

## **Gender, Poverty and Social Transformation: Reflections on Fractures and Continuities in Contemporary Uganda**

**Edited by**

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### **About the book**

The book brings together a collection of works and analyses obtained through a multi-disciplinary gender-focused research project conducted in Uganda by the staff and PhD students of the two collaborating institutions. Within the broad theme of *Gender, Poverty and Social Transformation: Reflections on Fractures and Continuities in Contemporary Uganda*, the book addresses key questions relating to the current debates on gender equality in Africa. While there is increasing scholarship in this area, much of the writing has focused on women as victims of gender inequalities and patriarchy.

This book is informed by two motivations. One, it addresses the representation of African women and attempts to move beyond stereotypes. This motivation points specifically to the need to go beyond women as eternal victims, taking the orientation of African women as social agents. Whereas it is an undeniable fact that women have been historically disadvantaged relative to men, looking at them as eternal victims creates a discourse of lamentations, which has tended to dominate the knowledge created about the African woman. The discourse of lamentations is without a doubt informed by the undeniable fact that Africa is a continent in crisis. Widespread poverty, war and displacement, and global marginalisation all make Africa a continent struggling with the problem of development. This problem of development then translates into developmentalism, especially in gender studies. This book is part of the overall effort to build resources for bottom-up agency (women and/or men).

The second motivation relates to moving beyond generalizations to illuminate concrete realities in gender relations. The authors acknowledge that whereas gender relations are in a continuous flux, scholarship in the field has not kept up the pace. In Uganda, especially, scholarship in gender studies has tended to lag behind the changes, thereby limiting sensibilities as well as innovations in gender development practice. The authors have a strong feminist focus and reveal new insights, both at the practical and theoretical levels.

Within the broad context of poverty, public-sector reforms and information communication technologies (ICTs) in Uganda, the book maps out the changes and continuities in gender relations in Uganda today. It explores critical issues relating to gender transformation as an aspect of social transformation, in aspects of health provisioning, sexuality, poverty transitions, dynamics of productive resources, culture, and new realities of women's subordination. The authors mapped out the rhythm of gender relations in these areas, addressing themselves to the need to bring new knowledge in the area of gender studies. The book comprises 11 chapters under four themes.

## **Theme 1: Beyond Economic Determinism: Reflections on Productive Resources and Women's Economic Rights and Empowerment**

On the global scale, the women's movement has made enormous strides as seen in tremendous progress in the arenas of both knowledge production and political praxis. Perhaps, much more than many other social struggles, feminist engagement has been able to lodge a claim and force major adjustments onto the global development discourse.

There is, however, a realisation that the successes in, for example, education, political participation and voice are being pulled down by very slow progress in meaningful economic gender justice. Pearson (2004), for instance, argues that there is a need for a renewed feminist political economy, calling for a "re-balancing of the concerns about representation and a refocusing on material inequalities and on social policies of redistribution" (Pearson, 2004: 603). Hence, the questions of access and control of productive resources and economic empowerment are regaining relevance in feminist articulation of social transformation. Whereas, up to now, the criticism of economic determinism was to dispel the notion of economic power as almost the sole determinant of women's liberation, it is now clear that economic power and access to and control over productive resources is a key ingredient in the feminist envisioning of transformation. This move does not necessarily have to involve a "back-slide" into economic determinism that Jackson (1996) warns against, i.e. the tendency for feminist articulation to be reduced to developmentalism, thereby collapsing gender into the poverty trap. Rather, it requires a renewed conceptualisation of economic rights in a much more holistic manner, anchored in the understanding of women's livelihood claims as well as their agency. The role of economic power and rights in the constitution of women's citizenship, therefore, cannot be disputed.

Talking about economic rights in the context of Uganda and sub-Saharan Africa in general, we are at once faced with the challenge of distinguishing between the pursuance of economic rights and developmentalism. Widespread poverty, war and displacement, and global marginalisation all make Africa a continent struggling with the problem of development; Ihonvbere (1994) refers to it as "Africa's predicament". This problem of development also impacts on the general research landscape in many ways, leading to a rising tendency of anti-intellectualism. It is in this sense that the majority of feminist scholars in Africa fail to find space for the "luxury" of debating rights. In what seems to be a direction to more pressing issues of material deprivation and abuse of human rights, the majority of feminist researchers find themselves dealing with "problems" and hence constructing a collective identity of African women as victims. This stance has been aggravated largely by the instrumentalist imperative from governments and donors, where women are taken as forgotten resources, now discovered to be harnessed and exploited further.

