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Finding the 'Missing' Male in Gender Discourses in Botswana

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Abstract

Researchers and activists in Botswana have played an active role in the international campaign to alleviate women's subordinate position in economic development. Of late attention has shifted from 'women' to 'gender'. This shift has been premised on the need to provide a more holistic framework that focuses on relations between women and men, rather than on women exclusively. However, there are mounting concerns among academics and development practitioners that the gender debate has reached a stalemate in Botswana. The impasse is manifested in the perception that 'gender' and 'women' are used as synonyms in much gender discourse, research and activism. This paper argues that focusing on women and ostracising men makes the task of mainstreaming (or engendering) research and practice an unobtainable illusion. We propose new dimensions in gender discourses that will provide more balanced perspectives on both women and men.

Introduction

In the 1980s and 1990s, the concept of gender emerged as a theoretical and practical tool for analysing the disparities in welfare between women and men in Botswana. Studies of the manifestations of culturally-based patriarchal practices exposed male dominance and female subordination in the social, economic and political arenas. The studies generated a large body of empirical data on female poverty, domestic divisions of labour, an ever-increasing incidence of violence against women and a continuing under-representation of women in decision-making positions. At the same time, it became evident that gender equality is not only an end to itself but also a means of achieving more sustainable human development (Greig, Kimmel and Lang, 2000). However, the debates on gender inequality that have occupied academic and policy circles for over two decades now seem to have provoked more questions than they have answered. While the theoretical questions raised by the debate have provided much-needed interrogations of our conceptualisations of social justice and human rights, the value of many of the purported solutions has not been as clear. One of the key problems has been the tendency to identify 'gender' with 'women', with resulting marginalisation of men.

The conceptualisation of 'women' as a single category and the over-emphasis on universal female solidarity continue to live on in academic research and policy interventions. Where this solidarity has not been evident, efforts have been made to create it through "empowerment" (Cornwall, 1997). The ostracisation of men from gender debates reinforces the notion of gender – particularly among men – as something women complain about but which has no relationship with politics, democracy and development (Molokomme, 1997). This is the result of a misapplication of

the concept of gender, which is theorised as holistic yet operationalised with a lot of limitations and exclusions, and a focus mainly on women. In particular, gender constructs that have been popularised in Western discourses are simply imported into contexts where they have little relevance to how people think about or organise their lives (Strathern, 1988). The collective categories of women and men are used to make blind assumptions about gender relationships, yet these relations – as evidenced in gender discourses – do not provide insight into the actual, socially constructed realities of women and men in different settings (Cornwall, 1997). Furthermore, the emphasis on ‘collective’ and generalised gender categories limits our understanding of women and men as social agents.

It can therefore be argued that the gender debate has reached a stalemate or impasse. In particular, there is growing recognition of the need to define with more precision the relationship between men and ‘engendered’ development policy and practice, and to examine men’s roles and positions with respect to patriarchy (Greig, Kimmel and Lang, 2000). As Harrison (1997) remarks, we need to understand the differences and similarities both between and among women and men, as well as the full complexity of interactions between men and women. This article advocates a comprehensive review of gender discourses in Botswana. We argue that focusing exclusively on women and ostracising men renders the project of gender equality unattainable. It is time for more balanced perspectives to be adopted in gender analysis, especially by seeing men not only as part of the problem but also as part of the solution (Greig, Kimmel and Lang, 2000).

Conceptualising Gender

Controversy abounds on how gender should be defined. Definitions of gender are highly dependent on different theoretical perspectives. In common parlance, gender is often mistaken for sex, which properly speaking refers only to the biological distinctions between females and males: chromosome make-up, reproductive organs, genitals, hormonal states and secondary sexual characteristics (Macionis and Plummer, 1998: 350). The attempt to explain gender relations on the basis of these biological differences is known as biological determinism, or biological essentialism in some of its extreme forms. Macionis and Plummer (1998) note that the most popular assumptions about gender rest upon the idea of gender as somehow ‘natural’ and therefore biologically determined. This approach equates sexual anatomy to sexual destiny (Moynihan, 1998) and asserts that certain behaviours and social structures are justified – and unchangeable – because males will always be males and females always females, giving very little or no consideration to the wide variety of behaviours of members of each sex and how they relate to each other in different settings (QDE, 2003).

