CHALLENGES OF GENDER MAINSTREAMING IN COLLABORATIVE TRANSNATIONAL RESEARCH

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Abstract

This paper addresses some of the challenges of gender mainstreaming in the context of a Rwanda-Canada social research project. The study partnership includes a team of academics from the Social Sciences Department at the University of Rwanda and three Canadian universities which are Calgary, St.Thomas and York. The ultimate goal of the research project is to create knowledge that could be used to train social workers to respond appropriately to the complex social issues of post-genocide Rwanda. The research team started by documenting the current practice of social

work by Rwandan social workers; it wanted to be sure to understand the influence of indigenous cultures and values in social work practices. Interviews were conducted with 19 social work practitioners in Huye and Gisagara Districts of the Southern Province of Rwanda. The findings about the above stated goal have been published elsewhere. However, the present paper is focusing on the challenges of gender mainstreaming which arose after the field work. In this transnational social research project, the research team realized that it had not adequately addressed the different socio-cultural values of the researchers, particularly their understanding of gender and gender equality. It was found that when research team members/collaborators have different geopolitical locations, gender equal collaboration can be difficult to achieve. The paper reflects on the importance of research collaborators, either locally or transnational, to practice self-reflexivity as they negotiate the issues of power and privilege to produce non-hierarchical and accountable knowledge. The paper suggests that research team members need to be open to discuss the construction of gender and gender equality in both the local and the global context of the research. This research is a reminder that engaging gender throughout the process of transnational social research is crucial to addressing gender equity in post-conflict contexts.

Keywords

Gender Mainstreaming, Transnational Research, International Social Work, Rwanda

1. Introduction and Concepts

Gender mainstreaming was established as a major global strategy for the promotion of gender equality at the Beijing Conference in 1995 (Eerdewijk & Davids, 2014; O'Connor, 2014). The strategy was intended to systematically integrate equal opportunities for women and men into institutions and cultures in programmes, policies and practices (O'Connor, 2014). It addressed the perceived failure of previous strategies, such as women-specific projects, to bring about significant changes in women's status (Eerdewijk & Davids, 2014).

The global strategy for gender equality has been critiqued for its technocratic application and its role in de-politicizing and neutralizing the women's movement in gender policy making (Lamprell, Greenfield, & Braithwaite, 2015). Feminists have been particularly vocal in critiquing it because it does not address the unequal gender power relations that are endemic in existing institutions (Davids, Driel, & Parren, 2014; North, 2010).Furthermore, the gender mainstreaming concept seems insensitive to the notion of intersectionality which explains how gender

discrimination intersects with other social axes of differentiation to produce complex unequal gender power relations for women and men (Tolhurst et al., 2012).

Despite the global interest in gender equality and women's empowerment, with widespread efforts to implement gender mainstreaming by state, civil society, and international institutions, the outcome in terms of the promotion of gender equality is far from conclusive (O'Connor, 2014) and women continue to face barriers that constrain their economic empowerment and equality. For example, although female participation in tertiary education has increased globally and currently surpasses male participation in almost all developed countries and in half of the world's developing countries (United Nations, 2015), women confront barriers as they transition from higher education to careers in research (Leatherwood & Williams, 2008). In addition, women continue to be underrepresented in research and development, limiting their ability to contribute to innovation on an equal basis with men. It has also been argued that these barriers affect the overall quality of research, given the different perspectives women bring to any project (United Nations, 2015). Addressing gender mainstreaming in research and higher education is doubly advantageous, for it has the potential to enhance the quality and credibility of the research outcome by promoting equal participation in research and higher education for everyone. In this paper, we address some challenges of gender mainstreaming in the context of a research project we conducted in Rwanda that involved both female and male researchers.

The government of Rwanda became committed to gender equality as part of its post-genocide reconstruction. The country established laws and policies with the purpose of mainstreaming gender equality. Laws such as The Prevention and Punishment of Gender-Based Violence (Republic of Rwanda, 2009) and the National Gender Policy were established. Finally, the National Gender Policy guidelines highlight principles, policies, and programs to integrate gender issues in the social, cultural, economic and political planning and programming (MIGEPROF, 2010). In theory, gender mainstreaming should also be reflected in research conducted in Rwanda.

