

## **9. Reconciling Perspectives on the World's Diverse Women and Cultures of Gender: Toward New Syntheses for the 21st Century**

IUAES Commission on the Anthropology of Women

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### **From women to gender and other dimensions of difference**

Those modes of anthropological inquiry, analysis, and theorizing that have given serious attention to lived experiences, social positions, forms of agency, and identities among females – that is, women and girls – have proliferated and become more theoretically and *culturally* diverse over the past three decades. Much of the early research assumed a reactive and corrective stance to earlier trends in the discipline, which were overwhelmingly masculinist or biased in favour of males, excluding women from substantive attention. ‘Woman’ as an analytical category was largely absent, and men’s placement on the ethnographic centre stage was largely taken for granted without shedding light on the underlying cultural principles that both informed and formed (i.e., constituted or constructed) masculinity as an artefact of society rather than as an outcome of biology’s naturalizing force.

In the context of this major shift in the discipline’s development, women came to be acknowledged as ‘holding up half the sky’ (a motto popularized by the 1995 UN Conference on Women; see Friedlander, 1996). In time, anthropologists, however, understood that the anthropology of women had its own limitations. Expanding the anthropological record to document, initially in descriptive terms, the complex experiences of women and girls was certainly necessary, but it was not sufficient. Also required were conceptual, theoretical, and methodological tools for bringing to light, interpreting, and explaining the

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underlying logics and principles that influence – if not determine – the meanings, social practices, and structures of power that constitute the diverse cultures of *gender* around the world. Within the past decade or so, anthropologists have become more critically reflexive about the extent to which the epistemological precepts and biases of Western cultures have governed the dominant terms of discourse on gender in the most influential zones of intellectual production and theorization.

The anthropology of women eventually developed into the anthropology of gender. Gender is often defined as the socio-cultural meanings attributed to the physical and biological differences between the sexes, and how those meanings are manifested both symbolically and materially in societies (Mascia-Lees and Black, 2000). Gender is a relational concept that anthropologists have found to be useful for elucidating the dynamics of socio-cultural systems that invest meanings, role expectations, and positionalities in female and male as well as alternatively gendered persons. Inquiries of gender and gendered relations are theoretically and topically diverse; they range from symbolic interpretations of the feminine to analyses of segmented labour markets and divisions of labour in anthropological political economy. They are also shaped by epistemological and ontological presuppositions that are influenced by thinking that is, more or less, culturally bound – although not always acknowledged and marked as such. The unmarked cultural biases of much of Western anthropology are an issue that is at the crux of many of the debates within the anthropology of gender and feminist scholarship.

American feminist anthropologist and practice theorist Sherry Ortner (1996) has pointed out that the gender and the gendered subject positions that women and men hold are *made* rather than inherited through natural processes. The making of gender occurs through ideological and discursive processes, which are sometimes depicted without subjects, as well as through the actions, resistances, and negotiations of actors or agents. Both actions and their unintended consequences are integral to the making, unmaking, and remaking of gender. This approach emphasizes agency or the capacity of women and men to act in socially and politically salient ways that, under certain conditions, may have the potential to resist, transgress, or transform established structures of power.

Earlier (and still some current) approaches to gender were (are) premised on an explicit or implied dichotomy between sex and gender. The idea that gender necessarily represents a cultural reading of biological sex has been disrupted by social analysts often influenced by poststructuralist and postmodern perspectives, especially those found in ‘queer theory,’ a growing body of

knowledge that problematizes the heterosexual and heterosexist bias in the study of gender and sexuality. The binaries built into the idea of a sex/gender system and the naturalization of sex as either male or female and as mutually exclusive have been challenged by approaches that blur the boundary between sex and gender, or altogether disconnect the two. Our observations and understandings of biological sex are in themselves gendered, viewed and interpreted through culturally constructed lenses. In other words, sex is culturally defined and, hence, gender, but gender is not necessarily anchored in sex, anatomy, or genitalia. Based on fieldwork among Brazilian *travestis* (transgendered sex workers), Swedish ethnographer Don Kulick has insisted that gender is constituted by ‘understandings, processes, subjectivities, and practices that are not necessarily generated from or tied to reproductive organs’ (Kulick, 1998: 10). As will be elaborated below, this more flexible (trans)gendered view concurs in many respects with the perspective of African scholars who view the dominant anthropological convention as culturally bound, in fact, Eurocentric rather than universal. These studies point to the need for *polyversal* constructs of gender.

