
Myths To Live By? Female Solidarity and Female Autonomy Reconsidered

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ABSTRACT

Female autonomy and female solidarity occupy a special place in gender and development thinking. For some feminists, myself included, they represent closely held ideals; as such, they are very difficult to bring into question. This contribution reflects on these ideals in order to raise critical questions about the attachments that gender and development practitioners may have to particular ways of reading 'gender relations'. It draws on ethnographic fieldwork in Nigeria to explore the lack of fit between received 'Western' ideas about gender and the complexity, contingency and multiplicity of relations and identifications among women in this cultural context. It argues that superimposing received notions of gendered power relations on those whom development intervention seeks to assist — in the form of gender myths that have a hold on hearts as well as minds — may offer these women neither succour, nor the means for them to empower themselves.

INTRODUCTION

Feminist engagement with development has long sought to challenge the myths created and sustained by pervasive male bias. Images of harmonious unitary households dissolve in feminist analyses of the realities of intrahousehold inequity and far-from-benevolent patriarchs (Folbre, 1994; Kandiyoti, 1988; Whitehead, 1981). The inequities of dominant models of economic development clearly emerge as the spotlight is placed on the assumptions that drive them, as on those who stand to gain or lose (Evans, 1991; Kabeer, 1994). And yet amidst the feminist critique of orthodoxies, exposure of prejudices and assumptions, and efforts to put right the 'gender blindness' of development, reside potent gender myths in which idealized representations

I am profoundly grateful to all the women and men in Ado-Odo who shared their experiences with me, not knowing quite what would become of their confidences. I would especially like to thank Mary Akinsowon, Baba Yemisi Akinsowon and Dorcas Odu for all they taught me about gender relations in Ado. I thank Jo Doezema from whom I learnt so much about the uses of myth; and, for their critical engagement with the ideas expressed here, I am grateful to Rosalind Eyben, Ann Whitehead and Buzz Harrison.

Development and Change 38(1): 149–168 (2007). © Institute of Social Studies 2007. Published by Blackwell Publishing, 9600 Garsington Road, Oxford OX4 2DQ, UK and 350 Main St., Malden, MA 02148, USA

of women, and of their relationships with men and with each other, gain a life of their own.

In this article, my focus is on these idealized representations and on two of the key supportive elements in feminist fables of women's liberation from male oppression. The first element is the powerful social imagery of women's solidarity. This is underpinned by assumptions of women's inherent co-operativeness with each other and the belief that if only they were to recognize their collective interests and oppression by men, they would be able to mobilize *as women* to seek greater social justice. The second element is the notion that if only women had greater access to and control over money, they would exercise economic autonomy in ways that would free them from the shackles of subordination to men, achieving with this the freedom to make their own choices, which many development actors regard as the fundamental ingredients of empowerment (Alsop et al., 2006).

The article begins by taking a closer look at these ideals of solidarity and autonomy. My starting point is not conceptual but personal: how I as a 'Western feminist' came to relate to these ideals, and the readings of African women's lives that they led me towards — and away from. It then goes on to explore how an analysis of gender and development narratives as myth and fable might help explain the purchase that certain ideas about women gain in policy and practice. My own ethnographic fieldwork in a small southern Nigerian town is used to juxtapose Western feminist visions of women's solidarity and autonomy against women's lived experiences of relationships with other women and with their husbands and lovers in this cultural context. It highlights the extent to which prevalent understandings of the nature and scope of 'gender relations' in gender and development narratives occlude other gendered power relationships experienced by women in this, as in other settings. The contribution concludes with reflections on the implications of revisiting the salience of the myths of female solidarity and female autonomy for feminist engagement with development.

SOLIDARITY AND AUTONOMY: IDEALS IN PRACTICE?

Ideas about female solidarity and female autonomy appear in many, if not most, gender and development interventions. They underpin the promotion of self-help and savings and credit groups; and they inform a host of 'women's projects', as well as mainstream interventions that seek to enhance women's participation in the public sphere. Get women into groups, the development mantra goes, and they will be transformed into social, economic and political actors. Get women into parliament, and they will represent women's interests. Give women access to independent incomes, and they will be freed from dependency on men. From the popularization of focus group discussions in applied research, to PRA exercises aimed at seeking the perceptions and perspectives of 'women' as a social group, sex-segregated spaces are seen

as those in which women will feel able to be vocal, authentic and find the confidence and support to express themselves, and to act.