We start this paper by highlighting some key challenges in adopting a gender mainstreaming strategy to promote gender equality in the context of social work research endeavours in some African countries. We go on to present a historical overview of gender mainstreaming in Rwanda. We explain the context of our study and its methodology, present our research findings, and discuss the lessons we learned. We conclude the paper by highlighting our

main points and offer some suggestions to address gender mainstreaming in social work research and higher education.

1.1 Gender Mainstreaming in Research

Soon after the Beijing Platform for Action of 1995 was signed by governments across the world, international development institutions and non-government organizations (NGOs) began to promote gender mainstreaming by supporting governments and civil society organizations in developing countries (Chaney, 2016). Over time, gender mainstreaming campaigns led by national and international organizations have generated awareness of gender-sensitive designing, implementation, monitoring and assessment of policies and programmes in different sectors of national economies (Tiessen, 2007). These campaigns work to ensure gender equality in both the public and private sectors. The results of their efforts are largely unknown (North, 2010). There is no consensus between stakeholders and policymakers on whether these efforts have had a concrete impact on gender equality at a global level.

We are interested in the challenges associated with the implementation of gender mainstreaming to promote gender equality in the context of research in the field of social work. Specifically, what are some key challenges in maintaining and nurturing gender equality in social work research? The main objective of doing social work research is to establish social justice (Parada & Weihbi, 2017). This obviously includes gender justice. Gender must be promoted in every stage of the research process - from start to finish. That said, to what extent have social work researchers been able to promote gender justice in various stages of their research endeavours? What are the key challenges they have faced? This paper discusses social work research challenges in the context of a collaborative research project in Rwanda.

A stable socio-economic and political order is one of the most important preconditions for doing research, and this is relevant for our Rwanda project. Another contextual variable is socio-cultural – the traditions and values of the study's participants. If socio-cultural values and traditions are not compliant with gender equality, then gender mainstreaming strategy promotion will necessarily be jeopardized in the research endeavour. Some recent social work studies in a number of African countries suggest their socio-cultural values often contradict or go against the notion of gender equality. An important study by Morley (2010) on the status of gender equality in the higher education sector in Ghana and Tanzania illustrates this point. This study uses a mixed method approach to interrogate the state of gender equality in private and public universities. This comprehensive study drew on 200 life history interviews of Ghanaian and Tanzanian university

students from diverse academic programmes and socio-economic backgrounds, along with semi-structured interviews with 200 academic staff and policymakers across Ghana and Tanzania. One important finding of the study is that although women's participation in higher education sectors in Ghana and Tanzania has increased considerably, only women from higher socio-economic backgrounds have access to higher education. Even more striking is the finding that the culture of higher education institutes in these two countries perpetuates and nurtures traditional socio-cultural values of the African subcontinent that are against gender equality. As a result, women students in Tanzanian and Ghanaian universities are visible minorities and may be pressured to quit their programmes. Sexual harassment seems to have been normalized, and women students do not dare to challenge gender-based injustices. Instead, they either keep silent or negotiate with their gendered situation.

The situation is similar in Nigeria. A study by Para-Mallam (2010) shows that simply increasing access to female education does not help to reduce gender inequality in the education sector. A pervasive cultural and religious bias in Nigeria consistently works against women's equal rights, including in education. In addition, in many African countries, traditional socio-cultural values remain deeply embedded in both state institutions and civil society organizations. A study by Wendoh & Wallace (2005) in Zambia, Rwanda, Uganda, and Gambia found that the staff of state organizations and development NGOs often show resistance to and resentment of gender equality even when they promote it in their projects.

Social and cultural values that are contrary to gender equality can create significant challenges to gender equal participation in collaborative research. How can research collaborators holding such values promote egalitarian research participation? The study by Wendoh & Wallace (2005) found that all the local collaborators consciously or unconsciously espoused the traditional socio-cultural values of the African context which oppose gender equality, even though they were apparently trying to promote gender mainstreaming in their work.