Biological determinism essentially glorifies what it sees as the innate superiority of the male sex and justifies male dominance as natural and inevitable. However, notions of appropriate gender behaviour are not static but differ over time, between ethnic and cultural groups and even between and within families (QDE, 2003). To whatever extent we may be biological, the human being is also moral and political; hence biological arguments cannot be used to legitimise male social dominance (Richards, 1982). Furthermore psychological research has shown that sex differences are quite small, their origins unclear and the variations within each sex far greater than the differences

between the sexes (Segal, 1999). Thus, Molokomme (1997) makes it clear that a comprehensive understanding of gender can only be attained by first distinguishing gender from sex. She contends that gender is the result of socialisation. Males and females are socialised to play different roles in accordance with their society's norms, attitudes, practices and expectations. Thus gender pertains to the social not the biological meaning of masculine and feminine. Sex-role socialisation theorists recognise that gender behaviour is socially conditioned, not innate. However their approach is weakened by a reliance on role modelling as the basis of stereotypical gender attributes, which are then seen as passively 'soaked up'. The socialisation approach also fails to address the fact that people's practice of their gender is dependent on where they are and with whom they interact (QDE, 2003). Furthermore, by focusing on sex roles, socialisation theories covertly reinforce determinism and essentialism.

The term 'gender' refers to the social aspects of the sexual differences of females and males (Macionis and Plummer, 1998). Gender constitutes the socially determined relations that differentiate male and female situations (Elson, 1995). The social constructionist perspective perceives gender as a fluid concept whose reality is influenced by historical, social and cultural factors, rather than anatomical ones. From this perspective, therefore, gender is not a natural or essential element of personhood (Hearn, 1992). The social constructionist perspective holds that gender is both created and practised in social interactions (Moynihan, 1998). People's conceptualisation of selfhood is the result of a multitude of ideas, attitudes, behaviours and beliefs to which they are exposed right from childhood (Witt, 1997). Witt found that children at very early ages use gender stereotypes in negotiating their world and are likely to generalise gender stereotypes across a variety of activities, objects and occupations. Gender is not just an issue of childhood however. The Queensland Department of Education in Australia (QDE, 2003) defines gender as a continuous process of identity construction and reconstruction throughout life, a constant, dynamic process in which we all play a part. This social constructionist perspective on gender questions the very principles of gender – and brings to light the gradual and silent marginalisation of the male, even under patriarchy! It gives rise to a number of insights that are of use to development practitioners seeking to work towards gender equality with both men and women (Greig, Kimmel and Lang, 2000).

Women, Gender and Development

Gender is one of the most commonly used terms in the field of development. Despite this, its meaning and implications have not always been understood in the same way (Molokomme, 1997). Nnaemeka (1997) even goes to the extent of arguing that the term is so widely abused that its use as an analytical tool has almost become obsolete. The concern with gender commenced in the 1970s as the role of women in the industrialisation of Western countries was brought into focus, especially in countries like Germany, France and the United States where men-driven wars had forced women to leave the private sphere of home life and actively participate in public economic and political life. As a result, it gradually became evident that women constituted the 'reserve army' of labour.

However, despite their enormous contribution, the role of women in national and

international development was never recognised, endorsed or adequately rewarded; men continued to define the private and domestic spheres as woman's 'world'. Given the reluctance of men to immerse themselves in these spheres, a number of institutions sprang up representing the public commodification of formerly private activities (Lingard and Douglas, 1999). This was the beginning of a revolution, which focused in its early stages on the liberation of the woman from 'patriarchy': a form of social organisation in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women (Walby, 1990:20). This oppressive system was conceptualised as the rule of fathers or the rule of the eldest male (Hermans and Nteta, 1992). The cultures of most African societies were therefore regarded as treating women as mere forms of property under male dominance (Hermans and Nteta, 1992; Wagner, 1999).