These representations, I suggest here, might be usefully characterized as myths, as much for the work they do, as for their actual narrative content. In using the concept of myth as a device to explore how assumptions of solidarity and autonomy feature in gender and development narratives, I am not suggesting for a minute that female solidarity or female autonomy do not exist. Although the popular understanding of the term ‘myth’ is that it can be counter-posed to ‘reality’, myths are neither true nor false. To see them in these terms is to miss the point, and misunderstand their social and cultural salience (Cassirer, 1946; Laclau, 1996; Sorel, 1908/1941). Myths are narratives that do more than tell a good story. They are composed of a series of familiar images and devices, and work to produce an order-of-things that takes shape and has its effects through resonance with the affective dimensions of deeply held values and norms. As Cassirer contends: ‘Myth does not arise solely from intellectual processes; it sprouts forth from deep human emotions . . . it is the *expression* of emotion . . . emotion turned into an image’ (Cassirer, 1946: 43, emphasis in original). Myths may disturb, but they also assuage; they may question, but they do so in order to reaffirm and reassure.¹

What has this got to do with development? Albert Hirschmann recognized the role that myths play in animating development actors in his 1967 book *Development Projects Observed*. He cites Georges Sorel, whose analysis of myth remains as salient now as when it was written almost a hundred years ago: ‘Myths are not descriptions of things, but expressions of a determination to act . . . A myth cannot be refuted since it is, at bottom, *identical with the convictions of a group*’ (Sorel, 1908/1941: 33, my emphasis). Where Sorel highlights the identifications that can mobilize myths, Laclau (1996) emphasizes the political salience of the ideological, as well as affective, character of myth. Doezema’s (2004) powerful analysis of the ideological uses made of the myth of the innocent trafficking victim draws on the work of Laclau and other political theorists to demonstrate the extent to which myths infuse politicized agendas with moral purpose.

Drawing on these theorists, it is my contention that female solidarity and female autonomy might be usefully seen as gender myths that many feminists — myself included — like to live by. I suggest that the dissonance between idealized representations of women’s solidarity and autonomy and the complex contours of women’s relationships with men and with each other provides a set of tensions that gender and development has struggled, and largely failed, to contend with. These tensions have often been resolved by simply air-brushing away conflicts and contradictions in women’s relationships

1. There is of course a huge anthropological literature on myth, growing out of the foundational work of Claude Levi-Strauss (1963). Providing an adequate account and critique of this literature goes beyond the scope of this article.

with each other and women's identifications with the men in their lives. The reason that these relationships remain poorly addressed is precisely because of the power that idealized notions of female solidarity and autonomy hold, as myths. My intention here is not to break with what might be regarded as the wellspring of what Sorel terms 'expressions of a determination to act'. Rather, it is to suggest that for development to make a meaningful difference to the relations of power that are such a potent source of gender injustice, we need to recognize the other stories that might be told about women's relationships with other women, and with men.

OF IDEALS AND MISRECOGNITION

The stories we tell have always served the dual purpose of explaining an otherwise incomprehensible world and creating and sustaining the world in our own likeness. (Busia, 1990: 93)

Female solidarity and female autonomy represent two ideals that I would not wish to live without. They have such a powerful grip on me that it is difficult to even countenance questioning them. Even as I recognize that they are fragile and flawed, and that the category 'woman' that they are premised upon is deeply problematic, they are still ideals in which I have considerable personal investment. Feminist fables, didactic tales that deploy and resignify elements of gender myths, embed particular readings of gender relations and women's agency in injunctions to act. This section reflects on how the gender myths and feminist fables I learnt along the way affected my readings of the lives of women in the two African countries I subsequently came to work in. I grew up the UK, in an era where second-wave feminism was to transform the perspectives of middle-class women, like my mother. She raised me with a series of feminist injunctions: don't ever let yourself be dependent on a man; don't have children without having secured yourself a good career; women are powerful, women are good, women are right. Less visible to me were her identification with my father or the tensions she may have experienced with the expectations of his female relatives, in her subject position as a wife and mother, or indeed her investment in maintaining a position of respectability by remaining married.

In the mid-1980s, I went to Zimbabwe, and stayed on there to work as a teacher. My feminist ideals took a beating as I wrestled to make sense of how women were regarded and treated by men, and the tense and distrustful relationships that women seemed to have with each other. I was guilty of all that Chandra Mohanty (1987) says about Western feminists' representations of the Other: I simply didn't understand what was going on, and in my attempts to make sense of it, read Zimbabwean women's lives through my own Western eyes. I constructed them as victims of male oppression and of the embedded structural dynamics of patriarchy that pitted mothers-in-law against their daughters-in-law in competition for affective and economic

resources (cf. Kandiyoti, 1988). And I saw as heroines those who escaped, who defied their husbands, who used *mupfuwira* (a magical medicine to delight many a feminist, which turns men into putty in a woman's hands and makes them do whatever they can to please women, including domestic work), who took lovers to match their husbands' philandering, and who gave as good as they got.

My beliefs in sisterhood and solidarity remained unscathed by my experiences in Zimbabwe. Women's hostility to other women could easily be explained away with recourse to ideas such as structural tensions residing in kinship systems — an old anthropological chestnut. The relative absence of close female friendships could also be explained by the pressure on women's time, the organization of production and so on. Women's suspicions of each other could be accounted for by the extensive sexual networking that was so much part of the social fabric, and which has caused such tragedy and loss in the years since then. And apart from those men who had been modified by *mupfuwira*, it was easy enough to read off from men's attitudes towards women as sexual partners and wives, a generalized notion of men-are-bastards that served the feminists of my generation well.