Enacting non-hierarchical and gender equal research is even more complex when it is transnational collaborative research. First, local and foreign collaborators often have different socio-cultural institutions and value systems; they may perceive the notion of gender equality very differently. Therefore, they may differ in terms of their understanding of gender-equal collaboration on the research team or how to promote gender equal collaboration within the team. Second, in transnational collaborations, researchers and/or participants are dispersed transnationally. They are differentially situated in terms of their power and privilege because of

their geopolitical situations, giving rise to a hierarchical research scenario that may threaten gender equality. These two challenges of transnational collaboration became apparent in our research on Rwanda.

1.2 Gender Mainstreaming in Rwanda: An Overview

Traditionally, Rwanda was a patriarchal society, with men assuming the power and controlling the resources (Burnet, 2011). Labour was divided according to gender, with women taking care of the family – raising children and performing household chores. Men were the main breadwinners and participated in the education of boys through what was known as *Itorero* during which boys were trained to transition to manhood through physical exercises, lessons on patriotism and the protection of Rwandan sovereignty, while women used *Urubohero* (Niyomugabo, 2015) to prepare girls to transition to womanhood through artwork and lessons about a woman's body and sexuality.

Some of these traditions continued during the colonial and post-colonial eras, and laws were established to reinforce the subordination of Rwandan women legally, socially and politically. Political participation was monopolized by men (Burnet, 2011). Women were prevented from engaging in commercial activities, such as entering into business contracts or seeking paid employment without authorization from their husbands (Burnet, 2012; Burnet, & RISD, 2003; HRW, 1996). Female-owned businesses were particularly vulnerable to husbands' takeovers (Burnet, 2012).

The 1994 genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda created economic and social disruptions that resulted in a demographic imbalance. At the end of the genocide, there were 89 males for every 100 females (NISR, 2012). This demographic and gender imbalance led to rapid political, social and economic changes, defining new and dramatic changes in gender roles (Burnet, 2011). Many Rwandan women embarked on jobs previously ascribed only to men, including becoming the head of the household and participating in public and political spheres. Other traditionally male jobs, such as construction work or farm work (e.g. milking cows), previously considered taboo for women, became gender neutral (Burnet, 2008, 2011).

Faced with these new realities, the government of Rwanda committed to gender equality as part of its post-genocide reconstruction. It aligned with the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (currently known as Sustainable Development Goals), particularly Goal #3 to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment. For instance, the 1998 amendments to the civil code on marriage and the 2003 inheritance law resulted in Rwandan women's rights to inherit family

property (Cooper, 2011). The government of Rwanda had a political will to promote women's protection rights and punish gender-based violence (Republic of Rwanda,2009). Through the Ministry of Gender and Family Promotion, the government of Rwanda addressed a number of issues relating to the promotion of gender equality and family welfare. A Gender Monitoring Office was established under Article 185 as an independent Rwandan public institution to monitor and supervise compliance with gender equality indicators by all government programs in Rwanda (Republic of Rwanda, 2015). The Constitution of Rwanda also states that at least 30 percent of leadership positions must be occupied by women (Republic of Rwanda, 2015).

Rwanda has been praised for its gender-mainstreaming approach. Some outcomes are promising. For example, in health, the infant mortality rate dropped from 106 to 59 infants per 1000 births between 2000 and 2010 (Musafili, et al., 2015). In education, women represent 44 percent of the enrolment in tertiary education, including 33.3 percent in public academic institutions, and 54.6 percent in private institutions (NISR, 2014). In 2000 the Gross Enrollment Ratio for women in higher education was only 0.44 times that for men (World Bank, 2003). Percentages are less impressive in academic leadership, where women make up 5.9 percent of university rectors, 5 percent of vice-rectors in public higher learning institutions, and 26.8 percent of the members of boards of public institutions. Worldwide, Rwanda has the highest number of women in parliament, with women occupying 63.8 percent of the house (Inter-Parliamentary Union, 2016).

