

Invited Book Review

Engendering Democracy in Africa: Women, Politics and Development

Niamh Gaynor, Routledge, London, 2022. 1st edn. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003147879>

Introduction

Following decades of global commitments, pledges, high rhetoric, grand commentary and global strategies in international and global development policy, politics and practice promising gender equality, empowerment of women and girls, and an end to gender-based violence, have you ever wondered why progress seems to be so pitiful? Niamh Gaynor's brilliant account of the relationship between women, democracy, and development helps us understand why things are the way they are and how we might make some tangible advancements in deepening and broadening women's participation in the public sphere and everyday political decision-making. Through a robust blend of rigorous academic scholarship, empirical analysis, and analytical reasoning, Gaynor explains why the mainstream 'add women's issues and stir' approach to development policy and practice is doomed to failure, if not designed to maintain the unequal, inequitable existing status quo across places, spaces, and scales. This book is a timely, insightful intervention into debates on women in politics, public life, and the public sphere more broadly, as it challenges overly simplistic, essentialist gender assumptions regarding participation and inclusion. It focuses its analysis on the experiences of women in African countries who have received extensive development interventions aiming towards the Millennium Development Goals (2000–2015) and the Sustainable Development Goals (2015–2030) with a particular focus on everyday politics in informal spaces.

The following provides a brief overview of the core content and focus of the book, before delving into its key strengths, and pointing to some areas that require further consideration and give rise to new research questions.

Elements of the contribution

For a relatively short volume, the book covers extensive ground geographically, theoretically, and empirically. In the opening chapter, Gaynor is brave and bold in her analysis and critique of the simplistic, romanticized homogenous assumptions informing pathways to parity in high political life for female parliamentarians, arguing that power, place, class, status, and socio-spatial dynamics matter in who gets selected, who gets elected, and whose interests are protected. She then introduces and justifies the focus of her contribution in this book, which intentionally avoids the study of formal institutional settings and rational institutionalism more broadly, instead exploring the everyday politics and lived experiences at local levels. It is within these spaces that decisions that affect every aspect of a person's life are made. It is also within these spaces that women's labour is both a key dependency for the conditions of possibility of all other activities, and yet remains hidden, undervalued, and under-recognized. Gaynor skilfully employs key geographic concepts of place, space, and scale combined with a poststructuralist analytical lens and grounded in a post-liberal democratic theoretical framework to expose what she refers to as the 'globalized nature of local inequalities' (pg 18) and explore the areas for transformation required to address these.

As she sets up the research challenge, Gaynor explains why gender inequalities in political participation matter. Explicitly challenging mainstream liberal methodological individualist assumptions that inform the construction and use of an extensive range of tools to measure gender inequality, Gaynor explains how cultural, historical, political, and material factors interact and intersect to generate and sustain gendered inequalities. These dynamic and relational factors are not and cannot be captured in sets of static, siloed, isolated, technocratic indicators. Through a radical critique of a range of measurement tools and gender indices, Gaynor explains how these fail to tell us anything of importance or value concerning the lived experiences of individual human beings embedded in relationships, histories, and social groupings. Further, they lack analytical capacity and explanatory power to unpack and explain the underlying continuum of gender inequalities that, as Gaynor notes, 'extends from the structural violence of poverty within policy and institutions to women's subordination and marginalization within public life, to patterns and practices of intimate violence within the home and community' (pg. 17).

Drawing on the post-liberal critical social theories of Fraser, Young, Mouffe, and Benhabib, and poststructuralist accounts of power, institutions, and agency in the works of theorists such as Lukes and Foucault, Gaynor uses case studies to explore domains of political participation in different

places and spaces on matters related to economic planning and decision-making, NGO interventions, global social media responses to and framings of local events, and community associations. She designs an analytical framework to explore each case study around four key questions. These questions form the basis of the *4 W framework* – *where* politics takes place, the *ways* in which it takes place, *who* is involved, and *what* issues are included and excluded. Carefully crafting conceptions of power, class, status, place, and socio-spatial dynamics, Gaynor develops the framework to examine how these factors influence the experiences and participation of women in everyday politics and public life. In so doing, she reveals the multiplicitous forms of violence instigated by the ongoing unfolding forms and norms of capitalist expansion and creative disruptions of the global political economy in women's everyday lives in countries across Sub-Saharan and Southern Africa. Through these cases, Gaynor builds a compelling case to argue why it is necessary to engender democratic systems, norms, and behaviours that celebrate difference, debate, diversity, and inclusion, and how it is possible to achieve this in specific places and spaces, based on the norms, principles, and participatory practices embedded within post-colonial and anti-colonial histories and forms of civic associationism that have long been a feature of African social life.

Areas for consideration and concluding comments

Some challenges and tensions within the narrative would benefit from further interrogation, e.g. the claim that attitudes towards women in leadership positions have remained largely unchanged despite the increase in the number of women in politics in countries such as Rwanda. Women's capacities and judgements are, according to Gaynor, seen to be 'inferior' (pg. 32). However, Gaynor then argues that there is some evidence to suggest that higher representation of women in leadership positions does make a symbolic difference and can positively affect attitudes towards women in public life (pg 33). How this happens, over what time-span, and under what conditions are not examined, and yet would suggest that it is imperative if genuine transformation of gender relations is to be achieved.

The work would also benefit from further interrogation of the relationship between gender-based violence, deepening economic stressors, and the possibilities of engendering participation and local deliberative democratic processes in contexts of unavoidable and unwanted climate and environmental changes. As it covers such a wide range of cases, the book raises a wide range of interesting and urgent questions not all of which can be addressed in a single monograph.

Finally, additional insights into the methods utilized for the case studies would be beneficial, in particular for readers who may wish to engage in locally based data collection activities in cross-cultural contexts. Gaynor presents an excellent account of her own positionality as a researcher in the research process, but less about how her positionality may have influenced research in the specific case study sites, how access and permissions were secured, further details on the challenges that she experienced, and how to address challenges of trustworthiness and robustness in the data collected.

Overall, this contribution is a must-read for researchers, students, and practitioners interested in re-politicizing (or perhaps simply recognizing the political nature of) gender issues in political participation and understanding the barriers to transformative change of democratic processes. The 'add women and stir' approach to gender equality, promoted through contemporary international development cooperation policies and practices, is exposed as a superficial light-touch easy fix that is insufficient to drive radical change in democratic participation. Rather, interrogation and invigoration of public spheres and civic spaces are essential activities necessary for enhancing democratic deliberation and identifying pathways to transformative change for democratic systems captured by neoliberal neocolonial capitalist logic.

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