Today, the African woman stands out as a central subject of social inquiry and general discourse. More and more research that relates to women's lives, voices, identities and experiences is being generated. There is a strong inclination towards approaches that seek to make African women visible, as actors and agents. Contributors to this theme set out from a realisation of the need to build resources for bottom-up agency, of women particularly. The aim is to recreate and augment the silenced positive images of women as movers and resilient actors. The authors aim to unearth the discourses that have

been few and far between, bringing out the critical silences in feminist knowledge and articulating needs with regards to gender and economic justice.

In Chapter 1, *Cutting the Coat According to the Cloth*, Josephine Ahikire interrogates the concept of women's agency in relation to claiming land rights in the context of policy shifts and reforms in Uganda. Ahikire argues that the decentralisation of land administration in Uganda has opened up new spaces for women's claims to land rights. Women have, in a way, utilised the space created to lay claims in the definition of their social citizenship, though in a setting of institutional failure and patriarchal domination. Based on studies conducted in Lira and Mukono districts, the chapter emphasizes that although the successes may not be many in terms of positive land rights outcomes, the increasing official utilisation of local and state land structures by women has the capacity to move the question of women's land rights from the realm of patriarchal orthodoxy to the world of heterodoxies, hence broadening the transformation possibilities. Such possibilities are evidently made more likely in the light of greater feminist social mobilisation, which will engender collective agency on land rights for more women. Such social mobilisation should also focus on the harmonisation of institutions in order to ensure adequate gender responsiveness in the rules and procedures.

A key aspect of women's agency relates to women's resilience in situations that may seem unbearable to a lethargic observer. Many writings on the African woman refer to the toiling women with "triple burdens". These are settings that require us to move beyond these generalisations and to look behind the curtain. In Chapter 2, *Untold Realities...*, Zerupa Akello spells out the new bargains in the patriarchal order. Akello's study of the situation in Tororo district, eastern Uganda, describes two major realities. On the one hand is the obvious decline in agricultural returns and a shrinking job market as a result of closure of factories and other business ventures that tend to provide employment to men. Women fend for the households almost single handedly, which has created a new terrain in which the rules for how women and men should behave are constantly being contested and negotiated in daily life (Townsend, 1999). Analysing men's reactions to women's economic muscle, the chapter illuminates interesting facts about the dynamics of power and the negotiations that play out even in contexts of extreme material deprivation.

Whereas feminist scholarship in Uganda has tended to be more about the rural woman and hence largely about gender relations in rural settings, there is increasing recognition of the need to diversify focus and orientation and to move the field beyond the recitation of a few rhymes and stereotypes. Using the case of Kampala, in *Plaza Women* (Chapter 3), Tabitha Mulyampiti contextualises women in the prosperity of the city and discovers that women are no longer occupying a marginal space in the urban setting. Mulyampiti asks how women participate in the relative prosperity and hence contribute to the social transformation of city life in Kampala. Kampala is the hub of Uganda's economic activities and, in recent times, the skyline of Kampala has changed dramatically, from small-scale shopping units to big complexes--what has been termed as the plaza phenomenon. "Plaza women", according to Mulyampiti, are a particular class of women who are part of this new phenomenon. Understanding the context that is animating women's prosperity undeniably moves feminist theorisation to another level--of not only accounting for subordination but also for factors that animate women's economic power. On the whole, the chapters under productive resources and economic

empowerment have only touched the tip of the iceberg. They call for more research and thinking on these issues.

In Chapter 4, Anna Ninsiima investigates Microfinance as an Instrument of Women's Empowerment and observes that, while the beneficiaries of microfinance have not necessarily collapsed into deeper poverty, only a meagre proportion, and then only if they had pre-existing savings, has demonstrably been successful. Needless to say, microcredit has been a subject of debate in the development industry, and the dominant feminist critique has been that microcredit stems from liberalist imperatives. The major criticism has been that, more often than not, the development industry tends to escape issues of power, of land ownership and rights into microcredit, which does not promise many possibilities for redistribution and transformation. Ninsiima takes another perspective, which recognizes the resilience and agency of women in the way they deploy benefits from microfinance while, at the same time, observing that for poor women, microfinance merely allows them to "hang in there". The chapter also emphasises that state intervention is necessary to regulate the conditions of microfinance institutions so as to benefit the poor, women in particular.