The very partiality of my understanding of gender relations in Zimbabwe — polarized, incomplete, read from my particular position as a white, middle-class, Western feminist — was to inform my choice of a field site for my PhD. I wanted to work somewhere where women were not dependent on men for their fortunes, where they were able to successfully balance motherhood and career, where strong women's organizations existed and where cultural and religious notions of femaleness were of power rather than weakness, agency rather than passivity, where women were respected *as women*. It was, in many respects, a quest for the feminist equivalent of the Holy Grail: for a place in which it was possible for women to really experience the solidarity and autonomy I regarded as fundamental to women's struggles against gender injustice.

It was a lavishly illustrated art history book bursting with images of women's power, autonomy and presence amongst the southwestern Nigerian Yoruba peoples that first captured my attention (Drewal and Drewal, 1983). The more I read about Yoruba women, the more fascinated I became. Accounts spoke of the legendary economic prowess of the market woman, source of an iconic image that conjures up a spatial and representational domain of female power *par excellence* (Belasco, 1980; Matory, 1994). I read about households in which men's and women's contributions were quite separate, and in which women exercised considerable *de facto* decision-making power (Fapohunda, 1988; Sudarkasa, 1973). I devoured tales of women balancing own-account income-generating work with child-rearing, helped out by other women and by older children (Dwyer and Bruce, 1988). I delighted in finding out about women doing very little domestic work, buying in meals and paying others to do their washing (Oyewumi, 1997; Sudarkasa, 1973). And the stories about the numerous and vibrant women's trade and social

associations, and of women's protests and political mobilization (Mba, 1980) were a source of inspiration. More inspiring still were accounts of Yoruba religion, some of which include tales from the area in which I was to work of a female goddess Odudua,² from whom the entire Yoruba peoples originated, and characters like the strong and stropky goddess Oya (Gleason, 1987).

I had a million questions about the more mundane aspects of women's lives: about how they got by and got on in their work and with their children and husbands, and about the contingencies of their struggles for money, children and peace (Cornwall, 1996). My research journey, pitted with all manner of epistemological and personal-political obstacles, was one that revealed to me the power of my own longing for something to be different. The difficulties I initially had in hearing what women and men had to say about each other and themselves threw up some of the potent challenges which theorizing gender in this African context represented for me. In the account that follows, I weave together personal narrative with ethnographic evidence culled from intensive participant observation and interviews,³ to reflect on the power of the myths of female solidarity and autonomy and on the implications of the dissonance between lived experience and idealized representations of women's identifications and relationships for gender and development practice.

FEMALE SOLIDARITY IN ADO-ODO

Once a thriving agricultural centre at the heart of the trade routes running through the far southwestern corner of Nigeria, recent decades have seen Ado-Odo's fortunes change and the town revert to a rather sleepy backwater. With a population of over 40,000 people, an approximately equal number of Muslims and Christians and a small residue of adherents to the Yoruba deities whose shrines remain in the town, Ado has a huge array of social institutions. These range from associations of women who save together, called *egbe*, with names like 'friends become an association', to church and mosque societies, to trades associations and unions, to vigilante and community development groups. A central market that bursts into life every four days brings women from the villages in the hinterland and from adjacent markets into town, many of whom organize themselves into associations to maintain harmony and save together. Although men have long been a minor part of the market, it is mainly a female arena and certain commodities are only sold by women — notably

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2. The town in which I worked, Ado-Odo in Ogun State, is home to a major shrine of some antiquity to the goddess Odudua; Odudua (also known as Oduduwa) takes on a male form in much of the rest of the Yoruba sub-groups to the north and east of this region (Peel, 2000).
 3. This article draws on anthropological fieldwork conducted over the course of eighteen months from 1992 to 1994 (Cornwall, 1996), and two subsequent shorter periods of research in 1997 and 2000.

those of least value such as leaf vegetables, as well as those associated with the highest turnover and most prestige, such as cloth and kola nut. Female market-sellers come to be known by the name of their commodity and gain prestige from their prowess within this domain.

The main road through the town is dotted with small shop-based businesses, many of which are owned by women. In hairdressing and tailoring salons, bands of female apprentices dressed in identical uniforms spend their days together learning their craft. Near the river and along the minor roads that run in all directions, groups of women gather to process palm and cassava, to pack pats of *fufu* (fermented, ground cassava flour made into a stiff porridge) for sale in the ring of markets that supply the Lagos metropolis. Some of these processing stalls are adjacent to clusters of houses in which co-wives and the wives of brothers and sons live and work together, others are sites in which neighbours come together to work. At church and in the mosque, women pray together, meet to plan activities to further the fortunes of their places of worship and extend invitations to the naming ceremonies, weddings or funerals of each others' families.

