

Book Review

Review of Marianne Bloch, Josephine A. Beoku-Betts, B. Robert Tabachnick. eds. *Women and Education in Sub-Saharan Africa: Power, Opportunities, and Constraints*. Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1998.

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Reading this book was an unexpected pleasure. I expected that it would consist of chapters reciting dry sets of statistics on falling enrolments and little else: no people, no stories, no insights into organisational, social or ethical complexities. Fortunately my expectations were incorrect.

The book's Introduction, by Marianne Bloch and Frances Vavrus, is one of the few in an edited collection that I have read that acknowledges the varying theoretical perspectives of the book's contributors, and encourages the reader to understand and interrogate these written perspectives and assumptions. It is also refreshing to be told that different theories can be useful in attacking various aspects of social reality. No particular model of theoretical correctness has been imposed on the book, so that a variety of perspectives are aired. For example, even oft-reviled liberal feminists have their place in critiquing the still all-too-prevalent government attitudes about the reproductive roles of girls and women. This is important in view of the fact that feminists of all people should be able to understand and accommodate the need for and uses of different vantage points and interpretations. Since the Introduction reviews different theoretical perspectives fairly comprehensively, it is also likely to prove very useful to undergraduate students in gender studies.

The book is divided into three main parts: non-formal education; formal education and politics; and economics and education. This range of topics is in itself an acknowledgement that girls and women learn useful (and non-useful) lessons in a variety of settings in contemporary Africa, and that a sophisticated analysis of women's oppression must at least survey all these areas. Education, whether formal, informal or led by the joint communications of women based in NGOs, is never seen as an automatic good by the authors. Consequently, the content of different forms of education is thoroughly explored, with assumptions about the inevitable value of education being consistently interrogated and empirical data being clearly presented to illustrate this.

The section on informal education contains an intriguing chapter by Lynda Day on so-called "precolonial education" for girls and women in Sierra Leone. The value of aspects of traditional Bundu society in shaping women's non-Western education is investigated, with the chapter providing an important discussion of how the positive role of traditional education has been maintained in the lives of girls and women. The chapter is marred, however, by the author's excessively admiring stance towards "tradition" and the somewhat anachronistic insistence on placing an obviously modern set of practices in a "precolonial" conceptual straightjacket. In responding to this chapter, I would certainly exercise the right granted to me by the authors of the Introduction to ask questions of the individual authors. In particular, I would question the chapter's presentation of the complex issues around the Bundu society's traditional practice of female genital mutilation, identified here as genital surgery. Day resolutely defends the practice as one that may be "bloody" but does not typically also excise women's sexual pleasure or their ability to function. This brings up a multitude of issues around foreign researchers observing complicated issues within Africa and struggling to keep their scholarly balance. At least Day could have acknowledged the practice as one which is painful as well as "bloody"! She does discuss efforts to reorient the practice, but at the end of the day one gets the feeling that she supports the female solidarity that is partially expressed through older women carving their understanding of traditionality on the bodies of girls.

The centre of gravity of the book lies in its examination of the conditions of schooling for girl children. Here, what is definitely the strongest chapter of the book, by Kathryn Anderson-Levitt, Marianne Bloch and Aminata Maiga Soumare, examines the classroom experiences of girls in the West African nation of Guinea. It is the kind of chapter that one wants to photocopy and give to school principals. On the basis of rigorous research, it investigates the boundaries of classroom behaviour by teachers and learners of both sexes, which either encourages or discourages classroom participation of girls. This is a fascinating chapter and I hope that it will encourage similar research across the continent.

In contrast to the rich analysis of formal education in this chapter is Josephine Beoku-Betts' chapter on gender and formal education. It must be said that this is a chapter of dry statistics and ritual tables of percentages, which is mainly based on World Bank studies. Sadly, this is practically the only chapter in the book that discusses tertiary education. It makes the expected observations about falling enrolment and success rates for women higher up in the education pyramid, but offers little in the way of exploring the gender dynamics that affect women's access and performance.

The weakest chapter in the section on politics, economics and education, written by Adele Gordon, Doris Nkwe and Mellony Graven, discusses gender and education in rural South Africa. After incredulously reading a chapter that seemed stuck in a conceptual time warp, I encountered a note only at the very end that the chapter is based on research carried out in the 1980s. As such its reliance on that old chestnut of "women's resistance" was finally explained. The chapter is in dire need of updating; the note in fact mentions that "significant changes" occurred in relation to groups like the Women's National Coalition, that the Gender Commission was formed, and so on. Despite the difficulties of the long lead time of the publishing process, one would think that a 1998 book would not leave readers with the impression that South Africa's Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP), for example, was still relevant and in place. The chapter does give a brief and welcome glimpse into the difficulties faced by schoolgirls in a peri-urban set of smallholding settlements (which are not identified by name) in the province of Gauteng. Still, this chapter should either have been recast and strengthened as a piece of contemporary history or left out of the collection altogether.

A final aspect of the book that should be mentioned are the two chapters, almost framing essays, at the beginning and end of the collection, written respectively by Nelly Stromquist on the agents and forces in African women's education, and Marjorie Mbilinyi on the politics of gender and education in Tanzania. These two veteran feminists range widely through a series of important issues and their thoughts on the interactions of politics, NGOs, feminist scholarship and women's organisations in contemporary Africa should be required reading.

This book contains no coverage of the effects (or existence, it must be said) of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. Nor does it deal with gender in the sense of competing and developing masculinities and femininities. Nonetheless, it does provide a comprehensive foundation on which to place newer studies, especially in the light of recent observations by researchers in South African education that, given the high levels of violence against girls and the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the least safe place for many young women is - school.

I found this to be a very useful and thought-provoking collection. Unfortunately, its high price of SAR575 - a problem all too common in studies of Africa, women and gender - will probably place it out of reach of many of the gender resource centers and university library collections where it would be of great interest, let alone of individual readers.

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