



Working Paper No. 40, April 2010

**STUDYING WOMEN:
PERSPECTIVE FROM THE SOUTH**

Peter Karubi Nwanesi and Lucy Sebli Seidelson

Working Paper Series

**Faculty
of
Social Sciences**

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2010

STUDYING WOMEN: PERSPECTIVE FROM THE SOUTH

Peter Karubi Nwanesi and Lucy Sebli Seidelson

**Faculty of Social Sciences
UNIVERSITI MALAYSIA SARAWAK**

Preamble

Sometimes in 1997, five students from the Southern hemisphere at the University of Science Malaysia Penang had a get-together with a UNDP Deputy Direct for South-East Africa. In the course of their meals and acquaintances, the subject of their disciplines surfaced. She was very delighted with the curriculums of four of the students. They were of Science and Technology background. But not with the fifth student who was majoring in Gender Studies. Her disappointment was so apparent with a high degree of derision. *“What are you going to do with ‘women studies’ in Africa? Are you sure you are not wasting your time and resources in this country”.*

Ironically, governments, civil society and United Nations bodies had committed themselves to work with and for women at the first United Nations World Conference on women in Mexico City as far back as 1975. Similar reaction and derision was also witnessed among some Asian students, especially the Chinese¹ students at the University of Canterbury, New Zealand. The UNDP Deputy Director’s reaction and others akin reactions set the path for this article.

In fact, outside the ‘western’ countries, the concept of gender or women study appeared tasteless both academically and the nature of profession the academia credential will fetch. Generally, the mention of this disciplinary attracts cynicism comments or hilarity. Additionally, probably on a subtle understanding or patronizing, (like

¹ The reference to a specific ethnic group here has nothing to do with racial connotation but based purely on data and information gathered in course of this research. And this position of mocking Gender study students is equally observed among many students with firm patriarchal socialization.

many in the South) some section of the western countries' populace sees this discipline as unnecessary or empathizing with the notion of gender equality and partnership. Yet, women are the integral part of families and vital force in the socio-economic evolution of any country. What is more, the female anatomy of human species is an important element of success on how well a 'country's human development' is measured and projected.

In essence, gender concerns (mainstreaming strategy) should be seen as important to all aspects of development; for all sectors and areas of activities; and a fundamental part of the planning process. Over the years, many have equally wondered afar if Women/Gender studies are a waste of resources and time, especially for students from the Southern hemisphere. Therefore, the subsequent unfolding illustration will examine varying issues in attempt to debunk this myopic understanding surrounding studying women and emphasises on the need to.

Statistic and Facts Dictum

Plausibly, the fundamental rationalization for women or gender study is often associated with the following specifics, and more often than not, a common characteristic of the states in the Southern hemisphere. These includes (but not exhausted);

- i. Three fifths of the world's one billion poorest people are women (and girls)
- ii. Out of the 960 million illiterate adults in the world, one thirds are women (and girls)
- iii. Of the 130 million children out of school, seventy per cent are girls. Most of whom are married off before they reach puberty
- iv. With a very few exceptions (and mainly in the Nordic countries and astonishingly—Rwanda), women make up, on average, only 16 per cent (in some countries less than 2 per cent) of parliamentarians worldwide
- v. Everywhere, women on average receive less pay than men, often in low-pay or dead-end jobs and spend about 70 per cent of their unpaid time caring for family members; paradoxically such huge

contribution are by no means associated with global economy or growth

- vi. Each year, half a million women die and 10 to 15 million suffer chronic disability from preventable complications of pregnancy and childbirth.
- vii. Women make up 49 to 51 per cent of the world population (UNDP 2006)². Besides, researches have shown that women make up one-half of the human resources a vital element to economy growth

Perceptibly, these explicit details exemplify the need to pursue the subject, '*women study*.' However, it also enables States and Policy formulators to advance women issues and ensure gender equality universally, and in the developing countries in particular.

The above facts apart, one may argue that ignorant plays colossal part in the position many sided when they are confronted with the issue of Gender/Women study. Even so, women studies as a discipline has continued to conscioustise and inform many on the old and new challenges facing women especially on the account of feudalism, gender segregation, conflicts, migration, capitalism and more recently globalization: a strong product for the increase in women trafficking.

Alongside these statistical data, other interrelated premises on women's question, such as gender equality, women's empowerment, discrimination, subordination, family and national gender positioning sturdily buttress the necessitate for '*women study*'. Such necessity can be correlated to human historical setting.

² **Source:** UNDP 2006. Taking Gender Equality Seriously: Making Progress, Meeting New Challenges, New York . UNDP: 2006. <http://www.undp.org.pl/publikacje/TakingGenderEqualitySeriously.pdf>. Accessed November 2009