In most of the arenas in which women live their everyday lives, they interact primarily with other women. Some of these relationships might be chosen, others might come about because of a woman's line of business, the man she married or the religion with which she came to be involved, either by choice or through marriage. Mapping women's social networks, I found them to span multiple domains of association in which one woman may have very different relational identities — as the mother of twins, as Iya Alata the successful pepper trader, as the faithful supplicant on whom blessings are bestowed, or as the client of herbalists in search of magical medicine (*juju*) to keep enemies at bay. I found some women to have diffuse, generalized social networks, and some to have remarkably constricted ones that consisted of a few trusted associates.

When it came to asking women about their close friendships, the people they really felt they could confide in, many said there were no such people: only their children. One of the women who said 'my children are my friends' claimed that she passed the time of day with women who went past the porch of her house, from which she ran a petty trading business, but never got into chat because 'you never know what people will do with the things that you tell them'. Women would laugh loudly when I asked if they were close to their husbands or able to talk to them about their worries, explaining the ideal of companionate marriage that the British like to entertain, and that some Nigerian Christians have adopted, although with rather limited reach beyond the elite (Mann, 1985).

In all of the sites in which women gathered and spent their everyday lives, there was a current of mild suspicion that would sometimes swell into outright hostility. Women spoke a lot of having enemies, *ota*, people who were out to do them harm, undermine their businesses, stop them getting pregnant or carrying a child to term, or cause them a lingering sickness that would drain

away all their resources. Those enemies, often the reason why blessings and magical means of protection are sought, are commonly of a female provenance. There is a Yoruba proverb that vividly conveys the haunting sense of enemies all around, none more potent or potentially harmful than those within the house itself: *Ẹhinkule ọta wa, ile ni aseṣi igbe; bi iku ile ko pani, ti ode ko rini gbe ẹ* — the enemy is in the backyard, the plotter against you is in the house; if death does not come from inside the house, that from outside will do nothing to you. As the proverb suggests, enemies outside — in the market, in rotating credit associations, in the church or mosque — are one thing. Those within the household are another again.

Feminists have long remarked on the sources of conflict within the household, and some have highlighted the divided, and divisive, loyalties of household members with different interests and investments in men as husbands, brothers or sons (Kandiyoti, 1988; Whitehead, 1981). But few have been able to acknowledge quite how difficult women can make the lives of other women. This is not surprising; exposure of this kind obviously detracts from the building of conviction to act that is so much at the heart of feminist myth-making. As I was tersely cautioned by a senior feminist colleague when I went in search of literature on gender relations amongst women that would help make sense of what I was finding out, ‘we don’t write about these things’. Nor could I really take it in at first, when women and men in Ado began to tell me regular tales of co-wives poisoning each others’ children or causing sterility, of mothers-in-law plotting to get rid of daughters-in-law their sons seemed to love too much, or of sisters-in-law or even women’s own sisters visiting healers to buy *juju* to make the thriving businesses or multiple pregnancies that they so envied fail. Women, I was constantly told, are ‘the death of the world’ (*obinrin iku aiye*).

It was perhaps to be expected that tensions between women within the compound might turn into suspicion and conflict. But what of other sites in which women came together? What of women’s associations in the market, at first glance an optimal site for female solidarity? Observation of the myriad market and trades associations in the town showed that they often did act collectively in the interests of their members, and provided a space for women to develop their leadership abilities as well as to network and build relationships with other women. But they did so despite and because of otherwise potentially fractious relationships between women. Functionalist as it seems, market associations appeared to serve less as spaces for solidarity than as mechanisms to avoid overt conflict. Women sitting side by side selling the same commodity were in direct competition with each other, a recipe for trouble. Herbalists reported a steady flow of market women coming to them to seek a range of protective measures to gird them against the interference of those who may wish a person ill. The marketplace is, after all, a place where friends, relatives and strangers mix: a place of power, and of potential danger from those enemies who might wish to bring a woman down and put her in her place (Belasco, 1980; Matory, 1994).

Women's savings and credit groups in Ado often had an instrumentality about them, functioning less to build group-based identifications as women than to administer loans. Some groups went as far as bringing men in to do the actual administration of money, 'because women always quarrel with each other' and because 'women cannot be trusted/are not trustworthy' (*obrinrin ko še gbẹkẹle*). The shift from group-based savings and credit to the patronage of individual — almost all male — 'collectors', who creamed off a proportion of women's savings in exchange for keeping it safe, reflected the fracturing of trust that was a consequence of a string of disaster stories, where women failed to honour their turns to contribute once they had benefited from a payout, or disappeared with all the money. As Colette Solomon (2003) shows for Ghana, savings and credit groups may often be spaces simply for transactions rather than for anything resembling solidarity. The pervasive sense that to share personal information with others is to lend them power that can be used against you meant that in many of these spaces, women simply would not divulge if they were experiencing difficulties, let alone gain 'empowerment' through group-based solidarity.