While Rwanda has made important strides and is committed to gender mainstreaming, continued improvement is needed. The recent emphasis on women's equality has apparently increased feelings of male exclusion and resentment, sometimes resulting in violence (Tu, 2015). Tu (2015) finds men can have difficulty acknowledging and supporting gender equality processes and women's empowerment. A study by Burnet (2011) in the urban areas of Rwanda, where women have gained greater economic autonomy, freedom, and participation in governance, finds increased partner/family violence due to changing gender roles. Men express anger and frustration about women's empowerment. Of course, the backlash against a reversal of women's traditional gender roles is nothing new. For example, in her ground-breaking study of migration and domestic work, Gamburd (2008) observes that female migrant domestic workers from Asia who become family breadwinners challenge traditional gendered roles and this can result in such male behaviour as drinking or violence against women.

Gender mainstreaming in Rwanda is at an early stage. As social work researchers from Canada, even though we have built a strong partnership with both female and male social researchers in Rwanda, we acknowledge that we need to be reminded of our own blind spots, our goal is to put gender-mainstreaming at the centre of all sectors, including laws, policies, economic development initiatives, and post-genocide reconstruction activities.

2. Research Issues

Research activities is one of our missions in institution of higher learning (Nierras, 2018). The current study's partnership was initiated by a team of academics from Canadian and Rwandan Social Work faculties, including York University, St. Thomas University, University of Calgary, and University of Rwanda (UR). In an initial study, the team obtained financial support from Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) to establish a Centre for Social Work Education and Practice at UR. The study aimed to: "a) strengthen the capacity of UR's social work program, b) prepare competent social work practitioners, and c) enhance the delivery of social work services to local communities". The team later obtained funding through the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Partnership Development Grant (SSHRC-PDG) for the project "Synthesizing Indigenous and International Social Work Theory and Practice in Rwanda." The goal of this project was to strengthen the capacity of the UR Social Work Program by co-creating knowledge that could be used to train competent social workers to respond appropriately to the complex social issues of post-genocide Rwanda.

3. Methodology

Drawing from community development, guided by the principles of social justice (McGrath et al, 2007), and using a participatory governance model, the study engaged a variety of stakeholders, including the members of an advisory committee formed during the IDRC project, students, academics from UR, and representatives from local government and non-government organizations. The team worked together over a period of four years (2013-2016), holding regular telecommunication meetings (phone calls, Skype meetings, and emails) and annual face-to-face meetings and workshops. Following Moffatt et al. (2005), community practice research was used to engage the reflexivity of researchers with community members throughout the study. In a shared commitment to involve university–community collaborations between Rwandan and Canadian Schools of Social Work, we engaged in dialogue in an intercultural space from which culturally relevant research and practice could emerge.

Data included information from 19 individual interviews with local practitioners, discussions among members of the advisory committee, and notes from the workshops during which the researchers presented preliminary findings and obtained feedback from participants. This iterative process of making sense of the data using different stakeholders occurred over the course of three years, during which the teams got together to establish consensus on the progress of the analysis, present preliminary findings to community stakeholders, and collect additional data based on feedback from both large and small group discussions. The research team also assigned topics for article writing. It was in this context that we decided to revisit the nature of social work research, the academics and students involved in the study, the context in which gender-mainstreaming is either considered or overlooked and the implications of research findings when gender-mainstreaming is left out. In the next section, we present our observations.

4. Analysis

4.1 Themes of Observation

Our observations revolve around three themes: 1) gender imbalance on the research team, 2) gender-mainstreaming blindness, 3) and gender-related issues in the study. The first two relate to our observations while the third refers to data provoking the question about the place of gender-mainstreaming in social work research.