Concepts of gender and gendered analytical frames are important accomplishments for anthropologists, many of them *feminist*, who have investigated this often basic and central dimension of human difference and social life. Gender, however, is only one point of entry into people’s lives. Within the past two decades, feminist scholarship (that is work tied to advocacy and mobilization for gender equity and women’s equal rights) has included social analyses that treats gender as only one among several salient axes or vectors of difference, inequality, and power – all of which must be addressed in order to appreciate the full complexities and multiple dimensions of women’s, and men’s, lives. Many feminists and other gender scholars have begun to employ *intersectional* approaches that address the ways in which gender intersects or interlocks with age, class, caste, ethnicity, and race. Feminists outside of the mainstream women’s political and women’s studies movements have contested dominant discourses that essentialize and reify gender (i.e., constructed it as though it has fixed, essential qualities that apply to all women in all situations). This problematic gender essentialism is based on the taken-for-granted experience of those women – a demographic minority within the world’s total population – who are privileged along lines of class, race, ethnicity, and national identity. Women from working-class and poverty-stricken backgrounds as well as from racial, ethnic, or religious minority communities have long insisted that gender is shaped and mutually constituted

by the simultaneity of class, race, sexual preference, religious affiliation, etc.; hence, universalized views on ‘the woman’s condition’, ungrounded in solid and extensive comparative evidence, have resulted in the exclusion or marginalization of many women’s experiences *and intellectual contributions*. For many years, intellectual imperialism of this sort has been the focus of intense debate especially within international arenas such as UN women’s conferences. There have been parallel debates in anthropology, leading to calls for feminist anthropology’s decolonization (Bolles, 1995; Lazreg, 2005) and for the decentring of U.S.-based anthropology so that those anthropologies of gender developed in other national settings, particularly in the Global South and East (e.g., China), can move from what is often viewed as the periphery to what can potentially be reworked to become the discipline’s expanded, internationalized centre.

### **Anthropology or competing anthropologies of women and gender?**

As I have suggested above, studies of women and of gender are not necessarily the same, although they may coincide and fuse into a unitary endeavour. There is not a singular anthropology of women and/or gender. There are diverse anthropologies and projects to rework anthropology toward the goal of making the discipline more effective in the 21st century, despite the intellectual legacy of colonialism. There is also another reason for thinking about women and gender in ‘and/or’ terms. Women and gender are often conflated, with gender assumed to mean women, and vice versa. But we must not neglect the growing number of studies on masculinity that feminist gender studies have made possible by critically exposing the effects of taken-for-granted patriarchy. Nor should we ignore the intellectual projects that address gender oppression without privileging it as the only or principal focus of critique, analysis, and political intervention. For instance, in the U.S., *womanists* of color (racially subordinated women who espouse *womanism*) target all of the oppressions and discriminations inflicted upon racially oppressed, especially African American, women and their communities, resisting what they see as the feminist inclination to privilege gender as the starting point of analysis and political mobilization (Phillips, 2006).

International and cross-cultural conversations among anthropologists interested in the conditions of women and the possibilities for their being emancipated from gender inequities are integral to the discipline’s development. Organizations such as the International Union of Anthropological &

Ethnological Sciences have offered a space for exchanges and collaborations that build upon the best practices of the diverse national trajectories within World Anthropology (Harrison, 2005b). Of course, this is an ideal and a long-term goal. The IUAES Commission on the Anthropology of Women is committed to bringing together scholars and practitioners from all around the world to produce conditions that may contribute to the cross-fertilization of perspectives, potentially leading to the formulation of research questions that would be less likely to emerge in less internationalized contexts. For example, at the last congress in Florence, Italy (2003) and, before that, the NGO Forum parallel to the UN's World Conference against Racism in Durban, South Africa (2001), the Commission sponsored workshops and sessions that drew upon and engaged the research of anthropologists from diverse cultural and national backgrounds. Those activities opened up space to accommodate the articulation of, in some cases, counter as well as complementary discourses on topics and themes that reflect priorities of interest and perspective that differ from those found in many Departments of Anthropology in the U.S. and Western Europe.

