platform for publishing research-related articles. This new online-journal provides an excellent platform for representing and promoting the idea of BIGSAS. It opens a space for showcasing ongoing research, creating transparency of the work carried out by Junior Fellows and providing a space for trying out articles and working jointly on them towards further publication. Each issue focuses on a certain thematic field or theoretical concept and Junior Fellows from any discipline are invited to submit papers, enabling common interests beyond the predetermined BIGSAS research areas to flourish. At the same time *BIGSASworks!* offers its workgroup participants deeper insights into and practical experience of what it means to be an editor. Last but not least *BIGSASworks!* makes BIGSAS and its research(ers), (i.e. us!), visible before our theses are published.

The name *BIGSASworks!* had various implications when we first chose it. First and foremost it is an abbreviation of "BIGSAS Working Papers!". Secondly, it is meant to show the work of our BIGSAS "work groups", so indeed it is the works that are resulting from a structure like BIGSAS. Thirdly, taking "works" as a verb, it demonstrates the work that we as BIGSAS Fellows carry out, with *BIGSASworks!* guaranteeing us a visible output in addition to our theses.

Bayreuth, April 2011

Antje Daniel, Katharina Fink, Lena Kroeker, Jaana Schütze

## The Editors of this Volume

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University, Berlin, and has worked as a lecturer at the Department of Population and Social Geography at the University of Bayreuth.

## Women's Life Worlds 'In-Between' Foreword by Erdmute Alber

It happened when I did my first field research in Africa as a PHD student in 1992 in a small village in Northern Benin. Together with my translator and field assistant I visited an old village chief and asked him for an interview.

When my assistant introduced me and explained to the chief why I was here and what I was doing, the old chief suddenly asked him if I was a man or a woman. Without translating that little piece of conversation to me, thinking that I would not understand it by myself at all, my field assistant answered the chief in the local language, telling him that I was a woman even if I looked like a man. Finally, he added that it is not so unusual for European women to travel alone or even to work overseas.

The fact that gender matters is now a given in African Studies. But nevertheless, as I was watched, armed with only basic knowledge of the local language, how my (male) field assistant talked about me being a woman even if I did not appear, to him and obviously also to the chief, to look like one, I understood that gender issues are not only one of many possible themes for anthropological research, but involve every kind of field research and every interaction as a researcher. This insight has accompanied my whole professional career up to now, and I am therefore very pleased that it is at the core of professional academic thinking by actual PHD students doing research in Africa and editing this volume, which I have the honor to present.

As a researcher, I (as everybody) am perceived as being a woman (or a man) who behaves in a particular manner, be it woman-like or not. When I did my field research on chieftaincy as a PHD student, the first irritation for some of the people I interviewed was that a woman could be interested in things that are mainly seen as being male issues. It was not just my physical appearance, or the fact that I wore trousers and rode a motorbike, that made people think that I was a man, but also the fact that I was interested in politics and chieftaincy. So, in a way, I appeared to them as being something "in-between" – a woman who behaved like a man and had male



interests and a woman who spent her time with a male translator and with mainly male interview partners. Researchers are always in-between, between their roles as women, men, students on the one hand, and, on the other, as taking on a role in the field. My role was, at that time, that of a man-like woman. That changed when I brought my daughter along with me. I still spent most of the time with men, but in our every-day conversations women became much more open with me, maybe because they felt that even if I acted like a man, I shared with them the experience of caring for my child. Obviously, when I started doing my interviews with old chiefs in company of my then one-year-old child, the question of whether I was a man was never again posed.

During that time I learned that the way in which people answered my questions was always influenced by the simple fact that they were talking to a woman from whom they expected a specific kind of behavior and a special way of thinking. The way we, as researchers, perceive our research themes and the people we are working with during field research is also always influenced by our ways of thinking and constructions of our gender identity as well as how we perceive the gender identity of the people we are working with. For a professional researcher, this is another point of being in-between: reflecting one's own gender identity and perceiving that of our research partners.

When I did my first field research in Africa, about chieftaincy in Northern Benin, my whole research did not only have a gender bias because I mainly talked to older men, and because chieftaincy is mainly seen as a male issue. It was also a gender issue because I did it as being a woman, and as such, I had to explain why a young woman from Europe travelled to West Africa alone and without a man's authority to conduct interviews with old men there.

Since then, times have changed. Gender issues, as the introduction to this book also broaches, are seen as being crucial not only for issues regarding field research but also for the organization of the production of knowledge in the (social) sciences. When the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS) was founded in 2007, we<sup>1</sup> aimed to supervise 100 PHD students (50

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1 BIGSAS was founded in 2007 by 23 lecturers and professors working for the department of African studies at Bayreuth University. We aimed to provide the Institute of African Studies at the University of Bayreuth with a highly qualified graduate school with a special focus on young academics coming from Africa. BIGSAS is financed by the 'Excellence

female and 50 male) during a period of 5 years. Of these, we hoped that 50% would come from Africa and 50% from Germany and the rest of Europe, which would enable students with differing cultural backgrounds to work jointly in the field of African Studies. Now that the five years are nearly up, both aims can be seen to have been fulfilled. But what we did not expect, as it was not something that we had reflected upon previously, was the fact that the majority of our PHD students coming from Universities in Africa are male students, whereas the majority of the students coming from European and German universities are female. Thus, our aim will be fulfilled, but, again, in a more gendered way than expected.

As one of the deans of BIGSAS, I am proud to present the first volume of the new BIGSAS*works!* series. The series is completely edited and planned by our PHD students. It was the initiative of the PHD students to create the series and to edit this very first volume, and it was their decision to choose *women's life worlds in – between* as its title and subject. They have, from the beginning of their being at Bayreuth University, realized how crucial the gender aspect is, not only within many of their PHD projects, but also within the everyday life of BIGSAS and the communication of the Junior Fellows (as BIGSAS calls its PHD students) within BIGSAS. The editors started with that observation, and then decided to publish a volume about women's life worlds "in-between", thus narrowing the more general gender theme down to the lives of individual women in Africa.

This decision paved the way towards a fresh and somewhat new way of thinking about gender issues. It is new in two aspects: Firstly, even if four female researchers – Antje Daniel, Katharina Fink, Lena Kroecker and Jaana Schütze – took the initiative of planning and editing the volume, there were several male colleagues who offered their contributions, of whom 2 were selected: Samuel Ndogo and Christian Ungruhe. The fact that male PHD researchers have become interested and academically engaged in women's life worlds and offer contributions to a volume dealing with that subject represents a new way of thinking that does not restrict gender to be a solely a female issue. Within BIGSAS, there are many PHD themes being worked on by male researchers that touch upon "female issues" without anybody being surprised. This was not the case 20 years ago. For many years, gender has been mainly perceived as dealing with "female issues" and not as looking at the negotiations around gender constructions. In BIGSAS there are today not only

dissertation projects by men dealing with gender constructions. There is a new, non-dogmatic openness which shows that the perception of gender has very much changed in the new generation of PHD students.

The second "new" aspect of looking at gender issues in this volume is a perspective that sets women actors embedded in a specific life world into the focus of reflection. This approach seems to be represented in many of the PHD projects within BIGSAS, and, thus, in a new generation of researchers dealing with gender issues. The "protagonists" of this volume are specific and individual women in Africa. They interest and fascinate the scholars because of the differentiated life worlds they represent as well as the variety of circumstances they deal with in their everyday lives. It is more the life stories and the everyday struggle of the women that interest the researchers than discussions about feminism or gender theory at an abstract level. This very first volume of *BIGSASworks!* therefore offers a wide insight into a plurality of living conditions for women in Africa and a concise reflection by scholars who are aware that they are trained in Europe and that their perspectives, even if female, differ from those of their protagonists.

Each woman's life world in-between which is depicted in this volume is, therefore, embedded in a specific time and space as well as in a specific socio-economic and political framework which influence the individual possibilities open to her as someone "in-between". The chapters of this book try to understand women's life worlds within these frameworks whilst always acknowledging women's individual capacities of acting by themselves. This perspective is not ideological at all, nor does it take ideas and perceptions of women in Africa as a benchmark for judging and theorizing about the gender issue. Rather, it offers the opportunity to represent and reflect upon the plurality of women's lives. This approach makes the reading of every chapter of this volume a pleasure, not only, I hope, for the supervisors of the PHD theses but also for women and men, here and there, in Europe as well as in Africa, or in-between.

**Erdmute Alber** holds the chair of Social Anthropology at the University of Bayreuth. She is Vice-Dean of the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies (BIGSAS). Her research themes include the political Anthropology as well as kinship, intergenerational relations and childhood in West Africa. She realized field research in Peru and West Africa, mainly Benin.

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## Women's Life Worlds 'In-Between': An Introduction to BIGSASworks!

By Antje Daniel, Katharina Fink, Lena Kroeker, Jaana Schütze

At the time of publication of this journal, 71 doctoral students, 40 of whom come from African countries, are living, working on, and discussing Africa's diverse realities in Bayreuth, Germany. We have come from places all over the world to this small town to work together on our individual PhD projects as well as to explore theoretical and practical scientific models. This multitude of backgrounds and viewpoints makes our everyday lives uniquely and productively diverse: Whether in abstract discussions or in hands-on planning sessions, the meeting of ideas and experiences form the overall structure of our lives and represent the backdrop of our academic work.

Sitting together in a café in Bayreuth, ideas crisscross the air over our table. The female Junior Fellows of our graduate school are meeting today to imagine and organize an international and inter-generational network of women both in academia and the corporate world— a network of female students, alumni and mentors that binds academic expertise, experience and leadership. This project translates theory into practice: Some of us around the coffee table are targeting questions around women's life worlds and gender relations explicitly as core questions in our PhD projects. Others deal with women's life worlds in an implicit, more entangled way, perceiving gender as a category that crosscuts their lines of investigation. Looking at contemporary women's life worlds links, for example, the past and the future: as female students, some of whom are forging an academic career for themselves, our discussions on a personal future entail ideas on home *and* office, home *or* office or even 'home office'. We are all performing gender roles on a daily basis. Whether we agree with it, struggle against it, challenge it or affirm it – gender, as well as race, is a key topos of identity formation/discourses.

The discussion is rich with anticipation and carried by the euphoric energy of people working together on the exploration of one idea. After

a while, though, a number of questions come up that lead directly to the core theme of this journal and that illustrate the necessity of a forum for exchange such as this first issue of the newly founded journal *BIGSASworks!*: Colleagues bring up critical points regarding the practical implementation of the proposed project, as well as its underlying assumptions. What does it mean to be a female academic in my context? What are the parameters which frame our discussion? What are the underlying, perhaps unconscious presumptions of our terminology? Is the reading of gender we have used so far in our debate one I can subscribe to? What does it mean to be (described as) a woman in Europe or Africa?

It is these very basic questions that broaden our horizon on the debate of gender and sex; on hegemonic masculinity, on the challenges and (im-)possibilities of reviewing gender in the academic world, understood as both the academic system and the graduate school we are part of. The topics raised over coffee allow for something that does not happen too often in the academic matrix – connecting academic work to the – private or public – lives we live.

Biographies, lifestyles, dreams and ideologies clash in the “contact zone” (Clifford 1997) created by a meeting of different ideas of gender and ‘being a woman’. The scene from the café in Bayreuth can be understood as a culminating point of a multitude of discursive strands that influence the way we write and think. In small incidents such as this we encounter the productive detachment that disagreement provides – a fruitful moment of political “tectonics” (Piesche 2009). When ideas meet and clash, a space ‘in-between’ develops that allows for a re-vision of all concepts involved. It is such a space which we wish for and aim at working towards. This academic journal represents a step towards this – by sharing perspectives which are not necessarily aligned or always agreed with, but which initiate an exchange of ideas.

Our discussion and this search for spaces ‘in-between’ lead us to revive old debates. African thinkers opposed Western concepts, searching for a kind of feminism beyond traditional roles and beyond Western feminism, which basically antagonizes women’s subordination due to patriarchy. African women, more than Western women, confronted local order, colonialism, post-colonialism and global influences alike. The United Nations Conferences of Women were pivotal to the birth of African feminism. In the beginning of the 1980s, alternative concepts of development and non-Western forms of feminism gained ground (cf. Pietilä 2007: 44) and questioned the idea

of 'global sisterhood' (cf. Wichterich 2000, which had resulted from the conferences. Within the frame of the conferences as well as in academic debates, Western feminism was perceived as a white, middle-class, heterosexual, essentialist construct deriving from the European and American women's movement of the 1960s. A non-Western viewpoint therefore criticized the ignorance of the lifestyles and visions of women from non-industrialized countries: 'Gender equality', 'sisterhood', 'motherhood', 'feminism', 'womanism' – concepts from different times and locations get their share of attention.

Merging with postcolonial ideas, aspects of race, history, culture and society as well as geographic differences have been discussed under terms such as postcolonial feminist theory, with a range of approaches and authors from Spivak (1988) to Oyěwùmí (2005).<sup>2</sup>

Writers and African feminist activists deal with this in a number of ways, of which two strategies can be highlighted: One approach criticizes mainstream Western feminism for its restricted view, yet tries to broaden the concept to make it work for the struggle of African women, the second approach dismisses feminism as a whole as a Western imperialist concept (cf. Amadu 2006: 3f) and as inappropriate for the condition of African realities. There is no global, inclusive 'sisterhood', rather the continuation of a "sisterarchy" based on access to power (Nzegwu: 2002). As a basic point of criticism, Ogun-dipe-Leslie (1994) argues that African feminism does not have to be in opposition to men, or to neglect biological roles and motherhood; rather it has to be understood in the context of the cultural and societal environment and has to involve women *and* men.

All these discussions lead us to re-think particular women's issues in Africa. If African women have different positions to Western feminism, how do they perceive themselves? And: How and to what extent do women change their life worlds when they feel disadvantaged or discontented? To what extent are women expanding their social, political or economic realm? Does this change result in a re-definition of gender roles? How do women in Africa deal with gendered hierarchies and authority? Are there conflicts or 'in-betweens' among 'traditional roles' and the behavior of women? What do we learn from the empirical data and experiences gained within our various research projects?

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2 The topic has been tackled in different lights, as feminism and the women's rights movement, womanism (cf. Walker 1984), sisterarchy (cf. Nzegwu) or a Muslim outlook on Westernized discourses. A discussion of different perspectives can be found in Arndt (2001) and Oyěwùmí (2005), Walker (1984), El Gatit (2009).

All these questions surround one core content: women's life worlds 'in-between'. 'In-betweenness' refers here to a situation when the life worlds of women transform, resulting from social, political, economic or environmental changes or uncertainties. In such a situation women negotiate between conflicting or contradictory assumed norms, roles, social practices or orders. Opportunities for women may change, expand or become limited. For example, women can rethink their roles and behavior, be it temporary or in long term perspectives.

Following this view we focus on situations of 'in-betweenness' of women in different African countries and in diverse realms of life, which include the economy, socio-political spheres, family, ecology, or migration.

The articles in this first issue of BIGSAS *works!* not only illustrate contemporary life worlds of women but depict processes of change within them from the perspectives of African Literature, Geography, Anthropology and Sociology.

Literary scholar Samuel Ndogo analyzes the autobiography of an exceptional Kenyan author and activist: Wangari Maathai. The title of her autobiography, *Unbowed* (2006), already suggests friction between her life trajectory and cultural notions of womanhood. However, the title also shows pride at having withstood opposition, which at the same time contests a society's readiness to tolerate an exception. Ndogo reveals the construction of the self of an activist as a process of writing, and asks how a biography is embedded in the socio-cultural situation, as well as how the cultural environment shapes the individual.

Katharina Nambula's paper shares Ndogo's perspective of Literature Studies and shows how the female protagonists in *Waiting*, written by Goretti Kyomuhendo (2007), survive in a politically instable and male dominated society during the reign of Idi Amin in Uganda. Facing the men's inability to sort out the chaos, Kyomuhendo's female characters temporarily deploy their hidden strengths to resume some order. As soon as men re-enter their former positions though, gender relations are back to normal. Yet the women gain a substantially better reputation and standing as they demonstrate problem solving capacities. Kyomuhendo therewith pinpoints the underestimated power of females in her society; yet this power is only revealed on a temporary basis.



Other aspects of uncertainty and how women deal with it are discussed by Serah Kiragu. With regard to global climate change, Kiragu assesses changes in women's livelihoods in semi arid Kenya. She describes the women's recent difficulties and how they are coping with a changing environmental situation. This approach vividly illustrates that a notion of women as passive victims does not hold. Quite in contrast, their mitigating of the consequences of climate variability has promoted a sustainable social change towards women's agency, which also reflects on other social spheres.

Young rural women in Northern Ghana change their social sphere altogether – at least temporarily. In his anthropological article, Christian Ungruhe describes how a whole generation of young girls move out from their rural homes to urban centers. They become actively involved in labor migration and therewith experience economic independence in an attempt to generate their dowry, acquire modern assets, and consummate relationships. Upon their return to the home village, however, modern urban lifestyles have to be incorporated into rural structures and practices. Although the journey marks a temporary phase in the women's lives, it is an important experience which they can bring to their future rural lives and a permanent phenomenon in women's biographies in West Africa.

In contrast, women in Lesotho participate in wage labor on a permanent basis, which is also reflected in their participation in politics and access to education and healthcare. Lena Kroeker illustrates in a historic and ethnographic overview why Lesotho ranks 8<sup>th</sup> in the Global Gender Gap Index 2010 and how women's high level of participation did not change but merely separated gender and generations. While women became heads of small household units, traditional arrangements remained intact whenever spheres of gender and generation fused again.

In accordance with the slogan "Another world is possible" various civil society representatives met at the World Social Forum with the aim of creating a more equal and just world. Antje Daniel portrays the strategies and main features of Brazilian and Kenyan women's organizations and explains how characteristics of women's organizations in the national context determine transnational activism within the space of the World Social Forum. Differences between the structures and objectives of the organizations as well as historic and socio-political processes shape the ideas of women's organizations, the way they participate at the Forum and their attitude towards a

patriarchal society. Varying concepts of feminism become evident as a result.

Even though each article stands for itself, it is obvious that some of them share not only a focus on women but also overall subjects such as migration (Ungruhe and Kroeker), insecurity (Nambula and Kiragu) or women's activism (Daniel and Ndogo). In these overlapping moments the authors create a multi-perspective relationship between women's life worlds and the shared topic.

Of course, the studies presented in this issue cannot do justice to the complex debates on women's life worlds. However, they help to make sense of both complex processes of decision making and interactions that take place – whether active or passive - in order to expand familial, social and political spaces.

The many submissions by students from a broad spectrum of disciplines also help us to recognize that women-related issues are not only evident in PhD-projects which address women as the core topic of their research. BIGSASworks! offered young academics the opportunity to explore their research fields through the lens of women's roles. However, the authors have also revised their material and thus enriched their research with interesting and crucial aspects on women's livelihoods which may otherwise have been left in the dark. In this, we see the strength of our first issue; providing fresh and original perspectives on an evergreen debate.

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# The Personal as a Challenge to the 'Old' Political Order in Autobiography: Wangari Maathai's *Unbowed: One Woman's Story* (2006)

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**Abstract:** This paper examines Wangari Maathai's autobiography, *Unbowed* (2006), to demonstrate the central role played by women in the making of modern Kenya. At the same time, we assess how autobiographical narratives may be considered as a means of inscribing the self within the grand narrative of the nation-state. One challenge encountered in the study of autobiographical writing in Kenya is not only the dearth of critical material, but also the limited number of primary texts within this genre. The problem becomes more glaring when one considers the number of such publications by women writers. It is as if the writing of 'narratives of self' is a male domain. Yet the role of women in the country's struggle for independence, and the undying quest for democracy cannot be ignored. This is because women have been at the forefront of these struggles and consequently in shaping the history of nation-states in Africa. It is within this context that Maathai's story becomes important as it dramatizes how the experiences of the writer challenge the status quo in both private and public life. *Unbowed* traces Maathai's life from her humble beginnings as a young girl growing up in a small village in central Kenya through to her arduous journey in the struggle for environmental conservation, an effort that led to the establishment of the Green Belt Movement and consequently to her being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. Her story is invaluable as it demonstrates personal resilience, courage and commitment in the struggle for justice and democracy in post-independence Kenya.

**Key Words:** Women, autobiography, nation-state, Kenya, memory, democracy.

## 1 Introduction

This paper examines the extent to which autobiographical writings can be viewed and read as narratives that seek to interrogate and deconstruct the history of the nation. As such, we assess how Maathai's story is a challenge to the old political order. On several occasions we see the writer at the forefront questioning certain positions, ranging from the political to the domestic front. Maathai's *Unbowed* is therefore useful as it helps one to see a woman's

resilience and determination to resist antagonistic forces such as state repression, violence, discrimination on the basis of gender, ethnic stereotypes, corruption, and environmental degradation among others. In a nutshell, the text demonstrates that it is possible to challenge the status quo and overcome vice with virtue; good is seen triumphing over evil. One way through which this is achieved is arming oneself with courage, which is one of the overriding themes in the text, aptly titled *Unbowed*.

The paper is inspired by several theoretical propositions on the nature of autobiography. William Ochieng' (2005) reminds us that the anti-heroes of yesteryear can become latter day heroes, and that history can actually be written from the point of view of the common people. As such, neither their place in history nor their biographies can be ignored. Ochieng' observes that the common assumption is that (auto)biographies are stories of great men who have made a significant contribution to their respective societies. Although he does not discuss any work by women, he is quick to point out that the hitherto common people may also have stories worth telling. And this is where Maathai's story becomes relevant in the sense that her voice as a woman cannot be ignored. I am also guided by Linda Anderson's (2007) *Autobiography* where various forms of autobiography are discussed as well as the ideological assumptions about the nature of the self. Anderson is also significant in the sense that she helps us appreciate the historical and cultural situations within which autobiographical works are located. As far as *Unbowed* is concerned, Anderson is relevant in that historically speaking, Maathai's autobiography is set during the struggle for independence as well as the post-independence struggle for democracy in Kenya. Moreover, we witness the diverse cultural experiences the writer goes through, as exemplified in her journey to acquire education. It is a journey that takes Maathai to America and Europe, and this exposure is very instrumental in both the intellectual and ideological development of the writer. The paper also benefits from Judith L. Coullie (2006) who discusses the role of "opposition voices" in autobiography with specific reference to the South African situation. Coullie is significant in this paper in that she helps us to understand autobiography as a "metaphor of the self." In this regard, it is possible to appreciate how autobiography not only presents personal experiences, but also how this can be read as being representational. For instance, one would be interested in the question of how far it can be said that Maathai speaks for the Kenyan women. Finally, the paper hinges on Ngugi's (2009) theorization on memory, which helps to examine how Maathai is "remembering" not only her personal struggle for justice, but also the

historic struggle of the nation against colonialism and the violation of human rights. Individual as well as communal memories are therefore linked through shared history and culture. Taking cue from Ngugi, the act of writing an autobiography may be read as a way of restoring memory. In other words, it is one of the ways which Africans can employ to confront what Ngugi calls "dismembering practices." (Ngugi 2009: 1)

## **2 Biographical Background**

Wangari Muta Maathai was born in Nyeri, Kenya (Africa) in 1940. She became the first woman in East and Central Africa to earn a doctorate degree. She studied for her Bachelor of Science degree at Mount St. Scholastica College in Atchison, Kansas (1964) and subsequently earned a Master of Science degree from the University of Pittsburgh (1966). She pursued doctoral studies in Germany and at the University of Nairobi, obtaining a Ph.D. (1971) from the University of Nairobi where she also taught veterinary anatomy. She became chair of the Department of Veterinary Anatomy and an associate professor in 1976 and 1977 respectively. In both cases, she was the first woman to attain those positions in the region. Maathai was active in the National Council of Women of Kenya (NCWK) from 1976 to 1987 and acted as its chairperson from 1981 to 1987. It was while she served on the NCWK that she introduced the idea of planting trees with the people in 1976 and continued to develop this into a broad-based, grassroots organization whose main focus is the planting of trees by women's groups in order to conserve the environment and improve their quality of life. Formed after independence – in 1964 – the NCWK is an umbrella organization that brings together Kenyan women's associations with the aim of promoting the welfare of women as individuals, the family and the nation at large. As part of its objectives, the NCWK carries out education campaigns on women's rights together with collaborating organizations and sensitizes the public on the observance of those rights. One of the missions of the NCWK is to mobilize Kenyan women and motivate them to participate in the political arena and to realize their common bargaining power. It is at the NCWK that Maathai honed her skills in advocacy and activism in environmental conservation and human rights.

In 1987, the Green Belt Movement, founded in 1977, was registered as a separate NGO, having been under the umbrella of the NCWK for a period of ten years. Although this parting was largely a result of interference by the government, Maathai feels that it was inevitable. All

the same, both organizations continued operating and the Green Belt Movement remained housed at the NCWK headquarters in Nairobi. A year earlier, - 1986 - the Movement established a Pan African Green Belt Network and has exposed individuals from other African countries to the approach. Some of these individuals have established similar tree planting initiatives in their own countries or use some of the Green Belt Movement's methods to improve their efforts. So far some countries have successfully launched such initiatives in Africa (Tanzania, Uganda, Malawi, Lesotho, Ethiopia, Zimbabwe, etc). In September 1998, Maathai embarked on new challenges, playing a leading global role as co-chair of the Jubilee 2000 Africa Campaign, which strives for the cancellation of backlog debts belonging to poor African countries.

Maathai is internationally recognized for her persistent struggle for democracy, human rights and environmental conservation. She has addressed the UN on several occasions and spoke on behalf of women at special sessions of the General Assembly for the five-year review of the Earth Summit. She served on the commission for Global Governance and Commission on the Future. She and the Green Belt Movement have received numerous awards, most notably the 2004 Nobel Peace Prize.

In December 2002, Professor Maathai was elected to parliament to represent her native Tetu constituency in Central Kenya with an overwhelming 98% of the vote. She was subsequently appointed by the president, Mwai Kibaki, as Assistant Minister for Environment, Natural Resources and Wildlife in Kenya's ninth parliament. Winning the parliamentary seat was, nevertheless, not an easy task. Ten years earlier she had told a journalist that "a woman politician needs the skin of an elephant." (Maathai 2006: 254) Although she had not seriously considered a career in parliamentary politics, this was to change when she realized that there were many limitations and obstacles one faced as an activist. She observes,

[w]hile I wanted to do what I could to ensure the oppositions' victory, I still felt my primary role was to bring about societal change outside elective politics. Nevertheless, I recognized the limitations of what one could accomplish outside parliament and active politics as a member of civil society. (Maathai 2006: 254)



### 3 Maathai, the Green Belt Movement, and Advocacy

It is almost impossible to talk about Professor Maathai without mentioning the Green Belt Movement. Through this movement, which employs an integrated systems approach, Maathai has helped to empower local communities on various aspects of development. The most prominent and visible of the activities of GBM has not only been the planting of trees, or greening the environment, but sensitizing farmers on how to utilize the indigenous biodiversity. (Maathai 2006:125) As a grassroots organization based on environmental conservation, the GBM was formed as part of a response to the needs of rural Kenyan women. These include basic needs such as firewood, clean drinking water, balanced diets, shelter and income. As such, the GBM was formed with the aim of creating public greenbelts involving local people, especially women, in the spirit of self-reliance and empowerment. (Maathai 2004)

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the role the GBM has played in various development projects in Kenya, it suffices to say that it is through this movement that Maathai was catapulted into the international limelight. Awarding her the coveted prize, the Norwegian Nobel Committee not only recognized the role the GBM has played in environmental conservation for over a period of three decades, but they also noted how the Maathai-led movement links the trinity of resource management, good governance and peace. The movement is therefore based on the premise that peace cannot be realized without the proper harmony of all the other factors. In her career, Maathai has endeavored to employ a holistic approach to empower marginalized groups in rural areas, especially women. She has also been at the forefront, agitating for democracy and human rights in Kenya. Some examples from the text will suffice to illustrate this point.