Discourses on patriarchy became a regular feature of African gender analyses (Mannathoko, 1992; WLSA, 1997; Mookodi, 1999; Maundeni, 2001). In Botswana, the application of the concept of patriarchy has primarily taken place within the context of identifying the basis of gender inequality, particularly within the context of culture and tradition. Patriarchy is defined as a traditional system of male dominance and female subordination. Using anthropological studies to inform their discussions, researchers have illustrated the embeddedness of patriarchal practices in male-specific spheres of public-political and family-based decision-making, socio-legal systems and inheritance practices, as well as in the context of gendered sexuality. However there are concerns that conceptualisations of patriarchy which espouse universal collective (domineering) male agency and submissive female victimhood are inherently limited. It could be argued (Nyamnjoh, 2001) that these conceptualisations represent forms of 'strategic essentialism', an inevitable phase of political mobilisation. The difficulty associated with this argument, however, is that it isolates women even more – and further excludes men from taking part in gender projects.

Moving from Women in Development to Gender and Development

Gender analysis, like feminist research generally, has a political commitment to women's liberation and the construction of egalitarian gender relationships (Imam, 1999: 15). The United Nations Decade for Women (1976-85) played a key role in making women more visible in social and economic development. The women-in-development (WID) approach was based on the premise that development processes would be more efficient with women fully incorporated into them. Thus the focus was primarily on women's employment and other productive activities (Moser, 1993; Kethusegile et al, 2000; Imam, 1999). In Botswana the WID policy framework was responsible for the creation of the Women's Affairs Unit (now the Department of Women's Affairs) in the Ministry of Labour and Home Affairs. Under the WID approach much of the focus has been on the generation of gender-disaggregated data, the identification of barriers that prevent women's participation in development and the development of policies and other measures to reduce these barriers (Women's Affairs Division, 1995).

However, many researchers (see Mohanty, 1988; Mohanty et al, 1991; Mies, 1998; Imam, 1999) have expressed disillusionment with the WID approach, particularly its failure to link 'the women's question' to issues of class, race, underdevelopment and globalisation. In addition, what emerged from the Nairobi Conference (1985) was concern over the seeming universalisation of the

category 'women' – thereby ignoring cultural, economic and political diversity. WID was also criticised for “leaving men out of the analysis” (Kethusegile et al, 2000). The emergence of the concept of gender and development is embedded in this political development of feminist discourse. The concept was given context by the identification of patriarchy as the predominant sex-gender system that promotes male dominance and female subordination (Sow 1999; Kethusegile, 2000; Alexander, 2001). Thus, the gender-and-development approach (GAD) gave itself the momentous task of addressing the shortcomings and filling the gaps of the WID approach (Elson, 1991; Meena, 1992; Moser, 1993; Kabeer, 1993). There were expectations that GAD would be a more holistic approach for addressing inequalities between women and men.

The GAD approach signals three key departures from WID. First, the focus shifts from women to gender and therefore to the unequal power relations between women and men. Second, all social, political and economic structures are re-examined from the perspective of gender differentials. Third, GAD recognises that achieving gender equality requires transformative change (ix). The transition from WID to GAD was intended to tackle women's subordination through an explicit emphasis on socially and historically constructed relations between women and men (Young et al, 1981; Moser, 1993; Kabeer, 1993; Razavi and Miller, 1995). Conceptually, this shift was intended to focus on relationships between men and women, and amongst groups of women and groups of men, stressing equity and equality within these relationships. The aim was to move away from enumerating and redressing women's disadvantages to analysing the social relationships between men and women (Greig, Kimmel and Lang, 2000). Despite this change men have been seen to be largely missing from all efforts to operationalise and promote GAD. They have not been fully integrated into the GAD discourse, as they are labelled oppressors, perceived as custodians and perpetrators of male domination and therefore seen as obstacles to equitable development (Cornwall, 1999).