Nuances in the work of African, Arab, and South and East Asian anthropologists have illuminated alternative views on problems such as genital cutting, the effect of economic development and globalization on minority ethnic groups, and the possibilities and limits of transnational feminist solidarity. A clear instance of this kind of intervention is found in Wu Ga's insightful research on changing economic roles, health conditions, and renegotiated ethnic identities of women of minority nationalities such as the Yi of Yunnan, China (2000). There is also Fadwa El Guindi's provocative analysis, which exposed the implicit Christian missionary biases within American feminism, impeding its ability to deal fairly and effectively with the complexity of women's lives in the Arab and Muslim world (cited in Harrison, 2003; El Guindi, 2005).

The scholarship of South Asian anthropologists has expanded the scope and stretched the limits of (Western-dominated) feminist anthropology since the Commission's founding in the mid-1970s. 'Women, HIV/AIDS and Human Rights' is an important, recent collection of articles that was produced from the Commission's collaboration with the Indian Anthropological Association and UNESCO in the 2004 inter-congress in Kolkata (*Indian Anthropologist*, 2005). Although the symposium and its later published results included contributions from anthropologists from the U.S. and France (e.g., Harrison, 2005a), as a whole, this special issue delineates the major issues within the applied anthropology of HIV/AIDS as a gendered pandemic that is made sense of in Indian

anthropologists' own term. That discourse, however, is open to colleagues from around the world, but it is framed in a culturally-inflected manner, maximizing its relevance and usefulness for informing public policy in India, and 'speaking truth to power' as it relates to the global circuits and structures upon which the gross maldistribution of resources and power is ultimately based.

In a perceptive essay, Subhadra Mitra Channa, editor of and contributor (Channa, 2005b) to the *Indian Anthropologist* issue on AIDS, exposes the Eurocentricism of many Indian feminists' conception of modernity and development – too often conflated or confused with Westernization (Channa, 2004). The embrace of the latter results in the devaluation and even 'trashing' of indigenous Indian knowledge and the attribution of heinous human rights violations against women to 'tradition.' According to Channa, a feminist methodology, if implemented as a truly critical practice, can be an important tool for redefining empowerment and more equitable socio-political possibilities for postcolonial India. In another essay, she employs her reworking of feminist methodology to transcend the ideological and political limits of Indian anthropologists who have avoided the investigation of caste or intersections of gender and caste (Channa, 2005a).

African scholars have also contributed to the internationalization of anthropological views on gender. Ifi Amadiume, Oyèrónké Oyèwumí (a sociologist whose research is anthropological in many respects), Filomina Chioma Steady, and Esther Njiro (2005), who has written perceptively on gender, development, and HIV/AIDS, exemplify trends that bring African women's epistemologies and cultural knowledge into anthropology's discourse on women and gender. Their insights attest to the importance of remapping Western-dominated analyses so that they can be repositioned alongside a variety of culturally-informed knowledges and become part of a pluricultural and polyversal conversation from which a new synthesis and paradigm shift might emerge. Through patient and open-minded give and take, the possibility exists for a genuine dialog and reconciliation of Western and non-western, Northern and Southern, academic and non-academic perspectives and standpoints (Harrison, 1997a: 2). Outside of an openness to difference and cross-pollination, Eurocentric and Afrocentric interpretations of gendered cultural dynamics will remain discordant. Steady (2000, 2006, no date) and Gwendolyn Mikell (1997), an African American (Pan)Africanist, have both elucidated the significant differences between Western and African feminisms with their divergent histories and assumptions about both women and gender.

Mikell, a feminist theorist and ethnographer of women's movements, points out that:

African feminism owes its origins to different dynamics than those that generated Western feminism. It has largely been shaped by African women's resistance to Western hegemony and its legacy within African culture. Clearly, it does not grow out of bourgeois individualism and the patriarchal control over women within capitalist industrializing societies...' (Mikell, 1997: 4).

She goes on to say that African feminism, which is still 'slowly emerging', is 'distinctly heterosexual, pro-natal, and concerned with many "bread, butter, culture, and power" issues'. Its reference points reflect the experiences of African countries forced to negotiate the effects of neo-liberal globalization. These circumstances have

pushed women toward greater boldness in addressing the economic and political elements that determine and affect their status in societies that have distinct cultural traditions and historical experiences' (Mikell, 1997: 5).

Steady characterizes African feminism as holistic and humanistic, resulting in a 'multiple consciousness based not just on gender but also on the structural racism resulting from years of racial domination, exploitation, and oppression' (Steady, no date: 4). African feminism links theory and practice and emphasizes activism, and enables women to develop 'survival skills, resistance and empowerment strategies and to become resourceful on their own and through alliances with others...' (Steady, no date: 4). It values culture while rejecting cultural practices or appropriations injurious to women.

