

Engendering Development through Social Justice: The Myth of Commonality in Kenyan Policies

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to gain a clearer understanding of how policy can ultimately lead to the marginalisation of the same people it seeks to empower through the assumption of commonality and the disregarding of fundamental diversity within the target group. We then proceed to sketch out what can be done to avoid this in gender-based policies in Kenya. Through an in-depth analysis of policy documents and long term strategic plans from the Department of Gender in the Ministry of Gender, Sports, Culture the study hopes to show the areas that have been overlooked in the development of effective gender based policymaking.

Introduction

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The research will investigate and document how policymaking in gender-based development initiatives currently falls short of adequately addressing the social context of intervention by ignoring the prevailing diversity among women as a social group. The research will attempt to answer the following questions:

- Does gender based policy currently take into consideration the diversity that exists in Kenyan women as policy stakeholders?
- What are the limitations in policy that does not address the real social context of policy making by disregarding women's diversity?
- How should/can policy incorporate diversity among women into the national gender-based initiatives?

The study seeks to understand how public policies have been developed to engender social justice and development in Kenya and what this has meant for the search for gender equality in the country. The study further explores how the acceptance of international instruments on gender equality has impacted the development of social policy on gender and ultimately the status of women in Kenya. It also investigates reasons why the acknowledgement of the place of women in development has not revealed tangible results in the improvement of women's lives in Kenya.

The second part will look at engendering development. The concept of gender equality will be explored with particular emphasis on the two approaches of gender mainstreaming and women's empowerment as the avenues to achieving gender equality as posited by the country's gendered policies. The use of the term 'gender' and the assimilation of women into the existing unequal structures and institutions of development and not social transformation in the mainstreaming rhetoric will be explored. Similarly the tendency of empowerment proponents to assume a powerlessness of the Kenyan woman, making them out to be 'victims' while the actual power structures of gender subordination are ignored, will be interrogated.

Ultimately, this section will explore the diversity and multiplicity of the lived realities of women in Kenya, taking a closer look at the myriad levels of heterogeneity of the Kenyan woman arising from the different facets of social identity that are evident in society including culture, race and religion. Finally the analysis reviews existing gender policies and what they have implied for gender equality and women's advancement by overlooking the existing differences among women given their global origins and the tendency to homogenize the concept of 'woman'.

Social Justice

When the women's movement first raised the issue of gender equality, national governments and international donor agencies accepted the goal in principle, but did not have any ready-made policy or instrument to address the set of concerns brought forward by women. Subsequently, developing policies, designing tools and implementing them was a lengthy process since the overriding objective of the women's movement was tantamount to changing the way that development was viewed and the direction that it would take henceforth. Removing gender disparities in human development and access to opportunities implied changing priorities and redistributing resources; the elimination of discriminatory practices meant changing laws and customs that have prevailed over centuries (Jahan, 1996, p.825).

There was resistance to change, created by ignorance, bias and conflicts of interest coupled with the perception that the women's agenda was not clearly understood or appreciated. In addition, it was undeniably threatening as it implied fundamental restructuring of existing society and institutions. Even when awareness was raised, and WID followed by GAD policies and measures were adopted by states and international agencies, implementation was difficult. Many of the objectives laid down by the donors and their development partners have still not been achieved with gaps emerging between intentions and results (Orock, 2002, p.94).

In Kenya as in most African countries, there have also been few measurable goals against which progress can be measured. Policy and programme interventions have not been adequate to ensure results with institutional frameworks that have been weak and requiring strengthening (SP no 2, 2006, p.6). The experiences of the last two decades indicate that while we need to acknowledge significant gains in several fronts, we also need to acknowledge that the fundamental objectives of the women's movement, particularly that of transforming social and gender relations and creating a just and equal world, still elude us (Jahan, 1996, p.826). Gender equality as a goal for development seeks the creation of societies within which all people; regardless of their differences have equal rights to and access to resources, opportunities and services as posited by the Beijing Platform for Action:

Equality between women and men is a matter of human rights and a condition for social justice and is also a necessary and fundamental prerequisite for equality, development and peace. A transformed partnership based on equality between women and men is a condition for people-centred sustainable development (Mission Statement, para.1).