The title of the book is derived from an incident (Maathai 2006: 222) during which a group of women was protesting for the release of their sons, held as political prisoners by the regime of then president Daniel Toroitich arap Moi, the second president of independent Kenya. During the Moi era, corruption had become deeply entrenched within the political establishment. Voices of dissent were clamped down upon as the only ruling political party, the Kenya African National Union, (KANU), tried to consolidate its power. Maathai aptly captures this situation thus, "the atmosphere became increasingly repressive as the regime ignored the needs of the people and hastened the destruction of democracy we had created since independence two decades

earlier". (Maathai 2006: 180) The political prisoners were therefore detained and intimidated because the regime deemed them to be subversive. Hence, as they camped at a place called Freedom Corner, on the edge of Uhuru Park in Nairobi, armed anti-riot police descended on them, mercilessly beating the hapless women and injuring many. To express their defiance against the attack, the women decided to use their bodies as a brave act of protest – they stripped naked. Maathai vividly describes this incident thus:

The mothers in the tent refused to be intimidated and they did not run. Instead, they did something very brave: Several of them stripped, some of them completely naked, and showed the police officers their breasts. (I myself did not strip). One of the most powerful of African traditions concerns the relationship between a woman and a man who could be her son. Every woman old enough to be your mother is considered like your own mother and expects to be treated with considerable respect. As they bared their breasts, what the mothers were saying to the policemen in their anger and frustration as they were being beaten was "By showing you my nakedness, I curse you as I would my son for the way you are abusing me". (Maathai 2006: 220-221)

This incident perhaps serves best to illustrate the kind of advocacy Maathai has been involved in. Indeed the mothers of political prisoners were unbowed calling upon the government to release their sons. In this episode the female body becomes a site of contestation between state repressive forces on the one hand and the oppressed women on the other. All the same, despite the harassment and pain inflicted upon them, the women refuse to give up. Maathai sums up their undying resolve thus:

The story of Freedom Corner did not end with my hospitalization or the dispersal of the mothers. *We remained unbowed*. The day after the police attack, many of the women, on their own returned to Freedom Corner. Finding the area guarded by hundreds of armed soldiers, the women decided to seek help at nearby All Saints Cathedral in contacting the other mothers and their supporters. (Maathai 2006: 222, my emphasis)

A second example of how Maathai was involved in this kind of advocacy can be found in something close and dear to her heart – the conservation of forests. She led a group of members from the GBM in

planting trees at Karura forest on the northern outskirts of Nairobi. Just like in the incident described above, their efforts were met with state terror and violence from goons hired by an unidentified 'private developer.' Her efforts were met with strong opposition by the Moi-led regime. She summarizes the experience thus: "KANU continued to mismanage the country's natural resources, especially forests. Our efforts to protect these resources, especially Karura Forest in Nairobi, placed the Green Belt Movement in direct confrontation with the government yet again" (Maathai 2006: 260).

A third example is Maathai's opposition to the construction of the infamous Times Complex at Uhuru Park (Maathai 2004: 186-189). On this occasion she wrote letters to the relevant authorities opposing, just like many other Kenyans at that time, the proposed project of building a sixty-storey skyscraper. Through the GBM, Maathai challenged the construction of the Complex, arguing that it was not viable and that it would have negative environmental effects on Nairobi's ecosystem. In one of the letters she appealed to members of the public to oppose the project: "Do not be afraid of speaking out when you know that you are right. Fear has never been a source of security. Speak out and stand up while you can". (Maathai 2006: 189)

In all these instances, we see a gallant soldier in Maathai, whose first name, Wangari, actually means 'Leopard' in Gikuyu. She employs the indigenous knowledge and oral traditions of her Gikuyu community in her memoir to illustrate how certain values were passed down from generation to generation. For instance, although she never met her paternal grandmother, after whom she was named, there is a deliberate attempt in the narrative to compare the two. "My mother always told me that I looked and behaved like my paternal grandmother, Wangari, after whom I am named. She was known to be industrious and very organized" (Maathai 2006: 49). Hence, it is possible to read the story on two levels: On the one hand we have a personal account in which the writer recounts her arduous journey from her humble beginnings in rural Kenya to her being awarded the Nobel Prize. On the other hand we also have a narrative about her Gikuyu community and by extension that of the Kenyan nation. The two are inextricably linked by shared memory and experiences, so it is not easy to draw a line between them. The art of storytelling and the naming system therefore may be regarded as ways through which the community remembers the past and also perpetuates a sense of continuity.

Which leads us to another point – how Maathai has confronted patriarchy in her personal life as well as in her career. She begins *Unbowed* with a vivid description of the community and physical environment into which she was born. One of the significant aspects of this section, aptly sub-titled “Beginnings”, is the imagery of fertility as well as the beautiful scenery of the hitherto undestroyed land. It is as if the narrator is celebrating both motherhood and the primordial past, creating a sense of nostalgia. “When a baby joined the community, a beautiful and practical ritual followed that introduced the infant to the *land* of the ancestors and conserved a *world of plenty* and good that came from that *soil*” (Maathai 2006: 4). This ritual is performed by women, and it not only ushers the newborn into the world of the living but is also a moment of celebrating motherhood and the goodness of the land: “Shortly after the child was *born*, a few of the *women* attending the *birth* would go to their farms and harvest a bunch of bananas, *full*, green and whole...the *fullness* expressed *wholeness* and *wellness*, qualities the community valued” [my emphasis] (Maathai 2006: 4).

By foregrounding maternal imagery, the narrator is in a sense also subverting the patriarchal order. This is perhaps best illustrated through the Gikuyu myth of origin. In this myth, it is said that God created Gikuyu and Mumbi, the founders of the community. They gave birth to ten daughters, but had no sons. Later, when time came for them to get married, Gikuyu prayed to God to send him sons-in-law. It is worth noting that after they married they gave rise to ten clans to which all the members of the Gikuyu community belong, and each is named after the women. “The daughters made the clans matrilineal, but many privileges, such as inheritance and ownership of land, livestock, and perennial crops, were gradually transferred to men. It is not explained how women lost their rights and privileges” (Maathai 2006: 5). Maathai employs this myth to validate her leadership attributes. “My clan, Anjiru, is associated with leadership” (Maathai 2006: 5). This is because each clan is said to have specific qualities and gifts such as prophecy, craftsmanship, medicine, and the like.

As an ardent proponent of the rights of women, Maathai puts a strong case for the womenfolk, especially from rural Africa, who actually form the bulwark of the GBM. On the GBM website, Maathai stresses the central role women play thus:

I placed my faith in the rural women of Kenya from the very beginning, and they have been key to the success of the Green Belt Movement. Through this very hands-

on method of growing and planting trees, women have seen that they have real choices about whether they are going to sustain and restore the environment or destroy it. In the process of education that takes place when someone joins the Green Belt Movement, women have become aware that planting trees or fighting to save forests from being chopped down is part of a larger mission to create a society that respects democracy, decency, adherence to the rule of law, human rights, and the rights of women. Women also take on leadership roles, running nurseries, working with foresters, planning and implementing community-based projects for water harvesting and food security. All of these experiences contribute to their developing more confidence in themselves and more power over the direction of their lives. (<http://greenbeltmovement.org/c.php?id=11>)

#### 4 Challenges in Maathai's Private life

Maathai's upbringing as well as education seem to have played a great role in shaping her world view. As noted earlier, the art of storytelling was part and parcel of her day to day activities. This folklore served two basic functions – education and entertainment. Knowledge was passed on in subtle ways through these stories. Values were also inculcated in the listeners. Maathai observes that “the Kikuyu stories reflected my environment and the values of my people; they were preparing me for a life in my community” (Maathai 2006: 50). One particular story that she identifies with is the story of “Konyeki and his father”. In this story, four women are held captive by an *irimu*, a dragon. Three manage to escape, but one who is love-struck remains and marries the dragon. She later gives birth to a son who is also a dragon. Although the story has elements of the universal struggle between good and evil, Maathai points out that she identifies with the women, especially those who were clever enough to escape. As such, there are two categories of women – those who stand up to oppose oppression and those who remain subservient. The story, she says, “reflects character traits that I easily identify with and encounter in other people. There is the women's naïveté – or is it deliberate refusal to face the obvious...But once you make a decision, you must be prepared to live with the consequences” (Maathai 2006: 51). This story has several layers of meanings. For instance, it reminds one of the significant role women have played in the struggle for liberation.

On another level, it demonstrates the importance of values of courage, patience and perseverance.

These virtues are perhaps best seen in *Unbowed* where Maathai describes how she went through a humiliating court case that ended in divorce from her husband, Mr. Mwangi Maathai, whom she describes as a "good man" (Maathai 2006: 106) when they first met. "In April 1966, I met Mwangi Maathai, the man who would become my husband, through mutual friends. He was a good man, very handsome and quite religious." (Maathai 2006: 105-106). Several years later, during the divorce case, which would leave Wangari quite devastated and publicly humiliated, the press quoted Mwangi as saying that he wanted a divorce because Wangari was "too educated, too strong, too successful, too stubborn, and too hard to control" (Maathai 2006: 146).

She points out however that she does not remember him uttering such a statement during the trial and that the unsympathetic press had found a juicy story in the saga. She therefore goes on to describe how the press wanted to depict her as the villain:

As it was, there was very little sympathy for me in the press: The reporters and editors, like many others assumed that if a marriage fails it is the woman who is not doing her part properly by obeying her husband. As far as they were concerned I deserved to be whipped publicly for challenging the authority of my husband. And since I was an educated woman, being publicly humiliated would also serve to warn other such educated women that if they also dared to challenge such authority, the same fate would befall them (Maathai 2006: 146).

Although this was a deeply hurting experience, she comes out stronger, unbowed, and bravely endures the public ridicule. She does not harbor any bitterness. This leads us to another example which demonstrates how Maathai has courageously and gallantly confronted male chauvinism.

In her article, "Challenging Patriarchal Structures: Wangari Maathai and the Green Belt Movement in Kenya", Janet Muthuki, a scholar in gender studies at UKZN, observes that "Maathai has been at the forefront of opposing the patriarchal and capitalist mindset of the Kenyan government" (Muthuki 2006). Muthuki cites the example of the GBM's advocacy activities such as the protest against the construction

of a skyscraper at Uhuru Park in Nairobi. "As a result of her opposition to this project, Maathai endured the wrath of a male-dominated Kenyan parliament who described her as a frustrated divorcee who had no credentials to challenge a state decision" (Muthuki 2006). Once again we see in this case how she is discriminated against on the basis of her status. Yet no one dared to comment publicly about the marital status of the then president, Daniel Moi, who was separated from his wife. But Maathai, perhaps because she is a woman, was dismissed on account of her status.

Nevertheless, she did not allow this kind of stigmatization to water down her efforts. Neither did she get cowed down by the threats she received from the parliamentarians. On one occasion some members of parliament threatened her with female genital mutilation (Muthuki 2006). This is how Maathai responded to these politicians:

I'm sick and tired of men who are so incompetent that every time they feel the heat because women are challenging them, they have to check their genitalia to reassure themselves. I am not interested in that part of the anatomy. The issues I am dealing with require the utilization of the anatomy of whatever lies above the neck. If you have [nothing] there, leave me alone (Maathai 2006).

## **5 Challenges in Maathai's Political Career**

After the introduction of multiparty democracy in Kenya, Maathai was the first woman to publicly call for a united opposition. Her argument, as well as that of civic and religious organizations, was that a fragmented opposition would not manage to unseat the Moi-led ruling party, KANU. And, true to her prediction, the opposition suffered a humiliating defeat after the first multi party elections in 1992. As if they had not learned from this experience, they repeated the same mistake of contesting the elections without a well-articulated nationalistic agenda. Although a multi party democracy guarantees that all parties wishing to do so may put themselves up for election, the situation in Kenya was such that the opposition was deeply divided according to ethnic affiliations. As such, the various parties found themselves pulling in different directions. And so in 1997, Moi smiled back to State House, with KANU forming the next government, continuing a legacy of patronage and reign since 1963 when Kenya gained independence from British colonial rule. During the 1997 campaigns, Maathai

contested for both parliamentary as well as presidential positions. She never won any of the seats, something she attributes to misunderstandings and political propaganda. In a way then, she uses the autobiography discussed here to try and give reasons as to why she was trounced by her opponents at both parliamentary and presidential elections. It is as if the status quo could not be challenged and any attempt to do so vilified.

The reaction of the voters was not altogether surprising: Given the political culture in our land I was expected to support the local favourite son for the president and seek a parliamentary seat through that presidential candidate's party and patronage. I could see it was a waste of time for me to argue for a political ideology and philosophy or to run a campaign based on issues. That time was far into the future (Maathai 2006: 259).

Maathai therefore challenges political patronage built around ethnicity and "personality cults" (Maathai 2006: 258) What she intends to demonstrate here is that she was defeated in the 1997 elections mainly because she chose to go against what the local leaders expected. In this case she was seen as a spoiler who was opposing Mwai Kibaki, the favorite local politician, who was also contesting for the presidential seat (Kibaki lost to Moi that year but won the seat in 2002). As Michela Wrong (2009) demonstrates in *It is Our Turn to Eat*, Kenyan politicians have for a long time rallied the support of their respective ethnic communities in order to ascend to parliament. This, according to her, is one of the major pitfalls and obstacles hindering the growth of the nation state. This is a trend where self-aggrandizement seems to overshadow the well-being of the nation. Just like Wrong (2009), Maathai argues that the culture of "it is our turn to eat" has contributed to disempowerment of these communities, yet during campaigns, these politicians promise their people that a favorite son or daughter of the community will bring goodies from the national treasury. This is what Chinua Achebe calls the "national cake" (Achebe 1966: 134). Achebe has dealt with this issue both in his fictional as well as in critical essays, where he sees the problem of Nigeria and by extension Africa as one of poor leadership. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Ikem, who is an editor at the *National Gazette*, sums up the state of marginalization and exploitation of the poor by the political leaders when he observes that they (the government) hold both the "yam" and the "knife" (Achebe 1988: 33). Here, yam and knife are used as metaphors for both resources and political power respectively. As such, there is no way such leaders can distribute



resources equitably. In the Kenyan context, Maathai sees the scramble for scarce resources, such as land, as one of the geneses of conflicts between the different communities. As stated earlier, the idea of equitable development is one of the pillars of her movement. At the same time, she points out that the “Big Man in Africa syndrome” (Maathai 2006: 258) perpetuates corruption and bad governance.

## 6 Conclusion

Maathai ends her autobiography by describing the sense of renewed hope and optimism that engulfed Kenya after the triumph of the opposition in the 2002 elections, bringing to an end the four-decade KANU regime. Although this historic moment was received with jubilation and merriment, Maathai is quick to point out that democracy may not really be the panacea to the problems in Kenya; democracy is not really an end in itself. This is because it may take time to rebuild a country that had been devastated by years of misrule and misappropriation of the public coffers. She says that “[t]he years of misrule, corruption, violence, environmental mismanagement, and oppression had devastated the country. The economy was in ruins and many institutions needed rebuilding” (Maathai 2006: 289). So she ends by stating that although the country somehow witnessed a new beginning in 2002, there is still the need for patience, persistency and commitment in building the nation for posterity.

This paper has enabled us to deconstruct some assumptions and definitions of the genre of autobiography. For instance, in *Tell Me Africa* (1973), James Olney doubts whether we can actually talk of ‘African autobiography.’ Olney sees the African subject as part and parcel of the entire community. As such, Olney’s conclusion is that what Africans write can only be referred to as “autophylography” (Andrews 1993) – which essentially portrays shared life, rituals, legends, myths as well as memory. His argument is that the goal of the subject in this genre is “to merge individual identity with group identity so that the part represents the whole, the whole is embodied and personified in the part, and the linear immortality of either is assured in the birth, reincarnation, and perpetuation of the common spirit.” (Olney 1973: 67) Such arguments place Olney in the league of critics who claim this genre is typically Western and, by extension, a male domain.

This position has, however, been challenged by critics such as Simon Gikandi (2003) and Kenneth Harrow (1994) who see autobiography as

one of the hallmarks of African literary experience. For Gikandi, individual stories are used to represent and celebrate communal experience, while Harrow views autobiographical writing as part of the genesis of African literature and also a prism through which African experience may be appreciated. These works may therefore be considered as cultural autobiographies because apart from telling personal stories they, to a great extent, proclaim the aspirations of the respective communities and/or nations. This argument is well captured by Gikandi, who observes that,

the authors are not concerned with the development of their own personalities; in fact, many of them try to sublimate their own individual stories in order to celebrate their cultures, which they see as collective and organic units. (Gikandi 2003: 35)

In *Unbowed*, Maathai presents a personal story of courage and determination. The private merges with the public in that the author bares personal experiences to demonstrate how an individual can challenge the status quo. This is evident in the numerous achievements Maathai has accomplished in environmental conservation, politics, education, the empowerment of women, and human rights among others. As such, her life is exemplary and a legacy for posterity.

Finally, Maathai's autobiography enables us to see the blurred borderline between the realm of the factual, reality and history on one hand, and fiction/fantasy, imagination and aesthetics on the other. But it should be noted that the common denominator between these two categories is the use of memory which seems to be the link in this interface.

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# Redefining Identity under Conflict: An Analysis of Goretti Kyomuhendo's Novel 'Waiting'

By Katharina Nambula

**Abstract:** Wars in Uganda during the past centuries have caused the physical and psychological dislocation of whole communities from which women in particular can be said to have suffered severely. In her novel 'Waiting', the Ugandan authoress Goretti Kyomuhendo broaches this topic by narrating the story of a family in a state of emergency as a result of Idi Amin's dictatorship. Not just the family members' regular life is disrupted, but the whole village set-up is changed through the extreme effects of war. Furthermore, as a direct result of the violence, the different characters are displaced from the life they were used to and from the roles they used to play in it. The article will show how Kyomuhendo's narrative uses the motif of conflict to explore changes in the characters' identities. Due to the violent death of two family members, the whole community is forced to restructure itself in order to bring stability back into their lives. Although the male characters tend not to cope with the situation, the women are represented as quick to adapt to the changing circumstances of the community. In this way, Kyomuhendo produces a narrative which uses the depiction of a socio-political situation in order to fight for a better status for women by creating a new female identity.

**Key Words:** Uganda, literature, women, social situation

## 1 Introduction

Uganda has suffered severe political instabilities since its independence from Great Britain in 1962, most notably under the dictatorship of Idi Amin<sup>3</sup> which lasted for eight years, where people were forced to live under appalling authoritarian control. Thousands of Ugandan civilians were murdered or forced to disappear indefinitely. Fortunately, Amin's atrocious reign finally came to an end when the Tanzanian army, together with the exiled Uganda National Liberation

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3 Idi Amin reigned in Uganda from 1971 to 1979 when he was toppled from his position and forced to escape into exile by the Uganda National Liberation Front (UNLF) supported by the Tanzania People's Defence Forces. In 1972, Amin became known all over the world as he expelled the South Asian population from Uganda, issuing an ultimatum of ninety days for them to leave the country.

Army fighters marched into Uganda and captured power in 1979. (cf. Bantebya 2006: 117f./146ff.; Bond 2005: xxviii.; Kyemba 1977: 260ff.) The extreme nature of violence which characterized the post-independence political turmoil and wars in Uganda brought about the extensive physical and psychological displacement of families and communities. Women suffered particularly severely from the consequences of these conflicts.<sup>4</sup> (cf. Bantebya 2006: 146f.)

In her novels, Ugandan authoress Goretti Kyomuhendo broaches issues regarding political conflicts and social dilemmas and uses them for the construction of the female characters' identity. Her literature can be considered 'experiential'. (Chimoun 1991: 30ff.) According to Kyomuhendo, a writer best works on what he or she has personally experienced. Consequently, she focuses on the lives and situations of women as this is the area she feels she knows the most about. As a result, she creates novels in which she 'narrativizes' her social surroundings.

I feel that as a writer, I write best if I write about something that I know. Being a woman is the first thing I know, and I know it very well--so that is why I principally write about women. I don't think men can write about, for example, the experiences of first menstrual periods. [...]. It's the small things they don't understand, which are so important. (Gray 2001:1f.)

As hardly any novels for adult readers had been published by women before Kyomuhendo's first work was printed in 1996,<sup>5</sup> the voices of women were nearly entirely absent in Ugandan literature.<sup>6</sup> For this reason, Kyomuhendo participated in the founding of the non-governmental organization FEMRITE (the Uganda Women Writers' Association) in 1996, an organization born out of an initiative by a group of writers who were displeased with the inequalities in the Ugandan publishing world. The NGO soon became an effective disseminator of Ugandan women's writings,<sup>7</sup> contrary to the other few publishing houses that avoided printing manuscripts by women for fear of taking commercial risks. Society saw women in the domestic-family sphere and not at the public pinnacle of attention and, thus, fiction (a

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4 For more information on Ugandan history cf. Gakwandi 1999 or Kyemba 1977.

5 Kyomuhendo published her debut novel 'The First Daughter' in 1996.

6 Only two female novelists had managed to have their narratives published before 1996: Barbara Kimenye in 1965 ('Kalasanda') and 1966 ('Kalasanda Revisited') and Jane Bakaluba in 1975 ('Honeymoon for Three').

7 All women writers who have been published in Uganda are members of FEMRITE.

genre which was – and still is – not easily sold in the country) written by women seemed difficult to sell.<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the founders of FEMRITE felt the need for women to take on a bigger role in the Ugandan literary world as well as to increase their public voice and, in this way, to strengthen their status and power in society.<sup>9</sup> In order to reach these aims, FEMRITE offers financial and emotional support, besides facilitating its members with a resource centre equipped with a small library, computers, printers, etc., which most women otherwise would not have access to. It makes arrangements for extensive participation in networking with other literary organizations and runs projects which are aimed at encouraging and enriching the Ugandan reading and writing culture in addition to giving women a voice in the public sphere so as to contribute to national development.<sup>10</sup> In their works, the authors question the structures of the existing gender roles which attribute an inferior status to women while giving men the necessary authority to make decisions for their female relatives.<sup>11</sup>

Kyomuhendo writes her fiction in a manner similar to other African women writers who try use the 'power of the pen' in order to raise awareness in and influence their readers. (cf. Chimoun 1991) She writes about subjects which have, in the past, either been left out or ignored by male authors. These particularly include topics that had been avoided because they question the status of women in the apparent social structures (e.g. by raising awareness of the negative effects of patriarchy on women and displays of power over women, etc.). At the same time, her work also deals with female views which have not yet been expressed in Ugandan literary discourse. Thus, she fuels the public discussion with a new perspective on the role and status of women in the patriarchal Ugandan society. (cf. Kiyimba 2008: 194, also cf. Bantebya 2006) Kyomuhendo's fiction<sup>12</sup> broaches the

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8 Kyomuhendo was the first woman writer in the 1990s to have her work published in Uganda. At that time she had to pay for the publication of her novel and marketed her book from door to door in order to make up for the expenses.

9 In their work 'Tears of Hope' (2003) FEMRITE authors collected real life stories of rural women in Uganda in order to tell the stories of their suffering. This book was followed by 'Beyond the Dance' (2009), 'I Dare to Say' (2007) and 'Farming Ashes' (2009).

10 Such activities include readings in schools throughout the country, holding public presentations and discussions, organizing writers' workshops, fundraising and lobbying for publications and the writer's club, a weekly meeting for writers of both sexes which gives them the chance to discuss their works with a small confidential and skilled audience.

11 In Uganda, the political efforts of women writers can be seen in the formation of FEMRITE. For further information, see the official website of FEMRITE ([www.femriteug.org](http://www.femriteug.org)) or Kyomuhendo 2003.

12 Kyomuhendo has published four novels for adult readers: 'The First Daughter' (1996), 'Secrets no More' (2001), 'Whispers from Vera' (2002) and 'Waiting' (2007).

subject of how women suffer in politically or socially disrupted and male dominated communities. The stories are told within distorted realities which dislocate their female characters from a settled role/status and, thus, force them to struggle their way out of problematic situations. (cf. Armstrong 2009: 260ff.) Kyomuhendo particularly draws the readers' attention to those problems of women which appear or are enforced through the patriarchal hierarchy in society (for example forced marriage, pregnancy outside marriage, poverty, lack of social security for separated women, polygamy, etc.). Thus, she points her finger at "a deeply rooted patriarchal socio-cultural system" (Kiyimba 2008: 206f.). By constructing her female characters in a realistic manner, Kyomuhendo both allows criticism of the real situation in Uganda and, at the same time, influences her young female readership. On the one hand, she gives her female characters a voice by telling their stories to a wide public. On the other, her female characters are often used as role-models, especially for young women, showing them examples of difficulties women have to cope with in society and how these women manage challenging situations appropriately. The works want to encourage women to remain ambitious in order to reach the goals they desire and not to let society discourage them. In this manner, Kyomuhendo uses the medium of literature in two different ways to fight for a better position of women where, among other things, the hard work of women is valued deservedly, where they enjoy the same social security as men, and where they unconditionally participate in making decisions which directly affect them.<sup>13</sup>

In the patriarchal Ugandan societies of today<sup>14</sup> women still have an inferior position compared to men. (cf. Musoke 2005: 369) Just like their male relatives, they are supposed to abide by strict role allocations (e.g. as wives, mothers, daughters, school students, etc.). These roles are meant to serve and stabilize the patriarchal structures of society. According to these structures, women are not consulted on their opinion during decision processes. Instead, their fathers, husbands or other close male relatives are asked for their advice. (cf. Tamale 1999: 26f.) Often, women's strengths are not immediately perceived in everyday life. However, in her fourth novel for adult

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13 For further information on the Ugandan literary landscape see Breitingner 1999 or FEMRITE 2000; for women's literature in particular see Arndt 2005 or Kyomuhendo 2002.