These were not the stories I wanted to hear, but I wrote them down as a good anthropologist is supposed to, then struggled with how I was going to tell them, as a white outsider tangling with representations of the Other. That they were fables of another kind, stories encoding cautionary tales about women's power, only became evident to me when I sought out actual examples. Their effects on consciousness and behaviour were real enough, but closer investigation showed that some at least were 'urban myths' — eponymous tales of a 'friend of a friend of a friend'. The occasions on which these stories came to be told and the editorializing that accompanied them provoked me to reflect: why is it that these narratives, retold in myriad forms but based on a similar core storyline, capture women's imaginations to such a degree? What is it about the ways in which they represent other women that resonates? Why was I never hearing anything but negativity about women, even from the younger women whose behaviour was so often a cause for moralizing commentary? What was in it for the women who told these tales?

FEMALE AUTONOMY IN ADO-ODO

If these stories disrupted my beliefs about female solidarity, how did my ideals of female autonomy fare in this context? On the face of it, Yoruba women would seem to be admirable feminist role models when it comes to autonomy. Joint household budgets are something so rare as to be exceptional and it is virtually unthinkable for a woman not to generate her own independent income (Fapohunda, 1988). The subject positions of wife, worker and mother are configured in very different ways in this context, enabling women to find ways of combining them in which there appear to be few of the tensions and trade-offs experienced by women like those of my mother's generation in

the UK, and indeed many of my peers. This very multiplicity of possibilities poses problems, however, for singular notions of empowerment and autonomy. A woman may be more autonomous or empowered in respect to one area of her life, without any necessary congruence or mutual impingement on other everyday relationships.

Many of the women I knew in Ado were financially independent. Some were even in a position where they were effectively supporting their families unaided by their husbands; and some confessed in private to buying their husbands smart clothes so that they could maintain the status of the family in the public eye. Financial autonomy does not translate so easily, however, into the ability to 'do and undo' that women would speak of when they described the exercise of agency in everyday life. Seeing poor women as individuals who pursue entirely independent and goal-oriented strategies, as is often the case in discourses on 'empowerment' and 'choice' in development, is to deny the complexities of their relational ties and the contingencies of lived experience. As members of families, associations and compounds, women's claims and entitlements are constantly reconfigured in relation to these others (Petchesky, 1998; Strathern, 1991). Making clear-cut, strategic choices is dependent on having the power to realize them: power that many of the women in Ado, including those with considerable buying and spending power, were not in a position to fully exercise (Cornwall, 2002).

Making it for themselves enables women to establish sources of security beyond their marriages; but, importantly, it also sustains marriages. As one trader confided:

When I was in money, my husband treated me well. He used to come to me to ask me this and that about how he was going on. Now I have no money, he just does whatever he likes without even coming to me to inform me. Some men do this. They will start making a misunderstanding every time and report you here and there [i.e. complain about you to relatives and elders]. They use this as a way of marrying another wife.

Contrasting perspectives on the way women use money gained from micro-credit shed light on some of the complexities at stake here. Goetz and Sen Gupta (1996) suggest that in handing over their loans to their husbands, women may end up doubly vulnerable and with dubious gains to empowerment; yet, Kabeer (1998) suggests, money can buy love, keep relationships afloat, enable women to maintain the peace and their respectability, and keep their families intact. Contingent circumstances make both of these readings a possibility in this context. The role financial autonomy plays in maintaining otherwise unstable relationships is significant. Yet this puts women in a delicate position precisely because of the uncertainties involved in maintaining wealth if they acquire it. Given that the majority of women in the town are engaged in the informal economy, the vagaries of the market pose one set of challenges. But, or so women's narratives suggest, far more potent obstacles to security were seen to reside not in women's relationships with men, but in the agency of other women.

One day I was chatting with a couple of women my age about co-wives. They asked me what women do in London. Restraining myself from spinning a feminist fable or two, I told them that it was against the law for a man to marry two wives, but that some married men have secret mistresses. I then told them the story of a relative of mine who did this for many years. When his wife found out, she was angry and threatened him with divorce. Eventually, she decided not to go. She had told me, I recounted to them, that if she had been able to get a reasonable job, she would have left. The women nodded, using this as an opportunity to caution the two teenage girls sitting with us to get their own jobs as ‘men are useless’. But, they said, her reaction was too extreme. ‘That’s what men do here in Nigeria’, said one of them with a sigh of resignation. The real problem starts, they said, when the husband’s relatives or his other wives begin to make trouble.

