

**PATHWAYS OF WOMEN'S
EMPOWERMENT RESEARCH
PROGRAMME CONSORTIUM**

**WEST AFRICA HUB ANNUAL DIALOGUE
ON EMPOWERMENT**

**'WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT
AND DEVELOPMENT POLICY'**

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Introduction

The Annual Dialogue on Empowerment of the West Africa Hub took place on Saturday, November 15, 2008 at the 51st Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association in Chicago. 2008. The theme of the panel was “Women’s Empowerment and Development Policy,” and the panel consisted of Takyiwaa Manuh as Chair, Akosua Adomako Ampofo, Akosua Darkwah, Charmaine Pereira and Hussainatu Abdullah. More than 50 participants attended the session, which was remarkable, considering the many competing panels occurring around the same time.

Takyiwaa Manuh introduced the audience to the Pathways of Women’s Empowerment Research Project Consortium (WE RPC) and the panel. Questions that the WE RPC seeks to examine are:

- What are the pathways that women have used to empower themselves?
- What are the discourses on empowerment used in policy circles?
- How are women represented in popular culture and everyday life?
- How does work empower women?
- The kinds of constituencies that women are building for gender equality

Presentations

In the first presentation entitled “Consuming Nollywood: Young Women’s Perspectives on Popular Films in Nigeria,” Charmaine Pereira discussed young women’s understanding of how gender, women and power are represented in English language films in Nigeria. She also sought to explain the popularity of the films and to explore and critique young women’s ideas on how gender, women, and power are represented in these films. She also wanted to explore the relationship between policy and popular culture.

Her presentation focused on young women’s responses to a particular film, *Indecent Girl*, which is about a lawyer, Charles, who falls in love with a dancer, Petra. Charles’ mother however tries to match him with someone else from his social class and introduces him to Adarko, a lawyer. Adarko’s mother forces her to go to a herbalist who causes Charles to lose his mind and leave Petra. However, Petra becomes pregnant and is later ‘born again’ and she uses her religious power to defeat the herbalist’s spiritual powers, and saves Charles.

Indecent Girl, raises the question of what is decent. According to the respondents, decency meant doing things the right way and not being wicked. Respondents also felt that women had a greater responsibility to be decent because women are mothers and are expected to live their lives as example for their children. Respondents saw Petra’s club dancing and her company as examples of being

indecent. The young women also believed that sex should occur in the context of marriage or quasi-marriage relationships, with displays of sexuality as preparatory to marriage.

Summing up, Pereira suggested that in place of policies and discourses which sought to construct poor women and girls as 'vulnerable groups', such policies should rather engage with the insecurities that members of such groups face in relation to their gender positionings, to power and empowerment, and how young women understand themselves in relation to the wider society.

Hussaina Abdullah gave the second presentation on "Women's Empowerment in Post-Conflict Sierra Leone." Giving the context, she explained that as with many wars, Sierra Leonean women experienced atrocities such as rape, slavery, abduction, and torture. As a result, after the conflict, the Sierra Leonean government, civil society organizations, women activists and international organizations focused on women's empowerment. The Sierra Leone government's women's empowerment program focused on:

- Increased participation of women in policy-making
- Protection of human rights
- Better employment
- Food security
- Health care
- Education

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission also focused on women and girls, and recommended:

- Specific legislation to address domestic violence
- Abolition of customary laws that discriminate against women
- 30% candidacy of women to national offices
- 50-50 parity in national and local politics
- Creation of a Gender Commission

The Law Reform Commission has focused on reforming laws that discriminate against women. These include:

- The adoption of a domestic violence bill
- Minimum marriage age of 18 years being set in the Marriage Act
- The Devolution of Inheritance Act which provides that everyone is entitled to inheritance, including those married under customary laws.

However the Land Bill does not say anything about women. The Bill of Rights in the Constitution also allows discrimination in the areas of marriage, divorce and inheritance. Noting that the government did not define or articulate its understanding of empowerment, Abdullah proposed the following as objectives of women's empowerment in the Sierra Leonean context:

- Challenge patriarchal ideology
- Transform institutions that reinforce and perpetuate gender discrimination and inequality
- Give women more access to resources
- Encourage more equitable distribution of power in society and
- Increase women's control over their lives

Akosua Darkwah made the third presentation entitled "Exploring Women's Empowerment in Everyday Lives: Intergenerational Perspectives in Ghana," from her ongoing work with Dzodzi Tsikata. The study is based on the survey that had been developed in Bangladesh whose key hypothesis was that paid work expands women's choices. However women in Ghana have always worked, including in work outside the home. The focus in the survey on paid work was considered misguided in the Ghanaian context, and the interest here was in considering what kinds of paid work make a difference in women lives given their varied contexts. Thus her presentation focused on how context makes a difference for women.