Towards Including Men and Masculinities in Gender

One of the most obvious gaps in gender and development studies, where new tools and new approaches are needed, is in relation to men. Old-style feminist theory dealt with them at one stroke: men were the problem, the barrier in the way of positive change. And while feminist activism urged women to change their attitudes and behaviour and come forward to claim their rights, it offered little more to men than a series of negative images of masculinity (Cornwall, 1997: 10). Thus in Botswana programmes to address gender issues rarely include men, and there have been few studies on men and their lived experiences. In recent years there has been growing concern about what Cornwall and White (2000) call “the missing half of gender”. This section of the paper explores this missing element from two key perspectives: men's life courses and men's sexuality, especially with respect to HIV/AIDS

Research on gender and life courses has largely focused on women. As Cleaver (2000: 1) points out:

With a few notable exceptions, men are rarely explicitly mentioned in gender policy documents. The superiority of women as hard working, reliable, trustworthy, socially responsible, caring and co-operative is often asserted; whilst men on the other hand are

frequently portrayed as lazy, violent, promiscuous and irresponsible drunkards.

Feminists have shown that women's positions of subordination are determined by culturally-based patriarchy evident in socialisation practices, child-bearing and child-rearing responsibilities, as well as women's constant juggling of multiple roles – production, social reproduction and community management. The inherent and often explicitly stated conclusion is that within our patriarchal societies men play relatively few or no roles with respect to social reproduction. Since a detailed discussion of gender roles in social reproduction is beyond the scope of this article, we shall focus specifically on child support.

The structures and processes of child support in Botswana have been documented and debated in a number of studies (Molokomme, 1991; WLSA, 1992; Driel, 1994; Motts, 1994). These studies show that the financial maintenance as well as the care of children in Botswana is primarily in the hands of women. Within that context, men are depicted as irresponsible with regard to child care and the socialisation of children. However a study conducted by Townsend (1997) provides some balance to the picture by looking into men's lived experiences, particularly their attitudes towards sexuality and marriage as well as their connections and contributions to their natal families, consensual partners and children within the context of socio-economic change. Townsend's anthropological study, conducted in the village of Mankodi between 1993 and 1994, fills an important gap in studies of household organisation and social relations by focusing on the lived experiences of men over time.

Townsend constructed men's life histories, focusing specifically on their relationships to various households over their life courses. Based on his analysis of the residential arrangements of men of different ages between 1973 and 1993 and the accounts of women and men in the community, Townsend argues that household formation for men extends over a lengthy period of time. Due to changes in marital practices brought about by male migration over much of the twentieth century, he found that men typically established permanent marital homesteads only after the age of forty. Before this, therefore, the male life course was characterised by high physical mobility between urban employment centres and the village. During this time men establish and maintain social and economic connections with individuals in various households in the urban centres and rural areas:

Single men, with no social children, who are not living in the village, may appear from one perspective to be single-person households and social isolates, while from another perspective they are members of a *lolwapa*, attached to others by a variety of competing claims, responsibilities and relationships both economic and affective (Townsend, 1997: 410).

Townsend points to the significance of male social parenting: men's contribution to the welfare of their acknowledged biological offspring and their contribution towards the welfare of other young dependants such as the children of their consensual partners, their siblings and their unmarried sisters. He posits that men have labour and financial responsibilities as sons, brothers, social parents, as nephews and sometimes as sons-in-law. While noting that some men evade many of these responsibilities and direct their income and energy to their individual needs, he

found that, due to the social significance of reciprocity and interdependence, most of the men in his sample attempted to meet their obligations.

Garey and Townsend (1996) point to inherent contradictions between statutory provisions and traditional customs relating to child support. The findings of their study illustrate the continuing embeddedness of child maintenance within customary childbearing and marriage customs. Child support continues to be seen within the context of lengthy and complicated marriage processes. The absence of traditional avenues for the financial maintenance of children by their fathers (beyond the first child) is due to the potentiality of marriage by the woman either to the father of her children or to another man. In the first instance demanding child support would be seen as antagonistic and confrontational, jeopardising the marriage process. In the second instance financial support by a non-residential father is seen as jeopardising the woman's chances of marriage to her current partner, who assumes the role of social parent of the woman's children. Garey and Townsend (1996) therefore posit that the reluctance of women to apply for maintenance and the unwillingness of men to support children outside current consensual relations are due to prevailing customs related to childbearing and marriage rather than to female ignorance or male irresponsibility. These studies illustrate the complexity and significance of cultural belief systems and practices in relation to gender roles. The issue of men's alleged lack of financial support of children needs to be examined within the context of the significance of cultural practices as well as the changing circumstances of women and men over the life course.