Ado women’s narratives on intrahousehold relations dwelt less on the classic concerns of feminist economists with the misleading presumptions about benevolent patriarchs and the inequities of intrahousehold allocation (Evans, 1991); rather, they were preoccupied with trouble, and with a very particular kind of trouble, that brought about and experienced by women. Talk of ‘women’s wars’ and of ill-defined but menacing ‘trouble’ peppered herbalists’ accounts of what brought women to seek their assistance. Women told me stories of how friends of friends had mysteriously swelled until limbs were so heavy or bodies so wasted they could scarcely move, upon which they would flee for their natal compounds in fear of their lives. Those who stayed in their natal homes thereafter, either to pursue their marital relationship in peace or seek someone new, were maligned by other women as *ilemoṣu* — literally women who return home without a good reason (such as illness or domestic violence), figuratively women who went astray and who, as women would be fond of telling me, ‘useless themselves [i.e. behave with ‘improper’ sexual licence] here and there running after men’. As I narrate elsewhere (Cornwall, 2002), tracking down women who were labelled *ilemoṣu* was a real eye-opener: they included many older women who had moved out when co-wives got vicious, and maintained their marriages from a distance; and others who recounted a string of mysterious illnesses caused, they thought, by other women in their husband’s compound.

‘Women’s wars’ within the household are considered to be some of the most dangerous. For many of the women I spoke with about their experiences of this kind of trouble, their reaction had been to try to keep the peace as far as possible, and only when things got intolerable to consider ‘packing out’. Their husbands seemed to have very little part in the whole thing, and often barely featured in accounts of why women left their marital homes. Women’s responses ranged from pleading for mercy, enlisting supporters from among their marital kin to defend them, and fighting back by using ‘weapons of the weak’ (Scott, 1985) such as songs. Women would recount these songs to me to illustrate why women needed to watch their backs. One, sung by a gutsy junior wife, gives a flavour of these forms of resistance:

The senior wife abused me that I stole locust bean
 The senior wife abused me that I stole salt
 How shall I spoil her name
 The one with a hanging lip
 The one with a hanging lip
 I shall make *buba* and *agbada* from her mouth [i.e. she's got such a big mouth, it's big enough to sew an outfit from] (translated from the Yoruba).

What drives women to leave, then, is less having acquired economic autonomy or even being sick of their husband — unless he is violent and openly abusive to her and his male elders' attempts to chastise him for this behaviour fail. It is more often that trouble with other women in the compound makes life so intolerable that women risk the reprobation of other women, and the damage to their reputation that the label of *ilemosu* can pose, and 'pack out'. In doing so, they jeopardize their relationships with those whom, for many women, are their closest friends — their children — who, regarded as the 'property' of the man, are often forced to remain at home, subject to the mercies of future stepmothers.

PUTTING 'GENDER RELATIONS' IN PERSPECTIVE

'Gender relations' are generally conceived in gender and development as referring not to *any* gendered power relationship, but to a particular kind of relationship between men and women: that of the heterosexual dyad (Moore, 1994; Tcherzekoff, 1993). In this context, as the account given in this article suggests, it seems that the kind of 'gender relations' that mattered more to women's prospects and well-being were the kind that barely feature in gender and development narratives: relations between women (Peters, 1995). Chantal Mouffe (1992) argues that the category 'women' consists of a collection of contingent, positional identifications that only gain salience or stability in particular configurations, for particular purposes. As I suggest earlier, women have multiple identifications in this setting; not all of them are framed as subject positions that are the kind of relational identities such as wives, wards and daughters that are often the substantive focus for gender analysis in development. As competitors in the marketplace, supplicants in religious settings, members of associations and, arguably, as those who cohabit compounds structured as much around women-centred 'hearth-holds' (Ekejiuba, 1995) as around male-anchored households, these other gender relations — relations amongst women — are vital when considering the complexities of gender and power.

The significance of this type of gender relations is put into relief by looking more closely at the particular kinds of relations on which analyses of gender relations depend — those between women and their husbands. Men as husbands or lovers are largely absent in much of women's everyday lives and interactions in Ado; and, as many of my women acquaintances and

friends assured me, men are often the least of their problems. The phrase ‘facing my children and my work’ is one I heard used often when women talked about their intimate relationships with their husbands, years into a marriage. The feeling was less that these men were actively misusing or otherwise oppressing them, than that they were vaguely useless, and not really giving them much of anything — be it love or money (Cornwall, 2002, 2003).

Once I got to know the husbands of the women I spent time with, I came to recognize that for all the patriarchal prerogative they could have had access to, some were positively sheepish when it came to telling their wives what to do. One particular man, who was to become a dear friend (sadly now departed), lived in a neighbouring room in the old mud plaster family house we shared with other family members. Dependent on his trader wife for sustenance, and on alcohol for peace of mind, I saw him cowering as she bellowed his incompetence at him, and then living through the agony of her openly seeing another man, packing all their possessions into a truck and moving to another town, then taking him to court for divorce.

What was happening to this friend of mine was, in some respects, the stuff of feminist fables: an ‘empowered’ woman giving as good as she got, securing herself a sex life and a ‘helper’ to compensate for his shortcomings, and making use of her economic autonomy to free herself from a marriage that had become a millstone. I had told a few of these fables myself. But when I witnessed this scene it made me step back and reconsider. I had become locked into a circular version of a particularly embedded piece of feminist rhetoric: that marriage is an oppressive institution which places women in a position of subordination. My friend’s situation did not seem to fit the bill at all. His wife flouted a lover in front of his nose, and he could do nothing about it; his economic impotence was exacerbated by his utter failure to exercise any control whatsoever over her, as prevailing norms dictated that he should do. He loved his wife and was outraged and hurt that she would treat him so badly.