600 women of different classes were surveyed from the Northern, Eastern, and Greater Accra Regions of Ghana, in both urban and rural locations. The study grouped the women into three age cohorts: 50 years and above; 30-49 years; and below 29 years. Themes covered were care work, reproduction, economic activities, decision-making, political participation and the associational life of respondents. Although all respondents had low levels of education, younger women were more likely to have attained higher levels. While most of the respondents were married, older women were more likely to be single.

In this presentation, the focus was on decision-making within households. Findings were that husbands were more likely to make decisions on issues that required large financial resources such as buying or building a house, buying large household items or spending money on healthcare. Decision-making was correlated to age and older women were more likely to make their own decisions about attending social functions or healthcare, but were less likely to make decisions about the acquisition of productive assets and large purchases.

The research team also interviewed different generations of one family in each region and Darkwah concluded her presentation by sharing the story of Amina, a

Muslim woman in Northern Ghana, who never received formal education, because her father prevented her from attending school. She however wanted her daughters to go to school. The interviewed daughter was sent to Accra to attend school. However, in Accra, she would hang out at night and eventually got pregnant by a Christian man. The daughter was brought back to her hometown by her mother. The mother felt that her daughter's generation had more life choices than she had when she was young. However Darkwah's conclusion is that in Ghana, work in and of itself doesn't give women more choices.

The final presentation on "Changing Representations of Women in Ghanaian Popular Culture," was made by Akosua Adomako Ampofo on her work with Awo Mana Asiedu. The paper focused on how representations of women have changed in Ghanaian popular culture and whether indeed changes could occur in such representations. She read a story describing the assault of a popular female artiste, MzBel by a group of university students at KNUST. Although the majority of popular musicians are male, Adomako Ampofo focused on female musicians and what they say about women.

She discussed "Sixteen years" by MzBel, which presents a sexy and independent woman and "Mi ye obaa" by Akosua Adjapong, portraying the idea of a chaste, demure woman. She also discussed "Naughty Girl" by Becca which is very open about sexuality and she finds Becca to be assertive and ambitious. Adomako Ampofo asserts that in "Naughty Girl," the girl is the subject not the object, who feels that she can express her sexuality and sets the agenda for sexual activity. She concludes that we should look at new forms of doing art and consider what women have to say.

A lively discussion followed the presentations. Participants at the session included a mix of published academics with long standing research interests in West Africa, younger scholars, some policy makers, and men. The relation between education, age and religion, and educational levels and ideas about marriage were raised in relation to Charmaine's presentation. One participant found it interesting that a younger, less educated woman, Petra, was associated with Christianity while the better educated woman, Adarko, the lawyer, and Charles' mother resorted to herbal medicine. The related issue was that more educated women (such as Adarko and Charles' mother) are concerned about respectability, which is associated with marriage, while less educated women are more concerned with autonomy. Such findings resonated with earlier findings in the work of the historian Claire Robertson and the anthropologist Gracia Clark, both of who attended the panel.

Many questions were addressed to Akosua Darkwah about women's decision-making. In response, she noted the absence of men from many households, and believed that affected decision-making. She also observed that most of the women in

the sample didn't earn a lot of money, which probably affects their ability to make decisions within the household. Other participants asked about the differential meaning of empowerment for younger women, who may not have the same family support systems as older women; the high numbers of single women among the oldest age cohort and they asked for more precision and specification. Thus it was suggested that more older women could be single because they were formerly married and are now separated or divorced. An interesting comment was whether older women who are still married are the ones who are in a less secure financial position. Some issues of method were suggested for the Intergenerational Study that it should compare "normal" people to "ultrareligious" people to see how that affects decision-making within relationships. There were also queries as to why the study focused on class in urban areas only, and further why class was examined with reference to residential neighbourhoods as there are different classes within residential neighbourhoods and even within families.

In relation to the popular culture study, participants questioned the subversive potential of the songs, industry controls over writing and distributing music; the impact of social burdens placed on musicians to do certain things. It was suggested that the study should consider the historical contexts in which songs were produced. Hussaina was asked about the policy implications of their research in terms of sexual and reproductive health, and why Sierra Leonean women had failed to respond to governmental inaction on a range of issues.

Other questions to the panel concerned the effects of the current economic crisis on women's empowerment; the relationship between women's empowerment and revolution; the implications of the existence of bride price in several West African communities on women's empowerment; societal suspicions toward liberated women and the 'pull her down' syndrome of some women towards other women, particularly high achievers.

In her concluding remarks, Takyiwaa Manuh thanked all the presenters and the participants for a stimulating dialogue. She emphasized the following:

- The need to understand how women and gender have been conceptualized in development policy spaces;
- The imperative of going beyond the idea of women as vulnerable groups, to see what kinds of agency women are deploying in their daily lives;
- Encouraging policymakers to focus on the different contexts of women's lives including work, associational life and generational issues. The need for development practitioners to pay attention to representations of women, because that may affect the outcome of many policies that are targeted at them