14 The Ugandan nation is constituted by a set of more than forty distinct societies. All these have rites and customs which are still strong today. Although they have many characteristics in common – particularly concerning their gender roles – it is difficult to talk of only one society due to the country's diversity.



readers<sup>15</sup>, entitled 'Waiting', Kyomuhendo questions this perception of the status of women. She places her characters in a state of emergency brought about by Idi Amin's rule of terror in order to show that women turn out to be the stronger sex and that they can take on tougher roles than those customarily granted them by society. Although this is not visible at first sight, it becomes clear when the members of the community are forced to adjust to the new circumstances. This requires the transformation of certain roles (for example when a member of the community dies, his or her role needs to be taken on by another member); and it is especially the women who are forced to take on the most challenging duties during these troublesome times.

The difficulties Kyomuhendo's female characters have to undergo in the course of the story represent common problems Ugandan women are confronted with during times of great fear and uncertainty. When the female characters Nyinabarongo and the Lendu woman temporarily take command, they, at the same time, actively transform their identities from women with passive roles without power and an inferior reputation into active members who are well respected for their skills and abilities. It is the women's initiative and commitment which causes a permanent substantial change of their identities in their community. In this way, Kyomuhendo creates a novel which does not merely depict the existing gender hierarchies but questions and disrupts them in the course of her narration.

## 2 Plot summary

The story – narrated by thirteen-year-old Alinda – is set in upcountry Uganda at the time of the fall of the reign of Idi Amin. With the invasion of the Tanzanian 'Liberators', Amin's soldiers loot shops, hospitals, banks, and many other things that lie in their way while escaping the attacking forces, wanting to seize as much as possible before these finally take power. Set in a rural area, there is great concern about the rampaging soldiers who pass nearby. Furthermore, the takeover by the 'Liberators', which has been long awaited by the Ugandan population, remains a matter of mystery since no one knows how the new soldiers might behave. Ugandan life remains shaped by uncertainty.

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15 Kyomuhendo has also published two novels for children: 'Different Worlds' (1998) and 'Hare and the King's Cow' (2006).

The book begins with Alinda's brother Tendo perching in a tree on the lookout for Amin's fleeing troupes. The family fears for its safety: they dig a pit in which they hide all their most valuable belongings (e.g. a bicycle, a radio, mattresses, and saucepans) – although well aware of the danger of having their belongings destroyed by termites – and also spend every night in a hideout within the banana plantation in order not to be surprised by the passing soldiers. Their situation is complicated by the fact that Alinda's mother is due to give birth any time soon. With the hospitals closed, lack of medication, and the impossibility of having a midwife come to their home, great dangers and fear become a part of everyday life for each of the family members. Everything about the future is uncertain: there is little news and no way of knowing what will next befall the family. When the soldiers finally come, the whole family structure is turned upside down. The grandmother (Kaaka) is murdered, the mother dies soon after giving birth and Alinda – being the eldest daughter – is left with the responsibility for the household as well as for the newborn baby. The whole family is traumatized. Her father is deeply lost in grief, her brother, Tendo, thinks only of fighting the soldiers together with the Liberators, while Maya, her younger sister, does not really understand what is happening and, thus is not of much help for the protagonist either.

However, not just her family is affected by the war. The whole village suffers from its consequences: There is Uncle Kembo, who had been successful for a while because he had converted to Islam (as Amin called on everyone to do) and benefited from the advantages given to him. But as a result of his own mismanagement, he lost everything. Another of the villagers is Nyinabarongo, a woman living next to the family's home. Although she has a young child, she lives separated from her husband and, therefore, feels the whole pressure of her solitude at this frightening time. Then there is Alinda's best friend, Jungu, a mixed-race child whose father was obviously one of the Indians forced out of Uganda by Amin, and Bahati, one of the Tanzanian soldiers, who falls in love with Jungu and decides to take the risk and desert the army to stay in the village. Additionally, there is the Lendu woman from Zambia who is accused of being a witch by Alinda's father at the beginning of the story. Because she is a foreigner and has great knowledge and experience in the use of herbal medicine, he believes her to have bewitched his newborn baby. It is not until the Lendu woman helps the old man of the village after he steps on a landmine and gets severely injured that she is accepted by the other villagers. The incident of the landmine represents the turning point of the plot: On the one hand it leads to an improvement of the

Lendu woman's role and image in the community; on the other it causes Alinda to collapse and fall sick for several weeks and, thus forces the other community members to restructure their roles and activities because they need to take over her duties. After the rearrangement of the whole community, something close to normal daily life develops. The novel finally ends with the prospect of Alinda and the other children being able to return to school.

Kyomuhendo uses the described theme of political conflict in her novel as a method to trigger the modification and adjustment of the different identities in line with the plot development. After the incident of the landmine, her female characters do not just take over the toughest duties but also take control of the whole community in this situation. By taking command and establishing something close to normal daily life, they enable the other characters to settle as well.

### **3 The Protagonist: a Young Girl of Whom too Much is Expected**

Alinda is the eldest daughter of the family. Accordingly, she has not just been educated by her mother to later on fulfill the role of housewife and mother but is also expected to be the most mature of her siblings. Because the mother is unwell due to her pregnancy, Alinda is responsible for doing most of the household chores as well as for instructing and supervising her younger siblings right from the beginning of the story. When the situation becomes extreme, she automatically slips into the role of the female head. She fulfills the duties which are expected of her as the oldest daughter in the house with a striking self confidence. She both knows what is expected of her and is willing to take over this role when she tells her sister: "*[...] Maya, you have to learn how to cook properly, now that Mother is not well. We have to take over the running of this house.*" (Kyomuhendo 2007: 31) Alinda is naturally considered to be able to take on responsibility for her siblings in the extreme situation. She seems assertive and appears to know how to look after the new-born baby. Her father, on the other hand, is unable to take over his wife's duties. Instead of taking care of his youngest son himself, he places the responsibility for him on his eldest daughter.

I picked up the piece of cloth that I had used to cover the baby and handed it to Father. 'Cover him, he will get cold.' 'But this is wet!' Father said, holding the cloth near his nostrils, 'and it smells of urine.' 'It's not urine. It's the saliva coming from his mouth. Cover him,' I said again.

Father looked at me hesitantly. He looked haggard, and his eyes stared blankly into space. His hands shook. 'Fold it and use the bottom part, which is dry,' I told him. 'I think you'd better hold him,' he said, handing me the baby. (Kyomuhendo 2007: 48)

However well Alinda manages her new duties, handling the emotional tensions seems to be too much for her. Her mother's state of health particularly scares her and finally causes her to lose control: "Just pound the cassava!" I shouted, losing [sic!] my patience. My nerves were frayed, and I was feeling nervous about the blood I had seen on Mother's clothes." (Kyomuhendo 2007: 29) The reader soon learns that she is overstrained by the increasingly demanding circumstances. When her grandmother gets killed while her mother is in labor, Alinda is the only one who is left to assist her in delivering the baby as the father failed to get a birth attendant. "Cut," she [her mother] commanded [...]. 'Cut what?' 'The umbilical cord.' My hands trembled and I could not hold the razor blade steady." (Kyomuhendo 2007: 41)

When her mother dies, Alinda's fears take over completely. She cannot cope with the situation and escapes into a dream where her mother is still alive.

'You're dreaming!' Maya cried out. I opened my eyes. The baby was lying next to me, crying silently, without tears. [...] 'You're dreaming during the day!' she laughed aloud [...]. 'You were singing in your dream!' Maya was watching me with amusement as she began laughing again [...]. 'And you were calling for Mother,' Maya continued. A shadow of sadness fell across her face, and she stopped laughing. (Kyomuhendo 2007: 47)

Alinda fears the future and how she will be able to live with grief in her heart. After the burial she breaks down for the first time: "[...] I sat on the red soil that had been scooped out of the graves, my head reeling and feeling dizzy. A river of tears streamed down my face, and I had neither the will nor the strength to stop them. What would life be like without Mother? Without Kaaka? And what was going to happen to the baby? *Would we survive this war?*" (Kyomuhendo 2007: 59f.) It is this contradiction between her fear and incapability of dealing with her sorrow and, at the same time, her duty to function properly as the new female head of the family (at the age of thirteen) which causes her to collapse in the end. Seeing all the blood at the old man's accident reminds her both of the night when her mother lost a lot of blood while

giving birth as well as of her grandmother's death. This is too much for her and she runs away. "I started walking away, placing one foot in front of the other, slowly at first, then more quickly, until I had put a distance between my weary body and the scene of blood." (Kyomuhendo 2007: 68) However, by escaping from the scene, she also flees the burden of carrying the responsibility for her siblings and, thus, from a task she is totally overburdened by. Her withdrawal triggers the rearrangement of the other characters' roles. It is this change of roles which finally allows Alinda to be a child again. For her, Nyinabarongo's development is of vital importance. Without Alinda's collapse, Nyinabarongo would not have been able to raise her reputation as it gives her the chance to convince the other community members of her skills by taking over the responsibility for the children and the household. As a result, Alinda recovers from her sickness and finds the time to grieve for her mother and grandmother.

#### 4 Agency and Passivity

Kyomuhendo uses agency and passivity in the different characters' behaviors to represent their ability (or inability) to cope with the demanding circumstances. Interestingly, the different characters develop according to their gender. While most of the women are limited in their actions due to their status in the community at the beginning of the story (with the exception of Mother and Kaaka who both die), they turn active and find a way out of the struggle later on. The men, on the other hand, seem to be in control of the situation at first and increasingly lose their self-confidence when the circumstances deteriorate. This behavior is at its extremes in the scene after the explosion of the landmine. Here, both the female and the male characters' reactions are demonstrated and it is the women's (as well as Maya's<sup>16</sup>) strength which is clearly portrayed. Whereas Alinda breaks down at the sight of the horrible scene, the other women remain calm and actively involve themselves in order to help the old man. Nyinabarongo and the Lendu woman in particular behave much more maturely and adequately than the men when a proper reaction is needed most, although both of them lacked a respected status in the village because they were foreigners and lived alone and thus did not meet the expected social moral codes and standards before the explosion. Nyinabarongo, for example, is a neighbor whom the family members have doubts about because she is divorced from her former husband. She is regarded to be a weak woman because she let her

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16 Due to Maya's age and characteristics, she cannot be considered a woman.

husband's family send her home without question while all her children except the youngest daughter remained with their father. This becomes visible when Kaaka refuses to ask her to help Mother deliver the baby, telling Father: "That woman behaves like a child. She wouldn't even know how to cut the cord. Anyway, what can you expect of a woman who let her in-laws chase her away from her own home?" (Kyomuhendo 2007: 32) However, Nyinabarongo proves to be a mature and responsible woman when she tells Alinda how to mind the baby and reminds her to be strong after her mother's and her grandmother's death. From then on, she comes every day to check up on the baby. At the end of the story her status is finally revised. She takes over household duties and chores like a mother, and, in this way, enables Alinda to be a child again. At the same time, she and Father become close to each other and end up having a relationship. This development is openly addressed when Father officially declares Nyinabarongo to be the new mother of the baby when talking about Alinda's return to school. "But what about the baby?' I said the first thing that came to my mind. 'Oh don't worry about that,' Father said with a little laugh. 'He has a new mother now,' he added, pointing to Nyinabarongo. Nyinabarongo smiled reassuringly and nodded her head." (Kyomuhendo 2007: 111). Nyinabarongo gives Alinda the chance to live the life of a 'normal' Ugandan girl when she takes over the role of the mother. Without knowing that someone was taking proper care of the baby, Alinda would not have been able to get back into the role of a child.

The Lendu woman's identity develops similarly. However, her character experiences the greatest change. She is a more distant neighbor who originally comes from Zambia. She is highly distrusted by the whole community at the beginning of the story because of her origin and behavior. But her courageous behavior after the old man's accident turns her into a respected woman and she is finally appreciated. When she comes to the horrible scene, it is her quick reaction as well as her knowledge which save the old man's life.

The Lendu woman broke the spell. She drew nearer and examined the old man's shattered leg. [...] "We have to remove it," the Lendu woman said. [...] "We will use a saw," she added grimly. "A saw?" Father and Uncle Kembo echoed in disbelief. [...] "[...] Has Tendo brought the saw?" Tendo had not moved. "Can someone please bring the saw!" the Lendu woman was now shouting. [...] Uncle Kembo went and sat on a tree trunk, holding his head in his hands. The Lendu woman

called Nyinabarongo to assist her as she tied her kanga tightly around the mutilated leg. [...] “Jungu, you will hold down his good leg, and Nyinabarongo will take care of the arms,” the Lendu woman said, examining the small saw in her hands. (Kyomuhendo 2007: 67-8)

The extreme nature of the accident triggers great fear in the members of the community. It results in a shocking and exceedingly testing moment which gives the Lendu woman the opportunity to present her abilities and, thus, to clarify the community's doubts about her. After this incident, the Lendu woman is accepted as a full member of the community and, as the story unfolds, moves in with Uncle Kembo and falls pregnant by him.

Maya and Jungu are the youngest female members of the community. Maya, Alinda's younger sister, is rather childish in her behavior at the beginning of the story, but is forced to grow up due to the turn of the plot. When the old man gets injured, Maya demonstrates her new responsibility through her readiness to assist the Lendu woman. “Maya stepped forward. ‘I can also help,’ she said bravely.” Like Jungu, Alinda's best friend, she helps the Lendu woman to amputate the old man's leg. Jungu's identity, however, develops negatively. At the beginning, she is presented relatively mature young person. Her manners make it easy for the whole family to accept her as a member. However, after meeting Bahati, Jungu dreams of moving to Tanzania with him, wanting to become a soldier herself. Without further consideration, she runs after the Liberators, thinking that Bahati is among them.

The male characters take a contrary turn. At the beginning of the story, they enjoy more respect and seem both to take on and to master their duties. However, the losses of war induce them to back out of their responsibilities at home (as in the case of Alinda's father who does not manage to take care of his children and Uncle Kembo who fails, out of fear, to protect his neighbor Nyinabarongo when she is in need) as they cannot deal with them anymore. The incident of the landmine increases their deterioration even further and pinpoints it for the reader. It is only after the women's takeover that they slowly catch up. Alinda's father is the patriarchal head of the family. He tries his best to protect his relatives from harm. As the soldiers are known to kill mainly men, he is forced to leave his wife – Mother – alone in the house during labor. However, he tries to help as much as possible by offering a solution. “‘Maybe Alinda should stay with you,’ Father said, turning to me. ‘She can assist you.’ [...] ‘Stay close to your mother. Come and call me if there is a problem. Maybe I'd better stay.’” (Kyomuhendo

2007: 33) At first, it is his calmness which gives the family strength. When the soldiers finally come, he remains composed. "It's the soldiers,' Father answered. 'I think they're coming. The gunshots sound so near.' He sounded very calm and controlled, and this reduced my own fear somewhat." (Kyomuhendo 2007: 23) However, when he realizes that he cannot protect all the family members, he begins to lose control. "There were furrows of worry on his face, and for the first time since the war began, I detected signs of fear in him." (Kyomuhendo 2007: 33) When first his mother – Kaaka – gets killed by a soldier and then his wife dies due to lack of medical assistance, he fails to deal with the loss and leaves the emotionally tough duties to his eldest daughter, Alinda. Although he tries to support her by comforting her, it is not until Nyinabarongo takes on the role of a mother that he properly resumes his responsibilities.

Unlike Father, Uncle Kembo cannot handle the extreme situation of war right from the beginning. He is introduced to the reader as a close relative who is known and disliked for his selfish behavior and capitalist way of thinking. Although he was rich during Amin's reign, he was never willing to support his family. Thus, it is not surprising that he does not manage to help after the explosion. However, as the story unfolds, he begins to grasp the importance of neighborly help. He realizes that he needs the people around him to be able to survive in such difficult times and tries to integrate himself more into the community. When the Lendu woman's house collapses, he allows her to stay with him.

Of all male characters, the old man is both the oldest and the weakest. Although rumors are afloat in the village about him having a criminal past, he is neither seen particularly positively nor negatively and attracts rather little attention from the community. Unlike all the other characters, his role in the plot is primarily symbolic. While his character seems irrelevant for the plot at the beginning of the story, it is of great importance to the development of the other characters later on. His injury represents the climax of the story and triggers the transformations of the other characters. At the end of the story, his recovery symbolizes the recovery of the whole community.

## 5 Conclusion

In 'Waiting', Kyomuhendo has created a narrative full of social criticism, calling in question society's attitude that women are the weaker sex. As a result of the serious political and social instabilities in



the time after the collapse of Amin's regime, the different members of the community are forced to modify and adjust their identities to the new circumstances. The female characters in particular play a leading role in reshaping the characters' identities. Although the change might seem minor at first sight, if closely looked at (with regard to gender relations), the women cause a significant improvement of their own status while also helping the male characters to resettle. However, the women do not desire to entirely alter the social structure of their community; they rather want to re-establish a normal life in such turbulent times. When they transform from characters distrusted due to their social and historical background into active and well respected members of the community, they help the entire community to find their way out of the displacement caused by the effects of war. Due to their agency, they acquire a new and improved status in society which they did not have before; in this way, they question the traditional gender hierarchies which afford men the ability and responsibility to protect women and to lead them out of trouble. Thus, their hard labor and determined behavior is of benefit to the whole community. Especially because they are not depicted as faultless utopian heroes, they represent average women who learn to understand the discourse and change their behavior in their own interests. By creating male characters which remain passive in the most challenging situations, Kyomuhendo critically questions the image of women and their role in society and shows that women are both stronger and bolder than imagined by society. Accordingly, Kyomuhendo consciously constructs determined and compelling female identities to show her readers that women stay strong in times of conflict. In the novel, the women settle in roles which are far more respected than before – merely through their own determination. Returning to something like normality encourages other women to be strong and effective without needing to fear the break-up of the social system which will lead to the loss of their social security. Thus, with 'Waiting', Kyomuhendo, convincingly questions and challenges the contemporary gender hierarchies apparent in most Ugandan societies.

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# Adaptation to a Changing Climate: Capacities of Kenya's Dryland Women

By Serah Kiragu

**Abstract:** This paper attempts to fill the dearth of optimistic representation of the position of women in the climate change discourse in general and their adaptation to climate variability and climate change in particular. Climate variability impacts already affect men and women differently. Predicted climate change impacts will exacerbate this situation. Women, due to their gendered social roles of production and reproduction are likely to carry the biggest burden of the impacts. Unfortunately, the majority of research and writings on gender and climate change have mainly concentrated on portraying women only as victims of climate change, a condition that may blur the window of opportunity of building on the capacities and milestones that women have achieved despite the existing inequality gaps. This paper uses experiences of women's capacities in living with climate variability in semi arid Kenya to demonstrate the viability of according women an agent rather than a victim position regarding climate change, and recommends that the opportunity created by the threat of climate change should be used to promote policies and actions that address the structural root causes of inequity between men and women.

**Key words:** Adaptation, capacity, women.

## 1 Introduction

Climate change is globally increasingly being considered one of the most serious threats to sustainable development and a potential hindrance to the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (cf. Vincent 2007, ADB et al.2003). Africa in particular has been pointed out as one of the continents most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change not only due to its exposure to the predicted increase in temperatures and decrease in precipitation, but also because the continent hosts the biggest percentage of the world's poor, who are least equipped to adapt to the impacts of such change (cf. Boko et al. 2007). Of the poorest and most vulnerable, women will bear the greatest burden when it comes to climate impacts (cf. Burton et al. 2006). Women in rural areas are highly dependent on local natural resources for their livelihood because of their responsibility to secure water, food and energy for cooking and heating. The effects of climate

change, such as an increase in extreme events like droughts and floods, will make it harder for them to secure these resources. Women comprise the majority of Africa's farmers, and the agricultural sector is highly sensitive to variations in climatic conditions. Women have access to fewer income-earning opportunities – they are usually the caregivers and therefore have limited opportunities to find paid employment; some have been left by their partners and others are widowed and girls are often taken out of school sooner than boys, thereby reducing their employment and income-generation options. Their childcare and domestic responsibilities, coupled with cultural inhibitions, limit their mobility, making them more vulnerable to natural disasters. In comparison to men, women are faced with historical disadvantages which include less power in decision-making, less recognition of their economic productivity and shouldering a disproportionate burden regarding reproduction and child-raising. An interplay of cultural, economic and social factors limit women's decision-making autonomy. It is therefore imperative that climate change and adaptation dialogues embrace gender relations so that the specific strengths, needs and priorities of women and men are built on, identified, and addressed.

The discussion presented in this paper deviates from the mainstream perspectives of gender and climate change which portray women as helpless and voiceless and as only entering climate discussions as victims (cf. MacGregor 2009). Instead, the paper aims to provide an agent perspective for gender relations in climate change debates in general and climate adaptation in particular by showcasing the capacity of women to mobilize for climate adaptation and vulnerability reduction within past and present climate variability contexts.

### **1.1 Climate Change and Climate Variability**

Climate change refers to “a change in the state of the weather of a given region that can be identified by changes in the mean and/or the variability of its properties and that persists for an extended period, typically decades or longer” (Pouliotte et al. 2009). The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), in its Article One, defines climate change as “a change of climate which is attributed directly or indirectly to human activity that alters the composition of the global atmosphere and which is in addition to natural climate variability observed over comparable time periods” (IPCC 2008). Climate variability on the other hand refers to variations in the mean state and other statistics (such as the occurrence of

extremes, etc.) of the climate on all spatial and temporal scales beyond that of individual weather events (Pachauri and Reisinger 2007). The severity of climate variability and change on social systems is determined by the vulnerability of a society as well as its capacity to adapt to the climate impacts.

## 1.2 Vulnerability and Adaptation

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) Fourth Assessment Report (Parry et al. 2007) identifies Africa as “one of the most vulnerable continents to climate change and climate variability”, as manifested through impacts that lead to reduced agricultural production, worsening food security, increased incidence of both flooding and droughts, spreading disease and an increased risk of conflict over scarce land and water resources. The continent's sensitivity of its social systems to climatic variations stems from its over-dependence on rain-fed agriculture, compounded by factors such as widespread poverty and limited human, institutional, and financial capacities to anticipate and respond to the direct and indirect effects of climate change (cf. ADB et al. 2003). Adaptation is the process through which societies make themselves better able to cope with an uncertain future (cf. Commission for Climate Change and Development 2009:3). Adapting to climate change entails taking the right measures to reduce the negative effects of climate change (or to exploit the positive ones) by making the appropriate adjustments and changes (cf. Parry et al. 2007). In general, adaptation options range from technological options such as increased sea defenses or flood-proof houses on stilts, to behavior change at the individual level, such as reducing water use in times of drought and using insecticide-sprayed mosquito nets. Other strategies include early warning systems for extreme events, water management, improved risk management, various insurance options, and biodiversity conservation.

Climate variability and climate change impacts are manifested locally – as *inter alia* hotter days, more intense storms, less rainfall, or changes in the onset of growing season - thus affecting local livelihood activities, economic enterprises and creating health risks. This means that vulnerability or adaptive capacity is also realized locally. Similarly, these impacts shape adaptation, decision-making, and action, the latter being the translation of knowledge and capacity into behaviors and activities (cf. OECD 2009). Individual and household decisions

about livelihood strategies and investments in a context of climate risks can thus represent real-life demonstrations of adaptation.

In rural Africa, women form the bulk of the population and mainly support families' livelihoods through subsistence agriculture and livestock production. They are crucial biodiversity managers, custodians of traditional knowledge as they work and experiment with the diversity of seeds, they keep sophisticated water management systems and agricultural technology in order to adapt to existing climate variability. These strengths should not go unnoticed as scientists and policy makers go about their business in devising strategies of adaptation to climate variability and change.

## 2 The Research Study Framework

The paper discusses examples of women's capacities from an ongoing empirical research study on adaptation to climate variability in Kenya's dryland region of Mwingi. The overall research study seeks to explore how local community adaptation practices are generated and sustained. Perceptions, knowledge and adaptive capacity are presumed to form the foundation of local adaptation practices. It is expected that conditions that enhance learning and the application of local knowledge will be brought to the fore for purposes of supporting local communities to improve and sustain livelihoods in a context of uncertainty occasioned by climate variability and change. As a high-profile frontier area, the predominantly semi-arid *Ukambani*<sup>17</sup> region which constitutes part of eastern Kenya has been, for more than a century, at the center of environment variability/development crisis labeling and intervention in Kenya (cf. Rochelleau 1995). The region in which the study area, Mwingi, is located is considered a classic example of environmental degradation and rural poverty with rural residents reporting recurrent crop failures and water shortages due to frequent droughts. Mwingi neighbors a pastoral community and occasional conflicts with this neighbor over access to natural resources, in particular water and pasture land, are a common occurrence. In addition, the district has a poor or non-existent physical infrastructure, and is noted to have been marginalized by past central government policies (cf. ALRMP & Pricewaterhousecoopers 2007; Orindi et al. 2007). The area is also one of the 28 districts which implement the *Arid Lands Resource Management Project* (ALRMP),

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17 *Ukambani* is the region occupied by the Akamba people of south eastern Kenya. It comprises the sub-regions of Kangundo, Kibwezi, Kitui, Machaks, Makueni and Mwingi.

an adaptation project run by the Kenyan government with support from the Global Environmental Facility's Special Climate Change Fund managed through the World Bank. Numerous Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) work in the area supporting local populations through different livelihood improvement projects. These factors offer a good opportunity to study how local peoples adapt to climate variability risks as well as the current status of their adaptive capacity. The fieldwork was undertaken in Mwingi, Kenya for a period of 8 months between 2009 and 2010. The study mainly deploys narrative interviews and focus group discussions to elicit the perceptions and practices of the rural households of Mwingi and the ways in which they relate to a biophysical environment constrained by climate variability manifested through frequent prolonged droughts and erratic, unevenly distributed rainfall.

## 2.1 The Study Area

The Mwingi region is located in Kenya's Eastern Province. It consists of Central, Migwani, Kyuso, Mumoni, Nguni, Ngomeni, Nuu, Mui and Tseikuru, all of which have, in the last three years, been reconstituted into six districts. The Mwingi region consists mostly of plains with some inselbergs in the Mumoni, Nuu and Migwani areas. The highest point is Mumoni Hill, with an altitude of 1,747 meters above sea level. The landscape is generally flat, with a plain that gently rolls down towards the east and northeast where altitudes fall as low as 400m. The highlands, namely Migwani, Mumoni, Central, and Mui, receive relatively more rainfall compared to the lowland areas of Nguni, Kyuso and Tseikuru. The area has two rainy seasons: March-May (long rains) and October-December (short rains). Rainfall ranges between 400 mm and 800 mm per year, but is erratic. The short rains are more reliable than the long rains. The region's climate is hot and dry for the greater part of the year. The maximum mean annual temperature ranges between 26°C and 34°C. The minimum mean annual temperatures in the region vary between 14°C and 22°C. The region has red sandy soils, loamy sand soils and patches of black cotton soils. River valleys have saline alluvial soils of moderate to high fertility. Most soils are of low fertility and prone to erosion and most hills are covered by shallow and stony soils. In Migwani, Central and Mui areas, crop farming is more prominent than livestock keeping because of the areas' agricultural potential.