As a development that has revolutionised virtually all aspects of modern life, ICT has a gender dimensions too. While in some respects it has fractured established stereotypes, in others it has reinforced gender identity. This is reflected in the chapters under this theme. In Chapter 5, Mobile Phone and Computer Adoption, Madanda Aramanzan contends that, since the year 2000, developing countries have adopted ICT rapidly and with optimism, hoping it can help counter development challenges such as poor health, low-quality education, poor governance, corruption and gender inequality. However, research demonstrates that the ramifications of ICT adoption are intricate. Patriarchy seeks to extend male power and privilege by harnessing ICT to elongate its existence in several ways. However, fractures in gender structures that reinforce women's subordination are noted with adoption. This partly explains the link between mobile-telephone adoption and gender-based violence. This chapter draws on empirical data collected using qualitative and quantitative techniques in two districts of eastern Uganda, namely, Iganga and Mayuge, taking a critical look at the role ICT plays in the transformation of gender relations and the reinvention of patriarchy. The chapter demonstrates that while ICT has a potentially huge developmental role, its adoption also has some negative ramifications.

In Chapter 6, on ICT and Access to Agricultural Information, David Mpiima examines the role of technology in enhancing women's agency in economic matters. He quotes earlier studies that have found that technology use not only improves the agency of women in agriculture, but also their yields. It is evident that, unlike other technologies like tractors, ICT (especially computers and the internet), can influence both household gendered division of labour, and decision-making in any agricultural production process. These technologies provide avenues for farmers to obtain needed information regardless of their sex. If a farmer can access this information, it can be used to improve key agricultural production activities, like actual farming, treatment of crop diseases, marketing and sourcing new seeds or even applying necessary technology. Findings from 500 farmers also indicate that ICT use enhances the earning ability of both men and women, as they can sell their produce directly, with limited intervention of "middlemen". This, in turn, leads to increased levels of equality within the household,

especially on the economic front, enabling women reach financial and decision-making powers they did not have before the uptake of ICT facilities at telecentres.

In Chapter 7, Nsibirano and Kabonesa focus on The Creation and Reconstruction of Gendered Identities by University Students as occasioned by ICT. The authors use a combination of a constructivist approach, symbolic interactionism and standpoint theory to explore the implications of growing internet use in Ugandan universities. Among the Ugandan students in this study, the internet is largely seen as a men's club, an attitude that devalues and restricts participation of female students. There exist defined masculine and feminine identities that include acceptable behaviour relating to the use of artifacts such as the internet. The chapter's central focus is the way university students use the internet as a space to reconstruct gendered identities.

## **Theme 2: The Political Economy of Sexuality, Domestic Provisioning, Healthcare and HIV/AIDS**

Uganda's neoliberal policies as implemented over the past two decades have reduced or eliminated social services, thus compelling families to rely increasingly on support from household members. In Chapter 8, *A Woman Never Falls Sick*, Grace Bantebya Kyomuhendo explores the links between women and adolescent girls' increased participation in the care economy, and their reproductive-health status. Though all household members are affected, the impact on women and girls has been disproportionate, with many women and girls not only experiencing acute poverty but being trapped in desperate situations as a result of their gender, and because of gender-stereotyped caring and nurturing roles in households. Evidence shows that, despite the increased care-giving burden of women and adolescent girls, a new pattern of care-giving roles involving both husbands and wives has not emerged. In addition to engaging in productive economic activities formerly outside their domain, women and girls have to continually negotiate their way through to perform and endure the burden of fulfilling their gender-stereotyped domestic care-giving roles. The lack of state-sponsored healthcare and subsequent negotiating of new care-giving exchanges has created unique constraints in women's lives, which have an impact on their sexual and reproductive health, leading to limited access and utilisation of health services. The rationality of caring notwithstanding, the negative aspects of care-giving work, especially from a woman's maternal-health perspective, have been overlooked at all levels of the government. There is an urgent need for policies that seek to address the negative impact of social reproduction in domestic settings to be enacted and implemented, in order to improve sexual and reproductive-health service delivery, to enhance utilisation of healthcare and promote positive maternal and reproductive-health outcomes.

Chapter 9, by Stella Neema, Joanna Busza, Pranitha Maharaj, John Cleland and Iqbal Shah deals with Women and Condom Use in Marital Relationships. In mature, generalised HIV epidemics like that of Uganda, the majority of new infections occur within marital or cohabiting relationships. This is due to prior infection or infidelity, and the proportion of HIV-discordant couples is high. Condoms are used as a family-planning method and infection prevention, but are not popular within marriage. Women in marital unions have positive attitudes towards condom use, negating previous studies that indicated the impossibility of condom use in marital relationships. Reference is made to several women, who reported initiation of condom use in their marital relationships contrary to findings of earlier studies in Uganda.