This case might have been exceptional, but it made me look more carefully at what was going on around me. There was a string of other cases in which it would be hard to describe the female half of a marital partnership as ‘oppressed’ in any respect. Granted, men like my friend were not the types who womanized, spent their earnings elsewhere and sought the easiest lives they could have, which represented very real dimensions of some heterosexual partnerships in this context. But, as I suggest elsewhere (Cornwall, 2003), seeing such behaviour as expressive of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ (Connell, 1995) leaves a number of questions unanswered, and obscures other masculinities that may be just as culturally salient.

As Jackson (this issue) argues, some feminist analyses of marriage have been blinkered to other dimensions of this particular ‘gender relation’. These include relationships of care and co-operation, as well as a mutual dependency that goes beyond idealized narratives of complementarity. And,

as O’Laughlin (1995) points out, conjugal relations are in any case only part of the complex relational ties within which women live their everyday lives, while — as I have suggested here — relations of conflict or co-operation with other women may come to play far more important a part in women’s struggles to get on and get by.

RE-READING ‘GENDER RELATIONS’ IN ADO

African feminist scholars have critiqued the profound misreadings of gender in Africa by Western feminist researchers.⁴ Challenging the polarities on which the kind of gender analysis that is prevalent in development tends to be based, they have highlighted the diversity of women’s identifications and attachments. Ogundipe-Leslie, for example, argues that outsiders have failed to realize that relationships with men may well be peripheral to African women’s self-perceptions, lives and desires. She contends: ‘All African women have multiple identities, evolving and accreting over time, enmeshed in one individual. Yet African women continue to be looked at and looked for in their coital and conjugal sites which seem to be a preoccupation of many Western analysts and feminists’ (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994: 251).

Privileging conjugality over consanguinity leads, as Sudarkasa (1986) points out, to a tendency to almost completely overlook important relationships of support that exist between women and men and obscure culturally salient axes of difference such as seniority and wealth. It also works to disregard the significance of the other gender relations that this article has highlighted. Indeed, Oyewumi (1997) argues that the unitary construct ‘woman’ occludes the interests women have in common with some of the men in their lives, whether as members of generations, families or economic groups, as well as the lack of common interests women may experience with other women. It also, perhaps most potently of all, misrecognizes the power that women can and do exert — over men, as much as over women. Acholonu (1995: 28) goes further: ‘those who present the notion that the African woman is suppressed and oppressed or is placed in an inferior position to men, have failed to realise that in many cases women are part and parcel of, if not the power behind, the scattered instances of male dominance’. This is an uncomfortable ‘truth’ for many of the varieties of feminism that have characterized gender and development; at the same time, it may well be ‘part and parcel’ of the very real experience of some of those women that gender and development interventions seek to ‘empower’.

4. See Gaidzanwa (1982); Imam et al. (1997); Nnaemeka (1998); Ogundipe-Leslie (1994); Oyewumi (1997); Steady (1987). Like ‘Western feminists’, the category ‘African feminists’ is unstable, plural and dissonant; there is a rich debate on what ‘feminism’ might mean in Africa, including whether it has any salience at all (Gaidzanwa, 1982; Steady, 1987), which includes important collections such as Nnaemeka (1998) and Imam et al. (1997).

Casting gendered power relations into as restricted a frame as heterosexual partnerships between women and men not only fails to make analytical sense. It also shores up representations of women, as victims or as heroines, that fail to get to grips with the realities of women's lived experiences of power and powerlessness. By erasing significant aspects of these experiences, the gender myths that are pervasive in development discourse can end up reinforcing a 'determination to act' that reproduces the very inequities that Chandra Mohanty (1987) pinpointed in her critique of Western feminists' writings on 'Third World women'. Read through 'Western eyes', African women's relationships with men in 'coital and conjugal sites' come to represent in gender and development narratives the major challenge in overcoming their presumed subordination; and the complex power relations that sustain social injustice and inequity are effectively shut out of the frame.

MYTHS TO LIVE BY?

My aim in this article has not been to argue that gender myths of female solidarity and female autonomy are of no purpose in inspiring efforts to change the unfair gender order. Nor has it been to suggest that these myths and the representations of women that they encode do not continue to hold value in some cultural contexts and for some purposes, both as 'ways of worldmaking' (Goodman, 1978) and as 'expressions of a determination to act' (Sorel, 1908/1941). Rather, the argument I am making here is that the myths that animate gender and development interventions may hold little resonance with the lived experiences of the women whom gender and development interventions seek to empower.