Mwingi is a homogeneous region inhabited mainly by *Kambas*<sup>18</sup>. The region had a population of 303,828 in 1999 according to the population census carried out in that year and 377,081 in 2009 with a growth rate of 2.4 per cent. It has an average population density of 30 inhabitants per kilometer. More than 95 per cent of the population is based rurally. The urban population makes up the remaining 5 per cent of which 4 per cent live in Mwingi Town with the remainder being distributed across other trading centers. The ratio of men to women is imbalanced in favor of women. In 2000, at an age bracket of 20-59, there were 66,234 women compared to 52,111 men. The projection for 2010 for the same age bracket is 78,885 women to 62,048 men. The last official population census put the percentage of female-headed households at 32%. The region shows a very high prevalence of poverty, which is estimated at 60% with the poor residing in the driest zones, namely Tseikuru, Kyuso, Ngomeni, Nguni and Nuu (cf. Republic of Kenya 2002).

The population in the study area relies heavily on cultivation and livestock keeping. Indeed, 75% of the household food and income is generated through agriculture. This puts a high value on land. Like other parts of Kenya, land tenure is governed by customary as well as state laws. Under customary law, women's tenure of land is based on social relations between men and women, and more specifically between husbands and wives, with few provisions being made for divorced women and even fewer for single women. The transition from customary to state laws of land tenure is usually organized through a patriarchal system since male household heads more often than not constitute the exclusive locus of land holding in cases of individual tenure (cf. Kameri-Mbote 2005). The gender relations in the study area are therefore a product of the interplay of multiple factors, amongst these the biophysical environment, the nature of livelihood production systems, poverty, land tenure, and local culture.

### 3 Women's Knowledge and Experience of their Environment

Women's productive and reproductive roles are intertwined, resulting in the generation of vital knowledge and capacity necessary for

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18 The *Kamba* (also called the *Akamba*) are a Bantu ethnic group residing in semi-arid Eastern Kenya. *Kambas* make up about 11 percent of Kenya's total population. The *Kikuyu* are the largest ethnic group, making up about 22% of the population and occupy mainly the central parts of Kenya. The *Luhya* form the second largest ethnic group and predominantly occupy western Kenya while the *Luo* make up the fourth largest ethnic group and occupy the region around Lake Victoria.

adaptation to climate variability and change. As custodians of homes, the women of Mwingi are responsible for managing the household work, from the kitchen to the farm. Most male household heads migrate to towns and other regions in search of paid labor. Women have to organize timely plowing, sowing, weeding and harvesting. They, over time, accumulate knowledge of the rainfall patterns as this information is useful for optimum crop performance. When droughts strike, men are more likely than women to migrate. Women remain behind to mainly take care of the family farm, children, and the aged. Their reduced mobility consequently enables them to capture even slight changes in the weather patterns. Through their social relations with other women, they share oxen labor for the preparation of farmlands. They also share any new information that has been received from outside their villages. They practice time-spaced sowing to minimize the risk of losing planting seed in the event of low or no rainfall. Frequent experience with droughts has provided some lessons for the local households. Women have learnt to diversify the crops they plant to ensure a harvest. This is done with the household food requirements in mind. *Mama Kanini*<sup>19</sup>, a local resident and mother of seven children says she prefers to plant fruit trees because they not only make her compound beautiful but they provide fruit for her children. She uses the kitchen waste water to ensure that her compound trees are well watered even in dry/drought seasons.

Reduced mobility under harsh climatic conditions seems to contribute to making women more innovative with regard to diversifying livelihood sources beyond farming activities. *Mama Kanini* laments that if she had the ability, she would open a school to teach women non-farming skills that do not depend on rains. She personally undertakes some non-farming activities - for a fee, she plaits women's hair and makes seat-covers. Apart from these seemingly feminine tasks, she burns construction bricks and collects sand from the river valley which she sells to people undertaking construction work. She says she finds it difficult to stay idle. Her efforts in multi-tasking and juggling productive and reproductive duties enable her to support her household with and without good rains. The migration of men has led to the uptake by women of tasks traditionally carried out by males. Women are now involved in the preparation of construction gravel for sale. They also make up the majority of laborers on construction sites where they are recruited by local organizations to provide paid albeit unskilled labor. When they do this, they are paid the same wages as their male counterparts<sup>20</sup>.

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19 This is not her real name. In the following, all names have been changed.

20 Source: Field Diary Notes, Serah Kiragu 2010.

Women have honed their planning skills based on their close interaction with their environment. They plan their labor according to the dictates of the environment and within their existing capacities. Trenches and bench terraces are made during the dry season. These become vessels for rain water harvesting and for the storage of runoff, thus increasing soil moisture retention and crop yield. They also reduce soil nutrient loss and facilitate the concentration of organic debris, compost and water within the crop land. Given that the rain pattern in this region is erratic, any means of harnessing rainwater are always welcome. Trenches and bench terraces are the most common and affordable technologies. Farmyard manure is spread on the farm during the dry season. This serves to improve the fertility of the land and increases the crop harvest. It is the duty of the women to manage the livestock sheds which additionally serve as the manure collection point.

The perception women have of the local climate conditions is vital for the responses they make. The women believe that there is a close link between droughts and tree cover in their environment. Trees are perceived to stop clouds and hence 'bring' rain. Since the women need the rain for their crops, they prefer to protect existing trees while at the same time planting more.

### **3.1 Collective Action**

Institutions for collective action have played a significant role in meeting the social and economic development goals for a large segment of the rural population in Kenya (cf. Place et al. 2004; Sanginga et al. 2009). Individuals working together share risks, they mobilize financial resources and share knowledge and spiritual encouragement. Collective action is conceptualized in two ways (cf. Ravnborg et al. 2000): The process by which voluntary institutions are created and maintained, and the groups that decide to act together. Collective action leads to the creation of people's organizations (commonly referred to as groups) which bring together individuals with common problems and aspirations and who cannot, as individuals, meet certain goals as effectively, if at all. By pooling their capital, labor, and other resources, members are able to carry out profitable activities, which, if undertaken by individuals, would involve greater risk and effort. It therefore implies commonality in purpose, objectives, and means of how to achieve these, i.e. what activities people could engage in to help them realize their goals. Groups, often numerically

dominated by women<sup>21</sup>, undertake many activities that include income generation, asset building, community marketing and social cultural functions (cf. Grootaert 2001).

Women's groups in particular have a long history in Kenya, with the earliest recorded emerging in the early 1960s. Many of these self-help groups were based on the rotational sharing of resources, mainly money and labor, with the aim of increasing the livelihood of the members and the community. Groups have however now diversified in membership to include men as they too start to realize the benefits of collective action with women. Women actors have also advanced in building up formalized organizational structures and arranging official registration with Government agencies.

Risk sharing through collective action by women is prominent in *Ukambani*, where the Mwingi district is located. As early as the 1980s, voluntary communal groups mainly consisting of women attracted national attention due to the scale and degree of commitment in the efforts in soil and water conservation (Kasperson et al. 1995). Initially, these groups functioned as associations of individuals engaged in reciprocal work for mutual benefit at individual and household level. They were engaged primarily in shared work on private land or in small group enterprises. The number of such groups has continued to grow over time. For instance between 2001 and 2007, some 1,358 were registered, with the highest number, 532, registered in 2002<sup>22</sup>. This high number in the year 2002 may have had a political motivation linked to the national elections undertaken later that year. Moving from the traditional tasks of rotational group labor, thatching and firewood gathering, the groups now undertake enterprises akin to micro-financing services/institutions.

There have been numerous theories explaining the factors underlying the popularity of women's groups. Some have claimed that the common denominators of problems shared by women have been a

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21 Some researchers studying collective action have hypothesized varying reasons as to why there are more women's groups or more women than men in self-help groups: Greig and Bohnet 2005 argue that women are more optimistic than men and would therefore discriminate against men based on perceived belief about sex differences in contribution to collective action; Adreoni (1990) points at unconditional social preference where women derive intrinsic benefits from cooperation with other women rather than with men in the context of collective action; Burman and Ardener 1995 and Anderson and Baland 2002 have evidence that Kenyan women trust men less, especially regarding money issues.

22 Personal communication, District Social Services Office.

motivation for women to seek “security in numbers”<sup>23</sup>. As a group, they are able to console each other and think of solutions together. Other arguments have pointed out the social nature of women. Groups are viewed as a suitable pastime activity in contrast to men spending their time at local breweries. Groups with male members on the other hand are viewed as difficult to coordinate, as men are observed not to trust each other and fight for leadership positions. Specific targeting by the government and NGOs can also be seen to explain the increase of women's groups. For instance, in 2006, the Kenyan government introduced the Women Enterprise Fund<sup>24</sup> (WEF) both as part of its efforts to realize the 3rd Millennium Development Goal (MDG) on “gender equality and empowerment of women<sup>25</sup>” as well as part of a flagship project falling under the social pillar in the *Vision 2030*<sup>26</sup>. To access this fund, women have to be organized in registered Self Help Groups or as individuals or companies owned by women.

It appears then, that women have over time positively exploited their immobility and numbers to manage their common challenges posed by their arid environments. In the case study area, women's groups generally consist of neighbors who are friends and not necessary individuals with kinship relationships. Given that they mainly remain in their home zones even during extreme climatic conditions like drought, compared to men who migrate to look for wages, women are better suited to organizing themselves and observing the rules they formulate, particularly because many relate to spatial proximity, for example sharing labor, holding meetings etc.

Interview results from some of the groups in the study area showed that men are attracted more to short-term rather than long-term gains compared to women. Women group members claimed that their husbands only start showing an interest in women's groups when tangible and visible benefits begin to be realized. This capacity of women to pursue long-term goals needs to be positively harnessed as it offers high potential for sustaining investments when women and men are provided with equal opportunities and treatment.

Local groups have become an essential relay for development assistance in Kenya. Government and NGOs work with community

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23 Field notes; interview with key informant from the Arid Lands Resource Management Project.

24 <http://www.gender.go.ke/index.php/Women-Enterprise-Fund-WEF/faqs-wef.html>

25 <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/>

26 Kenya Vision 2030 is Kenya's new economic development blueprint covering the period 2008-2030.

groups to deliver their technical as well as financial support. Given that the majority of the members of these groups are women, it means that women are already a notch higher in terms of various forms of capacities that have been offered over time. The District Agricultural Office of Mwingi has worked with women groups in various ways with the aim of implementing the Government's agricultural plans in the area. The activities include growing and branding Mwingi green grams<sup>27</sup> (*Vigna radiate*) for the purposes of organized marketing of the farm produce. NGOs also work through groups. The Regional Institute for Social Enterprise (RISE) is a network of 19 Community Based Organizations (CBOs) whose objective is sustaining livelihoods through social enterprise. Each CBO comprises 10 groups and each group comprises about 70 members. 90% of the group members are women (cf. RISE website<sup>28</sup>). These groups are trained and engaged in the farming and processing of value crops such as mangoes, aloe and sisal. With sisal, they make baskets which the network markets nationally and internationally.

### 3.2 The Mikuyuni Women's Group in Nguni Division

Starting with 13 members in 1998, this group has established itself with a current number of 12 women who have undertaken a number of activities over this period. While some of these activities have been successful in attaining the members' objectives of improving their families' livelihood, others have not. But the members have learnt to use the lessons arising from such scenarios. For instance, the initial activity of pooling money on a monthly basis and distributing to members in turns was affected by prolonged droughts. During drought periods, sources of income generation become scarce and amidst many competing household demands, it became difficult to raise the amount the group had set. They therefore changed strategy to single projects at agreed periods.

The members come from the same locality, with the farthest member coming from 3km away. They worship at the same church, a characteristic that perhaps contributes to the cohesion of the group. Its composition (a teacher, farmers and farmers/businesswomen in the local village center) is heterogeneous in terms of the members' occupations. The group's activities reflect the shared objective of sustaining income and consequently livelihoods in a climatically

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27 Green grams are quick maturing vegetables that can grow well even with little rainfall.

28 <http://www.risekenya.org/>

disadvantaged region. It has a communal farm in which the members grow green grams for sale. The group also has two bulls, a valuable type of livestock as a source of labor for land preparation. Each member has a goat bought through the group's initiative. Customarily, large livestock belongs to men and a woman has to seek approval to be able to sell these animals. But if she owns the livestock, she does not require this approval. Goats are highly valued in the *Kamba*<sup>29</sup> community. They are referred to as the "bank for the *Mkamba*<sup>30 31</sup>" or the "wealth on hooves<sup>32 33</sup>". Goats provide many opportunities: They can easily be converted into cash and they are prolific. They also survive even the harshest of droughts. They play an important role in the culture of the *Kamba* community. If a household does not have a single goat, then it is regarded as extremely poor. The women's group efforts have enabled its members to own goats which are not only a source of money in case of an urgent need but also a source of milk for the household.

The group has managed to obtain a government loan, a move the members concede would not have been possible as individuals. With the funds, the group has ventured into real estate. It has bought a piece of land at the center of the village where the members have constructed an office for their own operations. They plan to expand and construct rooms to be rented out for income generation.

### 3.3 Women's Capacities and Decision-Making Rights

Women's capacities emanate not only from their productive and reproductive roles but also gain strength from the physical absence of male household heads. Unfortunately, the migration of men from households in search for alternative income sources is not always accompanied by a commensurate transfer of decision-making rights. In the community studied, a woman cannot sell large livestock, namely cattle, sheep and goats without permission from her husband. This is irrespective of whether the male household head is present or has migrated. Women's ownership rights are limited to small livestock such as chickens and ducks although nowadays she can buy her own goat or sheep with her savings from the women's group contributions.

29 The *Kamba* People are part of the central Bantu linguistic group found mainly in the Kangundo, Kibwezi, Kitui, Machaks, Makueni and Mwingi regions of South Eastern Kenya.

30 Interview with a local community respondent.

31 A *Mkamba* is a member of the *Kamba* community.

32 Interview with key informant from the Ministry of Livestock Development.

33 Denotes the Ungulates – hooved animals.

Given that women's earnings and savings are normally low, many will not buy cattle due to its being very expensive. However, in households with absent male household heads, women manage their time without daily consultation with the husbands, a factor that can be linked to ease of access to social capital generated by networking with other women. The male household head takes over his customary duties once he returns to live with his family.

#### **4 Conclusion**

As a product of their social roles, men and women possess specialized skills and strengths and perform fundamental roles in their communities to help cope with environmental and livelihood risks. Yet, more often than not, the woman's role in managing these risks goes unheralded and is under-utilized. The foregoing discussion has demonstrated that women in the semi-arid regions of Kenya have positively harnessed their positions in gender relations. Their relative immobility has enabled them to accumulate knowledge of their environment and amass skills to manage the risks posed by their biophysical environment. In addition, women's shared challenges arising from burdensome productive and reproductive roles may have motivated them to employ their social capital through collective action. Indeed, collective action has the capacity to enhance the ability and capacities of women both in information and knowledge generation as well as economic empowerment, which are necessary ingredients in improving the status of women in decision-making. Collective action is slowly but surely being recognized by external institutions as a suitable avenue for delivering services to the community.

While these milestones are within reach, a lot remains to be done to eliminate the existing equality gap, particularly at levels of decision-making and access and rights to essential resources such as finances and land. The knowledge and experience of both men and women should be taken into account when planning adaptation processes. This necessitates adaptation strategies that promote inclusive and consultative processes that provide for the participation of both men and women and address gender equity. Adaptation processes need therefore be viewed as an opportunity for questioning and changing traditional gender relations. The gendered threats posed by climate change should be an additional motivation for governments to step up efforts to remove obstacles to women's participation in development by improving the living conditions of women, especially those related



to education, health and opportunity, allowing them to reach for and achieve personal and collective goals.

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# Migration, Marriage, and Modernity: Motives, Impacts and Negotiations of Rural- Urban Circulation amongst Young Women in Northern Ghana

By Christian Ungruhe

**Abstract:** Female labor migrants in West Africa have been widely perceived as followers of men and research on female migration in this region has long been neglected. However, during the past decades, an increasing movement of girls and young women to cities in the region has drawn attention to the phenomenon and anthropological studies have begun to discover females as actors in the migration process. In the rural societies of the Sahel, many girls and young women nowadays migrate in order to avoid social and economical marginalization and to achieve greater personal and financial autonomy.

According to various studies, this practice evokes fears amongst elders and is often seen as challenging gender relations and hence as violating social structures. However, whether the portrayal of female migrants as rebels reflects the actual impacts of their movements remains to be analyzed.

By referring to various studies on women's spatial mobility in the West African context and observations during my fieldwork in southern and northern Ghana, I want to analyze motives, impacts and perceptions of young females' independent travels to urban centers in West Africa and to contribute to current debates on female migration in the region and beyond. My aim is to point out that girls' and young women's labor migrations do not challenge rural social structures but rather contribute to affording women and girls greater economic and social autonomy as well as retaining fruitful intergenerational relations and social structures.

**Keywords:** Labor migration, Ghana, youth, intergenerational relations, dowry, gender.

## 1 Introduction

"I don't know any. But don't worry, I'll find one for you", Abbas<sup>34</sup> promised when I asked him if he knew of a teenage girl or young woman who had never migrated from his village in northern Ghana to

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34 All names of the informants have been changed by the author.

the southern cities of Accra or Kumasi during the dry season when farming activities have come to an end. We were sitting together with his friends at their meeting place in Zenindo, a Muslim Dagomba community with approximately 3000 inhabitants; a one to two hour drive northeast of the regional capital Tamale, discussing the boredom and struggles of rural life and comparing it with the opportunities and challenges of the urban centers. It was October, the peak of the groundnut harvest, when girls and young women are back from the cities and support the rural community in its farming activities. We were cracking the nuts Abbas' sister had collected and throwing them into her basket, waiting for the sun to set and the open-air video centre to show an American war movie. Neither Abdulai nor Yussif, Abbas' friends, knew of any girl who had never left their village for the city either, but promised to ask around. Three days later, Abbas told me that he had found Rokia, a young woman who had never moved south, and that she would be happy to tell us why.

Rokia is one of very few exceptions among her contemporaries. Every year hundreds of girls and young women from all over northern Ghana leave their hometowns for Accra or Kumasi to work there for a couple of months before going back home. Whereas young women from other regions or urban areas may look for work in order to earn money to pay their school fees, look for educational opportunities or to buy modern goods, young women from rural Dagomba communities, of whom a very large number migrate, are first and foremost engaged in accumulating goods for their dowry.<sup>35 36</sup> Visiting a village in the area of Tamale before harvest activities have commenced, one may meet only a low percentage of the local young women. Walking around Accra's and Kumasi's public places at the same time one can easily identify the village's absent girls and young women working at markets, street corners and bus stations. By far, the majority is busy working as *kayayei*, head porters, who carry goods for traders and customers in the cities' public economic hotspots. (cf. Awumbila et al. 2008, Kwankye et al. 2005, Opare 2003, van den Berg 2007 and Yeboah 2010 for more information on *kayayei*).

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35 Findings from a survey among females at different ages in Zenindo indicate that the majority of girls and young women have never attended school. However, today, the rate of young girls who attend primary school is increasing. This seems to be a common development in the rural communities in the region.

36 According to Goody (1973: 4), Islamized societies in Africa have tended to establish dowry systems. As part of a reason for this institutionalization, Goody (1973: 17) argues that it supports female inheritance (and thus secures female economic status) which is supported by Islamic norms. This is certainly the case in direct dowry transactions (from parents to daughter). Thus, if young women tend to raise their dowry by themselves, it is (although not a question of inheritance) a means to secure their economic wellbeing upon marriage.

Although now extremely common, independent female migration among Dagomba girls and young women is a relatively new phenomenon.<sup>37</sup> Only a generation ago, if they had not already been sent to a relative, females all over northern Ghana rarely migrated without their husbands or parents in order to obtain work in a southern city. In general, seasonal labor migration in West Africa was almost exclusively undertaken by men while girls and women mainly accompanied their parents or husbands when they were looking for labor on a long term basis (cf. Brydon 1992: 92 and Gugler 1989: 351). Thus, females in Ghana and other West African countries were perceived as followers of men and research on female migration in this region has long been neglected (cf. Gugler and Ludwar-Ene 1995: 261). Today, Rokia's exceptional role as a 'non-migrant' indicates a new generational movement – in spatial and cultural terms – among young females in rural northern Ghanaian communities. But what are the reasons behind this enormous flow of young female migrants? How does this movement correlate with social structures and cultural norms in the rural home communities? Whereas men's labor migration in the region is widely perceived as inevitable for the survival of the rural home communities, the practice of independent female travels in order to look for work in cities is often perceived as challenging gender relations and hence as violating social structures (cf. Knörr and Meier 2000: 9). However, whether this dichotomy reflects the actual impacts of their movements remains to be analyzed. By referring to studies by Jean-Bernard Ouedraogo (1992), Maria Grosz-Ngaté (2000) and Michael Lambert (2007) on women's spatial mobility in the West African context and observations during my fieldwork in southern and northern Ghana, my aim is to analyze the motives for, and impacts and perceptions of young females' independent travels to urban centers in West Africa and to contribute to current debates on female migration in the region and beyond.<sup>38</sup>

## 2 Motives and Impacts of Female Labor Migration in West Africa

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37 However, seasonal labor migration among young men from economically underdeveloped rural areas in the Sahel to cities in West Africa has been going on for decades (Cordell et al. 1996) and mainly in order to generate cash, modern goods, to negotiate social positions and to enjoy a period of "youth" (Thorsen 2006 and 2007 and Ungruhe 2010).

38 It is based on 13 months- of multi-sited fieldwork in northern and southern Ghana in 2007/08 and 2010 and is part of a wider research on the experiences of young men and women regarding juvenile migration from rural northern Ghana to the southern cities. I would like to thank Universität Bayern e.V. for sponsoring my fieldwork.

An increasing migration of rural girls and young women to urban centers is not unique to the Dagomba of northern Ghana. Educational opportunities, limited rural life chances and cultural restrictions, the attractions of a modern lifestyle and goods are motives for young women to try their luck in cities all over Africa (cf. de Bruijn et al. 2001: 21 and Tacoli 2001: 147f). Similarly, studies in West African societies continuously mention cultural constraints and a desire for personal development as the main reasons for going to Accra, Bobo-Dioulasso, Bamako or Dakar (cf. Ouedraogo 1992, Grosz-Ngaté 2000 and Lambert 2007).

### **2.1 Female Migration in South-Western Burkina Faso**

Ouedraogo (1992) portrays the increasing rural-urban migration pattern among young Dagara women in Christian-dominated communities in south-western Burkina Faso as a strategy to avoid social and economic marginalization. Since generations, income generating activities have been under the control of men since fields and farming products belong to them. Making money and finding access to goods have both always been difficult for girls and young women although they have now begun to find loopholes in the traditional system. During harvesting time, it is common for youths to "steal" and sell a little portion of the crops in order to acquire personal income, something which is tolerated by the local community. Today, this strategy is no longer sufficient for young Dagara women. Modernization and the availability of imported goods and new lifestyles have increased the desire for material things among girls and young women but their economic scope has not grown accordingly. On the contrary, as they are still excluded from economic activities, rural modernization (e.g. agricultural techniques and the commercialization of cotton and groundnuts) has not reached females but increased income opportunities for men. The growing exclusion of females in society has led to the rise of another strategy to achieve economic and social participation in the process of modernization amongst the younger generation: The independent migration of young women to urban centers. Bobo-Dioulasso, the destination of choice in south-western Burkina Faso, offers job opportunities in the informal sector. Furthermore, moving to the city represents an attempt to become temporarily independent from rural structures and role models and therefore a means to achieve a greater degree of autonomy. This migration to the cities has not come out of the blue. On the one hand, young migrants follow in the footsteps of some of their mothers and grandmothers who were sent to kin in the city to work as domestic



servants. On the other hand, they also emulate Ghanaian girls who traveled through their village to look for labor in Bobo-Dioulasso.<sup>39</sup> Thus, neither the absence of girls and their temporal migration to cities nor the independent movement of young women is alien to rural societies in south-western Burkina Faso. Nevertheless, the labor migration of their young women is perceived as a threat to the Dagara community. Widely labeled as prostitutes among other tribe members they are marginalized and find it difficult to find room to manoeuvre in city. Success is hard to gain and returning to the rural community rather means having to fit into the traditional female role than to live a life as a “modern woman” (Ouedraogo 1992).

## 2.2 Female Migration in Southern Mali

Similar to the Dagara context, contemporary practices of seasonal rural-urban migration of young Muslim Bambara females from neighboring southern Mali evoke fears among elders and men. Grosz-Ngaté (2000) portrays the movement of young women in rural Segou as a means to question the social status of elders and as an attempt to reshape gender power relations to the disadvantage of males. The females' labor migration is linked to the alteration of the tradition of marriage gifts in the region. Formally, it is the responsibility of a mother to provide items like calabashes, bowls, blankets and cloths for her daughter's dowry. But since the mid-1970s, mothers have been facing increasing difficulties in fulfilling this obligation, mainly for two reasons: Young men have gone to cities during the dry season since the beginning of 20<sup>th</sup> century when French colonial rule claimed tax payments in cash and the rural communities were forced to look for financial income. Since they started to come back with bicycles and radios and brand-new imported clothes, migration as a means to generate modern goods has become attractive amongst the younger generations. This also made an impact on young women, since their mothers could not provide a sufficient amount of industrially produced metal pots and cloth. Furthermore, the drought of the early 1970s forced many women to sell part of their property in order to support and feed their families. Girls were not only forced to generate their own bride-wealth but also had to help their families by reducing the amount of household members to be fed during the dry season

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39 Ouedraogo does not specify the time frame in this context. However, it is likely that Ghanaian females migrated to cities in Burkina Faso during the time of severe economic crises in Ghana during the 1970s and 80s.

through their temporal migration. Thus, girls' seasonal stays in cities were perceived as a win-win situation for daughters and parental authorities during this time. But once this flow of young girls to Bamako and other urban centers had taken place, it proved impossible to stop, and is still taking place today even though the reasons for it, i.e. serious agricultural crises in the 1970s and 1980s, are no longer acute. However, the massive seasonal migrations of girls have not only contributed to an inflation of their dowries but have caused moral concerns among elders. Since parents cannot provide for the increasing demands of their daughters, they are not able to prevent them from trying their luck in the city even though they fear that their seasonal migration will lead to sexual debauchery, sickness, and pregnancy. Nevertheless, moral incitements overshadow more crucial implications of female migration. Insofar as elders arrange marriages and daughters are not in the position to reject a selected partner, girls may take advantage of selecting their own (marriage) partners in the city and choose to stay permanently. This option threatens the male elders' status and their ability to forge alliances and gain wealth through arranged marriages with sons of powerful families. In this respect, the elders fear that if they lose the availability of unmarried daughters as a means to establish kin networks, it may lead to their economic downfall. Therefore, one can argue that girls and young women took advantage of the circumstances arising from a substantial crisis in the 1970s and 1980s and have not let go of their privilege of moving to the cities since then. The accumulation of opulent and fashionable items for their dowries in the city reflects their desire to be part of a perceived modernity, understood in terms of goods and lifestyle, and avoids further rural economic and social marginalization (cf. Grosz-Ngaté 2000).