4.1.1 Gender Imbalance on the Research Team

When we looked at the researchers on this collaborative project, we realized the Canadian team was entirely female while the Rwandan team comprised only male researchers. Arguably, this is reflective of the history of social work. For instance, in the Canadian social work profession, women dominate the frontline practice while men occupy administrative roles (Furness, 2012; Lewis, 2004; Schilling, Morrish, & Liu, 2008). Overall, 80 percent of social workers are women, and they make up 80–90 percent of social work undergraduate and graduate students (Service Canada, 2014). At the University of Rwanda, men dominate the social work program, both faculty, and students. During the 2014-2015 academic year, two-thirds of the social work students were males, 69 men versus 31 women. In the Department of Social Sciences, which includes Social Work and Sociology, there were 13 male faculty members and five female faculty members (information from the list of faculty members of the Department of Social Sciences).

Academic social work programs are new in Rwanda and were created primarily by men with academic training in other disciplines. The gender imbalance is not that surprising, as until

recently the education system in Rwanda discouraged women from attending postsecondary institutions. There are now three social work programs in Rwanda. The oldest of those social work programs in Rwanda was established in1999 in the former National University of Rwanda. Today, the program is located in the University of Rwanda that was formed in 2013 through the merger of Rwanda's previously independent public institutions of higher education, the largest of which was the National University of Rwanda. The two other social work programs exist in the Institut Polytechnique de Byumba (Polytechnic Institute of Byumba) established in 2007, and in the Catholic University of Rwanda established in 2010. Given our interest in gender-mainstreaming as a framework, it seems strange that the research team itself failed to use it. The explanation is the blindness of the research team.

4.1.2 The Blindness of the Research Team

From early on in the analysis, the members of the research team realized some data focused on specific issues affecting women in Rwanda. However, there was a gender blindness in the recruitment and training of students and in the formulation of the interview guide. There was also the gender imbalance on the research team: the Canadian members of the research project were women and the Rwandan members who were overseeing the data collection were men. The gender gaps is not persisting in other various sectors only (Virgil, 2019), but also in research, especially in transitional collaborative research.

When the partnership was initiated, the team's focus was on post-genocide reconstruction processes. Rwandan women's interest in participating was not initially considered. When the possibility of the interest of Rwandan female professors in the study was raised, we found several. However, they did not join the team until after the individual interviews had been completed. This may reflect a patriarchal and male-dominated environment deeply ingrained in academic institutions in Rwanda.

This blindness might have been reinforced by the nature of the transnational research. In our case, Skype and emails were the main means of communication both during the writing of the proposal and the preparation of the field research. The Canadian team relied on the Rwandan team to provide the context of social work in Rwanda, to engage community stakeholders who should be part of the project and to train students needed to assist with data collection and transcription. There was a lack of discussion of gender-mainstreaming in our research; this may have prohibited successful partnership collaboration between/ across researchers.

The methodology of this study encouraged knowledge produced in stages. After the gender imbalance was recognised, three Rwandan female professors who were interested in the project were asked to join. They participated in the continued analysis of the data and the dissemination activities. In addition, the input of the primary author of this paper helped discussions during workshops with community stakeholders.

The context is central to social work research. Drawing on the study of social work and gender relations in the context of Wales, Scourfield (2006) argues that social workers need to consider the ways gender is localized, while remaining sensitive to wider discourses of gender relations. He conceptualizes gender as relational and attends to the multiple and varied social practices of men and women and how they relate to each other. He notes the spatial dimension of gender relations and examines: 1) how gendered belief and gendered behavior vary according to locality; 2) how men and women negotiate their identities as men and women in relation to where they live and have lived; and, 3) how symbolic constructions of community are gendered (Scourfield, 2006).

We acknowledge that context was a major limitation of our study. We concur that social work researchers need to work with a contextual constructionist perspective by which they integrate gender relations as one of the analytical elements of research and knowledge production. The research team should address issues of gender and gender relations in the context of local construction of gender in Rwanda and in the context of gender construction in Canada and globally.

4.1.3 Gender-Related Issues

Gender-related issues were observed throughout the interviews with practitioners. Some participants highlighted the issues uniquely facing women in Rwanda, particularly those with other levels of vulnerabilities, such as being a widow, childless or growing old alone, after losing children to the genocide. One said:

"For a woman/widowed from the genocide with all [her] children killed, and now alone; it is very difficult for someone who had been before the genocide to no longer hear about children's voices at home calling mum, mum..." (Transcript 1).