In other words, there is a dual rationale for promoting gender equality. First, that gender equality, encompassing equal rights, opportunities and responsibilities for men and women alike, is a matter of human rights and social justice. And second, that greater equality between women and men is a precondition for and an effective indicator of a rich and sustainable human development (UN, 2001, p.1).

Kenya, along with other developing African countries, has signed and ratified most women's human rights international instruments and upholds in its Constitution, the social justice tenet of equality between all citizens regardless of sex. It is however evident that this intended equality is still slow in coming and women's low status is still consistently legitimized by various factors including inadequate policy interventions, gender-insensitive institutional structures, socio-cultural norms and conservative religious practices with only a few of its current modern legislations addressing the prevalent gender inequalities (FEMNET, 2004, p. 4).

In establishing her social policies on international instruments, Kenya has unwittingly opened up its policies to certain unassailable weaknesses which can be argued to be contributors to the inefficiency of the same, though they may not be the only or the most pertinent factor. Generally, the development agenda and the gender strategies for developing nations are still outlined and determined by development professionals at the headquarters of international development organisations in the West, resulting in a global gender agenda that is highly centralised and increasingly separate from the lived realities in the developing world (Lind, 2006, p. ii).

In these developing countries, Kenya included, the social realities are not homogenous as depicted by the gender and development paradigm that seeks to construct a generic solution to perceived realities, but is rich in diversity of experience influenced by race, class, ethnicity and culture (Bhavnani, Foran & Kurian, 2003 as cited in Singh, 2007, p. 103). The richness in diversity of women's lives is obscured by the creation of universally applicable category of gender resulting in ineffective policies due to the disconnect between theory and reality whereby 'gender' is taken to equal women and is placed at the apex of importance above all other social categories (McIlwaine and Datta, 2003, p.372).

Ultimately, these international gendered development strategies set unrealistic goals for gender equality and fail to seriously consider the opinions and world views of women themselves and substitutes these with the world view of researchers and policymakers instead (Singh, 2007, p.104). Chandra Mohanty succinctly described this world view in her 1988 critique of Western Feminist stereotyping of 'Third World' women as 'uniformly victimised, poor, and uneducated.' Social justice efforts through national policy must be based on or at least tailored to the local context for it to be effective as a tool for social development.

Engaging Development

In the last decades of the previous millennium, the discourse on development and its practical implications underwent a paradigm shift as the actual essence of the concept was submitted to intense scrutiny. The focus of attention shifted from the economic dimension of development to the more social justice oriented notion of people-centered development which was increasingly centred on issues of equality of access to resources, opportunities and benefits (Bhatta, 2001, p.19).

The focus was also driven by the notion of suitability and sustainability of development efforts for all people regardless of differences based on factors like race, gender ethnicity or culture. Action was urged for changing the existing assumptions, theories and models of development and the importance of social policies that changed organisational rules and cultures to move towards inclusive and participatory processes was emphasised (Jahan, 1996, p.827).

In light of the previous gender-blind and male-centred conceptualisations of development discourse and practice in the past, feminists strived for and contributed to the current acceptance of gender as an integral component of the development agenda. One of the most fundamental changes in this shift has been the move from a 'feminisation' of development in WID to an 'engendering' of development in the GAD framework (McIlwaine and Datta, 2003 p.369).

In feminising development 'a women's perspective' was added to the international development paradigm whereby a prevailing view of women's specific role in development, and projects that particularly targeted and supported women in the role, were outlined. However, this perspective was criticised for merely reinforcing traditional and oppressive sex roles and a new perspective that not only focused on women but also on their social context was adopted (Lind, 2006, p.13). This evolution reflected the different approaches taken in exploring the relationship between women, men and development.

Within the 'engendering development' paradigm, fundamental issues such as human rights, gender-based disparities, and the need to interrogate women and men as gendered entities in both discourse and praxis were adopted into the global development agenda (Bhatta, 2001, p.19). The overarching aim was for social policies to become 'gendered' and thus more effective in tackling social issues, with gender equality increasingly recognised as fundamental to all other aspects of development,. During the Beijing Conference on women in 1995, the principle of gender equality and women's advancement was declared 'the platform of action' for development (BPFA, Mission Statement, 1995), forming the foundation of the international instruments on which the Kenyan national gender agenda is based.

