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“It’s the Babies that Keep us Back”: Perceptions of Gender Equality in the Lives of a Sample of Black South African Women

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Abstract

This article investigates the perception of gender equality as experienced in the lives of a sample of black South African women. According to the South African Constitution women are guaranteed equality, but is this equality evident in the lives of ordinary black South African women? Is feminism still necessary in South African? An analysis of the perceptions of these women shows a need for a new feminism to suit the experiences and world view of this sample of women. Different forms of black feminism are found to be inadequate in resolving the inequalities experienced and the searching for an alternative form of feminism is suggested.

Introduction and Problem Statement

South Africa has one of the most progressive Constitutions and Bill of Rights in the world. One area that the ruling African National Congress (ANC) has put particular emphasis on is the promotion of women’s rights. Many laws have been brought in concerning women’s rights, such as, legalising abortion, giving women equal power in marriage, cracking down on domestic violence, criminalising sexual harassment at work and banning gender discrimination in all spheres. In the eyes of the Constitution, South African women have equal opportunities in all aspects of their lives and are protected by laws even in the home. But in reality is this what is occurring in the homes of black South Africans? Has the role of black men changed and is equality evident in South African households? This paper looks at the lives of a sample of black South African women to discover whether gender equality is a reality in South African society.

The aim of this article is to report on the findings of the research as described below and to explore the position of black women as

perceived by themselves in South African society. Have black South African women benefitted from South Africa's gender-egalitarian Constitution or not.

This essay will show the conceptual-theoretical framework on which the empirical investigation was based. This will be followed by a description of the empirical research design, the findings of the project, a discussion of the findings, and a conclusion.

Conceptual-Theoretical Framework: Multifarious Feminism

Black South African society is traditionally patriarchal. Men have been portrayed as strong, rational, reasonable and independent; women as weaker, emotional, irrational and dependant. In the light of this what kinds of feminism has developed in Africa to suit the conditions black women experience? Feminism, which has its origins in the struggle for women's rights, can be perceived as a white, western theory and, on account of this, there is a "dialectic, a tension in the attitude to feminism by Black scholars on the continent and also in the diaspora."²

2 M. M. Kolawole, "Transcending Incongruities: Rethinking Feminism and the Dynamics of Identity in Africa." *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity* 16 no. 54, (2002): 92.

3 Kolawole, "Transcending Incongruities," 93.

There cannot be an overarching "feminism" because of the different cultural, social and economic situations of women over the world. It is the situatedness of the conditions in which women live in Africa which will define the type of feminism developed. Feminism in a first world country has to be different from feminism in a third world or developing country because the concerns and issues that these women have will differ widely.

One of the most important issues in South Africa is that feminism cannot be looked at without taking culture into consideration. Black South Africans still have a strong cultural tradition which has a large influence on how women are perceived and their role in society. The negativity of some African scholars, male and female, to feminism, "is linked to the failure of feminism to address the many specific African historical and cultural contexts."³

What Alternatives to “Western” Feminism have developed in Africa?

The African feminist movement “often posits itself as counter-canonical to certain tendencies of mainstream western feminism and encompasses various, sometimes-oppositional stands, which inform each other and create a reflexive internal dialogue.”⁴ African feminism is diverse in nature and does not come only from African women scholars but from African American women scholars who identify with their African sisters.

4 S. Akin-Ania, “Beyond an Epistemology of Bread, Butter, Culture and Power. Mapping the African Feminist Movement,” *Nokoko: Institute of African Carleton University (Ottawa, Canada) 2*, (2011): 66.

5 Y. A. Blay, “All the Africans are Men, All the ‘Sisters’ are ‘Americans’ but Some of us Resist: Realising African Feminism(s) as an Africological Research Methodology,” *Journal of Pan African Studies 2 no. 2*, (2008): 63.

