
Book Review

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**Introduction to Gender Studies in Eastern and Southern Africa:
A Reader
by: James Etim
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This book consists of 16 chapters by eminent authors from institutions in different countries, ranging from Kigali Institute of Education (Rwanda) through Winston Salem State University (USA) to University of Kwazulu-Natal (South Africa). Although the book has an interdisciplinary flavour, its underlying theme is economic, social, political, educational and cultural issues relating to women in their quest for equality and empowerment over time, in Eastern and Southern Africa. Discrimination and gender inequality still exists in various facets of an individual's life, particularly in African countries. The book traces through the historical, cultural and developmental efforts toward women emancipation; these elements have contributed recently to the establishment of new academic programmes, such as Women and Religion, and Gender Studies.

Women's voices and feminist movements have been very instrumental in national liberation and political struggles in Africa. Previously, women were oppressed by patriarchy. However, since the 1979 UN Convention, domestic policy changes and international pressures have contributed toward the gradual elimination of discrimination, and women have subsequently gained increasing recognition of their uniqueness in the labour market, household environments, academic institutions, social, matrimonial and political levels in Africa. These changes are evident from case studies of life experiences of women in various geographical and industrial contexts, particularly in Namibia, in South Africa, Rwanda, Ghana, Sudan, Kenya and Zimbabwe, and distilled in the first eight chapters.

Policies are critically important in countering patriarchy and empowering women. But "how precisely do we take policies made in the board room and apply them in the bedrooms" (p.23) makes it interesting reading. Equally, interesting and perhaps demanding reflection is the case of a widower who has to surrender to the loss of personal dignity after being infected with HIV by her late husband, and suffer from emotional pain by being forced to marry the husband's brother (p.33) in a Southern African country.

South Africa is believed to have the best constitution in the world. Constitutionally, women have the same rights as men in South Africa. In Chapter 4, Laudine Hingston, making references to two South African television series, suggests that the media should

employ a progressive transformative gender lens in all aspects of production (p.74). She highlights that spouse battering, sexual abuse and rape of women are pervasive in contemporary South Africa, making it the rape capital of the world (p.66). She argues that many “South African men tend to hold the belief that women are their playthings and are objects to quell men’s sexual desires” (p.66). The high levels of corruption among the police and state officials as well as the rising unemployment rate might also contribute to social injustice that affects gender equality. However, surprisingly when it comes to the mediation role, in Chapter 5, apparently on the basis of a sample of 37 cases, Anderson reasons that “Throughout Southern Africa women are regarded as excellent choices for mediation because they are believed to be much more objective than men” (p.83). This is interestingly controversial.

Although marriage is a desirable institution, essential for reproduction of society, the union of two partners or multi-partners, as in the case of polygamy, is undergoing rapid transformation. Many people cannot afford the exchange of cattle, bride wealth and other expenses associated with African marriages, thus leading to alternative stable and thorny union relationships and reproductive choices. Julia Pauli insightfully examines the transformations in African marriages under four broad anthropological metanarratives in Chapter 6.

Education and skills development is critical to sustainable development and combating poverty. In Chapter 8, J. Etim and R. Gindeel comprehensively elucidate the role of education in women empowerment and the barriers that girls and women still face with regard to the acquisition of education in selected African countries. The high cost of education, traditions and customs, sexual violence, and early marriage are major barriers to women education at the tertiary level, though girls often outperform boys in schooling. A noteworthy case study in Sudan shows that over three-quarters of all respondents affirmed that “women should be trained in entrepreneurship at the university level (p.149). However, only a few women are in top leadership positions at institutions of higher learning. The reasons for this limited number of women in teaching and administration of schools and universities in Kenya and selected Sub-Sahara African countries are clearly explained by Ombati in Chapter 9.

The last section of the book is devoted to the contribution of women to political decision making in East and Southern Africa, land rights and state violence against women in Zimbabwe during the recent meltdown years, HIV and gender in Namibia. Increasingly, more women are turning to formal and informal sector entrepreneurship because of lack of employment opportunities and the need to realise personal and gender aspirations in both African and developed nations. But for women to reach their full potential and for entrepreneurship to develop to its optimum level, one needs an understanding of the various constraints that inhibit women-led enterprises and how to address them. In a very comprehensive Chapter 10, R. Rena addresses the challenges and obstacles faced by women involved in varying entrepreneurship levels in South Africa and it briefly highlights some policy measures taken by the post-apartheid democratic South African government to fast-track women entrepreneurship there. M. Matsodo and C. Iwu extend the discourse by making a detailed comparative analysis of women entrepreneurship in SADC countries and rounds off with enabling strategies and platforms for member countries to take entrepreneurship forward in their countries (p.210).

Women constitute slightly over half of the global population. Unless they are educated, emancipated and capacitated, the development of nations will be held back,

more so in Africa, where women bear the disproportionate burdens of poverty, poor education, limited career or social mobility, joblessness and deprivations. The prospects for a better life for women are brighter when there is gender equality and a serious commitment by individuals and policy makers to the enhancement of women capabilities. This book presents a comprehensive treatment of women's suffering and voices championing the causes and hardships of women in Eastern and Southern Africa. It develops a holistic approach to addressing patriarchy, gender disparities and women empowerment through educational, social, economic, political and entrepreneurial developments. Drawn from a multidisciplinary perspective, the book presents a rich and insightful analysis of the gender disparities in different countries of Africa and how the position of women is gradually turning around, though considerably more still needs to be done. Clearly written without mathematical complexities and technical jargons, this book is good for students, men and women in advancing gender studies, women development and human development in general. James Etim, the Editor, and the other contributing authors care deeply about this subject.