### **2.3 Female Migration in South-Western Senegal**

The relation between the acquisition of marriage items and female labor migration is not unique for the Bambara. According to Lambert (2007), the practice of accumulating dowries plays a crucial role for an increasing movement of juvenile female migrants to urban centers among the Muslim Jola in south-western Senegal. Young women from the isolated region of Casamance have started migrating independently to nearby cities or to neighboring The Gambia since the 1950s. Seasonal urban migration to Dakar became a widespread phenomenon since the completion of the Transgambian highway a decade later which offered easier access to the capital's growing job market. During the 1960s and 70s, young, unmarried females saw the

need to generate income themselves due to the increasing availability and popularity of imported goods like cloth and household items and the inability of parents and future husbands to satisfy their needs. However, urban migration was strictly bound to the dry season when farming activities are interrupted for a couple of months and ended after a few seasons when the girls reached appropriate marrying age since male authorities were not in favor of this movement and feared that they would lose female workmanship and marriage partners to the city. Nevertheless, bride-wealth migration became an increasingly popular habit among the younger generation of females. By the late 1980s, the circular pattern of urban migrations changed when many young females actually stopped returning to their village at the end of the season and began to look for marriage partners in the city. Thus, with a delay of 30 to 40 years, when young Jola women started to move to Dakar in significant numbers, the fear of male authorities and potential marriage partners proved justified. Acquiring a dowry in the city and becoming marriageable in the village as the habitual motive for migration has dropped behind contemporary motives of marrying and settling permanently in the city (cf. Lambert 2007).

Focusing on the studies of Ouedraogo (1992), Grosz-Ngaté (2000) and Lambert (2007), West African girls and young women from rural societies in south-western Burkina Faso, southern Mali and south-western Senegal seem to have three things in common. First of all, they feel economically and socially marginalized within rural structures, increasingly through the emergence of modern goods that men cannot provide and that are almost impossible to obtain by staying in the village. Secondly, and as a response to this, independent migration to urban centers has been established as a means to achieve greater personal and financial autonomy. Finally, their large-scale migration has evoked fears amongst male authorities who suspect a threat for local social structures and cultural decline through the rise of a confident young female generation.

Thus, according to the respective authors, today's independent female labor migration appears to be spawning intergenerational and gender conflicts: Whereas young women are now finding ways to overcome economic and social marginalization, men and elder authorities are feeling economically and socially challenged by an increasing female empowerment. On the one hand, going to cities for individual motives may contribute to social imbalance and imperil social peace within rural home communities (cf. Lambert 2007, Grosz-Ngaté 2000). On the other hand, although female labor migrations may evoke tensions between various groups, women may not be able to increase their

social and economic status at home upon return (Ouedraogo 1992). However, it is not yet clear whether these findings can be transferred to the northern Ghanaian context.

In the following, after a short historical outline of independent female labor migration among the Dagomba, multi-sited observations in southern and northern Ghana among young female Dagomba migrants will describe motives and impacts of female migration in West Africa and shed light on fears of marginalization, attempts at achieving autonomy and on the notion that social peace in the home communities is threatened through female labor migration.

### **3 Female Labor Migration in Northern Ghana**

In contrast to decade-long practices of the Dagara, Jola and Bambara, the contemporary massive independent movement of young Dagomba females to Accra or Kumasi is not based on long established local traditions of female migration. However, it did not occur out of the blue. According to accounts by some elders in Zenindo, married women migrated to Ouagadougou during the 1980s to work as dishwashers in bars or cleaners in households. Whereas this practice of labor migration seemed, in the past to be the initial reason for independent migration among Dagomba females, it has little in common with female migration nowadays. To begin with an obvious difference, the women who went to Burkina Faso returned home after several years of service and not seasonally like today's younger generation. Furthermore, labor migration in the 1980s was undertaken by just a few women from Zenindo and not by almost the entirety of the young female population of the village as it is nowadays. Most noticeable is, however, the shift in female motives for undertaking labor migration. Women in the 1980s went in order to support their families and households during a time when Ghana was affected by serious Sahelian droughts that had dramatic impacts, particularly on rural areas in the north (cf. van der Geest and de Jeu 2008: 16).<sup>40</sup>

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40 Van der Geest and de Jeu (2008: 16) argue that particularly during the 1970s and 1980s when severe droughts hit northern Ghana a downward trend in the rates of out-migration could be observed since it was "also a time of widespread economic crisis, political instability and high food prices in southern Ghana" and people tended to go back to their northern home communities. However, this may serve as an explanation as to why women undertook labor migrations to Burkina Faso instead of going to Accra or Kumasi.

Therefore, this practice of labor migration was mainly initiated by and as a response to severe crises.<sup>41</sup>

Today's struggle of female labor migrants from northern Ghana to acquire modern goods seems to have little in common with the motives and living conditions of their mothers. Nevertheless, working as head porters in Accra or Kumasi nowadays is by no means an easy job as one can easily observe by strolling through the city centers, markets and bus stations. Competition is high among an estimated 30.000 *kayayei* (cf. US Department of State 2009: 142), the load is often heavy and arguments with customers over payment are common.

### 3.1 Leaving Accra, Returning Home

During my fieldwork, I mainly worked with a group of around twenty young females between aged between ten years and their mid-twenties at central Agboghloshie Market in Accra. After a few months spent with them in front of a butcher's shop, which was their main source of income, I noticed a sudden and unusual change in their appearance. During a few resting hours after carrying goods for traders in the early morning, it was not the ordinary mix of sleeping, joking, playing cards or board games, buying cosmetics from mobile sellers and going out to buy hair extensions that characterized the scene. Rather, the majority of the group of young females was busy unbraiding their colleague's rasta braids at their meeting place under the shady porch of the butcher's. Mohammed, my research assistant, immediately interpreted the new way of hairdressing of one of the girls and explained to me that it was obviously time for them to return home: "She can't go back with her rasta hair. Her father would not allow her to enter the house. They will look at her like she is a prostitute." It was getting to the end of August, and by far most of the girls were indeed preparing to return home after several months of load carrying in Accra. "We go back to farm groundnuts. Our families need support", was how one of them explained their collective return home. During the following days, the *kayayei* were busy buying cloth,

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41 In this respect, the beginnings of independent migration among Dagomba women are comparable to similar developments in southern Mali during the 1970s. However, as indicated above, female migration among the Bambara was not undertaken by married women but by young girls who apparently did not support their rural households by acquiring financial means for their family but reduced pressure on their fathers to feed the family by their physical absence and on their mothers by accumulating marriage items themselves (Grosz-Ngaté 2000: 94 and 1986: 227).

buckets, sets of pots and other items for their dowries and gifts for their families. Apparently, acquiring goods in order to accumulate a notable dowry is on top of the girls' list. "We only go to Accra because of the money and the marriage items", was how Abbas' younger sister, Zenabu, explained the run for household items.

A few days later, I joined a bus-load of 30 girls and young women on their way home to the Northern Region. Ten *kayayei* from Zenindo and twenty others from neighboring communities had hired the vehicle and were already busy helping the driver to lift their luggage on top of it when I arrived at the meeting point at dawn. Most of the girls looked different. The rasta styles were gone and their hair was tightly braided on their scalps. However, quite a few wore new, eye-catching big earrings even though their clothing included the usual combination of long skirts and t-shirts. The bus was heavily overloaded and even inside hardly any space was left between all sorts of bags and cases when we set off on the 18 hour journey to Zenindo. Upon arrival in the early morning between 1 and 2 am the dirt road that intersects the village was full of men, women and cheering children who waved and welcomed their daughters and sisters. The latest popular Ghanaian, Nigerian and Shakira songs were being played loudly and a young crowd danced to the tunes on a makeshift dusty dance floor next to the road. Those of us who had just arrived enjoyed the open-air party for a while after unloading the bus and went to our various compounds quite late.

When I got up just a few hours later, I met Abbas and we discussed the journey, the party and our plans for the day.<sup>42</sup> We agreed to visit the newly-arrived migrants and to have a look at the goods which they had brought. When we reached the first compound, Salifa's mother told us that her daughter was not around and that we would not meet her fellow migrants either since they had all gone to the fields to harvest groundnuts. But she proudly showed us the gifts that her daughter had brought from Accra. Salifa's mother got a piece of cloth, soap and fish while her father received two loaves of bread – a common set of gifts for the family as we were to realize during our

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42 When I expressed my surprise at yesterday's big welcoming celebrations he agreed by saying that the girls' and young women's parents and siblings did indeed intentionally stay up to welcome them. However, he put my astonishment into perspective by stating that parties are a rather common event in the village on weekly market days during harvest time when the girls are back from the cities. Obviously parties are a feature for the young generation after a hard day's work as well as a means to stay in touch with the modern modes of life that the girls experience in the city. At Old Fadama, publicly known as Sodom and Gomorrah, the quarter of Accra where many *kayayei* stay during their time of labour migration, open-air parties are frequent and popular events.

visits to the other returned migrants' households . On one of the following days, Salifa showed us the goods she had bought during her recent stay in Accra and which were already stored in her room. They included three colorfully painted aluminum buckets, twelve pots in similarly bright colors, a big and two small pans, useful tools for carrying firewood, bathing children, collecting groundnuts and other household activities – items that are comparable in size in style to the purchased goods that her fellow *kayaye* also brought home.

### 3.2 Dowries and Migration, Marriage and Modernity

During our visits to Salifa's and the other girl's households we always met mothers who were proud of how much their daughters had collected and stated that things were done differently when they themselves were young. Among earlier generations, mothers among the virilocal Dagomba endowed their daughters with household items and cloth for their marriages when they left their natal home for their husband's compound.<sup>43</sup> In addition, money that the daughters earned by helping friends and neighbors at harvest was given to their mothers to save for their dowries. This pattern of mothers providing for their daughters has changed in recent times. "Now they have to go to Accra to get their goods. We cannot provide like our mothers did", was an often-expressed sentiment amongst the mothers of Zenindo when I asked about the connection between migration and marriage payments. One elderly woman explained this change by stating that it is far more expensive today to generate an adequate dowry. "At our time of marriage the cost of dowries was low and we could get our items with less money involved", confirms another woman. Their accounts indicate that the quantity and quality of marriage items has increased over the generations. But why has this tremendous increase, which seemingly forces today's generation of young females to go to the southern cities actually taken place?

Avoiding economic marginalization seems to serve as an explanation. A noticeable amount of marriage goods enables out-married daughters to establish themselves in the new household and gain status among co-wives and sisters-in-law (cf. Padmanabhan 2002: 77f). The dowry's importance for the women's status and ability to avoid economic marginalization is highlighted by the facts that a husband has no rights over it as it remains her property even in the

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43 This is a common practice among various societies in West Africa (cf. Masquelier 2004, Cooper 1997, Lambert 2007 and Grosz-Ngaté 2000).

case of divorce (cf. Padmanabhan 2002: 77, cf. Masquelier 2004: 232 and Cooper 1997: 94) and thus functions as a kind of social insurance in patrilineal societies (cf. Schildkrout 1982: 64).<sup>44</sup> Therefore, Cooper (1997: 64) argues that "the value of gifts and their social significance must keep pace with the market and the evolving sense of what constitutes wealth in a changing world". In order to keep up with impacts of modernity and respond adequately to its challenges, to avoid marginalization and gain , room to manoeuvre, girls and young women from various West African societies are forced to acquire modern goods for their dowry which reflects social and economic values and almost the only way of achieving this is by trying their luck in a city (cf. Masquelier 2004: 230 and Yan 2005: 637).

Remarkably, Rokia's exceptional role as a non-migrant underlines this. When Abbas and I met and asked her why she had never joined her contemporaries to go to Accra and Kumasi, generated personal income and come back with modern clothes and goods for her dowry, she explained that she does not have time to stay away for some months. "Are you schooling or serving an apprenticeship?", we inquired. "No", she said and showed us a table packed with loaves of bread at the roadside where passengers board and alight from the few buses that connect Zenindo with Tamale and communities in the district. "I don't go because of my business. I got it from my mother and I've been running it for ten years now. There is no need to go because I make money here. Accra doesn't attract me. I don't want to go at all. I didn't buy marriage items yet. I get my clothes in Tamale." She started to run her mother's bread selling business when she was a young girl of 12 years of age. For her, making money and being able to buy dresses in the meantime is as important as for her travelling peers. However, generating goods for her dowry is not yet on her list. Her business seems to be lucrative: She is not forced to accumulate household items in bits and pieces but will buy a bulk of items in due course.

Her contemporaries have to follow a different strategy. Whereas avoiding economic marginalization indeed contributes to the motives of young women for undertaking labor migrations, it is only part of an explanation. Although Rokia's case serves as an exception from the rule and, generally, unmarried females seem to be deprived from substantial individual economic activities in the rural communities

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44 Furthermore, young married women in West African societies are empowered to take part in economic activities by having the opportunity of selling items of their dowry in order to get financial income (cf. Cooper 1997: 64).



(Padmanabhan 2002: 108),<sup>45</sup> the contemporary generation of young Dagomba women has found opportunities to generate income in their various home villages. Harvesting groundnuts on the farms of neighbors, relatives and friends during several weeks between August and November is crucial in this context. They are an important cash-crop for farmers and casual farm laborers in the village. A bag (of 1,50m in height) of peeled groundnuts was sold to traders for about half a million New Ghana Cedis<sup>46</sup> in 2008. Harvesting groundnuts is collective farm work. After a group of famers and their sons have met at their various farms to uproot the crops, their wives, daughters and sisters remove the roots and collect the groundnuts in the fields. This practice is one of the few economic opportunities for young women in the village. They receive a portion of one fifth of the yield they have collected as payment from the farm owner. During a season, young females are able to get four to five bags which they can then sell to traders.

One the one hand, yielding groundnuts constitutes a substantial financial income for the young women. Its profitability is reflected in the fact that the bulk of migrating girls and young women explicitly returns to the rural home communities to harvest this cash-crop.<sup>47</sup> However, being able to generate and sell four to five bags of groundnuts qualifies interpretations of female labor migrations as an irrevocable necessity to avoid economic marginalization. It rather seems that the combination of labor migration and groundnut harvest, thus making money both in the city and in the village accelerates dowry acquisitions, marriage and achieving social status for young women. Nevertheless, on the other hand, it is not individual economic opportunities alone that attract them to return home. Parents, neighbors and relatives need their support. Collecting groundnuts is a female business and the various farmers need laborers in numbers to accomplish harvesting during a certain period of a few weeks in the year. Contextualizing this two-fold issue, the practice of returning from

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45 Patrilineal inheritance of land (Bierlich 2007: 14) and their residential relocation upon marriage deprive unmarried females from cultivating their own farms lots and thus from significant income generating opportunities for personal use (Padmanabhan 2002: 108).

46 Approximately 30 €

47 Remarkable in this context is the fact that the introduction and rise of cash-crops serves as an explanation for the inflation of dowry payments in West African countries (cf. Alber and Häberlein 2011 for the correlation between the cotton boom and rising costs for marriage transactions in northern Benin). Among the Dagomba in northern Ghana, the introduction of groundnuts as cash-crops for women may have had similar effects in recent times (see Padmanabhan 2002: 84 and 108). Another source of income for women is making soap or butter from shea nuts (cf. Padmanabhan 2002: 84f).

cities at a particular time in the year when young women are able to make money in the village and the rural community is in need of their labor force reflect intergenerational and -gender negotiations. In this respect, Padmanabhan's (2002: 108) interpretation of labor migration as resistance to denied rural economic opportunities of young Dagomba women who "completely [remove] their labour power from the picture" and thus deny any substantial support in farming activities of their families and community still remains to be proved.

### **3.3 Intergenerational Relations: Tensions, Conflict and Negotiations**

Taking the widespread practices of seasonal homecomings into consideration and putting them into a broader perspective, labor migrations and the acquisition of goods for dowries cannot be appraised as opposition strategies undertaken by young females against economic restrictions represented by village life. Rather, looking for labor in Accra or Kumasi, seasonal returns to rural home communities, supporting the family and community during harvest, the ability of making money in the village and marrying within the rural social and cultural framework reflect perspectives of intergenerational negotiations.

Today's young women in Zenindo and other rural communities in northern Ghana, West Africa and probably on the whole continent want to participate in a young topical mode of life, a perceived modernity with its consumerism, fashion, symbols and stories (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 2005). Going to Accra or Kumasi, 'seeing the city', making money, consuming goods and enjoying leisure activities, and participating in an urban lifestyle that their rural community cannot offer reflects this notion. Although living in a southern city might meet their needs and expectations to a certain extent, *kayayei* may become vulnerable and face previously unknown dangers (cf. van den Berg 2007). Unwanted pregnancies, sickness, harassments by customers, traders and the police, poverty and sexual assaults are common menaces in often poor living conditions in the cities (cf. Awumbila et al. 2008, van den Berg 2007 and Yeboah 2010). Therefore, parents and elders may, out of fear for them, be against their daughters and granddaughters migrating, nevertheless, attempts to prevent them to leave for the cities are often half-hearted and parents let them go. One mother reveals the limited options of a parent by saying "Everybody is going. There is nothing I could do".

If labor migration was all about 'enjoying youth', parents would certainly increase their efforts to prevent their daughters from going. However, since generating goods for their dowry is at the top of the young women's list, serious preparations for marriage and thus, 'achieving adulthood' is an important feature of their circular movements. Parents acknowledge the need for their daughters to accumulate a bulk of modern goods for their dowries since an opulent bride-wealth generates prestige and secures a women's social and economic status in the husband's compound (Padmanabhan 2002: 77). In addition, economic preparations for marriage reflect the young women's acceptance of female role models in the rural Dagomba communities. Getting married and gaining status among co-wives and in-laws by bearing children and working in the household is still a necessity for young rural women in order to become respected adult members of the community and to be looked after in old age. In this context, the decreasing ages of today's young women at the time of their marriages serve as a continuation of their endeavor to broaden their economic and social scope.<sup>48</sup> After bearing the first two children and securing the continuation of the patrilineal descent, a woman reaches the status of a "cooking wife" (Padmanabhan 2002: 77), a prestigious yet responsible position in the household. A cooking wife is obliged to contribute ingredients to prepare food for the various members of a household. Usually, her husband grants her a piece of farmland to cultivate crops that she may use as ingredients for cooking. Furthermore, a woman may sell some of her harvest for personal use. Therefore, farming her own lot of land contributes to a woman's economic autonomy.<sup>49</sup>

Thus, in social and economic terms it is reasonable for a woman to marry at a relatively young age. Circular labor migration and being able to accumulate a wealthy dowry during a few stays in Accra or Kumasi is a means to achieve this. In this respect, today's young women indeed gain a greater degree of autonomy, however, one that reproduces social structures and which is not intended as a tool to undermine cultural values, gender power relations or intergenerational hierarchies. When *kayayei* in the southern cities begin to prepare their return to their rural home communities shortly before the communal harvest of groundnuts, buying gifts for the family, changing their hair

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48 A survey among 50 women in Zenindo indicate the actual ages of females at the time of their marriage have dropped from mid-twenty to sixteen to twenty years of age.

49 It is noteworthy, however, that the practice of independent female farming is a relatively new phenomenon. According to Padmanabhan (2002: 93f) it was introduced in the 1990s as a response to declining harvest yields. Still, it is an issue of constant debate in Dagomba villages.

styles to show respect to their parents and buying items for their dowries to prepare for marriage, they thereby acquiesce to hierarchies and social fabrics. Blending in rural structures and fitting in their roles as young females by readopting household tasks immediately upon return supports this argument.

Nevertheless, avoiding social and economic marginalization, achieving greater personal autonomy and reproducing social structures simultaneously seems to reflect a too idealistic picture of the phenomenon of young females' labor migration and may overemphasize functional aspects, particularly in the realm of intergenerational relations. As Alber and Häberlein (2010) rightly argue, intergenerational relations are neither free from conflict nor do they represent static pillars of societies. They incorporate the potential for change and give rise to constant processes of negotiation. Indeed, perspectives on circular labor migrations among young Dagomba females reveal intergenerational relations as dynamic and quite controversial processes. The opportunity to choose one's own marriage partner (in the city or the village)<sup>50</sup> and the decrease of the actual ages of females when marrying as well as mothers lamenting that their daughters are too young to marry and to leave the parental compound underline this. In this context, parents can no longer count on their daughters' help in the household. Furthermore, the independent movement of their daughters to the southern cities evokes reasonable fears among parents. Continuous media reports of sexual harassment, sickness and prostitution may overemphasize the young females' vulnerability; but also still engender feelings of anxiety in the rural communities. "When they go, we don't sleep at night", expresses the mother of a young *kayayei* in Zenindo. Intergenerational negotiations are fragile constructions. Girls who return pregnant, refuse to return, or follow excessive lifestyles in the cities may undermine implicit agreements. Lambert's (2007) account of the recent phenomenon of young rural Jola females who stay and marry in Dakar serve as an example of this.

It is not predictable whether labor migrations among the Dagomba will develop in a similar direction to that of the young women from the Casamance region. Currently, there are no indicators that they will do so. On the contrary, the phenomenon of large-scale female migration to cities among rural communities in northern Ghana illustrates that social and economic challenges like the apprehended marginalization of young women and changing conditions (expansion of the dowry) –

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50 According to Yan (2005: 637f), generating one's own dowry broadens young females' influence in their own marriage affairs.

although these do have the potential to cause massive social change and tension – can be incorporated into the social fabric in the course of intergenerational negotiations.

#### 4 Conclusion

The key motive of today's generation of young Dagomba females for traveling to Accra or Kumasi after harvest is to generate goods for their dowries in order to avoid social and economic marginalization and to achieve greater personal autonomy. This practice marks the primary difference between their migration and the crisis-related migration of their mothers during the 1980s. At first sight, there seems to be a shift from the need to migrate in order to secure the survival of the home community to the desire to travel for merely personal intentions. Similar to Lambert's (2007) and Grosz-Ngaté's (2000) observations in Senegal and Mali, the young women's need for marriage items and the quality and quantity of these goods have increased in the course of time (cf. Cooper 1997: 102 and Masquelier 2004: 230 for comparable findings in Niger). Likewise, the inflation of dowries often serves as an explanation for the increasing migration of girls and young women all over the Sahel to urban centers in the region. In this respect, the "monetization of bride-wealth" (Grosz-Ngaté 1988), such as the dowry appears to challenge rural social structures in West African societies.

Accounts by Lambert (2007) and Grosz-Ngaté (2000) underline this argument. During the fledging stages of young women's urban migration in West Africa, their movement was not stigmatized as a rupture with traditional local structures. It was a means to overcome substantial, life-threatening crises (Bambara) and a process of negotiation between females and male authorities (Jola). Still, years and decades of an ongoing migration process have changed the male perception of this in the various West African villages. While young females' labor migration has become a massive phenomenon in the Sahel, men fear a dwindling of their status in the rural communities due to the young women's self-empowerment and challenge of gender power relations.

However, to assume that females' large-scale migration to the cities in West Africa in order to acquire economic wealth (making money and generating modern goods) are a general attempt to challenge rural power relations entails the risk of overemphasizing individual economic interests whilst neglecting possible others. Whereas

avoiding economic marginalization and achieving a greater personal autonomy are strong motives for today's young Dagomba females to undertake labor migrations to the southern cities, they cannot be reduced to attempts of gaining power. Rather, as observations in northern Ghana indicate, they are part of intergenerational negotiations and reproduce rural social structures as Salifa's case illustrates. Seasonal returns and reintegrating into traditional role models underline this.

Accumulating wealth and gaining room to negotiate in economic and marriage affairs as well as elders' fear of dangers and of their daughters adopting unfitting life-styles in the city may evoke continuous debates and even serious tensions among generations (like the cases of the Jola and the Bambara indicate). Nevertheless, non-migration is not an option for the majority of young females. Only in rare cases, like Rokia's business, that provide a more promising economic alternative, may young females decide not to leave for urban centers.

Among today's young migrants and elder authorities, fears, debates and tensions are part of ongoing processes of intergenerational negotiations. Young women achieve a greater personal autonomy in exchange for accepting cultural norms and values upon return. Therefore, and in order to contextualize young female labor migration in rural West Africa, these findings would contradict Ouedraogo's (1992) conclusion of young female labor migrations as a disillusion of their economic and social expectations. Returning home and acknowledging social positions and structures is not a failure of intended motives of migration but part of the intergenerational exchange in reciprocal processes of negotiations in which young women gain the opportunity to avoid economic marginalization, keep pace with modernity, and achieve greater personal autonomy.

Indeed, contemporary practices of marriage and migration among young rural women in northern Ghana, and probably in West Africa, cannot be separated from impacts and perceptions of modernity. However, as the case of the Dagomba indicates, keeping pace with a perceived modernity does not necessarily violate intergenerational relations and rural social structures but may be a signifier of fruitful and vibrant intergenerational relations.

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# Lesotho's Performance in the Global Gender Gap Index 2010: Conflicts over Resources and Roles of the Female Breadwinner

By Lena Kroeker

**Abstract:** Annually, the World Economic Forum publishes the Global Gender Gap Index which ranks 134 countries in terms of gender disparity. Criteria for measuring this gender-based gap include economic participation, political empowerment, educational attainment as well as health and survival. Surprisingly, the 2010 index found a consistent increase in women's general participation in the above in Lesotho which now ranks 8th, and has thereby positioned itself ahead of most Western countries.

De jure, Basotho-women have managed households in the absence of men since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century due to male labor migration. Recent shifts in the labor market since the 1980s have caused women to also join in labor migration, and in doing so, like the index attests, female family breadwinners have now gained ground in their educational attainment, access to healthcare, and economic participation and are now de facto heading household units. However the new labor market can only be said to have brought about a separation of households and not an actual shift in gender and generational interaction.

**Key Words:** Lesotho, Participation, Labour Migration, Urbanity.

## 1 Introduction

While women comprise half of the human resource, they remain globally under-represented in many social spheres. The World Economic Forum annually publishes the Global Gender Gap Index (GGGI) which measures gaps in the participation of males and females in education, health, politics, and the economy. 134 countries, including Lesotho, are ranked according to their progress in closing important gender gaps. Countries with little disparity rank high, without any relevance given to the overall developmental level of a given country<sup>51</sup>.

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51 GGGI 2010: <http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gendergap/report2010.pdf>, accessed 15/10/2010.

The study included twenty-five Sub-Saharan African countries<sup>52</sup>. Of these, Lesotho is the one which has experienced the most radical change, mastering a continuous climb from a ranking of 43<sup>rd</sup> in 2006 into the top ten in 2009 and 2010, now ranking higher than most European countries. Even though the GGGI found women in Lesotho to be lagging behind in political representation, the index interestingly highlights Basotho-women's<sup>53</sup> high literacy rates, secondary school enrollment, access to healthcare, and economic participation.

This surprising result deserves a closer look. How is it that Lesotho, a tiny, low-income country without much international relevance scored high in three out of the four criteria under study? What is unique about the women of Lesotho? How do high levels of women's participation affect gender relations in the country?