Another vital part of the picture is the impact of HIV/AIDS. The rapid spread of HIV/AIDS in Botswana has generated a lot of research on sexual practices and behavioural change, but while much of this research rightly tries to take gender into consideration, the focus has tended to be on women. This is because it is recognised that culturally-entrenched patriarchal practices prevent women from negotiating safe sexual practices. Moreover women tend to be more accessible to health care facilities due to their social reproduction roles. In the process, however, men, male sexuality and male gender identities have not been adequately addressed.

One notable exception has been the *Men, Sex and AIDS Pilot Study* (Ministry of Health, 1998). By focussing on men and male sexuality – their views about HIV/AIDS, condom use and their experiences with sexually transmitted diseases – this study takes a step toward a more balanced approach. The study begins from the uncontroversial assumption that gender inequality is a result of patriarchal cultural beliefs and practices and observes that the traditional Botswana belief system socialises men to assume power even in marriage. Laws assume that men have the power and authority to decide any marital question and often regards married women as minors. As a result men act as conquerors in relationships and are notorious for having multiple partners. Indeed it is not uncommon for men in Botswana to practice unsafe sex simply to prove their manhood and because they feel this is what is expected of them. It is also very common for men to avoid talking emotionally about sex, as this is seen as an 'unmanly' thing to do (Ministry of Health, 1998: 8).

The key question in the study, therefore, was to examine the context within which men's sexuality occurs, with particular reference to HIV/AIDS. It is important to note that the methodologies employed in the study were primarily qualitative. They included focus group and

informal discussions with men in their social networks and places of entertainment. The study was based on the assumption that “men wanted to discuss male sexuality in a more personal way” when the opportunity was created (Ministry of Health, 1998: 11). The aim of the study was to provide this opportunity and foster a sense of ownership of the subject by the male participants. While the study found that the majority of men (up to 83 percent) gave the impression of having positive attitudes towards the use of condoms, the actual use of condoms was considerably lower, and condoms were used more regularly with casual partners. Some of the obstacles to regular condom use were cited as “irresponsible behaviour” under the influence of alcohol, unplanned sexual intercourse and reduced sexual sensation. The strength of internalised ‘manhood’ attitudes was evident in the words of one participant, a 24-year-old soldier:

Today is bad for me. I’m from my girlfriend’s place in Broadhurst, and she has dumped me.

Little does she know that my policy is that for every girl I lose, I find two more better ones . . . I am not a small boy, who cannot live without sex (Ministry of Health, 1998: 21).

When asked whether he practiced safe sex, the respondent said he did. However it was noted that younger men indicated that when they were drunk, the urge to “do it the natural way” took control.

A Crisis of Masculinity?

As mentioned before, explanations of what is regarded as ‘male behaviour’ have largely been framed within feminist perspectives. The possible reasons for male hostility to feminism and power-sharing have been attributed to insecurities arising from challenges to their positions of power in social, economic and political life. Are men therefore undergoing a crisis of masculinity? The extensive literature on this issue attempts to contend with men’s lived realities, including attempts to find reasons and causes for what are regarded as negative and harmful aspects of men’s behaviour – violence, crime and unsafe sexual practices. The key argument is that men find themselves in predicaments resulting from a perceived loss of power and control (Chant and Guttman, 2000; Cornwall and White, 2000).