Other participants talked about how they acted as social workers responding to their clients' needs:

"Social workers act for the well being of vulnerable people such as the elderly,... widows….." (transcript 10).

"We do have a program about gender equality mainstreaming and fight against gender-based violence". (transcript 2).

"...We help [mainly] widows from the genocide and their children, but this doesn't mean that we do not help some men, so it means survivors in general". (transcript 9).

Given the extent of the issue, one questionable aspect of this research was its ability to comprehensively capture voices of women experiencing gender discrimination in different spheres of their lives in Rwanda. The team is exploring further research initiatives that could address this gap.

4.2 Lessons Learned About Gender Mainstreaming

When we talk about adopting a gender mainstreaming strategy in research, we ultimately aim to conduct a non-hierarchical and gender equal research process from start to finish. That is, gender equality should be integrated into every stage of the research, including the study design, implementation, and presentation of research findings. It is important to remember that gender equality should not be taken only as equal participation of women and men in all stages of the research process; it should be seen as equal participation between women and men in the research scenario irrespective of their situation along with other broader axes of differentiation (race, class, culture, ethnicity, geopolitical situation). In other words, the notion of intersectionality (Carbado, 2013; Tolhurst et al., 2012) should underpin research that is committed to enact gender equality in all stages of the research process.

However, following some important observations from other research in African countries, as well as our research findings on Rwanda, we suggest that in practice it can be hard to implement gender mainstreaming as an operational strategy in the context of social work research. First, the political stability of the research context is important. This is especially true in research involving extensive fieldwork, which is typical in social work. Second, the socio-cultural contexts of many African countries are not conducive to the promotion of gender equality in research. It is challenging when researchers remain within a value system that struggles to support gender equality. In our study, the Rwandan researchers were all males working in an institution historically dominated by men and in a field of study that was just emerging in a post-genocide

setting. The leadership for the new social work program in Rwanda came mainly from male administrators.

Third, in research collaborations, stakeholders' perceptions, biases, and understanding of gender and gender relations could pose a challenge in promoting gender equality in research. In our research project, Rwandan female academics' interest in participating on the research team was not initially taken into consideration. This reflects a patriarchal, male-dominated environment, which has been an integral part of academic institutions in Rwanda. Fourth, in transnational research collaborations, gender equality in the research process can be difficult to achieve for two reasons. First, collaborators on both ends of the transnational research team may come from different socio-cultural and value systems and their perceptions of gender equality may vary considerably. Second, when researchers work in a transnational context, gender intersects with geopolitical situations, resulting in a complex scenario of transnational hierarchies involving gender and gender relations. This complicates the good intentions of sustaining and maintaining gender equality on a transnational research team. These two issues posed important challenges to our Rwanda-Canada partnership and are relevant to other research partnerships involving transnational collaboration.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, we address some of the challenges of gender mainstreaming in the context of our Rwanda-Canada research project and we identify several layers. Difficulties can accrue from the socio-cultural values of the participants, particularly their understanding of gender and gender equality. The two ends of a transnational research team had different values and realities that were not initially apparent. When research team members/collaborators have different geopolitical locations, gender equal collaboration can be difficult to achieve. During the research process, the value positions on gender mainstreaming have become more compatible and coherent through discussions and the increased participation of female academics on the Rwandan side not only in the project but in the administration of University of Rwanda.

Collaborative research could address the challenges by remaining sensitive to research participants' geographic and socio-cultural differences. It is important for research collaborators, either locally or transnationally, to practice self-reflexivity from start to finish as they negotiate the issues of power and privilege to produce non-hierarchical and accountable knowledge. Specifically, in the context of transnational collaboration, research team members should be open

to discuss the construction of gender and gender equality in both the local and the global context of the research along with other areas of cultural and socio-political blindness that may influence the research process and outcomes. Engaging gender in both transnational contexts can suggest ways to sustain and nurture gender equality in transnational research. This research is a reminder that engaging gender throughout the process of transnational social research is crucial to addressing gender equity in post-conflict contexts.

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