The mainstay of the platform for action was the concept of *gender mainstreaming* coupled with the complementary notion of *empowerment*. While previous development strategies emphasised the addressing of women's practical needs such as food, shelter, education and health care among others, through interventionist targeted projects; GAD looks to meeting both practical and strategic gender needs that arise out of an analysis of both men's and women's social roles and requires changes in the structures that define women's position in any given culture (McIlwaine and Datta, 2003, p.370). And in essence, GAD through the notion of gender mainstreaming seeks to alter the quantitative aspects of women's participation in development to the more favourable transformative aspects. This ideological process requires agenda-setting that would transform the existing development agenda through prioritising gender concerns (Jahan, 1996, p.829).

In this case, the participation of women as decision makers in determining development priorities and fundamentally re-orienting the nature of the mainstream is the key strategy, resulting in successful development efforts where women are not only recipients but a part of the process of development. In reality though, Kenya has adopted the second and more politically acceptable integrationist approach to mainstreaming that incorporates women's and gender concerns into all of the existing policies and programmes, focusing on adapting these institutional procedures to achieve gender equality without transforming the overall development agenda (Reeves and Baden, 2000, p.12). This has had various negative and limiting results to the gender agenda which are explored below.

The national gender policy broadly alludes to '...the targeting of marginalised groups and their integration into the, mainstream of development' (NGDP, 2000, p.6). While on paper the Kenyan government states the intention to pursue and ensure the transformation of existing institutions and decision making mechanisms to realise sustainable gains for gender equality (SP no. 2, 2006, p. 6), in reality gender mainstreaming in Kenya has remained a checklist of institutional planning focused on processes and means rather than substantive ends, leading to a preoccupation with procedural detail at all levels, rather than clarity or direction on objectives (Baden and Goetz, 1997, p.5).

The preoccupation with instrumental objectives of integration rather than the substantive objectives of gender equality means that gender concerns are assimilated into the same structures that have previously led to the subordination of women. Invariably this leads to the depoliticisation of the same gender issues as priority is given to institutional strategies, in the hope that once institutionalised gender concerns will become legitimate, and get routine attention in government operations. Although this has happened in some cases with gender issues becoming legitimate concerns in departmental discourse and praxis, the emphasis on institutionalisation has also resulted in the overlooking of the overall gender equality agenda (Jahan, 1996, p.828).

In monitoring the adoption and institutionalisation of the mainstreaming policies and measures rather than the impact of these measures on the ground, the potential to achieve the substantive objectives of gender equality and women's empowerment is not realised. Assimilation of gender concerns into existing structures also opens up the possibility that integration and bureaucratisation of gender concerns, especially women's needs, will lead to invisibility of the same in the broader development discourse rather than to transformation. In this case, these issues would get subsumed into a myriad of other development concerns and would not stand out as critical as they would if the structures were changed to specifically acknowledge gender as pertinent to the design, development and implementation of national policies (LWF, 2003, p.9). Similarly, the critical voice of women may remain outside the structures, and end up unheard as most of the prevailing government structures have a predominantly male view although they may be seen as gender neutral.

This 'invisibilisation' of women in development is further exacerbated by the lack of proper gender disaggregated data for the design and implementation of government interventions in countries like Kenya where only regional statistics based on poverty are used (Muteshi, 2006, p.51). Where effort is made to use gender specific data, one finds that the statistics are based on a the neoclassical economic paradigm that tends to a static and reductionist definition of gender , especially women , stripping away considerations of the relational aspects of gender, of power and how patterns of subordination are reproduced (Baden and Goetz, 1997, p. 7).

The gender agenda is increasingly more technocratic and mainly based on information that tends to reduce women's gender issues to a set of needs or gaps, amenable to administrative decisions about the allocation of resources while failing to accommodate or validate issues of gender and power (Goetz, 1994 as cited in Baden and Goetz, 1997, p. 7). The end result is policies that address the symptoms but not the root causes of gender inequality thus lacking in any real change or sustainability as the status of women is not changed. Ultimately gender mainstreaming should implicitly involve structural change, transformation of social institutions and processes, as well as a restructuring of gender power relations in society.