The economic aspects of this predicament are regarded as a result, in part, of the ‘breadwinner’ and head of household ideology. According to the male crisis argument men are facing challenges to their authority as increasing numbers of income-generating women are challenging culturally-based notions that the man should be the breadwinner and head of household. Challenges to male authority within the context of protection and resource provision are due largely to limited employment opportunities, retrenchments and changing political circumstances. In South Africa, for example, Morell (2001) points to effects of the changing political environment on male identities. He argues that during apartheid many unemployed black males compensated for their lack of economic power by heroic participation in the freedom struggle. However once apartheid was defeated men were forced to return to the grim and disempowering realities of unemployment and the squalor of township life. The resulting frustration manifested itself in heightened gender violence.

At the end of 2002 and the beginning of 2003, Botswana society was rocked by a series of brutal murders of women. In all the cases the suspects were men who were, or had been, the

victims' lovers. The reactions of both women and men to the murders questioned the emphasis on gender violence and universal conceptualisations of men, and pointed to the need to review conceptualisations of gender within the particular context of Botswana. In debates held at the University of Botswana the idea of a crisis in masculinity was supported by many young men and women. The key issues emerging were those associated with challenges to traditionally-held notions of male power and control over women in relationships. These views were also evident in debates in the media – namely the justification of male violence in response to heightened female power – often referred to as *Emang Basadi* (“stand up, women”).

The male crisis discourse is useful for providing insight into the changing socio-economic contexts that African men and women are forced to contend with. Exclusive over-reliance on this type of analysis, however, can at best be described as providing a rather simplistic answer to an otherwise complicated set of questions relating to the ‘missing male’. The male crisis discourse falls back on pre-existing essentialist and reductionist notions of male and female identity and does not add any intrinsic value to existing gender-power discourses. The idea of a generalised male crisis hinges largely on contemporary predicaments that are regarded as affecting men as a category, while failing to provide new insight into men’s lived experiences as individual social agents.

Understanding Male-Lived Experiences

Role theorists argue that people are compelled to perform culturally prescribed roles for the benefit of both society and themselves. In so doing individuals are seen to be engaging in theatrical-like performance, requiring them to ‘learn their lines’, assimilate behaviours and display appropriate social behaviours in a multitude of settings. This process of socialisation acts as a conveyor, (re)producing ‘ideal’ models of behaviour and transmitting dominant stereotypes (Whitehead, 2001: 19). There is growing interest in understanding the contexts within which masculinities emerge, as well as how individual men negotiate their own positions.

Within the context of Botswana, Pattman (2001) drew on discourse theory to examine the social construction of gender identity among students at the University of Botswana. Foucauldian discourse theory challenges the essentialist views of gender identity as fixed and pre-ordained and addresses masculinity and femininity as relational categories. Pattman’s use of qualitative interview methods facilitated open discussions. The findings of his research allude to the male respondents’ references to cultural markers (identified by the young men) of masculinity – excessive drinking and womanising which they interpreted as both “virility” and “naughtiness”. Rather than just fitting into these stereotypes, however, young men were continuously engaging and negotiating them. This was done by constantly referring to other men, women and the larger society with regard to stereotypical models of manhood. Such negotiation to a large extent determined their choices in regard to practices such as alcohol consumption, sexual behaviour and violence.

Ratele (2001) examines the discursive experiences of black men in South Africa. He adopts an approach that attempts to fit the experiences of black men into what he describes as “foreign and pre-existing” frameworks. His research, conducted among black professionals, explored the

intersections of race and gender subjectivities – how women and girls are located in the ways in which black men view themselves and take up their social positions. As with Pattman Ratele’s use of loosely structured interviews facilitated frank detailed discussions of men’s experiences within the context of race relations, family, relationships with women and relationships with other men. The presentation of Ratele’s findings in the original languages adds to the richness of the data.

Conclusion

The enormous project of achieving gender equality in Botswana requires much insight into attitudes and practices that perpetuate inequalities between women and men, but these insights should be informed by analytical frameworks that allow for the understanding of lived experiences, rather than those that are essentialist and prescriptive. In order to arrive at practical solutions, it is imperative to expand our discussion of sex-gender systems beyond the patriarchy debate to include the lived experiences of African men, within their cultural contexts, in relation to women and to each other. This paper points to the need for more research on how women and men actually negotiate their gender identities over time, as well as on how these negotiations are played out in family life and in intimate relationships.

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