I will focus on developments in Lesotho to illustrate each of the criteria of the GGGI and will trace the increase of female participation in the four categories. The findings in the first part of this paper are drawn from literature research. In the second part, which is drawn from empirical data<sup>54</sup>, I look into urban young women's livelihoods in Mafeteng, one of Lesotho's economic centers. In Mafeteng, I found a blueprint of the GGGI result in so far as women exhibit a high level of agency in almost every field except household politics. In conclusion, I argue that without a doubt, economically active urban women are indeed change agents in terms of gender relations, but only in

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52 African countries and their positions in the 2010 GGGI: Lesotho (8), South Africa (12), Mozambique (22), Namibia (25), Uganda (33), Botswana (62), Tanzania (66), Malawi (68), Ghana (70), The Gambia (75), Madagascar (80), Angola (81), Zimbabwe (92), Mauritius (95), Kenya (96), Senegal (101), Zambia (106), Burkina Faso (111), Cameroon (114), Nigeria (118), Ethiopia (121), Benin (128), Ivory Coast (130) Mali (131), Chad (133) (GGGI 2010: 8-9).

53 Lesotho's population is called Basotho in the plural and Mosotho in the singular. Sesotho refers to language and culture.

54 I collected data between 2007 and 2009 while working in Lesotho on a longitudinal ethnographic study in collaboration with Frankfurt/M. University Hospital's HIVCENTER and as a PhD student with the University of Bayreuth (Germany). The study addresses the prevention of mother to child HIV transmission from a biomedical and familial perspective. Formal and informal interviews as well as participant observation took place in the hospital, during counseling, at home and with relatives. Furthermore, data was collected in a Mafeteng Government Hospital based study on Attitude towards Childbirth in Mafeteng (ATCBM-study), in which 162 expectant women and next of kin in 12 health centers were interviewed about household-decision making. A standardized questionnaire combined quantitative questions on biomedical data and a qualitative approach to social questions (method-triangulation). Besides, I conducted formal and informal interviews with experts in NGOS, traditionally and biomedically trained health professionals and family members.

particular social realms. This article does not primarily intend to criticize the GGGI, aiming, instead, to illustrate quantitative with qualitative data as well as to interlink women's participation, which the GGGI measured statistically, with observations on gender relations, which result from empirical fieldwork.

## **2 Gender Gap Aspects: A Historical Overview**

Landlocked within the Republic of South Africa, Lesotho is situated at the heart of Southern Africa. Although Lesotho has a recorded population of approximately 2.1 million, a large number of Basotho migrate to South Africa either temporarily or permanently in order to find work. International as well as domestic labor migrants support their families in Lesotho, who also rely on small-scale agriculture as a livelihood.

In recent decades, though, South Africa's demand for labor migrants from Lesotho has declined and Southern Africa's agrarian, climatic and health conditions have also deteriorated. These social and economic changes have had tremendous effects on women's livelihoods over the past three decades. Given these changes, how has Lesotho been able to achieve the progressive gender situation which the Index profiles?

### **2.1 Category 1: Economic Participation and Opportunity<sup>55</sup>**

While in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century southern Sotho tribes enjoyed a diverse economy, consisting of extensive cultivation, pastoralism, hunting, gathering, and raiding, the pressures of dislocation forced the tribes to retreat into the mountains. Conflicts with the Boers over land usage and military pressure from the Zulu drove the Basotho into inhospitable and largely infertile territory, which did not allow for the subsistence strategies which they had previously relied upon. However, the arrival of Evangelical missionaries, who had also been uprooted by the Calvinist Boers, brought about agricultural innovation and encouraged social change in many spheres of life.

In 1867 diamonds were found in Kimberley, South Africa, and shortly thereafter gold mines opened around Johannesburg. Instantly, an

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55 The titles of each chapter refer to the four categories within the GGGI.

increasing number of Basotho laborers began to migrate to South Africa to supplement their families' arduous agricultural production with income they could send home from the mines. By the 1960s and 70s almost half of Lesotho's adult male labor force worked for months at a time in South Africa's gold and diamond mines. Until recently, Lesotho had a higher percentage of its labor force working outside the country than any other nation in the world (cf. Cobbe 2004; Rosenberg 2004: 84).

Women who stayed behind in Lesotho spent their time grinding corn, cooking, fetching water and fuel, making clothes, weaving, making pottery, maintaining homes, and raising children. Petty cash was generated by raising and selling small livestock, such as chicken and pigs and from brewing beer for sale, which was a particular pastime for elderly women. Cash remittances from migrant laborers were mainly utilized for basic family expenditures such as food, clothing, livestock, bride-wealth, housing, furniture, agriculture, and for saving<sup>56</sup>.

Male migrant laborers would spend only ten weeks or so of the year at home (cf. Gay 1980: 74) with women serving as provisional heads of households in the interim. Due to the absence of men, women were substantially involved in building the country following Lesotho's independence in 1964. Female workers dominated many areas of local infrastructural development such as construction, water supply, and in the tertiary sector (cf. Matete-Lieb 1997: 64–76). Despite the strong presence of women involved in community development, major decisions were often made by men on their short visits home from South Africa or upon their retirement when they returned to their marital homes (cf. Rosenberg 2004: 399; Gay 1980: 135).

About a decade later, as migration began to decrease, gender relations again changed in Lesotho. Technological developments in the mines, declining global prices for gold and diamonds, and shifts in the South African labor policy following the end of Apartheid all aggravated the male labor market drastically in the 1980s and 90s. In 1987, remittances still accounted for almost half of Lesotho's Gross Domestic Product (GDP), while in 2005, remittances had shrunk to 20.4% of GDP (cf. United Nations – INSTRAW) and the number of Basotho labor migrants steadily decreased. The retrenchments of labor migrants in South Africa severely affected the Basotho workers and their families by decreasing or eliminating remittances.

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56 List according to value in decreasing order (cf. Van der Wiel 1977: 80 in: Gay 1980: 139).

As the opportunities for men in South African mines shrunk, the opening of Chinese textile factories in Lesotho offered new opportunities for formal employment in urban areas. Since the 1980s, Lesotho has gained approximately 50,000 jobs in the ready-made garments industry, with jobs being filled almost exclusively by female seamstresses. Employment enabled women to supplement or compensate for the loss of family income, as 72% of the formal labor force in Lesotho was made up of women (GGGI 2010: 193). Many women additionally combined formal and informal<sup>57</sup> occupations to generate income and serve as breadwinners after the men were no longer able to sufficiently provide for their families (cf. Gay 1980: 295; Kimane&Ntimo-Makara 1998: 119).

## 2.2 Category 2: Educational Attainment

Christian missions in Lesotho played a major role in education, as French clerics began introducing churches, schools and health stations from 1830 onwards. Girls were explicitly included in the primary schools run by the French missionaries and a secondary school for girls was opened in Lesotho as early as 1871 although, it was attended mostly by King Moshoeshoe's royal clan members (cf. Silase et al. n.d. [2001]: 34).

Boys dropped out of school early mostly to herd livestock at a young age. To date, about 15, 000 herd boys, many of them teenagers, look after sheep, goats, cattle, donkeys and horses<sup>58</sup>. Girl's education in contrast was more easily combined with domestic chores and now more girls attend school in Lesotho<sup>59</sup> than boys, which is unique in Africa's educational landscape (cf. Unesco 2005: 257). The high rates of female school attendance afford Lesotho a high literacy rate of over

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57 Formal employment in Lesotho entails skilled manual labour in offices as well as unskilled labour such as employment in textile factories and shops. Informal occupation includes the aforementioned traditional female income generating activities, which migrant labourer wives practised, besides jobs as domestic helpers, door-to-door trading, vegetable and pastry vendors, call kiosks etc.

58 UNICEF estimated that 15, 000 boys worked as herdboys in 2007, many of them aged 12-18 years, others up to the age of around 40. Some bring livestock back home to the owner every evening, others return after months to the cattle posts. However, few herdboys had/have access to education and health facilities and live away from their families and are exposed to harsh climatic conditions (cf. UNICEF 2007).

59 Enrolment in primary school comprises 74% of girls and 71% of boys, secondary school: 31% of girls versus 20% of boys; tertiary education: 4% female and 3% male attendance (GGGI 2010: 192).

80%. Nevertheless, high rates of school attainment have not changed the position of women as minors in a patriarchal society.

### 2.3 Category 3: Political Empowerment

Today's set of laws still bases on the one written by King Lerotholi in 1903, which saw women as being generally under male custodianship. Nevertheless, since the 1920s women have taken on political positions as village and ward chiefs in replacement of their fathers, husbands or sons. Ironically, Lerotholi's daughter in law, 'Mantsebo, took over as first queen regent from 1941-1960. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century four of the 22 principal chiefs who must be affiliated to the royal clan were female and to date it is estimated that 35% of the villages are represented by women (cf. Gay 1980: 41; Rosenberg 2004: 403-403)<sup>60</sup>. Regardless of women's agency in traditional bodies, the parallel colonial administration and the colonial civil law forced women to play a subordinate role.

This legal discrepancy of *de jure* and *de facto* remains to date. For example, the Land Act of 1979 allows every Basotho, regardless of their marital status, to hold land titles, while the Marriage Acts entails community of properties under male custodianship. However, especially unmarried, separated and widowed pro-active women have defied this practice by holding land titles allocated by traditional chiefs, opening bank accounts and by speaking for themselves, so that in 2006 laws that entitled women to do all of the above were eventually passed, although this fact does not seem to have been publicized (cf. Women Thrive Worldwide n.d.).

### 2.4 Category 4: Health and Survival

HIV/AIDS was first reported in Lesotho in 1986 and has been on the rise ever since. In 2007, 23.6% of the population was infected (cf. CIA Worldfactbook) affecting the most (re-)productive segment of society, scourging reproductive health and presenting a multitude of social challenges, making it the most urgent of public health issues. The health crisis is forcing families into dire economic straits due to the loss of ill members' income, as well as the expense and time required

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60 The GGGI does not recognise female participation in traditional bodies but only in parliament and ministerial positions. 24% of the MPs are female, while 32% of the ministerial posts are held by women (GGGI 2010: 193).



to care for those who should be at their strongest, healthiest age in terms of both productive and reproductive capacities.

Women are typically responsible for the home-based care of sick and bedridden relatives and are therefore affected socially to a larger extent than men. The high numbers of sick and dying people, as well as the need for people to care for them leaves both fewer people to generate income and, at the same time, larger networks dependent on this income.

Despite having the highest HIV-prevalence worldwide after Swaziland and Botswana, the Gender Gap Index ranked Lesotho number one in terms of access to healthcare. On closer inspection however, it becomes clear that the index mainly measures health by comparing male and female life expectancy. Due to HIV/AIDS, life-expectancy has now gone down to 52 years (2011 est.) for both sexes, which does indeed translate into equal chances for men and women, as suggested by the Index (cf. CIA Worldfactbook).

### 3 Summarizing Remarks

The GGGI suggests a small disparity between male and female participation in Lesotho which has become even smaller in recent years. Most significantly, the massive changes in employment suggest two conclusions: Firstly, the retrenchment of international labor migrants<sup>61</sup> in South Africa reduced male participation and therefore balanced male and female involvement in formal employment. Retrenchments as well as the down-scaled agrarian production and health situation resulted in less family income, a reduced ability to produce cheaply (e.g. agricultural products, food, handicrafts), and higher costs for goods that cannot be produced (i.e. medication, clothing, building material, school equipment). New employment opportunities for women at the same time caused a significant increase in female participation. A high involvement rate of women in local politics, the educational landscape, a major shift in household-economy, and equally bad public health for men and women, which affects women as primary caregivers, contributed to the upward trend in female participation. As a second conclusion such data suggests that women quickly adjusted to social changes as they took over as

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61 In 2000 labor migrants in the mines of South Africa came from: Lesotho (58,000), Mozambique (57,000), Swaziland (9,400) and Botswana (6,500). About 60% of the mine workers are foreign. (cf. IOM: (n.d. [2006]: 2).

family breadwinners to meet the increasing demands of family networks. As demonstrated in the above historic overview, both conclusions are reflected in a seemingly narrowed gender gap.

#### 4 Young Women in Urban Lesotho

In the following chapter I will cross-check my conclusions by assessing the livelihood of urban women from an ethnographic perspective. Taking today's productive and reproductive activities in an urban setting into account I come to a more detailed and slightly different conclusion to the results of the GGGI.

In contrast to the above described international labor migration of men, who traveled between Lesotho and South Africa, women rather migrate from rural areas to bustling town centers within Lesotho. Migrating women establish economically independent female-headed households whose structures however differ from rural female-headed households, which are dependent on the earnings of male migrant. How do these women combine productive and reproductive activities? And what does family life look like?

##### 4.1 The Urban Female Breadwinner

Due to labor migration the rate of urbanization has exceeded 6% in recent years and has resulted in more women (24%) than men (22%) living in urban areas (cf. Corno & de Walque 2007: 9). Numerous unmarried girls in their 20s and 30s move to the towns in search of employment in the textile factories or elsewhere. 60 000 predominantly female workers were employed only in the apparel industry in 2005 (cf. ILO [n.d.]: 10). This change in the sphere of production brought about changes in the reproductive pattern as well; shifts in household economy also effected new household and family arrangements:

LeTselela came to Mafeteng-town aged 20 to work in the textile factory and supplement her mother's income as a counselor in a rural branch of the district administration. LeTselela was not married but had a boyfriend working in Maseru whom she usually met on weekends. She lived on her own in a single *Malaene*<sup>62</sup>-

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62 Mapetla describes this form of housing, *Malaene* as several "single roomed dwelling units attached to each other in a linear form and in clusters of tenements" (Mapetla 2005: 131-152).

room for four years and the couple did not share any income. When she had a child, it was sent to her grandmother's village, which she visited after pay-day (Fieldnotes: Kroeker 11/16/2008-05/12/2009).

In contrast to other African countries, female workers in Lesotho usually live in towns, away from their family home, for several years, while in many cases elsewhere (see Ungruhe, this journal) girls come to town for a short period, for example to gather their dowry. Basotho-women move due to a higher regular demand for financial resources such as additions to the family, school fees, medical fees or in replacement of a (male) breadwinner (Fieldnotes Kroeker: 11/17/2008; 10/30/2008; 11/18/2008). Urban female-headed households tend to become smaller and/or more decentralized. A couple with children may live in more than one household and members may switch between various urban and rural households:

Leshome, aged 36, started to migrate between village and town in 2001 when she found employment in Mafeteng's textile sector. Leshome, being the firstborn, was committed to trying to assuage the family hardship and has since generated enough income to fund her younger sibling's education. Now that the lastborn sibling is about to graduate, she and her long-term boyfriend are planning a family of their own. However, she still does not intend to marry or move in with him; he, being a widower with children, does not intend to marry into a second family either (Fieldnotes Kroeker: 11/07/2008-05/21/2009; also cf. Kaufman et al. 2000: 24, 26).

Single female tenants or single-mother households can no longer be considered exceptions in urban Lesotho<sup>63</sup>.

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63 Accordingly, I distinguish in this paper between household and family. With family I mean the extended family, which may be spread over a larger geographic scope and includes more than one generation. A household in contrast comprises people who live together in one place. An urban household may include only one person renting a single room, as well as a couple or a single mother with her child(-ren) or an in-house helper, who also lives at their employer's house. Household refers rather to one residential unit, while family refers to a social, agnatic entity.

## 4.2 Conflicts over Resources and Roles

An employed husband is expected to spend the generated income on the family and serve wife and children with resources for daily needs. Thus, marriage used to promise a lifelong right to a homestead which the husband would have to build, access to resources such as financial support, social standing as a mature member of society, and a familial network of security for wife and children (Gay, 1980: 45). Practically, family income such as remittances from the husband and unmarried brothers are handed to the eldest female family member, who then allocates it on request to the younger household members. With the advent of high unemployment rates among men due to retrenchments, marriage no longer fully assures a family's livelihood<sup>64</sup>.

In contrast to male income, female income was never managed by family elders. Migrant laborer wives, for instance, who generated their own petty income, even when living with agnatic or consanguine family members, were not expected to hand money over to their superiors. Earnings belong to the woman and can hence be used for her children, personal needs or the family as she wishes (Fieldnotes Kroeker: 02/03/2009). Both heading a household as well as generating independent income can be said to increase the independence and self-confidence of Basotho women (cf. Gay 1980: 293; Griffiths 1990: 13-16) regarding life decisions and power in negotiations as the following case reveals:

LeRobong comes from a rather well-off household and dropped out of school when she got pregnant and married. She intended to further her studies after weaning her child, however, her husband forbade it. He was not comfortable with her eventually becoming financially independent from him due to being more educated and having a better job than him. His job as a contractor in South Africa did not suffice to provide for the family when their second child was born. LeRobong took up employment as a counselor at a hospital and moved into a rental in town on her own. After having forbidden her to go back to school once she now says: "I suffered so much, I don't want him to block me again" (Fieldnotes Kroeker: 11/23/2008).

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64 It would be interesting to analyse how the rise of women's agency and household-decision making affects men psychologically. I have not yet, however, come across any data concerning this.

According to the Demographic and Health Survey of 2004 in Lesotho (cf. GoL 2005), 70% of the women stated that they individually decided for what their cash earnings are used. In contrast, 22% of the employed women made their decision jointly, like MaRobong, who consulted with her mother and mother in law (GoL 2005: 37).

MaRobong, 22 and just married lived with her in-laws when she was offered a job as interpreter. Her husband requested that she must hand over her salary to the mother in law to support the family in the same way as he, as a taxi driver, does. He wanted her to help buy formula milk for his baby nephew who lived in their household. MaRobong refused, arguing that a wife's salary is supposed to be her own and must not be considered family income. She thus decided to give half of the salary to her mother in order to save it for a mobile phone and bought groceries for the in-laws' household with the other half. While mother and mother in law accepted her decision, the husband got angry since she disobeyed his decisions for the first time (Fieldnotes Kroeker: 02/02/2009).

However, MaRobong's mother and mother-in-law's support of her decision caused tension between husband and wife due to his loss of authority, while she increased her agency. Due to these conflicts over power, resources and traditional roles, solvent women would rather live away from their husband or family. Men are afraid that their wife's financial independence will lead to disobedience and marital trouble (cf. Bourdieu 2002: 549-558). Hence, women often move out and rent a room in town in order to avoid conflicts and to enjoy independent decision-making without having to consult the head of the household on day-to-day decisions. Both reasons, heading a household as well as financial autonomy, are equally appreciated. Consequently, solvent women mostly decide on spending money on rent, groceries, home remittances, children's school needs as well as on putting a little aside (Mapetla 2005: 131–152).

While I found several households headed by females, I did not find a single one where an employed woman was supporting an unemployed partner. In that case they would rather not stay together and I suspect female financial power to undermine male authority, which might result in discomfort for both partners. I also assume that a wife in that case would protect her husband of mockery ('He is not able to cater for his wife and children') and rather state that he works elsewhere than to

admit that he depends on female income. Of course, male employees likewise rent rooms in town, where they, in the absence of females, perform female household chores such as cleaning, cooking and washing. However, if wife, sister or girlfriend were present she would be expected to take on those chores culturally connoted as female and therewith prevent a deconstruction of gender roles<sup>65</sup>. Therefore, the social spheres of men and women would rather be separated than shared: The couple would stay in different household units.

### 4.3 Family Arrangements of Urban Women

Childbearing is a vital part of a woman's social standing and marital wellbeing since it permits full recognition as a mature member of society (cf. Romero-Daza, 2004: 957–964, Ashton 1952: 30). Recently, however, the average marrying age has risen to 21 years for women and 26 years for men (cf. GoL 2005: 90). The age at which women first get pregnant has also increased to approximately 22 years in urban areas whilst the number of children per woman has decreased. While the 1976 Census recorded 5.4 children born per woman on average, in 2004 this had sunk to only 3.5 children in urban areas (cf. GoL 2005: 58, 91). Since a number of employed women considered children as an appreciated gift but having many children as being too expensive, I assume that female income-generation factors on family planning (see also Sen 2001: 198, Kaufman et al. 2000: 26).

MaThloni, aged 26, came to town to work as a maid and fell pregnant in 2005, without being married. The father refrained from supporting her or the baby financially and MaThloni took up employment in the textile factory to support herself in town as well as her aunt, who minded the child in the village, and her unemployed sisters. The experience of being the breadwinner as well as financial hardship have both played a role in Mathloni's delaying or refusing marriage and having a second child (Fieldnotes Kroeker: 06/11/2008).

In fact, a more individualized lifestyle entailed also a more individualized sex life dissociated from reproduction which the high uptake of contraception amongst Basotho women also reflects (cf.

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65 Chipeta (2005: 35–52) illustrates the inter-linkage of gender and architecture in urban Malawi.

Gay 1980: 294; Kaufman *et al.* 2000, Griffiths 1990). Young women engage in relationships with or without intentions of marriage. Kaufman *et al.* mention that solvent women may even pay bridewealth by themselves to satisfy their parent's financial expectations and prevent familial interference regarding their choice of husband (cf. Kaufman *et al.* 2000: 26). Married labor migrants likewise often enter casual relationships due to their separation over time and distance from their spouses. Since children are often raised by elder, unemployed family members in the villages, offspring create a strong bond between the rural home and the urban household (cf. Gay 1980: 78, 295, 308; Griffiths 1990: 6; Fieldnotes Kroeker: 11/05/2008; 11/11/2008; 11/23/2008).

Urbanization has apparently led to a shift of families in terms of size towards the nuclear family type. One may assume that the extended family fall back system has also changed and weakened due to geographical and social distance. Quite in contrast, however, intergenerational relations remain intact and family bonds do not erode due to labor migration. Traditionally in Lesotho, children of school age are not supposed to sleep in the same room as their parents yet urban architecture often does not allow for a separation according to sex or generations<sup>66</sup> (Fieldnotes Kroeker: 05/29/2008; 06/03/2008, see also: Chipeta 2005: 35–52). Therefore either a female relative or maid would come to stay with mother and child(-ren) in the same room or children would be sent to a relative's house, allowing the parents to live together in the rental. In either case the nuclear family would be split up. Urban mothers regularly send remittances and groceries to the extended family, which Muzvidziwa (2003: 24) refers to as "double-rootedness". Women rely on both an urban as well as a rural household and the family support system is far from eroding but combines urban wage labor with rural childcare arrangements (cf. Gay 1980: 294-295). Unemployed members of the extended families tend to in particular organize care for the aged, children and the sick, while women migrants visit their family monthly after payday to deliver money and groceries (Fieldnotes Kroeker: 06/03/2008; 11/23/2008; 05/12/2009). Cramped living conditions in the industrial areas and the fact that women migrate, leaving their offspring behind, may contribute to constant travels to and from the family home.

Nevertheless, young urban mothers are quite conscious that arrangements of female labor migration and separation of spouses are not the ideal type of family life. Young women dream of eventually

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66 For an excellent overview of changing family and gender patterns in relation to urban housing in Southern Africa see Kalabamu 1998.

getting married to a husband who would care for their social and financial wellbeing, as well as father their children. The ideal family in their opinion comprises a married couple who live together with their children and entertain a close bond to extended families for support and care, although men enabling this were described as hard to find and much sought-after (Fieldnotes Kroeker: 02/02/2009; 03/01/2009, 07/19/2010). A small job for the mother would grant her some pocket money for her own needs.

## 5 Analytical Framework

My empirical data suggests that urban women in Lesotho actively switch between productive (paid) and reproductive (unpaid) activities, something which was likewise the case during industrialization in 19<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Becker-Schmidt (2003) underlines that industrialization urged women to combine these activities. This engendered a double workload for females since productive activities were highly appreciated as participation in public and social life but caused women to struggle with their workload since time-consuming female household and family chores had to be fulfilled additionally. Thus, women fulfill a double workload, which has its roots in the *double socialization* ("*doppelte Vergesellschaftung*" (Becker-Schmitt 2003)) of women. Becker-Schmidt analyzes that gender roles had a reciprocal relationship in a historical context, whereby the male spheres dominated the female spheres. Nowadays however, female socialization allows girls and women to engage in both productive and reproductive activities and to look up to both their mother and father as a role-model, whereas boys can still only look up to male role-models. She concludes that the homologue social gender arrangements have become less significant due to women's double socialization, although not in spheres of political and economical relevance, the spheres of strong male hegemony. In contrast, though, my examples show that women manage to separate their activities by decentralizing households. Nevertheless, where the "traditional" family stayed together, "traditional" gender relations also remained.

To explain these findings further, I argue, following Comaroff (1985: 60, 81), that men retain authority over media needed to initiate sustainable social change (see also Boehm 2006). A change of gender roles would relate to religious and micro-political transformations as Griffiths notes:



Women are actively engaged for support, compensation or distribution of property but they have less access to those resources which confer status and power and this makes them more vulnerable in their dealings with men (Griffiths 1990:8).

In practice women take charge and confidently make decisions affecting everyday life. Yet, although gender roles were not contested, livelihood has changed significantly. Mapetla (2005: 131-152) investigated the awareness of a traditional divide of private and public domains and found that Basotho-women were seemingly quite aware of traditional gender roles and referred to them when men were involved in arguments (Mapetla 2005:131–152). Despite the fact that women were more highly educated and often better informed on ongoing debates, they remained disempowered and acted according to societal gender expectations in conflict situations (cf. Ntimo-Makara&Makara-Khatleli 2005: 195–217). Particularly in the case of a conflict situation, especially in expectation of disagreement, women will argue from their “traditionally founded position of weakness” (Mapetla 2005: 131-152; NtimoMakara&Makara-Khatleli 2005: 195-217). I would like to add that not only men, but also elders, both representatives of ‘traditional’ superiors, still have the decision-making power regarding issues that reach further than the female-headed urban household.

Examples from my study support this notion. Without doubt, women employees manage their life in town and decide on providing financial support for the extended family. However, women do not take over in extra-household decisions such as long-term investments and immobile assets and the underlying patriarchal system remains intact:

LeRobong as well as MaRobong have some financial independence and make household decisions on a day-to-day basis. However, none of them made decisions outside the household for long-term investments for family well-being such as building a house, buying sites and registering them in their name. Only very few women in my study did so. MaThloni, for example, who is orphaned and not married bought a site. Neither a husband nor father or brother could have signed a contract in her stead. A second example was MaSupa. Being a widow she was bold enough to apply for a plot on which she intended to build a house for her and her daughter; an endeavor her husband did not manage

during their short marital life (Fieldnotes Kroeker: 10/2008 – 5/2009).

Neither MaThloni nor MaSupa adopt traditional gender roles. They undertook productive and reproductive activities in and outside the household since there was no custodian such as a father, brother or husband who would carry them out in their place<sup>67</sup>. In general, women only take over extra-household decision-making in the absence of men.