However in the prevailing discourse and practise of gender equality the transformative aspects of gender equality do not seem to be sufficiently considered, especially by governments, as Naila Kabeer argues, 'instead of an open-ended process of social transformation, we find the notion of empowerment as a form of electric shock therapy to be applied at intervals to ensure the right responses.'(2000, p. 50). Similarly, Signe Arnfred states that; 'to a large extent the gender language has implied a de-politisation of women's issues in development, turning gender into a matter of planning and monitoring and not of struggle.' (2000, p. 75)

This weakness of the gender mainstreaming paradigm has been the focus of criticism by the Development Alternative for Women of a New Era, DAWN who argue that 'adding gender or women to frameworks that have led to the exclusion of women and to the marginalisation of the majority of poor people in the first place should not be an option, going on to posit that an effective gender equality agenda must be one that 'goes beyond equal opportunity; it requires the transformation of the basic rules, hierarchies and practices of public institutions' (DAWN, 2000) to ultimately create an environment conducive to progressive policymaking.

Further to these inherent shortcomings of the gender mainstreaming paradigm as it is practised by many governments including Kenya, is the fact that it is basically a top-down approach that has seen commitment at the policymaking level of the state without much change in the development policies at implementation. In many cases 'tokenism' is the cause, whereby on paper at least, there is a token strong commitment to gender equality and yet, in practice this does not materialise into concrete and applicable projects and programmes (Bhatta, 2003, p.25).

Tokenism may be driven by a need to show compliance by governments to international bodies and donors so as not to jeopardise economic support or a simple lack of political will to make the necessary structural and procedural changes required including budgetary allocations, planning and management of interventions (Muteshi, 2006, p. 62). On the whole, gender mainstreaming loses its potential transformative aspect when it is broadly applied without consideration to the local context realities. As the Applied Socio-economic Research (ASR) organization of Pakistan's Nighat Khan argues, gender analysis has become a technocratic discourse in spite of its roots in socialist feminism, is dominated by researchers, policy-makers and consultants and no longer addresses issues of power central to women's subordination and social change. She identified factors underlying this shift as the professionalization and 'NGOisation' of the women's movement and the consequent lack of accountability of 'gender experts' to a grassroots constituency (Baden and Goetz, 1997, p.5).

The shift from a grassroots articulated focus to a more professional discourse imposed from above thus makes issues and goals to become repetitive in a fixed global language controlled by outsiders who are inevitably removed from the lived realities of the women whose lives they seek to improve. Also contentious is the adoption of the term 'gender' to replace 'women' in the gender mainstreaming development discourse, that some have seen as the obscuring of the 'real' issue behind gender disparities (Arnfred, 2000, p.75), that of power relations.

The concept of 'gender' is constantly used in a descriptive manner; for example to denote men, women, boys and girls in the Kenyan National Gender and Development Policy (2000, p.3), leading to an operationalisation of the same definitions in the gender agenda that minimises the contested and political nature of relations between men and women. As Arnfred argues, 'where talking about women implied an awareness of women's marginalisation and subordination the term gender is used as a neutral term referring to both women and men' (Ibid, p.75).

One can hypothesise that this has been done to accommodate the overall macroeconomic policy objective of development as laid out in international agendas thereby relegating the social transformative aims of women's struggle to a secondary position in terms of priority. Gender equality, therefore becomes important for its instrumental value for improving economic advancement rather than an end in itself (Bisnath & Elson, 2000, p. 12). Conversely, in developing nations like Kenya, the prevailing robust patriarchal nature of society and in turn the governing structures, the use of the term 'gender' while seen as a strategic retreat by development practitioners to avoid the conservative backlash against what may be seen as a hostile feminist agenda, is still seen as a threat to the 'natural order' of society by some. The belief here is that 'gender' and gender based programmes serve to over-politicise the status quo between men and women (Baden and Goetz, 1997, p.11) and if allowed to continue would disrupt cherished social organisation as one speaker at the Beijing Conference stated '...we have to try to neutralize the tremendous amount of gender [and] gender perspectives, which are going to go directly against our families and against our children'.