Amadiume and Oyewumi, Igbo and Yoruba women respectively, have presented provocative challenges to Western feminist constructions of African women and gender systems. Drawing upon historiographical, ethnohistorical, and ethnographic evidence, they argue that Western notions of women and gender are premised on a 'bio-logic' inappropriate for understanding the gendered histories of African societies. They claim that the very notion of 'woman' as a foundational category indexing 'shared interests, desires, or social positions' was introduced by colonialism and the biologically determinist ideology it imposed on West African societies. Before colonialism, they argue,

'body-types' and 'body-reasonings' were not the basis for social identity, inclusion or exclusion. In their view, personhood in pre-colonial times was highly situational and shifting and was not essentialized in terms of dimorphic anatomy (Oyewunmi, 1997). Regardless of biological attributes, women's gender roles (e.g., male daughters and female husbands in Igbo societies) could change (Amadiume, 1987). Even today, the emphasis in mainstream gender discourses on how African tradition victimizes women has inhibited the ability of many international/transnational feminists to engage and learn from those women whose success and empowerment stems, in good part, from their cultural heritage. For example, Oyewunmi recounts that her 1996 fieldwork reminded her that she could not assume male dominance as a given across all domains. She encountered 'two female baálè village heads in Yorubaland who 'were the torchbearers of their family heritage of rulership ...' (Oyewunmi, 1997: xiv).

Culturally-influenced epistemological and theoretical differences in making sense of gender and women's lives do not present unsurmountable or irreconcilable barriers to communication and exchange among scholars, especially if they understand the constructive role that criticism, self-criticism, and give and take play in intellectual and professional development. Two feminist anthropologists whose scholarship has been enriched and deepened by their cross-fertilizations with culturally-different intellectual traditions and trajectories are Gracia Clark and Mary Weismantel. They represent role models for the successful negotiation and reconciliation of difference. Clark's (1994) exemplary research on market women in Kumasi, Ghana demonstrates the mobility and transferability of Black/African feminist theory across racial and continental borders. Gracia, a British-trained economic anthropologist, uses Black feminist intersectional theory to frame and execute her complex analysis of market women's remarkable negotiation of economic conditions in a context of structural adjustment and other national and global constraints.

Mary Weismantel (1995), also American, works among indigenous people, the Andean Zumbagua, in Ecuador. In her sophisticated analyses, she employs theory she learned from her indigenous research consultants. The consultants were not formally trained intellectuals. They were ordinary *Indios* and *Indias*, who had become much more than the traditional 'informants' on whom ethnographers rely for data, expecting the source of theory to be external to, and often distant from, the field site. The Zumbaguas' views of making kinship

through material interactions provided a vernacular theory that Weismantel made explicit and formal for the purpose of her analysis and interpretation. Provocatively, these explanatory accounts of the Zumbagua world informed Weismantel's perspective on gender, adoption and family making not only in the villages where she conducted fieldwork. The accounts and mode of accounting for the world turned out to be useful for rethinking changing configurations and expectations of kinship in U.S. society. She demonstrated that local Amerindian theory, once it was distilled and elaborated, was more than emic data in that it also had cross-cultural relevance for making sense of other parts of the world.

### **When feminisms converse**

Despite competing conceptualizations and theories of women and gender as well as women's diverse social locations and access to power, there is substantial evidence demonstrating that females disproportionately bear the brunt of poverty, political disenfranchisement, and other forms of structural violence – from environmental degradation to the abuses of paramilitary and militarized masculinity (Harrison, 2004). Regardless of Amadiume's position on women's lives before British colonialists arrived on the scene, she recognizes that women's organizations in postcolonial Nigeria and the African immigrant community in England must mobilize for gender equity (Amadiume, 2000). Steady has richly documented African women's collective action for development and democratization, especially the case of Sierra Leone – from traditional associations to the UN system (2006). African feminist struggles for gender equity are clearly integral to the international women's movement, despite the cross-cultural tensions, contradictions, and disjunctures that exist.