6 J. S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, (London: Heinemann, 1988):133

7 Mbiti, *African Religions*,133.

Black feminism developed in America in part in response to “white” feminism to say to black women that they do need to overcome sexual, class and racist oppression and that there is a place for black women in feminism. Black feminism, as explained by Patricia Hill Collins, acknowledges that the “matrix of domination” experienced by Black women transcends US borders, but “she positions the intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender and sexuality as the ties that bind black women globally with no mention of history or culture.”⁵

In Africa an important role of women is their reproductive function and therefore motherhood is seen as central to the identity of women. Motherhood is a prerequisite for social acceptance; many non-mothering women may experience feelings of rejection and low self-esteem. The importance of children is one of perpetuating the chain of humanity. Mbiti says, “in some societies it is believed that the living-dead are reincarnated in part, so that aspects of their personalities or physical characteristics are ‘re-born’ in their descendants.”⁶ So a person who has no descendants “in effect quenches the fire of life, and becomes forever dead since his line of physical continuation is blocked.”⁷ People who have physically died in African society become the ancestors or living-dead because they are remembered by the people still living; if there are no people to remember you this is a great misfortune.

The woman as mother is seen as an embodiment of the generative aspect of society, and is equated with the life force itself.⁸ Because of the veneration of motherhood and the idea that many African women's identity is tied in with being a "Mother." Catherine Acholonu "proposes the concept of "motherism" as a conceptual framework for investigating Africa women's unique experiences. "Motherism," therefore, provides a response to "feminism" which Acholonu sees as being grounded in Euro-American cultural experience."⁹ Another alternative that has developed is "womanism." "Womanism" recognises not only the sexist oppression of women, but also the racial and classist oppression as well as accepting the male participation in emancipation. "Womanism is rooted in Black culture which accounts for the centrality of family, community and motherhood in its discourse and as an ideology has extended beyond the frontiers of Black America to being embraced by women in and from Africa, and in other parts of the world."¹⁰ These forms of feminism all have come out of African-American women's experiences and been adopted by feminists in Africa.

8 B. Bakare-Yusuf, "Beyond Determinism: The Phenomenology of African Female Existence." Available at: <http://agi.ac.za/sites/agi.ac.za/files/fa_2_feature_article_1.pdf> [Accessed 23 February 2013].

9 Bakara-Yusuf, "Beyond Determinism," 4.

10 S. M. Ebinoluwa, "Feminism: The Quest for an African Variant," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 3 no. 1, (2009): 230.

11 O. Nnaemeka, "Nego-Feminism: Theorising, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way," *Signs* 29 no. 2, (2004): 377.

12 Nnaemeka, "Nego-Feminism," 378.

Nnaemeka speaks of a brand of feminism which she sees unfolding in Africa which she calls nego-feminism, which is the feminism of negotiation and nego-feminism which stands for "no ego" feminism. She says "the foundation of shared values in many African cultures are the principles of negotiation, give and take, compromise, and balance."¹¹ African feminism uses this negotiation, give and take, and compromise to challenge patriarchy in African society, "it knows when, where, and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts."¹² Nnaemeka argues "that African feminist theory should be built on the indigenous" and cites Claude Ake:

Now, what is the indigenous and how might we build on it? The indigenous is not the traditional; there is no fossilised existence of the African past available for us to fall back on, only new totalities however

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hybrid which change with each passing day. The indigenous refers to whatever the people consider important to their lives.¹³

Building on the indigenous implies ownership where the worldviews and values of the African women are considered and not Euro-centric or Western concepts thrust upon them. Nnaemeka's feminism brings in a practical side when she says, "African women do feminism; feminism is what they do for themselves and for others."¹⁴

Do these forms of feminism fit into the experiences of the sample of Black South African women used in the research? An important context in which to put any discussion of women in Africa is community and the key to community is family. Murove says that "the African concept of family is unlike the western nuclear family; it embraces all those with blood ties. Many therefore qualify as fathers, mothers, brothers and sisters. But family not only involves those who are alive now but also those who came before and those who have yet to come."¹⁵ Amoateng confirms by saying that "the families are social groups that are related by blood (kinship), marriage, adoption, or affiliation with close emotional attachments to each other that endure over time and go beyond a particular physical residence."¹⁶

When discussing community and family there has to be a mention of Ubuntu (humanism or humaneness) which is a philosophy and way of life which is found in South Africa and indeed Africa as a whole:

Ubuntu as a way of life finds meaning in the expression which recurs across the various African languages in Southern Africa: *umntu ngumntu ngabany' abantu* (Xhosa) or *motho ke motho ka batho ba babang* (Sotho) meaning, a person is a person through persons.¹⁷

A person becomes a whole human being because of the community and it is in the community that a person will reach their full potential. Central

¹³ Nnaemeka, "Nego-Feminism," 377.