'Gender' is seen as alien and a threat to established life and any interventions that are based on the same are shunned unless they are tailored to the social reality as gender disparities do not occur in a vacuum (Kabeer, 2000, p. 12). This has often led to a watering down of gender mainstreaming language and interventions so as to accommodate the same marginalising socio-cultural structures that it seeks to change. Instead of governments looking for creative ways to acknowledge the concerns of women as entities existing in a socio-cultural context, the gender mainstreaming rhetoric has centralised gender equality to western notions of development, distanced social policy from the lived realities in target populations and ultimately obscured unequal power relations between men and women behind the political correctness of gender.

However, gender mainstreaming is currently not practised in isolation and is typically coupled with the notion of empowerment whereby empowerment refers to the process of transforming gender power relations, through individuals or groups developing awareness of women's subordination and building their capacity to challenge it (Reeves and Baden, 2000, p. 35). CIDA defines empowerment as a situation where people, both women and men, take control over their lives: set their own agendas, solve problems, and develop self-reliance. Empowerment is not only a desirable outcome but also a process that can be individual, collective, social and political. Although the concept is based on the premise that outsiders cannot empower women, institutions, including international co-operation agencies and national machineries, can support processes that increase women's self-confidence and develop their self-reliance (CIDA, 1999, p.8).

It is essentially a bottom-up approach which makes it complementary to the top-down approach of gender mainstreaming aimed at achieving an effective overall development agenda based on gender equality as a prerequisite for social justice. Empowerment is associated with participatory, bottom-up approaches to development objectives, justified through the conception that freedom over economic decisions leads to increased development efficiency at the local level in terms of design, implementation and outcomes (Narayan, 2002:3-6).

Women's empowerment is considered essential in the struggle for the eradication of poverty and national development and is considered as principal, given that women constitute the only social category exposed to discrimination and marginalisation across all social, cultural and political boundaries (Malhotra & Schuler, 2005:71). Widely used in development jargon, empowerment has recently overshadowed other elements of development as it is seen to be an all-round panacea to more than one issue. It has been connected to decreasing levels of corruption, promotion of social cohesion and trust and it is claimed to reinforce government and project performance (Ohlsson, 2004, p.1).

While most definitions of empowerment will be concerned with institutional nature of development and the formal procedures therein to expand the assets and capabilities of poor people to participate in, negotiate with, influence, control and hold accountable institutions that shape their lives (Narayan, 2002, p.14), the concept of empowerment is also being transferred to other societal spheres, giving special attention to the unequal power relations between women and men (ibid, p.25) and the need to transform the nature of these power relations.

However the concept can be highly political and its meaning is sometimes contested. This is due to the fact that central to the concept of women's empowerment is an understanding of the notion of power itself. Empowerment for women has had negative connotations for society in general and men in particular for they take it to mean that it invariably involves the radical alteration of society and the loss of men's traditional power and control over women both within and outside the family (Batliwala,1994, p. 24).

While this confrontational approach implies that it is not merely a question of sharing whatever it is that men have, but wresting it away from men and putting it in the hands of women, in reality women's empowerment does not imply women acquiring power over men, but rather the expansion of freedom of choice, action and resources to influence those institutions that affect their lives (Ohlsson, 2004, p.5).

Empowerment described in part as being about the ability to make choices, must also involve being able to shape what choices are on offer as empowerment is not something that can be done to women but one that must allow for them to analyse, develop and articulate the overriding needs within their lived realities (Bhatta, 2001, p.23). Problems arise when these interests are pre-defined from above either at government level or by development organisations, resulting in the imposition of an ideal of empowerment without the analysis of the local causes of women's subordination (Reeves and Baden, 2000, p.35).

Where women are merely taken as passive beneficiaries of the empowerment agenda instead of instruments of change, there is a wide application of a global narrowly defined empowerment paradigm based on a theory and policy focus on women's powerlessness, self-reliance and individual choice, which obscures the power aspects of gender and development (Bisnath & Elson, 2000, p. 12).