Out of 40 women, 13 reported that they had initiated the use of condoms in their marital relationships; 15 reported that the husband/partner had initiated it, 10 reported both initiated condom use, and only two reported it was provider-initiated. Both spouses contribute in providing condoms for use at home. Women as social agents have shown themselves to be not only fearful users of condoms within marital unions, but have also taken the middle ground in their relationships to demand and use condoms. A paradigm shift is required to understand the broader issues related to risky sexual behaviour in marital unions, gender roles, power imbalances, and couples' communication and to address the twin risks of HIV infection and unintended pregnancies. An implication for programmes might be that they should assist with couples' communication more broadly, including the sharing of test results--this trend is illustrated in HIV counselling for couples, testing and home-based HIV testing for whole families together.

### **Theme 3: Marriage, Sexuality and Changing Trends in Gender Relations**

Sexuality is conceived as being intimately linked to gender relations, economic and cultural processes (Lancaster & di Leonardo, 1997, McFadden, 1992). The linkages between gender and sexuality are clearly articulated by Giddens (1992: 1) who asserts that "when I set out to write about gender, I found myself writing about sexuality." According to Giddens, sexuality is a central element through which our identities, our bodies and our social experiences are mediated. Access to gender as a framework for self narration and for locating subjects within social communities is negotiated through sexuality (Butler, 1990).

While dominant feminist scholarship has hitherto perceived sexuality as a vector through which power is organised and exercised (Jeffreys, 1990; Richardson, 1996; Rubin, 1984; Tamale, 2001) and constructed as a site of women's oppression and men's power, in Chapter 10 Florence Kyoheirwe Muhanguzi explores how, on the contrary, sexuality offers opportunities for women to express their agency. The dominant feminist contention is that interaction between women and men in sexual unions have been noted and perceived in terms of an active subject (the powerful male) and passive object (the female) who lacks agency and is powerless and oppressed, whose sexuality and in particular sexual pleasure and desire is highly controlled, suppressed, pathologised, sinful and largely constructed in relation to male sexual pleasure (McFadden, 1992; Tamale, 2003). Consequently, women's experiences in sexual unions are perceived to be negative, characterised by endemic gender-based violence, coercive practices and unwanted sex--consequences that have become endemic in many African countries and Ugandan society in particular (Hlatshwayo & Klugman, 2001). However, in *Sex is Sweet*, Muhanguzi demonstrates that power inequality and hierarchy in sexual unions have been deconstructed by women to ensure positive sexual experiences. The chapter reveals women's agency in expression and engagement in negotiation for pleasurable and romantic sex.

Contrary to feminist theorisation that conceptualises sexuality as a monolithic and static category in which women are denied agency (Meah, Hockey & Robinson, 2011), women spoke of sex not only as pleasurable ("sweet") but also as something they actively pursued, skilfully and artfully, well under their control as active participants and beneficiaries, right from setting the agenda, the sexual

intercourse itself and the post-intercourse antics. The chapter demonstrates women's diverse options and choices for sexual expression and having pleasurable sexual experiences that include both verbal and nonverbal sexual practices. Women's freedom to discuss sexual matters amongst themselves indicates a sense of women's agency and empowerment and fractures in the restrictive social mores associated with female sexuality. Women's acknowledgement of such experiences is fundamental to the conceptual understanding of the reproduction of sexual power relations, and adds some weight to the theoretical feminist work on the eroticisation of the dominant-submissive conceptualisation of sexuality (Shefer, 1999).

The chapter takes a new tone on issues that have largely been written about negatively—sexual desire and pleasure (and other areas of sexual marital unions) or written about with undertones of moral condemnation (Signe, 2004), thus silencing women's sexual agency. However, the chapter acknowledges continuities of some of the dominant negative constructions of female sexuality that continue to stand in the way of women's freedom and desire to express their sexual interests and needs.

In a similar vein, women actively circumvent social structures (patriarchal structures) and impediments that constrain them from demonstrating their agency and avoid being victims of subordination. In Chapter 11, *Educated Women in Marital Relations*, Peace Musiimenta articulates how women's understanding of their position in society propels them to work hard and succeed in two conflicting spheres: the private and the public. The chapter examines educated women's agency in executing their roles as mothers, wives and career women. The chapter notes that, while educated women are perceived to be at the apex of social hierarchy, privileged and liberated, they continue to experience subordination that creates dilemmas for pursuing opportunities in the public sphere.

Musiimenta observes that although education is reported to create equality between men and women, it has instead produced a contradictory status by maintaining women's subordination in society. However, educated women take marriage as their cross to bear, and devise strategies to demonstrate their agency rather than fall victim to subordination. Consequently, they grow, move and succeed ably with their families and careers. Women boost their agency to counteract the institutional and social impediments to their status through delegation, good time-management skills, employing house helps and taking unfinished office business home.