Despite all the lipservice that has been paid to gender as socially constructed, mainstream development interventions aimed at empowering women are often based on gross essentialisms about women and men. For all the nuance feminist theory can offer, the translation of feminist thinking into development narratives has tended to produce social constructions that are remarkably singular and static. Narratives of gender in development often take little account of the complexity of women's relational subject positions, nor of the contingency of their identities and identifications. Simplification and sloganizing shears away the analytical potential of the concept of gender, reducing it to a stagnant phrase that connotes so limited a range of relational identities that it tells us little about the lived dynamics of gendered power relations.

Hirschmann (1967) cautions that to confuse the idealized prescriptions with which myths provide us with any actually existing reality is a grave mistake: myths serve, he argues, less to speak about what is really going on than to motivate action. It could, of course, be contended that to confuse the promotion of instruments such as the creation of women's groups with the existence of solidarity within them is to miss the point: such interventions

often serve to *create* organization where it is lacking. But as Solomon's (2003) analysis of savings and credit groups in Ghana and Harrison's (1997) account of men in women's groups in Zambia show, this may be wishful thinking: women may simply use these institutions for their own projects, draw together members of their own kin and networks to constitute 'women's groups' so as to benefit from development assistance, and be puzzled as to why donors do not seem to want their menfolk to benefit from them too. Similarly, it can be argued that even if economic empowerment interventions stop short of dislodging embedded inequities, they do at least give women more choices — including the choice to use their gains to maintain their marriages and enhance their bargaining power within the domestic arena (Kabeer, 1998). Yet, as Cecilia Sardenberg's (2006) distinction between 'liberal' and 'liberating' empowerment suggests, to turn spending power into personal clout is one thing but to use that clout to lever gains for gender justice is another thing again.

Clearly, sustaining the myths that women are inherently co-operative and selfless on the one hand, and, on the other, that they would readily break out of the webs of social relations in which their lives are enmeshed and act as autonomous sovereign individuals if only they had the material means to do so, is not doing women — and particularly poor women — much of a service. For a start, it fails to acknowledge the gendered power relations that women themselves may experience as more of an obstacle to the exercise of their agency and pursuit of well-being than relations with their husbands or lovers. It also fails to appreciate the very real implications of social connectedness for any account of agency, and with it the limits of the form of liberal individualism that is so hegemonic in mainstream development thinking.

It is easy to explain away (and continue to disregard) the significance of the kinds of gender relations this article has placed at the centre of its analysis, and replace them with gender myths about female solidarity and autonomy. Indeed, it is safer to bury frictions between women in explanatory frameworks that place the blame with patriarchy than to acknowledge that not only are women's identifications contingent rather than fixed, stable or enduring, but so too are those of men (Connell, 1995; Cornwall and Lindisfarne, 1994). The implications for development practice are two-fold. First, short-cut, quick-fix empowerment solutions skimp on the kind of power analysis and the long, slow, processes of engagement that are needed to enable women to work together effectively to bring about change in their and other women's lives. Second, it suggests that zero-sum strategies that seek to enhance the power of women relative to that of men are too crude an instrument to redress prevailing injustice and inequity. Recognizing this calls for enquiring more deeply into and working with women's own sources of strength, solace and security rather than reading their situations through a set of institutionalized lenses that bring only one dimension of their gender relations into focus.

Acknowledging the limits of the gender myths that this article focuses on means going beyond a view in which giving women spending power is the

way to tackle deep-seated social inequities in which these very women may have significant investments. It means going beyond the assumption that women are inherently more co-operative and if only women had a voice they would use it in favour of women as a group. This does not mean giving up on autonomy and solidarity as ideals that can guide and inspire action: it does, however, call for qualifying them. Autonomy can be cast in more relational terms as expanding the capacity 'to participate effectively in shaping the boundaries that define . . . the field of what is possible' (Hayward, 1998: 12), rather than in terms of the unfettered acts of sovereign individuals. 'Empowerment' thus comes to constitute renegotiating and re-imagining the boundaries of the possible from within actually existing webs of sociality, not simply the act of making independent choices. And solidarity can be recast as something that can be actively constructed through identification with a shared concern about issues of social and gender injustice: it comes, thus, to reside in 'interest' (Arendt, 1958; see also Adams, 2002) — that which people find in common, which binds them together — rather than in a presumed commonality of interests.

Solidarity, autonomy and empowerment remain feminist keywords; they represent closely held ideals for many, capturing vital elements of the normative project of changing gendered power relations that lay at the heart of the original Gender and Development (GAD) agenda (Razavi and Miller, 1995). The gender myths associated with these ideals may have outlived their usefulness, but the overarching goal of transforming unequal and inequitable gender relations has not lost its salience. To address it, strategies are needed that can reanimate and repoliticize the gender agenda and lend it broader purchase and greater analytical and political bite. For this, new myths may be needed: narratives that speak about justice and equality in ways that both hold more resonance with women's everyday lives and can better serve to enlist broader constituencies in the struggle to bring about a fairer world.

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