This hypothesis inevitably arises in the West and is assumed to address gender concerns in the development process in less-developed countries. In reality though, this assumption does not hold true due to various factors that are explored in the following sections. The global empowerment discourse assumes a commonality of women and their experience of gender power relations that lumps all women believed to be marginalised into one broad category and in so doing defines the 'third world woman' as powerless victims marginalised through similar social processes in need of a singular approach to empowerment.

The term 'woman' becomes a signifier of one end of a dualistic pair always the lesser and oppressed one without consideration of the socio-cultural dimensions of this duality and the other factors that would make gender relations more complex than assumed (Flax, 1993, p.336).

In turn the gender agenda has ended up substituting the term gender for women, putting it at the top of all other variables that generate and propagate unequal power structures that lead to women's marginalisation (McIlwaine and Datta, 2003, p.372). The reality though is that power relations of gender are determined by a myriad assortment of social, cultural and economic factors that go beyond the realm of gender.

'Gender' or 'woman'; as the category that it has come to define, is not a static and monolithic essence defined once and for all but rather the site of multiple, complex, and potentially contradictory sets of experiences, defined by overlapping variables such as class, race, age, lifestyle, sexual preference, and others (Braidotti, as cited in Chan-Tiberghien, 2001, p. 458). In ignoring these existing permutations of gender relations and power structures, the empowerment rhetoric has in various ways not only not mitigated the prevailing inequalities but has also ended up propagating new hegemonies and forms of marginalisation of women (Ahmed, 1998, 55).

The problem with the empowerment agenda as it is practised now is the evolution that it has undergone as it has been assimilated into the mainstream development discourse to accommodate an individualistic notion of empowerment based on liberal economic rationale of self-reliance and self-improvement (Young, 1993 as cited in Oxaal, 1997, p.5). While there is nothing wrong with this, the end result in some states like Kenya is the case where the individual ideals of an advantaged few, that is the bureaucratic and feminist elite, is privileged over the outlook of the masses who are not included in the policy making processes ending up with policies that do not address the issues of majority of women (Baden and Goetz, 1997, p.7).

Empowerment, in gendered policies assumes a one dimensional outlook on power relations in society and how this plays out. It overlooks the fact that power and subordination can occur in multiple ways and degrees (Briskin, 1990, p.101), in both the public and private lives of women and also as individuals or in a collective. Empowerment agendas must acknowledge that the public dimension of women's lives cannot be separated from the private and that power relations in both private and public domains will shape the society and in so doing the equality of gender or lack thereof (Watson, 2007, 101).

In order to tackle women's empowerment as a tool for changing the status of women, it is necessary to establish the location of power in societies and how it is exercised, at all levels of social life including the private-that is the family, the public- in this case the communities and finally the macro-level of the state (Bhatta, 2001, p.28).

Addressing only one or the other may not be sufficient in improving the overall condition and position of women in the long run, for example while tokens of change may occur at state level with more women being nominated into parliament and government, the lives of the common women may not have a corresponding improvement as we see in the example of Kenya.

Similarly, governments must realise that assuming that promoting a certain type of activity will necessary lead to empowerment, may not hold true as women's empowerment cannot be defined in terms of specific activities or end results given that it necessitates a process whereby women can freely analyse, develop and voice their own needs and interests, without them being pre-defined, or imposed from above, by planners or other social actors including NGOs (Oxaal, 1997, p.6). The assumption usually made, that planners can identify women's needs runs against empowerment objectives since it in as sense results in these same development practitioners taking away women's own agency and thus further disempowering them

Empowerment cannot flourish in the current agendas in Kenya that mainly involve top down approaches. With no real input from women, a common one-size-fits-all solution is employed for policy issues, differing interests are subsumed into one broad agenda and potential gains for women's advancement are lost.