¹⁴ Nnaemeka, "Nego-Feminism," 378.

¹⁵ M. F. Murove, *African Ethics: An Anthology of Comparative and Applied Ethics*, (Pietermaritzburg: University of KwaZulu-Natal Press, 2009), 262.

¹⁶ A. Y. Amoateng, *Families and Households in Post-Apartheid South Africa: Socio-Demographic Perspectives*, (Cape Town: HSRC Press 2007), 14.

¹⁷ Murove, *African Ethics*, 65.

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to Ubuntu is belonging and "it states that no one can be self-sufficient and that interdependence is a reality for all."¹⁸ Based on this conceptual/theoretical framework the empirical investigation follows.

Empirical Investigation

The purpose of this study was to determine to what extent gender equality as expressed in the new Constitution of South Africa has enlightened the lives of a sample of black South African women. This was a qualitative investigation in which an ethnographic strategy was used which is a "strategy of an inquiry in which the researcher studies an intact cultural group in a natural setting over a prolonged period of time

by collecting, primary, observational and interview data.¹⁹ The instrument used was communities in conversation. This empirical investigation took place in a school in East London and is part of a larger project, SANPAD which is undertaken with the Netherlands. This particular project is called HRiED, Human Rights in Education and Diverse Religion and Cultural Context. This project has taken place in different parts of the country and is aimed at empowering young girls and women. The first part of the project involved getting Grade Seven girls and boys at the school to write narratives. They were asked: In your diary write about the religious and cultural practices of girls in your family and community. Write about those practices that make you feel good and those practices that make you feel not happy or sad (uncomfortable). Upon analysis of these narratives certain themes were identified and these themes were used to start the second part of the project, starting a community in conversation with the teachers and mothers at the school. Meetings took place over three consecutive days at the school in the staff room.

The participants in the group were teachers and student teachers as well as mothers who worked at the school. There were nine participants, five Xhosa speaking black women, three coloured women and one white woman. The participants all signed informed consent forms to participate in the study. The trustworthiness relies on the honesty of the participants and their relationship to the participants of the community in conversation. The data was collected by recording and videotaping the

18 Murove, African Ethics, 260.

19 J. W. Cresswell, Research Design. Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches, (London: Sage Publications, 2009), 13.

meetings which were then transcribed, analysed and interpreted in the light of the feminist theories and Ubuntu mentioned above.

Findings

During the discussions issues of gender were brought up time and again. What follows are the words of the black women (which includes the coloured women) in the group which reveals their thinking of the roles and position of women and men in South African society.

Examples of the Answers Given by Women in the Empirical Research

I think it's because we have the babies, they will always drag us down. The babies are still on us, the men are not there. Always stuck with the babies!

Men get promoted to HOD (Head of Department), etc., before women. Not so much in the foundation phase where there are generally no men, but from Grade Four onwards it is perceived that the man will be the better candidate because he is a man. I think a man will get into a HOD or principle before a woman.

It is perceived that the woman must look after the baby, if a woman is a manager and young there is a good chance that she is going to take maternity leave in the next five years. Therefore it's not a nice thing for us, so then we have to find a substitute where a man can just carry on.

From personal experience my daughter was under thirty and female and they couldn't give her the position as manager because she was female. She would have actually been the youngest manager in the country. They won't do it. This is still a big issue, last year at one of the schools there was a female acting principle at a high school, the post was advertised and a man got the position, and yet she was acting principle from 2009. There is still very much male domination.

One male, who is eighteen years old, said girls have to work twice as hard to do what a guy can do, he was not meaning it condescendingly, just observing what is going on in the work place. For them to be rated equal they have to work twice as hard, why? If you are qualified what has that got to do with it?

At university in the SRC you will always find that the president or chairman is a man and the girls are voted as secretaries. It makes me so angry girls are secretaries all the time!! In that thing they wanted to vote a girl, but the chairman said you have to find someone more masculine who can control the crowds. They just degrade women, so when you grow up you think I can only be a secretary.

