REVIEW ESSAY

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AFRICAN WOMEN AND GLOBALIZATION: RECENT RESEARCH AND THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Sylvain H. Boko, Mina Baliamoune-Lutz, and Sitawa R. Kimuna, eds. *Women in African Development: The Challenge of Globalization and Liberalization in the 21st Century.* Trenton, N.J.: Africa World Press, 2005. 199 pp. Figures. Tables. Notes. References. Index. $24.95. Paper.

Jepkorir Rose Chepyator-Thomson, ed. *African Women and Globalization: Dawn of the 21st Century.* Trenton, N.J./Asmara, Eritrea: Africa World Press, 2005. 292 pp. Tables. References. Index. $29.95. Paper.

Jane S. Jaquette and Gale Summerfield, eds. *Women and Gender Equity in Development Theory and Practice: Institutions, Resources, and Mobilization*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2006. 364 pp. Graphs. Charts. Tables. Bibliography. Index. $84.95. Cloth. $23.95.

Globalization, neoliberalism, and African feminist thought establish the frameworks for these three works, which display a wealth of scholarship on the current condition of African women. Through empirical research, they enrich the data on the unequal ways women and men have experienced the impact of global economic forces on their countries. African feminists reiterate challenges to Western feminists at both the theoretical and practical level; at the same time they are mindful of the sometimes ambiguous burden that women experience in an era in which women's rights and capacities to be autonomous are frequent goals. The third volume, which concerns recent thought on policy formulation and implementation, contains fresh data on institutional change, in particular, along with discussions of resources and mobilization that find occasional mirrors in the other two.

The purposes of the collections differ enough for each to contribute its own view of the potential and diversity of African women in the early years of the twenty-first century, as well as of the crises they face. The principal themes and the parallel and different views of the authors will constitute the

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main body of this essay. Yet before beginning, this reviewer proposes that the global financial crisis of 2008 lends a historical flavor to the research and opinions contained in these works. Certainly capitalism is not dead and the global economic forces driving it may have only been slowed by the events of the year. Yet revelations of corruption and mismanagement, of sheer awfulness of scale, have shaken the foundations of the system. They raise the question of whether our understanding of these global processes and their consequences may yet be transformed in ways we cannot even begin to articulate.

Sylvain H. Boko, an economist, and his colleagues in *Women in African Development: The Challenge of Globalization and Liberalization in the 21st Century* examine the impact of globalization and structural adjustment programs on African women's economic activities; the primary goal is to assess how these forces have shaped women's contributions to African development. While recognizing that structural adjustment programs often had more serious and negative consequences for women than for men, the authors proceed from within a framework generally supportive of liberalization. The collection includes essays on conceptual issues related to globalization and gender inequality, the empowerment of women, and sectoral analyses—on education, on women in the labor force, and on demographic trends (relating to the aging of the population). The authors join other scholars in recommending that special education and skills training focused on women, on legal change to facilitate women's access to land and other property, and on the promotion of political leadership positions for women will all enhance women's capacity to participate more significantly in the economies of African countries. The authors demonstrate that it is not so much a "low level of women's participation in economic activity" (191) that is at issue, but rather that despite Herculean participation in their countries' economies, the benefits women reap are minimal. Until this is redressed, the authors conclude, African economies can scarcely revitalize.

If the Boko volume focuses on "development" in the neoliberal sense of economic growth, *African Women and Globalization,* edited by Jepkorir Rose Chepyator-Thomson, offers a critical posture toward the entire phenomenon of globalization in the cultural as well as the economic realms. This collection addresses women as agents rather than as victims in the development process. Filomina Chioma Steady articulates this stance from the outset, by defining the authors' understanding of globalization as a process that retains Africa as

> a continent whose resources and enormous wealth benefited, and continues to benefit, people who are primarily of European or North American descent. This is facilitated by structural racism, which continues to serve as an operating principle of the global economy.... [Nevertheless,] African

> women continue to resist these forces; they organize at the local, national, regional, and international levels to keep them at bay. (xi)

Global income inequality has become chronic: it has created what Steady refers to as "a new market apartheid" (21). While some African economies show modest growth in the early years of the twenty-first century, the majority of the "least developed countries" (as assessed by UNECA and the World Bank) remain African (25). The development of international feminist institutions, agendas, and collaborations, and the emergence of continental or regional feminist networks, while positive initiatives, may not be enough. To ensure that theory guides praxis in the contest for the liberation of women, Steady proposes that black women in Africa and the diaspora must draw "on a wider political and ideological spectrum of feminism" and "link with other counter hegemonic paradigms and movements" (38).