The Myth of Community

The gender identity of women has often been presented as monolithic and homogenous by certain social theorists and mainstream feminists (Campbell, 1993; Skevington and Baker, 1989; Mohanty, 1988). This is in part due to the fact that the social category of women has been treated as a stable category of analysis, while assuming a historical, universal unity among women based perceived and shared notion of a subordination and marginalization within society (Mohanty, 1988, p.71). But this ideology of sisterhood based on an assumption of commonality of experience has since been proven inadequate to the complexity of women's lived realities, with the realization that the privileging of 'womanhood' over other categories of social interactions was insufficient to articulate women's space and struggle for advancement (Briskin, 1990, p.103).

Feminist theories and critiques of development are instrumental in revealing that the countries of the South are not culturally, politically, or economically homogeneous, nor are gender relations experienced in the same manner by all Third World women (Chan-Tiberghien, 2004, p.468). Black feminist Audre Lorde has warned of the danger of implying that all women suffer the same oppression because they are women and has, together with other black feminists, sought to show that this ignores the varieties and degrees of women's subordination. It also ignores how these experiences change with a woman's race, class, and cultural setting. There is more variation among countries in the South than among industrialized societies of the North (Barriteau, 2000).

The tendency to homogenize the concept of 'woman' under the term gender, and assume the universal applicability of these definitions to development, creates specific problems for women in the South. Programs and policies that are designed to integrate women into development and those that are critical of the relations between women and development are ending up being disempowering and marginalising in themselves as women who don't fit into the pre-defined categories are left out of development benefits (Singh, 2007, p.105). The assumption of commonality among women and the broad definition of women as a singularly homogenous group with similar experiences and realities have left the gender equality struggle to varying degrees in society and in the policy implementation arena in particular.

This struggles are largely on two levels, that of the use of the term gender to replace women and therefore assuming a commonality of definition of 'woman' while advancing gender as the foremost issue in the inequality question(Kabeer, 2000, p.12) and thus ignoring the social context of the same; and the second level of the global outlook of the gender agenda in development discourse that assumes a commonality of the manifestation of gender disparities and therefore suggesting a common solution which in most cases is based on a western definition of equality (McIlwaine and Datta, 2001, p.370). An investigation of these then shows a variation of impact of equality policy on the plight of the marginalised woman in developing countries like Kenya.

The term gender as used in the current equality discourse and praxis is fraught with differing problems the most evident being the interpretations that it is imbued with. The notion of gender has in itself proved to be relatively abstract and sufficiently removed from the complex social relations it seeks to represent for most people outside the feminist and development realms. The concept of 'gender' in these realms arose from the need by feminist theorists to understand the complexities of women's subordination , these scholars argued that women, like men, are biological beings but that women's subordination was socially determined and not biologically determined (Batliwala, 1995, p. 9).

They argued further that to conceptually differentiate between these two realities, it was necessary to identify 'sex' as the biological demarcation between male and female, and 'gender' as the delineation between roles and responsibilities of masculinity and femininity as constructed through socialization and education, among other factors.

The discourse went on to establish that what is biological is fixed and unchangeable, but what is social is subject to change and should be the focus of attention for the equality agenda (Young, 1998, p. 98). Gender as an analytical tool has helped to clarify these elements of role differences, social interaction and the dynamics of power in society, all of which undermine the value of those who are considered as less privileged; be it women, children, the old or any other form of difference. It also satisfied the need to include men in inequality discourse given that women did not exist in a vacuum and any solutions to gender disparities had to involve men.

In addition gender has come to be a synonym for women as it has a more neutral and objective sound than the hard hitting language of feminism and lends itself to greater political acceptability (Reddock in Barriteau, 2000).

This report argues that the greatest way that the term gender has turned out to be problematic is in the fact that it tends to define women in one static monolithic way based on an assumption of commonality that is far removed from the lived realities and experiences of women. In addition, this generalisation is also based on the experiences of white, middle class women living in liberal societies that could not be further from the 'third world' woman that development rhetoric seeks to emancipate.

In her most seminal work, *Gender Trouble* (1990), Judith Butler argued that feminism has made a mistake by trying to assert that 'women' were a group with common characteristics and interests. In so doing, she argued, they managed to achieve 'an unwitting regulation and reification of gender relations' reinforcing a binary view of gender relations in which human beings are divided into two clear-cut groups, women and men thus ignoring any differences that existed within (Butler, 1990, p.25). She goes on to suggest that the prevailing western ideologies on gender, have a hegemonic hold on the discourse and practice of development and have come to be seen as the norm to aspire to whereas realities are much more complex.