Even in politics on TV I haven't seen a woman even close to presidency. In the news paper and on TV they were crying and saying if a woman becomes president we will never have a life. They were writing these things in the newspaper as if when a woman rules the country it will fall apart.

There is always stereotyping, men say that women are good at languages and men are good at maths.

It will take a few generations until women have been empowered through education. As soon as the girls are educated they start practicing that in their lives. But while you are not empowered even if you know your rights, unless you are financially independent you are not going to be able to enforce your rights on the men. As long as you are dependent on that man financially.

You will not have rights depending on men financially.

Some kids in my area (semi-rural area) where I come from they (girls) finish Grade Twelve and they are sitting there (at home) and I asked one girl why are you not going to varsity, and she said I don't have money. I said I am not using my mother's money. She said it's not worth going to varsity anyway and come back and sit here. I said who said you are going to come back here?

They have the mentality of where I come from no one succeeds. I think there needs to be more people from the rural areas that should come back and say I made it from here. They run away from here and never come back, people never see that inspiration of saying; Hey! She came back and actually ploughed back, I can actually do the same.

There is the perception that boys will go for work for the family but girls will get married and leave home.

At university in class I said I was a radical feminist and the first thing one boy said was, 'do you know the meaning of it? So he was insulting my intelligence. He said feminists are people who think women know everything and I said you are the one that doesn't know anything. If you are a feminist it's not like you say women know everything, it's about empowering women that are

not in empowered. And not only you having to work, come back and do what they (men) expect us to do and play a role in making them happy.

Boys challenge female teachers they are defiant, especially Grade Seven, they will do what they are told but with reluctance. They will listen to men teachers though.

At home rules don't apply to them (boys) and they come to school and think the same thing. When the boys are asked to clean the classroom they will say it's not their job to sweep.

Rules at home often only apply to girls, for example, curfews. The boys are allowed to do whatever they like. The boys expect their sisters to clean and cook for them.

The mothers will come to us (the teachers) and say they can't control their sons. The mother will be ruled by her thirteen year old son and often there is no male figure in the household.

Black men expect to be pampered you can't say make your own coffee because you are in for a hiding.

The older generation is very stuck in their ways and they expect girls to cook and clean and there is no time for homework, to study or do assignments. Mother's expect their daughters to cook and clean and look after their siblings. One learner missed a whole week of school because she had to look after her baby brother.

Look at the Hendrick's children, she was just so small but she used to walk with that baby tied to her back, Grade Two or Three. She used to walk like an adult very comfortable with that baby tied around her back. Not even getting tired and she used to walk a distance from the squatter camp to the baby care centre just for hand outs for the baby and you don't know where the mother is.

These findings indicate that this sample of black South African women still experience and see gender discrimination, bias and stereotyping of women on a daily basis.

Is Feminism Relevant in the New South Africa?

With South Africa's gender-egalitarian Constitution is feminism still needed in South Africa? As can be seen from the findings for this sample of black women, gender inequality issues are still very relevant in South Africa and they have experienced or seen gender inequality in all spheres of life; corporate, business, university, school, home and politics.

Therefore there is a definite need for a type of feminism that ensures that these inequalities are identified and rectified:

While our Constitution is regarded as one of the most progressive in the world, *Realising Rights?* questions the extent to which women are able to realise the rights enshrined therein. The passing of a number of progressive laws and the amendment of certain pieces of a number of legislation, theoretically implies the improvement of women's position in society—yet the reality is that the majority of women continue to face marginalisation and discrimination in their homes, workplaces and communities.²⁰

20 D. Lewis, "Discursive Challenges for African Feminism," in *African Feminist Politics of Knowledge: Tensions, Challenges, Possibilities*, eds., A. A. Ampofo and S. Arnfred, (Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2009), 209.

What are the components that have come out of the findings that are necessary for a South African black feminism to help ensure that these problems of inequality are attended to and if possible resolved? First, the perception of women by men, that they are the weaker sex, they can only be secretaries, they look after the children, and this attitude can be seen in the defiance of the boys in the class room. In a general discussion of this issue the women in this group thought that in order to change this perception of women by men it must begin in the home. One participant said "changing starts with moms. The boys must be taught equality and they must learn to cook, clean, wash clothing etc. They must share duties in the home."