These complications, notwithstanding, anthropologists are making genuine efforts to forge some measure of cooperation and solidarity across cultural, national, and hemispheric lines of difference. These efforts come out of a commitment 'to find our common pains, values, challenges and goals' (Billson and Fleuhr-Lobban, 2005: 399). Three exemplars will be highlighted to demonstrate the kinds of collaborative projects – with applied and activist implications – in which anthropologists have participated toward those ends. One example is Eva Friedlander's important compilation of plenary speeches from the NGO Forum that accompanied the 1995 International Women's Conference in China (Friedlander, 1996). A member of International Women's Anthropology Conference (IWAC), which has worked with the IUAES

Commission on the Anthropology of Women, Friedlander served as the coordinator of the NGO Forum's Plenary Sessions, which featured many of the international women's movement's leading activists and intellectuals. Wishing to expose a wider audience to those diverse perspectives on peace, development, and women's rights, Friedlander's *Look at the world through women's eyes* was, in many respects, an unprecedented anthology in its international breadth, cross-cultural scope, and interdisciplinarity. A number of the speakers/authors were activist anthropologists, bringing this discipline's perspectives into the women's NGO movement.

The second exemplar is the IUAES Commission on the Anthropology of Women's UN World Conference against Racism project, which led to the publication of *Resisting racism and xenophobia: Global perspectives on race, gender, and human rights* (Harrison, 2005). With its diverse contributors, the collection tackles gender's intersection with those human rights violations that implicate racism and related intolerances in many different parts of the world. The approaches, although not at all uniform, are shown to be part of a common web of connection and contestation. This collaborative project was led by an anti-racist feminist (myself) whom Zillah Eisenstein would characterize as 'a Nonwestern Westerner who lives in the West with other-than-Western eyes' (Eisenstein, 2004: 114). This phenomenon stems from the double consciousness conceptualized initially by Pan-Africanist theorist and activist W.E.B. Du Bois (1961[1903]), whose prolific scholarship on African Americans and the problem of racism manifested particularly in white supremacy. Feminists have built upon and extended this concept to elucidate the role of 'multiple consciousness' in racially and often class subordinated women's cultural and intellectual production and collective social/political action (e.g., Harrison, 1997b: 97; Steady, no date: 4).

The third and final internationalist collaboration and *tour de force* in feminist scholarship, framed in part by an anthropological vision, is the comparative research that resulted in *Female well-being: Toward a global theory of social change* (Billson and Fluehr-Lobban, 2005). Based on case studies, undertaken mostly by teams, of eleven different countries across four continents, Billson and Fleuhr-Lobban provide the grounded conceptual and analytical threads for weaving a relatively cohesive picture of the changing but unevenly developed states of female well-being in the 20th century. This comprehensive project enabled them to construct a gendered theory of and

model for social change and global female well-being. The more than 30 principles identified to explicate these complex, variegated, and nonlinear processes were extrapolated from the extensive body of statistical, historical, and, when available, ethnographic data provided by the case studies. Three examples of these principles follow:

Principle 4 - Comprehensive, publicly supported education for females is a necessary condition for social change that favours well-being (378).

Principle 18 - The more powerful and independent women become, the more likely it is that powerful males will abuse, ignore, ridicule or physically harm them – as a way to regain their real or perceived lost power (383).

Principle 24 - The well-being of a Muslim woman is determined not by whether she covers herself with the hijab, but by her family's standard of living, her sense of security and freedom from harm or abuse, her level of education, her sense of agency, and her own personal preferences (387-88).

In this significant empirical and model building project, which includes a thoughtful discussion on 'lessons for activism', Billson and Fleuhr-Lobban are able to redefine and expand, both conceptually and operationally, what global female well-being should mean and the necessary global standard required to assess and work toward prescribed goals. Equal educational, economic, and political access; quality healthcare; freedom from violence; and protected human rights are necessary conditions. Female well-being is absolutely important, because it is integral to the well-being of entire communities, nations, and the world at large. Its achievement, however, depends on the collective will to make it a reality. More inclusive human rights movements, 'informed by feminist thought and action', are central to cultivating that collective will (Billson and Fleuhr-Lobban, 2005: 411).

While this work clearly represents an impressive accomplishment, it, nonetheless, reveals the greater infrastructural capacity of Northern feminists to initiate and coordinate such far-ranging and multi-sited projects and, as a

consequence, to produce theory that transcends the limits of more territorially-restricted social research. Despite its best intentions, this project's division of labour, in many ways parallel to those of the two earlier publications, reproduces the prevailing intellectual status quo. This friendly critique is only meant to encourage more anthropologists to work harder to achieve the kind of transformation necessary to reinvent and decolonize anthropology so that, for instance, African or Asian/Pacific-led research and theory-building can appear at the centre of the world social scientific stage – with all the requisite institutional and ideational supports for legitimating and consolidating such a watershed development.

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