This myth of commonality serves to negate the multiplicity of women's experiences in their own socio-cultural contexts wherein women are not an undifferentiated group but comprises of various sub-groups, each having interests, demands and constraints that are uniquely different and important to them (Bhatta, 2001, p.18). Similarly, the multiplicity of relations of power cannot be ignored as they result in different permutations of marginalisation of women, showing that , while women as a whole are discriminated against, the impact of poverty and underdevelopment is experienced differently by uneducated, very poor, disadvantaged and, in some societies, low-caste, women to mention a few categories (Briskin,1990, p. 103).

Differences among women at the local level can therefore not be ignored or a commonality of marginalisation or interests be assumed. Policy, if not developed to accommodate these issues in creative ways, will tend to engender new and different types of oppression that Fraser called the 'gender hegemony' (Fraser, 1990, p.158). In summary, 'gender' should not be seen as an independent factor in the equality discourse since women cannot be separated and abstracted from their particular context and need to be regarded as one disempowered grouping among many others (Ohlsson, 2004, p. 5). Women carry multiple, crisscrossing identities which also serve as determining factors in defining their position in society and consequently must be seen as such for any real progress to be made.

In ignoring these socio-cultural nuances of women's lives, the uniqueness of many women's lives is lost in macro-narratives and analyses that create universally applicable categories such as gender (Singh, 2006, p. 104). The myth of commonality in gendered policies in Kenya is not only propagated by the use of 'gender' as the defining category of interventions but also by the global foundations of these gendered policies.

The prevailing approaches to development are based largely on international instruments on gender equality which have been ratified by governments and serve as broad guidelines of what to do. This has propagated the universalism of discourse and in turn, praxis of the so called gender agenda (Connelly et al, in Barriteau, 2000) based on the exclusive, privileged axis of the western liberal feminist , that ignores the articulation of differences, of the multiple and diverse rationalities already present within society.

Universalism in the gender efforts of developing nations like Kenya mean that the local context of policy and the lived diverse realities of the women who are not a homogeneous category, but are differentiated by class, race and nation, and whose options and opportunities are often determined more by these factors than by their gender (Jahan, 1996, p.828).

It ignores the fact that gender relations do not operate in a social void, but are produced by the organisation of institutions reconstructed and reproduced over time. In other words, policy and other social interventions cannot be divorced from the fact that gender relations are aspect of broader social relations which are constituted through the rules, norms, and practices by which resources are allocated, tasks and responsibilities assigned, values are given and power mobilized (Kabeer, 2000, p. 12).

Conclusion

Social policies based on international instruments, tend to give a broad outlook to gender issues with a uniform approach prescribed for the alleviation of perceived issues in abject disregard of the local context. The development agenda and the gender strategies for developing nations are still outlined and determined by development professionals at the headquarters of international development organisations in the West, resulting in a global gender agenda that is highly centralised and increasingly separate from the lived realities in the developing world.

These strategies assume homogeneity amongst women that is not real, similarly, the assumption usually made, that planners can identify women's needs runs against empowerment objectives since it in a sense results in these same development practitioners taking away women's own agency and thus further disempowering them.

Empowerment cannot flourish in the current agendas in Kenya that mainly involve top down approaches. With no real input from women, a common one-size-fits-all solution is employed for policy issues, differing interests are subsumed into one broad agenda and potential gains for women's advancement are lost.

The myth of commonality serves to negate the multiplicity of women's experiences given that women are not an undifferentiated group but comprise of various sub-groups with each having interests, norms and values that will be important to them. Similarly, the multiplicity of relations of power based on class, race, ethnicity and gender cannot be ignored as they result in different permutations of marginalisation of women, showing that, while women as a whole are discriminated against, the impact of poverty and underdevelopment is experienced differently. Differences among women at the local level can therefore not be ignored or a commonality of marginalisation or interests be assumed.

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