Second, from the findings are the perceptions women and girls have of themselves. The fact that these young girls see no future ahead of them

requires that they need inspiration and guidance to empower themselves. The participants of this group felt that it is through education that women and young girls can get empowered, as well as by role models and women putting back into the societies from which they come.

Third, family and community are essential parts of the lives of South African black women as two of the participants said:

Xhosa society is about community, you take on other people's children if something happens to the parents and you look after them.

In Xhosa culture the family is everything, even if you have never met them, they will look after and feed the person. If there is no food in the house you can go down the road and say my mom is so-and-so and the lady will say "I know you" and will cook for you. At Christmas time you go from house to house and get food. To be part of a community is very important.

Four, there must be a connection between theory and praxis, the environments of black women have to be taken into account, i.e. the social, economic, family and life experiences. A feminist theory needs to be informed by the conditions which impact on women's lives.

In the light of this, what type of feminism seems adequate for the position of South African women? The black feminism of Hill Collins does acknowledge that black women experience more than sexist oppression, but class and race oppression as well. But she does not take into account the cultural and historic aspects which also make up the identity of black South African women. Motherism limits the identity of woman, as they are not only defined by being a mother, although this is very important in Africa, this way of identifying women excludes those women with no children and minimises the different identities of women. Womanism does take into consideration culture, family and community, but it has its origins in the African-American experience and what is

needed is an indigenous feminism which is more accommodating of the diversity of experience of African women.

Nnaemeka sees an indigenous feminism emerging which she calls 'nego-feminism' which challenges inequality by "negotiation,

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accommodation and compromise."²¹ This appears to be the best fit but it still does not incorporate all of the four points mentioned earlier. There needs to develop a new indigenous feminism which incorporates culture, family, marriage and motherhood and which is not perceived as being against men. As the one participant said "feminism....is about sharing the activities we have to do." This new feminism must "address ways that men can unlearn sexism."²² It has to investigate how to empower women and girls and because of the philosophy of Ubuntu it must be aware of community and the role men play in black South African women's lives. It must be pragmatic, "women who have daily contact with men need useful strategies that will enable them to integrate feminist movement into daily life."²³

Conclusion

In South African society, inequality is still very prevalent and the gap between what is in the Constitution and what women experience in their everyday lives is very wide. The findings indicated that this sample of black women have not benefitted from the new gender-egalitarian Constitution. Therefore a new feminism has to grapple with these inequalities, but within the philosophy of Ubuntu and in the sense of community. Individuals, men and women, are an integral part of the whole community and this "belonging does not only make one complete but gives one a sense of identity and security."²⁴ Being part of a community leaves little room for individualism. A loner is viewed with suspicion and he or she will be referred to as inkomo edla yodwa (lit: a cow that grazes on its own").²⁵

"Ubuntu' feminism has to involve men, and although this appears contradictory, men are an integral part of the family and community. Ignoring men and the role they play will only lead to more misunderstanding and suspicion between men and women. In this new black feminism the multiple roles of women needs to be accounted for: she is woman, mother, daughter, wife, lover, worker and caregiver to any that need her. Very few black women have the luxury of discarding family and community to pursue their own interests, this feminism has to be pragmatic and take into consideration the situatedness of the lives of

21 Nnaemeka, "Nego-Feminism," 380.

22 b. hooks, *Feminist Theory from Margin to Centre*, (London: Pluto Press, 2000), 78.

23 hooks, *Feminist Theory*, 79.

24 Murove, *African Ethics*, 68.

25 Murove, *African Ethics*, 68.

these black women. It is the cultural, economic and historical situation under which these women live which will direct the type of feminism to evolve.

The findings clearly show that one of the most important functions of a new feminism has to be the upliftment and empowerment of women and young girls. This upliftment and empowerment has to go hand in hand, because of the interconnection between men and women, with changing perception of men and boys towards women.

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26 C. D. Roux. Human Rights Education in Diversity: Empowering Girls in Rural and Metropolitan School Environments. Research Proposal. <<http://www.hreid.co.za/>> 2009.

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