Underscoring agency in a broader sense, Chepyator-Thomson admonishes Africans not only to control their economic wealth, but also to assert the importance of indigenous languages, social structures, and a truly African production of knowledge. In subsequent essays, the authors embellish these critical themes. They are not unaware of practices that continue to burden women even though inspired by policies designed to create greater autonomy for them. For instance, Mutindi Mumbua Kiluva-Ndunda cautions that even movements emphasizing women's agency, like the Greenbelt Movement in Kenya, do not adequately take into account the burden on women's health that work requirements created (chapter 10).

The third volume under review, *Women and Gender Equity in Development Theory and Practice: Institutions, Resources, and Mobilization*, presents the perspectives of scholars who in many cases (e.g., Jane Jaquette, Kathleen Staudt, Irene Tinker) were in the forefront of the women and development movement in the 1970s and have led many of the transformations in that movement in the intervening decades. Long engaged in policy development and implementation, the authors nonetheless adopt a critical stance about past conceptualizations of women's situation. They assert the need for creative thought about a panoply of policy concerns: the gap between the rhetoric of equity and implementation; the environment; equitable access to land and resources; labor issues; microcredit facilities; education; and empowerment. Their recommendations for the future seek to establish a balance between civil society, the state, and markets. The reemergence of the state as a desirable factor in these equations is particularly notable.

The authors seek more penetrating analyses of enduring problems. Sylvia Chant argues that analytically equating female-headed households with poverty is an error; the diversity of age and wealth that she found in her Latin American data precludes "categorical labeling," and requires more attention to the variety of women's conditions and the decisions they make (88–91). Diana Lee-Smith and Catalina Hinchey Trujillo caution that

advocating women's individual ownership in land can work against choices women themselves make, given their cultures' expectations of behavior and customary law. But they also attest that women lose access to land not only because of the transformation of subsistence agriculture, but also because government condemnation of areas for large-scale projects has often significantly diminished women's access to environmental goods they traditionally gather (161–62), creating a double burden. In Uganda, going beyond a single legal framework that called for women's rights in land, collaboration between local grassroots groups and the Huairou Commission staff sought to implement such calls by establishing a network of paralegals who helped resolve local disputes over land issues (168–69).[1] Reforestation initiatives are not omitted from consideration: Louise Fortmann points out that women in two Zimbabwean villages refused to plant trees on family lands because they would lose the product of their labor in case of widowhood or divorce. But they did plant trees in the village woodlot, the products of which women themselves controlled (195).

Pollution hazards to women's and children's health from indoor use of cooking fuels appears as a concern in more than one of the volumes under review. Kirk R. Smith's article (in Jaquette and Summerfield) applies the concept of "disability adjusted life years" (DALY) across different regions and finds that in Africa that burden is 35 percent greater for women than for men—the highest percentage of any continent. In *Women in African Development,* Toussaint Houeninvo and Boko agree that cooking fuel is a major source of pollution. Their research in Benin shows that women would participate in pollution control, given supportive regulations, adequate income, and an opportunity to participate in decision making.

Assessment of women's employment in Free Trade Zones (FTZs) gives rise to diverse opinions. Writing on Kenya, Shadrack Nasongo (in Boko et al.) sees FTZs as a positive development for women because the income from such jobs enables women to disengage from the constraints of patriarchal structures. Jaquette and Staudt (in Jaquette and Summerfield) reiterate the double-edged character of this phenomenon; they note that conditions for women working in the FTZs are in need of improvement, but they also caution that the application of labor standards or bans on child labor should not become excuses for Northern protectionism. Context is important: while child labor can be exploitative, in some circumstances it becomes a source of dignity and/or survival.