## 6 Conclusion

The results of the GGI suggested that male and female participation and participation opportunities in economic, health-related, educational and political issues was at a fairly equal level in Lesotho, also denoting an upward trend. As I have illustrated by employing both a historic and ethnographic approach, female employees' economic and familial activities in urban Lesotho have changed in recent years. Women largely participate in the economic, health and educational sphere and fairly well in politics. This does not, however, result in balanced gender relations, on the contrary, the male and female spheres disconnect for the following reasons:

- Through employment women increase their autonomy over housing arrangements, in day-to-day decision-making, maintenance of social relations and formal and informal partnerships. Women's wage labor enhances self-esteem and socio-economic status which leads to a change of gender tasks: Women are taking on the role of the family breadwinner. Some prefer to remain independent by not getting married or by keeping households separate. Male and female spheres therefore disconnect due to financial independence contesting power-relations between spouses, but maintain a strong rural-urban linkage with their extended family.
- The confined spaces of urban dwellings often facilitate familial change, since architecture does not allow for the culturally required separation of sex and generations. Housing options

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67 In a national comparison of all districts, women in Mafeteng district were most involved in independent decision-making. 66% decided individually on healthcare, 49% on large purchases, 68% on daily purchases, 67% on family visits, 81% on nutrition. Agency was particularly high in districts with a garment industry meaning high female employment (DHS 2005: 41-42).

result in split families leaving a mother with children or a couple without children to stay in town, which causes shifts and changes in generational arrangements and family life.

- Young women look forward to marriage and family life, but the burden of supporting dependent family members delays their plans.
- Married women provide financially for the family and make female intra-household decisions, but do not participate in decisions outside the household (large assets like real estate, land, long term social security, political decisions). For husbands the duty of providing financially interlinks with the right to make decisions. When LeRobong as well as MaRobong generated income and wanted to make decisions on their own, they also faced conflicts with their husbands who saw their authority vanishing.
- The role of women in local politics, namely the female chiefs, remains unclear and under-researched. Being in a reputable and powerful position they may function as role models of female agency. I assume though, that they also only take over after their husband, the former *morena*, has passed away and until a new male *morena* claims office, which suggests that they also act merely in replacement of a man. The GGGI ignores female representation in traditional bodies, only recognizing governmental politics in which, indeed, women are under-represented.

The social arenas women used to have a say in, such as household and fertility, have rapidly changed in the last three decades, strengthening women's decision-making powers. While in the mid- 20<sup>th</sup> century women were more likely to head households representing male superiors, they are now increasingly heading households in their own right. However, large household expenses are still only in female hands temporarily and in the absence of men. *Double socialization* in combination with *double rootedness* allows female agents to expand their scope easily towards male duties, while men remain restricted to male chores. Females additionally take on male duties, although they are not yet able to enjoy the rights which come with these duties and are not permanently involved in political and strategic decision-making.

The GGGI merely measures how much women participated in four key areas, and it remains unclear whether women participate with both rights and obligations or only obligations. An assessment of rights and obligations would however provide useful insights on whether men

also take over traditionally female chores, along with the rights and obligations attached to them or whether females have fully entered a field under study. In providing this assessment, the GGGI would interlink participation and changes in gender relations.

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# Women's Movements against Economic Globalization: Kenyan and Brazilian Women's Movements at the World Social Forum

By Antje Daniel

**Abstract:** The World Social Forum – a platform for anti-globalization activists – is one of the largest and most important transnational spaces for civil society actors. While a lot of people praise the WSF as a transnational space that gives a voice to the poor and marginalized, voices which often remain unheard within global processes, this study of Brazilian and Kenyan women's organizations questions this statement. The participation of Kenyan and Brazilian women's organizations shows that the possibilities offered by the WSF are used in different ways. The extent to which women's organizations attend the WSF and benefit from the opportunities depends on the specific characteristics of women's organizations in the respective countries. The paper's comparative approach to Kenyan and Brazilian women's organizations analyzes the similarities and differences of various women's organizations and explains their transnational activities within the WSF. Processes of integration of women's organizations within the WSF (or marginalization) become obvious and illustrate the specific relationship between the national characteristics pertaining to women's organizations and transnational activism.

**Key words:** Women, Globalization, Kenya, Brazil.

## 1 Introduction

In accordance with the slogan "*Another world is possible*", numerous civil society actors, including women's organizations from different countries regularly attend the World Social Forum (WSF). Many of these participants share the anti-globalization focus of the Forum and take part in protests against economic globalization, particularly neo-liberalism and a world dominated by capital and any form of imperialism. The WSF intends to discuss alternative means of building another world, a world of solidarity, social justice and equality (Bourgeois 2006: 6). The WSF offers an opportunity to receive and share information on globalization issues, to interact with other participants, build coalitions, get involved in transnational networks and draw attention to national disparities and discontentment. To what



extent do women's organizations from Kenya and Brazil utilize the opportunities presented by the WSF?

## 2 The Relevance of the World Social Forum for Women's Activism

Until now the discourse on the WSF has described the possibilities of the WSFs as a global space, with the focus being on the history and emergence of anti-globalization movements as well as the characteristics of the WSF (Aguiton 2002, Brand/Heigl 2007, Leggewie 2002). At the same time the WSF and its potentialities for constructing "another more equitable world" (Moreau/Steinborn 2005: 7ff) are emphasized. Scholars also point out the integrative and global dimension of the WSF: While economic globalization, in particular neo-liberalism, causes disparities and brings about the economic and social exclusion of some developing countries, the self-set goal of the WSF is to spread the anti-globalization message around the world and to integrate marginalized countries into discussions and processes of globalization (Moreau/Steinborn 2005, Schade 2005, Sen et al 2003).<sup>68</sup> As well as this normative debate on the WSF, scholars have analyzed the structure and character of upcoming transnational networks, spaces and movements (Della Porta/Tarrow 2005, Gosewinkel et al 2004, Keane 1998, Rucht 2001, Smith et al 1997). However, few scholars illustrate the relation between transnational activism and national characteristics (Sikkink 2002, 2005). In order to address this lack of literature, the following empirical<sup>69</sup> paper will draw attention to the interdependence between the national self-organization of Brazilian and Kenyan women and their activity within the transnational space presented by the WSF.

As the relevance of the WSF as a transnational space for women's activism is increasing, the WSF itself is gaining in importance and therefore merits a closer look. Since the decade of the conferences of the United Nations (UN) in the 1990s, these conferences and resulting

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68 For further information on economic globalization and global inequalities see Altwater/Mahnkopf (1999), Garrett (2004), Schirm (2004), Ziai (2000).

69 The following article is based on three lots of field research. I collected the data between 2009 and 2010 in Kenya, Brazil and at the WSF in Belém in 2009. The research is part of my PhD project on "Women's movements between national activities and transnational networking: A comparative view on women's movements in Brazil and Kenya" at the Bayreuth International Graduate School of African Studies. Data was collected through more than 90 interviews with representatives of women's organizations, 20 expert interviews and participant observation. A standardized questionnaire on the participation of women's organizations at the WSF complemented this approach.

international norms have become the most important transnational space for civil society actors. The UN World Women Conferences and the related Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) are particularly prominent international terms of reference for women's activism worldwide. The declarations of these conferences reaffirm women's rights and establish working frameworks for states to fulfill the convention. The UN conference took place in Mexico City in 1975, in Copenhagen in 1980, in Nairobi in 1985 and in Beijing in 1995 (Pietilä 2007, Schöpp-Schilling 2000). The Beijing conference was a particular success both in terms of its size and results: The conference approved that the human rights of women form part of universal human rights.<sup>70</sup> While the UN conferences provided many impulses in the 1990s and were one of the most important transnational spaces for women's activism, the number of participants has decreased since the Beijing conference. The CEDAW and decisions made at the conferences were criticized because of their limitations: Nation states which ratified the CEDAW are obliged to implement international norms decreed by the CEDAW into national law. However, in many cases national laws have not been implemented and/or have had little impact on the daily life of women (Wichterich 2000: 260). At the same time coalitions formed between women's organizations at the conferences dissolved and the follow-up conferences held in 2000 and 2005 were overshadowed by conflicts. Furthermore, the gap between highly professionalized women's activist groups (mostly women's non-governmental organizations – NGOs) which usually participated at the UN conferences and grass-roots organizations which remain excluded became wider. Thus, a counter-movement based on grass-roots activism and called the World March of Women (WMW) (in Portuguese *Marcha Mundial de Mulheres* – MMM) was founded in 1998.<sup>71</sup> The WMW is a response to the dominance of NGOs at the UN

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70 Furthermore, a consensus was achieved that gender-based violence and all forms of sexual harassment and exploitation are incompatible with the dignity and value of women (Holthaus/Klingebl 1998: 46-51). Also, the Optional Protocol of the CEDAW was prepared in 1999. This protocol provides the CEDAW with the mandate to hear the petitions and complaints of individuals, groups of individuals or NGOs about violations of the Convention (Pietilä 2007: 30, Schöpp-Schilling 2000: 114). The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action for Equality, Development and Peace (PFA) did, however represent a milestone in activism. The Platform focuses on a visible national policy of mainstreaming - meaning the empowerment of women and their inclusion in all policies and decision-making processes (Pietilä 2007: 72ff). The follow-up conferences Beijing+5, Beijing +10 and Beijing +15 aimed to review and appraise the mainstreaming process in the different countries.

71 The main office of the WMW used to be located in Quebec and moved to Brazil in 2005. About 5000 groups from 164 countries belong to the WMW (WMW 2008).

conferences and can be understood as an anti-hegemonial, feminist action movement aiming to take women's activism back to the street (Conway 2007: 67, Wichterich 2007). Since 2001 the WMW has also become part of the International Council of the WSF. However, beside the UN conferences, new spaces, such as the WSF, have become attractive for women's activism. There are some differences between the WSF and the UN conferences: First, in contrast to the UN conferences, where women activists tried to change their national situation through putting pressure on the UN to include women's rights in the constitution of national states, women's organizations at the WSF are committed to changing their situation through protest. The WSF also offers the possibility to link international women's organizations with grass-roots organizations as well as to mobilize different groups (Wichterich 2007). Secondly, the WSF has a broader thematic focus than the UN conferences: While the UN conferences work on women's human rights, the WSF also includes current global occurrences, like the impact of economic globalization on the situation of women. Regarding feminist positions, the UN Conferences aim to establish a consensus of women's rights and to advance dialogue across differences among the movements, while several feminists within the WSF are obviously related to left-wing ideas, which sometimes overlap the feminist struggle. These feminists are part of the anti-globalization movement and fight against capitalism and patriarchy. In their view, feminism is itself a radical and egalitarian project of social transformation (Conway 2007: 67). Because of the differences between the WSF and the UN conferences the two transnational spaces can be understood as complementary. Nevertheless it has to be mentioned that feminist groups present at the WSF, particularly the WMW, try to overcome some of the areas not covered by the UN. While some feminist studies describe the role and impact of the UN conferences (Pietilä, 2007, Wichterich 2007), analyses of the WSF remain marginal (Alvarez et al 2004), giving once again rise to the question of the extent to which women's organizations from Kenya and Brazil use the WSF as a platform for their concerns.

In the following paper the WSF in general as well as differences between the WSF in Brazil and Kenya will be analyzed. Following on from this, a short passage describing the main characteristics of women's organizations in both countries will provide information about national conditions for transnational activism. The participation of Brazilian and Kenyan women's organizations at the WSF will then be considered against this backdrop. I will argue that specific features of women's activism in Kenya and Brazil determine the relevance and

attendance of women's organizations at the WSF. Thus, the particular interconnection between national conditions und transnational activism will become apparent.

### 3 The World Social Forum

The WSF was founded in 2001 in Brazil as a counter-summit to the World Economic Forum in Davos (Bourgeois 2006: 5). The shared economic paradigm of the World Economic Forum – neo-liberalism – was considered a cause for the concentration of wealth, the spread of poverty and global inequity (Aguiton 2002: 15f, Leggewie 2002: 116). In contrast, the WSF symbolizes hope and the struggle for the idea that “Another World is Possible” (Moreau/Steinborn 2005: 7ff). In this way, the WSF is an open space for anyone fighting against economic globalization and those interested in supporting social development. The forum is a “plural, diversified, non-confessional, non-governmental and non-partisan” (Charter of Principles, point 8) open meeting. The forum is a meeting place which offers a wealth of information opportunities through round table discussions workshops, presentations and other activities. The main focus is on topics concerning economic globalization, the production of wealth and global justice and peace as well as diversity and democracy. Gender is a cross-sectional topic. The main thematic areas of female actors are women's human rights, sexual and reproductive health, women's empowerment as well as political participation and workers' rights. Apart from providing information, the WSF offers the possibility to exchange experiences, to build up coalitions and identities, to declare solidarity, to coordinate strategies and protests or to get further support. Last but not least civil society actors draw attention to national disparities and discontentment or as the case may be, influence national decision-making (Brand/Heigl 2007, Schade 2005). For women activists the forum offers the opportunity to benefit from all these advantages, to draw attention to gender inequalities and/or to make the voices of women heard within the anti-globalization movement (Alvarez et al 2004: 273, Conway 2007). Thus, the WSF offers a space which is used by a variety of women's organizations with different positions.<sup>72</sup>

The idea of the WSF originated in Brazil, where it was held five times; in Porto Alegre from 2001 to 2003 and 2005, and in Belém in 2009

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72 For more information on feminist positions within the WSF see Alvarez et al (2004) and Conway (2007).

(see figure 1). The organizers of the WSF perceive the WSF as a *World Social Forum Process* which aims to encourage protest against economic globalization around the world (Bourgeois 2006: 6). As such, the WSF also took place in Mumbai (India) in 2004, in Nairobi (Kenya) in 2007 and in Dakar (Senegal) in 2011. In the year 2006 the WSF was held as a polycentric forum in Bamako (Mali), Caracas (Venezuela), and Karachi (Pakistan).<sup>73</sup> The highest participation rate (155.000 participants) was attained at the 2005 WSF in Porto Alegre. In Kenya 75.000 people attended the forum. Most participants came from the host and the neighboring countries. European and US-American civil society actors were also highly represented at the WSF (WSF 2007, 2009).

Table 1: World Social Forum 2001-2011

	Location	Participants	Organizations
2001	Porto Alegre	20.000	no information
2002	Porto Alegre	50.000	5.717
2003	Porto Alegre	100.000	4.962
2004	Mumbai	115.000	1.653
2005	Porto Alegre	155.000	6.872
2006	Bamako	25.000	
	Caracas	72.000	
	Karachi	30.000	
2007	Nairobi	75.000	1.140
2009	Bélem	130.000	4.872
2011	Dakar	75.000	1.200

Source: <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br> (accessed: 03/12/11).

The WSF is usually organized by a national Organizing Committee comprising different civil society actors. The International Council, the coordinating body of the WSF, decides on the strategy of the World Social Forum Process.<sup>74</sup> At the same time the International Council prescribes guidelines within the Charter of Principles to be taken into consideration when conducting the WSF.<sup>75</sup> Despite these general procedures the WSFs have different characteristics which I will shortly refer to here. The WSFs held in Belém and in Nairobi particularly

73 In 2008 the International Council called for activities to be organized in all countries around the world. This year the Council also decided to conduct the WSF every two years.

74 The International Council consists of 129 organizations and decides on the strategy and methodology of the WSF. Its work is supported by an International Secretariat, which is based in Brazil.

75 <http://www.forumsocialmundial.org.br/>, accessed: 06/12/10.

underlined the diverse implementation and the different participation of women's activism between integration and marginalization:

The WSF held in Belém was based on various experiences of organizing the WSF and was embedded in a supportive political and societal environment: The WSF is a well established space for civil society and is recognized through substantial media coverage. According to an interview with a member of the International Council, the Forum is rooted in Brazilian society (Field notes: 02/12/09). Consequently, all relevant and popular civil society actors participate. This is also the case for women actors. A main reason for the success of the WSF is the support of national and provincial governments both financially as well as ideologically.<sup>76</sup> Usually one third of the expenses are paid by state institutions (Teivainen 2004: 175).

The main reasons for bringing the WSF to Nairobi were to integrate Africa in the process of the WSF, to show solidarity with Africa and to showcase the struggle of civil society actors against domination, colonialism and neo-colonialism (Simonson 2007: 5f). The WSF in Nairobi presented other features to the Brazilian forum: As the WSF was conducted there for the first time, the Organization Committee were not as experienced as they had previously only organized national or local forums. In addition to this, conflicts between the Organizing Committee and the International Council emerged and overshadowed the WSF. The Kenyan organizers refused the assistance and guidelines of the International Council. While the members of the International Council emphasized that the guidelines were important for spreading the idea of the WSF around the world, the organizers responded that these guidelines could not be adapted to the local context and condemned the help offered. (Field notes: 02/12/09, 06/17/09). Furthermore, the ambivalent relationship between the Kenyan government and the Organizing Committee hampered the organization of the event. The WSF only received a small amount of technical support from the government. The Kenyan government did not allow the Forum to be conducted in Nairobi city center. Finally, members of the International Committee stated that the civil society actors attending were not able to represent Kenyan civil society (Field notes: 02/12/09, 05/26/09, 06/17/09). For example, the high costs of participating and a lack of information on the WSF excluded poorer organizations. Thus, protest against the WSF arose, which led to the establishment of a Poor People Forum which was held parallel to the

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76 Although the WSF did receive a large amount of support from provincial and national governments, the non-partisan orientation of the WSF ensured that the forum remained an autonomous space. A politician is only allowed to participate in the WSFs as an individual.

WSF (Simonson 2007: 40).<sup>77</sup> One of the Kenyan organizers explained that they had also had problems mediating the idea of the WSF as an open space which has to be occupied and created by civil society. He described that conference mentality - which was characterized by the attitude that in order to participate one needed an official invitation and full cost absorption - hindered attendance of the WSF (Field notes: 06/17/09). Although several problems emerged during the WSF, the forum was an important step towards integrating Africa into the anti-globalization movement. Some of the participants asked for patience because the World Social Forum process is still in its infancy and warned those with high expectations. The WSF was both disappointing and marvelous (Simonson 2007: 43). In view of these issues, it is pertinent to ask whether the Kenyan forum actually highlighted a general problem in the World Social Forum Process. With regard to the implementation of the WSF in India, where none of these problems emerged, it can be stated that the 2007 WSF was influenced by particular national conditions. These diverse experiences in implementing the WSF influence participation and the relevance of the WSF for women's activism. Furthermore, particular characteristics of women's organizations can explain the level and type of participation at the WSF and the different ways in which the ideas of the anti-globalization movement are adopted.

## **4 Women's Organizations and their Participation at the WSF**

### **4.1 Women's Organizations in Brazil**

Most of the existing Brazilian women's organizations emerged in the 1970/80s during the protests by civil society actors against the military dictatorship (1964-1985). The military regime lost its legitimacy because of political and economic crises.<sup>78</sup> This process of de-legitimization opened up new political spaces for social and political action. A democratic movement arose to which women's organizations largely contributed. Women's actors have played an active role in bringing about political change to Brazil and have influenced the way

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77 Participants of this forum demanded free entrance to the forum and were granted their request.

78 Brazil had a strong economy but corruption, soaring inflation, unequal income distribution and foreign debt caused an economic crisis. Politically, the military dictatorship lost its legitimacy because of failures within the political system such as corruption and the high degree of repression. For more information on the crisis see Soares et al (1994).

the constitution has been defined (Alvarez 1994: 15-19, Caldeira 1998: 76ff, Soares et al 1994: 310-318).<sup>79</sup> Women activists related the struggle for democracy with their claims for women's rights. Women entered the public sphere and women's issues such as sexuality or sexual violence began to be discussed in society. At this time women's organizations were supported by trade unions, left-wing parties and international donors. In the period of consolidation (after 1985) Brazilian women's organizations increasingly lost power. Institutions and political parties took over their role. Furthermore, the homogeneity of women actors dispersed. Old conflicts (ideological, political) resurfaced as the common objective of democracy appeared to have already been achieved (Alvarez 1994: 33-44, Caldeira 1998: 78f). Women's organizations regained power in the 1990s. The socio-economic situation of women declined because women were strongly affected by the economic crises. From there, a common protest once again arose, this time with economic neo-liberalism at its core. At this time, transnational exchange and support also became more and more important (Caldeira 1998: 80f).

Since then, a variety of women's organizations have emerged, representing women of different age and class. Also, the characteristics of organizations have changed, they have gained structural complexity, and become more professional and ideologically diverse (Lovell 2000: 98, Soares et al 1994: 308ff). The thematic foci of women's organizations now encompass reproductive rights, particularly rights of abortion, the trafficking of women and political and economic rights, which are concentrated on more or less by the different organizations depending on the situation of women in the country and on particular gender-inequalities. While the situation of women has improved with regard to education, worker rights and health services, political participation is still low and women are still discriminated against in the economy and with regard to their reproductive rights.<sup>80</sup> Activists are engaged in achieving the equal participation of women in the social, economic and political sphere and in contesting patriarchy within Brazilian society. Most activists share a feminist orientation and perceive feminism as an egalitarian project of social transformation and of changing relations between men and women. It is striking however, that only few organizations offer social services such as healthcare. The majority of women's organizations

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79 Women's organisations achieved the inclusion of several gender aspects in the constitution: For example the prohibition of gender-discrimination in the labor market (article 7), protecting motherhood as a social right (article 6), and family planning as a free choice (article 226).

80 For more information on the situation of women in Brazil see Lebon (2003).



are engaged in changing the situation of women through lobbying, advocacy and influencing national decision-making processes, and social services are perceived by many representatives of women's organizations as being the responsibility of the state (Field notes: among others 04/12/10, 05/21/10, 05/29/10, 06/24/10). Another important feature of women's organizations in Brazil is their relationship to left-wing parties and trade unions. This relationship was forged during the common protest against the military dictatorship and is still a main financial source for women's organizations and important for mobilizing women for protests (Alvarez 1994: 33-44). This relationship shows that Brazilian women's organizations are highly politicized and that protest is a common way to realize objectives. In Brazil women's movements exist which fight against patriarchal society and for changing gender roles and towards gender equality in all fields of life. Generally, civil society members are considered relevant actors for representing the citizens and for solving social conflicts. Thus, there is an established civil society and culture of protest in Brazil (Birle 2000, Hengstenberg 2000: 15ff).

With regard to financial resources, women's organizations mostly receive hybrid financing, including external donations, support from state institutions or funding through companies. Representatives of women's organizations stated that recently, international donors have increasingly begun to shift their support towards Africa because it seems that Brazilian society is no longer in need. This is resulting in more competition between the women actors and an increase of voluntary work. Generally, non-remunerated work in women's organizations is higher in Brazil than in Kenya (Field notes: among others 03/26/10, 06/08/10).

With regard to the regional spread, women organize themselves in all parts of the country, although density varies.<sup>81</sup> Local, provincial and national co-operations form an overlapping collage of thematic and cross-cutting issue networks and movements. The high density of provincial and local networks is also remarkable: They realign the struggle of rural women with those in the cities. All of these networks offer the possibility for continuous co-operation and mostly influence political decision-making. One of the most important movements at national level is *Articulação de Mulheres Brasileiras* (AMB): It is a key player in the field of political lobbying and monitoring government

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81 The Amazon Region in particular has a low density of women's organizations. Indigenous women who live in the Amazon organize themselves as women groups which are part of indigenous organizations. In general, the number of women's organizations is low (Field notes: 04/04/10).

policy. Similarly, an active integration in other Latin American and international networks has been reported. Transnational involvement is manifested by two international women's networks – the World March of Women (WMW) and the International Gender and Trade Network (IGTN), which are both based in Brazil. The former is part of the International Council of the WSF and actively involved in the anti-globalization movement (WMW 2008).<sup>82</sup>

Despite the intense cooperation described, divisions between the women's organizations can be seen along regional and financial lines and in the groups' diverging ideological orientations. For example there is a high concentration of welfare organizations in the relatively poor north-east of Brazil, while in São Paulo numerous politicized organizations and trade unions can be found. With regard to feminist positions organizations are divided, for instance, along their ideological and thematic positioning on abortion rights, reproductive health or on prostitution and homosexuality. However, representatives of women's organizations emphasize that rather than dividing members, ideological disputes are fruitful for initiating debates (Field notes: among others 04/11/10, 06/24/10).

#### 4.2 Brazilian Women's Organizations at the World Social Forum

Looking at the attendance of Brazilian women's organizations at the WSF in 2009, approximately 150 organizations were involved, including popular organizations like the AMB or WMW as well as smaller women's groups like the Articulation of Amazonian Women (*Articulação de Mulheres do Amazonas*) (WSF 2009).<sup>83</sup> It seems that a large number of Brazilian women actors represent a variety of gender-issues. Since indigenous populations in Brazil were one of the crosscutting issues of the 2009 WSF, the situation of indigenous women was also discussed there (WSF 2009).

The majority of representatives of women's organizations mentioned during the interviews that the WSF is an important event for civil society. They used the WSF to get into contact with national and international activists. The forum was also seen as presenting a good opportunity for women's groups to showcase their own work as well as

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82 While the IGTN also participates in the WSF, the network is more involved in monitoring the work of International Institutions like the World Trade Organization.

83 The African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) was the only Kenyan women's organization to participate in the WSF in Belém,

for drawing attention to particular issues concerning women. (Field notes: among others 03/29/10, 05/08/10). For example ABM created a 'Women's House' (*Casa de Mulher*) for members of the movement, holding a national meeting, discussing gender inequality and presenting their work at the WSF. The decision to conduct a national meeting at the forum was made because the WSF offered the opportunity to obtain support for traveling costs and also to demonstrate the presence of AMB in the World Social Forum Process (Field notes: 05/14/10). Some other organizations used the possibility of the WSF more to get into contact or involved with national, regional or transnational networks like the Sergipe Lesbian Movement (*Movimento de Lesbicas de Sergipe*) (Field notes: 01/26/09). Furthermore, some organizations wished to participate in order to create informal contacts with politicians. For example, representatives of the Association for Research and Promotion of Health and Women's Rights (*Associação para Pesquisa e Promoção da Saúde e dos Direitos da Mulher*) got in touch with some politicians and this informal contact led to a sustainable cooperation between the Ministry of Health and the organization (Field notes: 01/22/09). In this way, it can be said that women activists used the advantages of the WSF to get involved in political decision-making.

Besides, the anti-globalization context is important for a number of women's organizations. Women activists like the WMW are engaged in the anti-globalization movement, and were able to renew and confirm their feeling of being part of this movement during the WSF, making shared identities and the reinforcement of the groups' own ideologies further reasons for participating in the WSF. For these organizations the anti-globalization movement is an essential issue which is being discussed beyond the WSF and which influences their daily work (Field notes: among others 01/21/09, 06/24/10). Looking at the protest of women against economic globalization, most women's organizations shared the protest and were willing to contribute. Although a lot of women's organizations did not have a specific focus on economy, they were very aware of the fact that global challenges have an impact on the daily situation of women.<sup>84</sup> Consequently, they became involved in the protest against economic globalization within the WSF.

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84 The consequences of neo-liberalism, for example the way worsening working conditions and social services affect the daily lives of women, were afforded particular attention, For further information see Klingebiel/Randeria (1998).

