



Bookie M. Kethusile Lopi, Alice Kwaramba, eds. Barbara. *Beyond Inequalities: Women in Southern Africa. Women in Development Southern Africa Awareness.* Harare: Southern African Research and Documentation Centre, 2000. iv + 332 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7974-1749-6.

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An African Feminism

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A sophisticated backlash against feminism and the "abuse" of gender in African studies has arisen in recent years. Leading the charge in that respect has been Oyewumi Oyeronke's book *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota Press, 1997). The argument is that gender and perhaps even "woman" are imported European concepts that inescapably impose Western oppressions and dichotomies upon Africa. Western feminists, and African scholars trained in the West who value gender as an analytic tool, are straightforwardly equated to imperialists of the more commonly recognized variety.

Numerous logical and methodological flaws render this argument risible. To my mind, however, the strongest counter-argument is the existence of African women who unabashedly embrace the strongest statements of international feminist solidarity. Obioma Nnaemeka's edited collection *Sisterhood, Feminisms and Power: From Africa to the Diaspora* (Trenton and Asmara: Africa World Press, 1998), in one example, or the journal SAFERE (Southern African Feminist Review, out of Harare). The book under review falls into this category, opening as it does with a paean to the United Nations Fourth World Conference on Women: "one of the greatest milestones in the history of women's struggles and the efforts of the international community to promote

gender equality and the empowerment of women" (p.1). Roughly thirty erudite African women contributed to the book in consultation with women's groups throughout the region. Unless one is prepared to dismiss all these people as stooges of the West, then they make a compelling case in favour of an inclusive and quite assertive African feminism.

The book itself does not offer much new empirical research. Rather, it brings together scholarship, development literature, and government policy statements from around southern Africa that focus on key concerns in women's lives. Following a theoretical and historical overview by Marjorie Mbilinyi, the chapters are organized thematically: politics, economy, law and legal reform, the environment, health, agriculture and food security, gender violence, education, and "the girl-child." An important additional theme that typically gets overlooked in this genre is women with disabilities, including consideration of the gender-specific ways that stigma attaches to the disabled.

The book shows how African women in the region are severely disadvantaged by pernicious combinations of customary and modern patriarchies. It shows as well that women desire and are mobilizing for liberation from men's power over women, and that governments have committed themselves by their own laws and by international conventions to improving the rights of women and girls. It takes a strong imagination to see all this as the

imposition of Western values.

There is a wealth of data here, with abundant references to further studies on topics as wide-ranging as HIV/Aids, witchcraft, legal rights, structural adjustment programmes, deforestation, stereotyping in the media, female genital mutilation. Unfortunately, the lack of an index reduces the book's value as a handy reference tool. Relative newcomers to the field of gender will nonetheless probably find it a good introduction to the many overlapping aspects of gender discrimination and violence. The book concludes with a focused discussion of specific political targets for advancing the cause of women's empowerment. Some of these goals are quite manageable and may be useful to activists who feel overwhelmed by the enormity and negativity of the big picture.

Regrettably, the contributors to the book sometimes fail to rise above the level of platitudes. These are highlighted in the columns a la World Bank annual reports: "Information, education and dialogue are key to integrating men in the process of women's empowerment" (p.65); "a large part of the contribution of women farmers is overlooked" (p.93); "The woman with a disability faces the double barrier of being a woman and being disabled" (p.185), and so on. These sentiments and insights are not actually very new and the basic premise of this book is consequently rather implausible: the oppression of women in southern Africa continues in part because well-intentioned policy-makers, researchers, media and so on lack information about the status of women. If only they knew! In fact, it seems to me, there is an abundance of information both historical and contemporary that shows how the oppression of women in southern Africa developed over time, works today, and is recreated over the generations. That information is readily available to policy-makers. The gender-disaggregated statistics that

Beyond Equality cites, for example, in many cases are actually taken from well-read and well-respected pillars of the establishment such as the World Bank.

Such information is ultimately inconvenient to decision-makers, not because it is difficult to access but because it implies that they should change their behaviour or give up the power and privileges that they have come to enjoy so well under the capitalist dispensation. To imagine that more and better information about women's oppression will change their hearts seems naive. Ironically, this faith puts the book in a theoretical camp that Mbilinyi and other socialist feminists have long been critical of (GAD or, if you want to be really cruel, WID).

Some puzzling gaps also weaken the book. No one has contributed from Lesotho, a country with some of the most dramatic gendered history anywhere in the world. There is but a single contributor from South Africa, the regional giant whose scholars have been among the pioneers of gender historiography. There is, moreover, very little discussion of the truly momentous political and legal changes for women in that country. Among the latter is the achievement of the right to freedom from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation. This right, and the whole issue of homosexuality and homophobia, cut to the heart of anti-patriarchal conceptualizations of democracy and human rights. It is disappointing that *Beyond Inequalities* entirely ignores it. That aside, the book is a commendable contribution to debates about the African-ness of African women's struggles for human rights and dignity in solidarity with feminists worldwide.

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