The underlying importance of women's education, and the need to strengthen women's capacity in social reproduction as well as to enhance their self-worth, are frequent themes. Several articles in *Women in African Development* call for more appropriate education; but they also note that education may not be enough in the context of the stagnation of formal sector employment caused by globalization (Elizabeth Asiedu and Donald Lien; Nii O. Tackie, Meigan Fields, and Arthur Siaway). Based on studies

in Kenya, Cameroon, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, N'Dri Therese Assie-Lumumba, in *African Women and Globalization*, demonstrates the increased importance of class as a factor in education. She argues that social movements must work to counter state support of the upper classes via taxation: while everyone pays taxes, only some benefit.

Multiple references evoke the complex reality of empowerment in Africa. Empowerment is not only a matter of greater participation in electoral politics; it also connotes a range of human potentials, from greater autonomy in the domestic sphere, to greater participation, from the lowest to the highest levels, in decision-making on policies affecting housing, pollution, and the economy as well as in government. Further, empowerment embraces women's roles in finding solutions to the the challenges faced by African governments, NGOs, and grassroots organizations vis-à-vis the perspectives of feminists or donors in Europe or the Americas.

In *Women in African Development* empowerment indirectly underlies concerns about women's economic role in development; however, for the authors of the other two volumes, empowerment is more central. Chepyator-Thomson and Steady explore the positive effects of globalization for enabling new types of transnational alliances among feminists that can bring moral and material support to social movements in Africa. The authors in *Women and Gender Equity* focus on the way research data are transformed into meaning. Building on a theme mentioned earlier, Jaquette and Staudt argue that feminists should be wary of delegitimizing the state; they suggest it has important roles to play in disciplining markets and in underwriting social services. Faranak Miraftab points out that when the conditions on the ground are far from equal, government's "equal" treatment of unequal parties perpetuates discrimination. Empowerment is often seen as giving women agency, the freedom to make choices; but like Miraftab, Chant notes that the utility of making choices depends somewhat on available options. She stresses that in developing societies, those options may be very limited, leading women to make difficult choices that outsiders find puzzling (for instance, to stay with an abusive husband in order to have access to productive resources). Amara Pongsapich states provocatively that social movements move politics from "representative democracy" to "dialogic democracy" (223), allowing for reinterpretation of the meaning of democratization—as process not as structure. These reinterpretations may lead not so much to new governments as to new forms of advocacy to promote social justice.

Commenting on the relationships between Northern donors and Southern recipients, several of the authors in *Women and Gender Equity* argue that greater transparency and collaborative partnerships should replace older hierarchical patterns of donor versus recipient grantee. Jaquette and Staudt assert that it is unrealistic to think that donors can provide funds with no strings attached, but they urge feminists to strive toward achieving greater balance in negotiating power between NGOs, grassroots organizations, gov-

ernments, and donors. Doe Mayer, Barbara Pillsbury, and Muadi Mukenge advocate small grant programs to NGOs that allow them to learn by doing. They observe that local organizations play a critical role in the success of any project, in that their authority enables them to reach out to the local society with techniques that are familiar.

A final theme that emerges strongly is that the value of networking between African and Western feminist organizations is bidirectional: while providing new allies in the international arena that enable local groups to exert pressure, such networks also bring authoritative views from African feminists and organizers to Western scholars and donors.

Despite the different backgrounds of the authors and the different focus of each volume, what these essays share is the cross-fertilization of ideas, debates, development critiques, and policymaking agendas of recent decades. The widening global disparities of wealth and well-being continue to haunt us. Through the darkened glass of current economic conditions we can scarcely see where the turmoil will lead us. Nevertheless, readers can take some comfort in the fact that these essays demonstrate unequivocally that we scholars are at least listening to one another more than in the past. That is an important step in the right direction.

Note

1. The name of the Huairou Commission is derived from the location in China of the NGO meeting associated with the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. According to its Web site, "The Huairou Commission is a global coalition of networks, institutions and individual professionals that links grassroots women's community development organizations to partners" (www.huairou.org/who/index.html).

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