### 4.3 Women's Organizations in Kenya

Since independence from British colonialism in 1963 women's organizations have been co-opted and ruled by the government (Odoulu/Kabira 1994). The societal and political scope of activism was limited by the repressive de facto one party system of the Kenya African National Union (KANU).<sup>85</sup> The first women's organizations which were independent from government intervention emerged in the 1980s. The UN World Women Conference, held in 1985 in Nairobi, provided impulses for creating women's organizations working in the field of women's rights. For example the Federation of Women Lawyers (FIDA) or the African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET) were founded. The transnational event thus opened the door and legitimized the self-organization of women in a closed social and political society (Ruto et al 2009). Since then, women's organizations have been highly funded by several international donors. In the 1980s, women's actors also became part of democratic movements fighting against the autocratic government and campaigning for a multi-party system (Nyinguro/Otenyo 2008: 12ff, Odoulu/Kabira 1994: 194ff, Wölte 2002: 171). Since the implementation of the multi-party-system in 1991, the number of women's organizations has been growing constantly. The democratization of the political system gave civil society actors broader social and political scope and led to the emergence of numerous women's organizations such as the Education Centre for Women and Democracy (ECWD) or the League of Kenya Women Voters. Most of them aimed to influence political transition by integrating gender issues into political discourse (Wölte 2008: 140). The same happened after the first peaceful change of government, which brought 40 years of one party KANU rule to a conclusion.<sup>86</sup> The official registration of organizations was facilitated, which resulted in an increase in women's organizations (Field notes: 04/14/09). At the same time political opportunities for women's activism increased: Women's issues became part of the political agenda and women's organizations started to co-operate with the government: "The opportunities presented by a reformist government after 2002 have made it easier for women's organizations to work in the political arena" (Kihiu 2010: 183).

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85 Between 1963 and 2002 Kenya was ruled by the Kenya African National Union (KANU) led by Jomo Kenyatta and from 1978 by Daniel arap Moi.

86 In 2002 Mwai Kibaki, who ran for the opposition coalition National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), was elected President and after 40 years in power, the KANU rule came to an end.

Today a large number and diversity of women's organizations exist in Kenya (Muteshi 2006). The thematic focus of women's organizations encompasses education and empowerment, political representation and reproductive rights, in particular female genital mutilation. The objectives of women's organizations resulted from the particular situation of women in the country. In contrast to Brazil, gender-inequalities can be reported in all spheres of social, economic and political life.<sup>87</sup> The majority of women's organizations are community based organizations and self-help groups which deliver social services to rural areas. Women members of these less-formalized organizations aim to carry out welfare activities for group members and/or the community. In contrast to Brazil, a huge density of welfare organizations exists which deliver social services to women without touching upon the issue of gender relations (Field notes: among others 04/15/09, 06/23/09). The highly institutionalized women's NGOs are almost all located in Nairobi. In contrast, these women's organizations have a broader scope of activity: besides social services they propose to change the situation of women through lobbying, advocacy and partly through influencing political decision-making processes. But, in comparison to the total number of women's activism, only some are engaged in social change by calling existing gender roles into question (Field notes: among others 05/04/09). It can therefore be said that these women activists mostly do not have a feminist orientation, but instead, aim at widening the scope of women's actions and participation in all spheres of life without questioning gender relations. Generally, civil society actors are more expected to provide services than to try and change the way their society works (Schmidt 2000: 325).

Regarding the regional spread of activities the Nairobi-based organizations are mostly less rooted in the rural areas and cannot therefore be said to be in touch with the majority of Kenyan women. Although some claim to represent all Kenyan women, rural women do not feel represented by women's NGOs in Nairobi (Field notes: among others 04/01/09, 06/04/09). A strong divide between rural women and the institutionalized NGOs of Nairobi can therefore be said to exist. Moreover, other dividing factors, for example different ethnicity, between women's organizations can be reported (Field notes: among others 04/28/09, 05/06/09, 05/20/09). The dimension of ethnic belonging became obvious during the post election violence in

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87 For more information on the situation of women in Brazil see Kemble (2003).

2007/2008,<sup>88</sup> which also affected women's organizations through mistrust or ethnic violence between and within the women's organizations (Field notes: 05/27/09, 06/24/09). The post election violence weakened cohesion between women's organizations and gave rise to a new power balance between the organizations, although these issues had also been a dividing factor previously. In addition to this, the dominance of some popular women NGOs and their lack of integration power (or will) or conference-mentality will weaken cooperation between the groups. The strong dependency on funding also exacerbates competition over financial resources (Schmidt 2000: 309f). It can be assumed that even though co-operations and networks do exist, they either solely concentrate on making demands or they are weak and not sustainable. While most of these networks are organized along thematic lines such as reproductive health or violence against women and consequently integrate just a number of women's activists, a common national commitment by the majority of activists remains rare and temporary: For example Kenyan women join together and celebrate International Women's Day or pre-election periods. However, experiences in cooperation and network building are favorable conditions for activities at transnational level. Consequently, even on the transnational level cooperation is not frequent and the majority of women's organizations do not use the opportunities presented by transnational activities.

#### 4.4 Kenyan Women's Organizations at the World Social Forum

Difficulties in implementing the WSF and the political and societal scope in Kenya constrained the participation of women actors at the forum which took place in Nairobi in 2007: Just 15 women's organizations participated (WSF 2007).<sup>89</sup> Only a few of the participating women's organizations such as the Young Women's Leadership Institute (YWLI) or the African Woman and Child Feature Service (AWC) are well known national organizations which are active in the field of women's human rights. Besides, splinter groups and smaller women's organizations made use of the opportunities provided by the WSF. It becomes clear that the participating women's

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88 After the last elections in December 2007 a conflict between Kibaki and Raila Odinga's opposition Orange Democratic Movement (ODM) emerged. Vote rigging became the reason why rising protests escalated into violence and destruction of property. Almost 1.000 people were killed and nearly 600.000 displaced. The situation was mediated by UN secretary-general Kofi Annan. In February 2008, Kibaki and Odinga signed an agreement on the formation of a coalition government.

89 About 5 Brazilian women's organizations took part.

organizations cannot represent the broad spectrum of women's organizations in Kenya (Field notes: 02/19/09, 04/14/09). In addition, only a few women's organizations offered lectures or workshops, tending to organize instead, theater performances, cultural events, catering services or even selling products, demonstrating that participating women's organizations were only involved in the thematic debates of the WSF to a small extent (Field notes: 04/02/09, 04/16/09).

Out of the small number of women's actors which participated, the majority wished to exchange opinions with other civil society actors and to represent their work at the forum. The WSF was hardly used for building up common strategies or for joining national or transnational coalitions and networks. One of the highlights was that Minority Women in Action, a lesbian women's group, was founded during the WSF: While social spaces are closed to lesbian women in Kenya because lesbians are discriminated against and hindered in their self-organization, the WSF offered the possibility to go public for the first time. Since then, women's groups have become more and more involved in civil society (Simonson 2007: 22). However, the WSF did not prove very sustainable for women's activism. Two years after the WSF, many employees of women's organizations were not aware of who exactly had participated and how the organization had been represented. There is almost no awareness of the WSF among women's organizations in Nairobi left (Field notes: 04/14/09, 04/21/09, 05/12/09).

The above raises the question of exactly why so few women's organizations are present at the WSF: One obvious argument is the lack of information prior to the WSF, but some other aspects seem important in order to explain the absence of women's organizations at the WSF: First, only few participating organizations used the opportunity to share their idea of anti-globalization and of belonging to a bigger movement. Women's activists mentioned that the struggle against economic globalization is less rooted in society and is also not part of women's organizations (Field notes: 14/04/09). Global economic challenges are not the main focus of attention; women generally do not relate their daily situation to global economic constraints and do not seem to have much knowledge of economics. Economic issues are rarely discussed amongst women activists, if they are, then it is in relation with the micro-financing opportunities for women working in the informal sector. Secondly, the majority of women's organizations within both the local and the national context overlooks the relevance of global economic processes (Field notes:

06/04/09, 14/04/09). The lack of awareness of global issues illustrates that one of the main ideas of the WSFs could not be communicated. Thirdly, conference mentality –characterized by the attitude that in order to participate one needs an official invitation and full cost absorption – hindered attendance. This conference mentality can be related to and also results from the groups' strong dependence on external funding. The perpetual search for funding in itself fosters competition between the organizations and also paralyzes self-organization. Finally, the low level of political awareness and relation to feminist ideas led to the fact that most women's organizations did not assign the WSF any particular importance.

## 5 Summary

The participation of Brazilian and Kenyan women's organizations at the WSF illustrates that today a variety of transnational spaces for women activists exist: The dominance of the UN conferences has been broken; other transnational spaces such as the WSF have become more and more important. The WSF, along with some women activists within the WSF are now contesting the dominance of international institutions and economic globalization. While the aim of the WSF is to integrate voices from the South in the anti-globalization movement, the participation of women actors shows that this promise was only fulfilled for Brazilian women's organizations. Global structures of integration and marginalization – which are often criticized by the WSF organizers – were reproduced within the WSF. For Kenyan women's organizations the exclusion from the anti-globalization movement is still a matter of fact. It can be assumed that the WSF is victim of its own criticism.

The extent to which women's organizations are able to share in the anti-globalization movement and benefit from the opportunities of the WSF is restricted by the particular implementation of the WSF and also by the particular characteristics of women's organizations. Although in both countries the main focus of activism is at the national level, women's commitment at the WSF differs. National conditions have an influence on how the idea of the WSF as a transnational space is perceived: In Brazil the long tradition of left-wing ideas and politicized women's organizations as well as the existing awareness of globalization processes offer an important basis for understanding the aim of the WSF and to incorporate individual ideas. Also, existing national, regional and international women's activism creates the awareness that networks can be important in reaching goals towards



gender equality. The individual self-awareness of women activists has an influence on their identification with the anti-globalization movement. Brazilian women organize themselves on the basis of feminist ideas with the aim of changing gender roles in society and of fighting against patriarchal hierarchies within society. In contrast most Kenyan women have a different view on feminism; some reject the idea of contesting patriarchy, emphasize the role of being a mother and organize themselves without automatically intending to change gender roles. While the feminist orientation of Brazilian women activists can be connected to feminism within the anti-globalization movement, this cannot be said for the majority of Kenyan women activists. In addition to this, Brazilian women's organizations are based on voluntary work and many organizations work with few financial resources, while Kenyan women's organizations are highly dependent on the financial support of external donors, which in some cases also influence their agenda. Hence, financial conditions hinder the self-organization of women's groups: Representatives of women's organizations confirm that women's participation without financial support is inconceivable in Kenya. Therefore, the particular characteristics of women's organizations in Kenya and the focus of women's activism at the local and national level lead to the fact that the WSF is less interesting for Kenyan women's organizations. This focus as well as the fragmentation between the women's organizations make it less self-evident for the groups to participate in the WSF. Although some actors attended and benefited from the WSF, the idea of the WSF did not prove sustainable. It can therefore be said that the different extents and benefits of Brazilian and Kenyan women's organizations within the WSF leads back to the national characteristics of women's organizations. It has become apparent that national conditions hinder transnational activism and shape the particular interconnections between national and transnational activities.

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## **Beyond the Texts: Further Thoughts on the Need for an On- Going Debate on 'Gender', Knowledge- Production and Silence**

By Katharina Fink

### **1 Introduction**

"Research is not about finding the right answers; it is about posing the right questions", wrote South African scholar Yvette Abrahams in a text we have our students discuss in a seminar on the institution of the museum as a site of constructing race and gender (Abrahams 2004: 151). Here, as in a number of her writings, Abrahams' aspiration was to work on the 'location' of female biographies in the present, focusing on the case of Sarah Baartman, the South African woman who, in order to escape from the constraints of her country of origin, followed the flow of transnational promises from the shores of Cape Town to the streets of Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, where she performed – by force or contract – to the amusement, fascination and repulsion of her audiences and ended up, after her death, as a dismembered proof of 'Otherness', her dissected labia and brains serving as stepping stones for French scientist Georges Cuvier and being on display in the Parisian Musée de l'Homme till far into the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Qureshi 2004). Sarah, aka "Saartjie" Baartman, became, as the 'Hottentot Venus', an object for the self-figuration of European science and society alike and stands metonymically for the violent utilization and the necessity of the Black female body for Western fantasies of the 'Self' and the 'Other'. I take Abrahams' wish to "locate" as a point of departure for some more impulses to provoke thinking beyond the texts and topics gathered in this first volume. I would like to refer to four small examples, ranging from Bayreuth, to Cameroon and South Africa. They are not research-based case studies in their own right; rather they are personal experiences and encounters collected during

field work in South Africa and Germany<sup>90</sup> that allow further thinking about the topics and the blanks in this volume. I wish to strengthen the point that beyond the findings of the articles and the impression that 'feminism', 'womanism' and gender issues have already been highlighted from all angles and by any possible name, there is the drastic need to continue with and intensify this discussion, especially from a transnational perspective.

## 2 First Example: Locating an Icon in the Present

Sarah Baartman, the woman infamously dubbed the 'Hottentot Venus', is one of the examples of excessive representation that seems to have created more blanks than insights. She and her story have been analyzed, put on display, portrayed and re-interpreted over and over again from a number of different angles: In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Sarah Baartman served, in her stage performances, for the invention of the Black<sup>91</sup> female body as site of uncanny 'Otherness' and for the establishment of a White bourgeois female sexuality (constructed in negation of the Black female body the audience came to stare at). Her body was, while she was alive, analyzed for the creation of 'modern science' and racial classification; after her death her dissected body parts and a plaster cast of her body continued to serve as sites of 'Otherness' and fascination until the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the struggle to repatriate her remains from France to South Africa, Sarah Baartman again was used; this time as a site for the male rhetoric of Pan-Africanism, as expressed in former president Thabo Mbeki's speech on her late burial in South Africa in 2002, as well as for Post-Apartheid nation building. The steady appropriation of Sarah Baartman is perceived as anything from creating 'sisterhood' to updating 'sisterarchy' (cf. Nzegwu 2003).

In a seminar that is concerned with the possibilities and limitations of the institution of the museum, the life story and iconic career of Sarah Baartman is one of the cases we discussed with the students. The working conditions of her hustling in Europe are difficult to describe at

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90 My PhD project focuses on the different routes to remembering the suburb of Sophiatown in Johannesburg, South Africa. This entails museum work, literature, art, aesthetics, and everyday practices of collective and individual memory. A special focus is on the current joint project of the Centre for Culture and Languages in Africa (CCLA) at the University of Johannesburg, in cooperation with the Trevor Huddleston Memorial Centre in Sophiatown.

91 In order to stress the entrenchments of 'racial' categories not only in South Africa, I capitalize the terms Black, White and Colored, which should not only indicate the construction they represent but also their historical dimension.



the time of our speaking. No vocabulary, we recognize, seems appropriate in order to avoid inscribing ourselves, the born-afters, into her life. Yet her absence could, we discovered, lead us to reconsider other absences: The White gaze. The European woman. The continuation of the construction of science, of what is 'scientific', what is 'real'. She herself remains unreachable. Who can listen to her? Her voice itself, it seems, is lost, apart from one original trace in the archives (Crais and Scully 2009: 99). What sense of belonging and home (Hooks 1994) can a woman like this create? And what strength does a 'we' hold in the fragmented world of our fragmented biographies, ever-shifting from project to project? Abrahams' attempt to re-locate and reconcile Sarah Baartman's story as a woman's story has engendered praise and criticism alike. While some of our students perceive her work as outdated and radical – and also insignificant for their lives – they share her core sentiment: There is no use in remembering an icon and in re-visiting gender conditions of 200 years back if not in relation to the present in which we speak and write. "Perhaps the best we can do is to write a story of Sarah Baartman for our time", Abrahams concludes (Abrahams 2004: 152) and links her story with the struggles and the social position of domestic workers in contemporary South Africa.

### **3 Second Example: 'Tradition' as an Argument**

The second example also links different time-levels, yet in a drastically different sense: 'The past' is used here as an argument for correcting the present. Talking to elifas, a young filmmaker based in Johannesburg, about his recent project, a documentary on the contested topic of homosexuality and national identity in Cameroon, we come to discuss the underlying concepts of gender that are at stake. When confronted with the homophobic argument that homosexuality and political activity concerning equal rights are products of (neo-)colonialism, are 'imported' from the 'West', and have to be fought against, the young activist dug deeper and rediscovered practices that deal with spirituality and same-sex activities which are not framed as aberrant and leading to failure, but as 'authentic' local practice and tradition. His research so far shows that although there is knowledge of them, these practices are silenced (elifas 2010). In public, heterosexuality and stable gender relations are described to him as strongholds of identity in the contexts of everyday life. The pressure put on those trying to distance themselves from these patterns is severe, as the case of homosexuals not only in Cameroon shows, and leads to tactics (De Certeau 1994) of performing them in

other, perhaps less confined spaces, such as clubs or, depending on the available connectivity, the virtual world. A close study of these tactics – of breaking with gender stereotypes without breaking them entirely would be worthwhile.

An example of the difficulties of insisting on the continuity of 'stable' traditions within changed reality in contemporary South Africa, the country in which elifas and I met: Thando Mgqolozana's book "A man who is not a man" (Mgqolozana 2009) delivers a critical discussion of masculinity as a concept. He narrates the story of a young South African man who undergoes Xhosa ritual circumcision; only to discover (and suffer from) the fact that the support networks that enabled the meaningfulness of this *'rite de passage'* no longer exist.<sup>92</sup> With his controversial writings, Mgqolozana has put his finger into an open wound: Indeed, from year to year, a large number of young men die from the missing adjustment and re-invention of a tradition 'for' the present<sup>93</sup>. The clashes and complicities of 'tradition', the 'nation' and contemporary conditions are a ground for academic and political activity alike.

#### 4 Third Example: 'Empowerment' and the Category of Experience

Shortly after Mgqolozana brought attention to the category of masculinity in his semi-fictional writings, Crystal Orderson presented a moving analysis of the lives and struggles of Colored women in the Cape Flats, the massive, wide-spread townships surrounding Cape Town, at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg. The speech, delivered as the annual Ruth First Memorial Lecture, was widely published and revealed a similar ambivalence of gender as being both in motion and rigid. In her lecture, she focuses on the changes in the structure of living (together) in South Africa, and their impact on the everyday life of women in the Flats. Her study provides important insights gained by listening to ordinary women narrating their lives, and reveals a counter narrative to the South African story of transition – what she calls "social exclusion in action"<sup>94</sup> (Orderson 2010). It highlights how women negotiate their roles as mothers, lovers

92 For more information on the book and its author: <http://ukznpress.book.co.za/blog/2009/07/01/a-man-who-is-not-a-man-author-thando-mgqolozana-speaks-to-maureen-isacson/> (accessed 2.1.2011)

93 Coverage on this topic can be found in a number of South African newspapers, e.g. in the weekly Mail and Guardian: <http://www.mg.co.za/article/2010-06-30-botched-circumcisions-kill-40-in-sa> (accessed 2.1.2011)

94 All following quotations from Orderson's 2010 Ruth First Lecture if not indicated otherwise.

and breadwinners, in a “feminization of poverty” reinforced in the name of ‘development’. Facing the breakdown of the clothing sector as a source of labor income, the women in Orderson’s study struggle to feed their often fatherless families and depend entirely on the governmental child grant, living hand-to-mouth on a daily basis. Deprived of perspective and trapped by poverty, they sustain themselves through female support systems. In contrast to these efforts to manage basic life, popular media often portrays these women as being lazy and opportunistic. Orderson’s research confutes this: “In reality the women are in fact battling to survive and trying to make ends meet, of every opportunity they can access so as to give their children a better chance in life. However, without the matriarchal networks in the community like their grandmothers, sisters, mothers and aunties, they would be unable to make ends meet.” As she puts it further:

Sixteen years into post-apartheid South Africa, they find themselves continuing to live on the margins of society. Dislocated, disconnected they are trapped in an ongoing cycle of poverty and deprivation. (...) The grant is their only means of participation in the mainstream economy even if it lasts only for a few days. (...) These women are the casualties of a country that is all too keen to present a world-class face to the outside world but not provide world-class services and opportunities to its own people. For these women, a job would open the door to dignity to provide for the most basic needs. It would mean not having to beg or depend on moneylenders for food for their children.

Orderson’s study sheds light on a silenced contradiction which she calls the increase of “women’s gendered burden, despite formal commitment to gender equality.” While gender equality and empowerment is politically significant and prevailing, as for example expressed in South Africa’s National Gender Policy Framework<sup>95</sup>: changes made in its name in fact bring about quite the contrary: reinforced exclusion.

In contrast to the misfortunes caused by the rhetoric of top-bottom ‘development’ that actually uses gender as a category of action as described by Orderson, the articles in this volume illustrated cases of negotiating without touching the gendered order. Gender as a role is

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95 Accessible online here: <http://www.doh.gov.za/docs/policy/gender.pdf>, accessed 2.1.2011.

not verbalized; if the women described override historically established gender roles, they do it temporarily and nearly *en passant* (eg Nambula, Ungruhe 2010). The negotiation of space within existing gender roles is best described as a re-working, as a liminal activity. Women and girls do re-define their chores, influenced by change and uncertainty surrounding them, yet they seem to manage it by 'doing' gender, not 'talking' gender. This challenges the alleged 'necessity' of a theoretical tag for practices, a translation, and demands the deconstruction of presumptions on the 'how -tos' of activism as well as directing the analysts' gaze to the category of experience. This, as Pumla Dineo Gqola discusses regarding the acceptance and acknowledgment of creative writing as a relevant contribution to theory, could perhaps also be seen as "an active deviation from the binary opposition which sees theory and practice posited against each other engaged in an exercise of polarity." (Gqola 2001: 11). Acknowledging experience as a category of analysis makes it possible to re-locate political rhetoric in everyday life, puts it to the test, and enables the consideration of tactics of the local.

## 5 Fourth Example: Gender-Bodies

The last case I want to refer to leads back to the encounter with the iconic figure of Sarah Baartman at the beginning of this text and illustrates the power-ridden 'entanglements' (Nuttall 2009) of cultural concepts, ideology and terminology. 200 years after Sarah Baartman's death, and 7 years after her burial, the turmoil surrounding the demanded gender-testing of South African athletics talent Caster Semenya during the championships in Berlin in 2009 illustrated how the body of a Black woman served as a terrain for performing nation building - again. The International Association of Athletics Federations' (IAAF) committee demanded yet another gender test from the young athlete who was excelling in her track running. This demand gave rise to extreme criticism in South Africa. In the perception of the public Semenya's case stood as a synecdoche for the treatment of African women by the Western world. Caster was dubbed the 'New Sarah Baartman' (cf. Gevisser 2009) and was interpreted as a continuation of historically established power imbalances between Africa and Europe.

Indeed, like in Sarah Baartman's<sup>96</sup> story, the body was used as a site for discussing and defining gender roles, race and the rejection of

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96 It is a rather queer feature that the surname of one of the most famous South African women, Sarah Baartman, who became an icon for the treatment of African women, intercontinental

concepts presented as neo-colonial threats: Turning Semenya's case into an attack on her African identity, Julius Malema, head of the African National Congress' (ANC) Youth League and not exactly a feminist on a daily basis, refused the media's labeling of the athlete as a hermaphrodite by turning linguistic: There is no word for this in Pedi, Semenya's and his mother tongue, Malema stated, therefore this name-tagging symbolizes an aggression from outside, particularly the West (cf. Afrodissident 2010). The debate illustrates a discursive threesome: the continuing tendency to define the (Black) female body, the re-definition of a young South African woman turning from a transgendered discourse back to the 'safe' state of being either-or, and also the appropriation of the female body as an arena for defining and defending 'the national'. Another incident that made this concern evident is South African Arts and Culture Minister Lulu Xingwana's condemnation of artist Zanele Muholi's photographs of lesbian couples at the exhibition "Innovative Women" as "immoral" and "against nation building".<sup>97</sup> These discussions are not new; in fact they often are echoes of older ones. The transnational dynamics of changing appearances, their shifts and consistencies demand vigilance and should be investigated further.

## 6 Wrapping up: Towards a 'Now'

The four glimpses encountered in South Africa and Germany indicate the complexities of gender relations in their manifold shapes, in a world that, as the cases above show, cannot be understood in the local 'or' global setting alone; and is, though at times perceived as stable and continuous, defined by constant change, uncertainty and the force and promises of social and political contacts. Prevailing questions are: How do these changes, which speak of a 'glocal' condition, influence the way in which gender relations are lived? Are they perceived as threat, or as an opportunity? How is gender invented and performed in the context of the local, such as in the example related by the filmmaker, and in global discourses, such as the international attention given to the case of the runner Caster Semenya? How do individuals make sense of the changes encountered in an everyday life both local and global, and how can

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relations, exhibition politics, and gender roles, literally translates as "bearded man" in English.

97 Cf. "South African minister describes lesbian photos as immoral". Online at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/mar/02/south-african-minister-lesbian-exhibition>, accessed 2.1.2011.

gender become a site of fruitful “political tectonics” (Piesche 2008)? And what do, as Dipesh Chakrabarty analyzes in his recent works (cf. Chakrabarty 2009), the concepts of freedom and agency mean in an age where the interdependency with, for example, geological and ‘natural’ phenomena is becoming visible again, the key word here being climate change? The encounters cited earlier show that there is the constant need to revisit terminologies. All the concepts encountered –empowerment, change, order – have to be used with care and cause us to ask: Where do they come from? Where can they lead us to?

As the articles have shown, changes which often come about spontaneously are – as tactics of the local – more pragmatically than ideologically driven and rely, as both Orderson and Gqola emphasize, on experience, not on academic discourse. Change is not perceived as either a threat or opportunity, but as a combination of both, leading to a complex mix of activism and passivity (an interesting thought on passivity is expressed by Halberstam 2008). This ‘inbetweenness’ is a revealing factor to the conceptual construction of gender as such, and ties in with identity as an ever-changing and moving field, a practice and process more than a stable product.

Women have formed the focus of this first issue. The move towards discussing masculinity (eg Mgqolozana, elifas) and the transgressions of gender as a binary system, fundamental alternatives and the motives of males’ condemnation to it would be important now, as well as to investigate the small changes, the shifts and the points of friction. There is a need to continuously question the field and academia, the assumptions, controversies and messy zones of contact. Perhaps the best we can do is to locate the terminologies we deal with, as Yvette Abrahams’ text asked us and our students to do, in the present realities of our research participants and ourselves in order to avoid overwhelming and simplifying textualism (cf. Tomaselli 2009). The quality of debates around gender and gender equality does not lie in the academic chasing of terminology as a means of distinction (cf. Bourdieu 1984) but in the steady, unfashionable struggle towards establishing sites of re-vision, right within a “culture of expediency” (Stoller 2009) that requires quick gender mainstreaming. This ‘worlding’ (Gqola 2001) prevents us from following abstractions that exclude the worlds they speak of. It also continuously deconstructs the security of having found an answer. The papers in this volume provide a number of insights and answers; moreover they prepare the ground on which to revise the concepts discussed and compel us to use the

energy they have created to investigate the *beyond* that has become visible.

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