

PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH, GENDER AND PRODUCT: Some Problematics and Pointers

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I participate.
You participate.
He participates.

We participate.

They rule.

- Gaullist Declension
of "To Participate"

Women's work is never done.
Women's voice is rarely heard.

- Adage

"The African farmer, she..."

- UNICEF Deputy Director
on Household Provisioning

Panoramas and Pitfalls

Participatory research (PR) has attracted growing attention and enthusiasm since the late 1960s. In the 1990s it has become a fashion - a rather dangerous thing to be judging by the history of both development theory and social policy. In the process rather too much is claimed for it (resulting quite often in less being achieved), real problematics glossed over and a curious conflation made between the technique and (less frequently) product and the highly personal (and usually in some sense radical or revolutionary) goals of many of the users and promoters.

This paper seeks not to discredit PR nor to suggest it is irrelevant to empowering women to be able to define and pursue less unequal and less constricted roles for themselves, but to raise certain problematics in procedure, product and the inherently interventionist (by no stretch of the imagination neutral) roles of facilitators. It also seeks to examine certain key areas in Sub-Saharan Africa in which participatory research (and decentralised policy articulation and operation) is potentially important in respect to gender linked issues.

Seven Problematics

First, **participation can have different meanings** in respect to research, appraisal and process. **Participatory research** may be a means to a thesis, a job, a consultancy to a non-participatory client. So long as the participating community is not given false expectations there is nothing inherently wrong with - and may be a good deal to be said for - this.

Similarly **participatory appraisal** by, e.g. aid agencies/foreign non-governmental organisations (NGOs) is frequently a specific input into a basically non-participatory process. This, too, does have valid uses. Consulted persons are often nearer to being subjects than non-consulted even if the participation ends with data and perception collection. Mystifying the basic top down (or outside in) nature of the process and beguiling the objects of (not participants in) the overall process that they are subjects are not valid.

A **participatory process** includes participatory research and appraisal as components in a participatory flow: design-decision through implementation-monitoring-review and modification. Except in this processual context, PR cannot claim to be empowering in the Freireian sense beyond a modest potential contribution to self and other understanding. That is not to say it is invalid, simply that to claim too much is both discrediting and self confusing.

Second, **product matters**. Poor and excluded people usually view processes primarily as means. A process that does not yield a product is too expensive to be continued by them. A productless process is a very Western upper middle class intellectual and psychological amenity good. Equally, however, **process matters** to the extent processes which treat people as ends (not merely means) are empowering and are also more likely to be able to produce recipient friendly products. Process and product interact.

Third, **specific material results matter and link with power**. For example, African rural women wish a research, appraisal, action process related to household and garden plot ("women's") water to produce more adequate supplies, more reliably, at lower labour cost and with mechanisms for sustainability. They are very concerned about their workloads, their budgets (of time, of receipts, of expenditure obligations) because poor people have to be. This is a functional approach, but is not anti-participatory if many community members desire it.

Nor is it as unrelated to power as might be supposed. In most of Africa men build (including wells and small water systems as well as homes) while women operate and maintain. Teaching men how to maintain wells/water schemes and setting up male management committees does not, therefore, work well. Directing training to women and having them form a management committee majority is usually feasible - once the idea is raised. If that happens - because water for the household and garden plot food for the table are perceived as important by men - the general status of women *vis à vis* men in community public affairs is likely to be enhanced. But it is the functional, material gain which is the entry point (for the women as much as the men) not abstract empowerment. Clearly not all divisions of labour are unproblematic or equitable, but understanding what they are is the first step to using or altering them.

Fourth, **conflict, conflict of interest, tension, contradictions and head on clashes are not the same thing**. Any systemic change and most functional ones, do entail conflicts of interest. To suppose all members of a geographic community have fully common interest is a disempowering illusion. These are by no means all antagonistic contradictions inevitably leading to head on confrontations. Negotiated compromises based on perceived overlapping interests are possible, especially if divergence of other interests is accepted not obfuscated. In practice a process of inclusion and empowerment (gender or other) is usually well advised to start with positive sum games in which compromises and syntheses leave most parties demonstrably better off. The outsider can - if trained and informed - be a useful catalyst and mediator but rarely a legitimate adjudicator. Still more rarely is deliberately seeking to

heighten contradictions a valid external role. Contrary to Trotsky's perception, worse is not usually better and is even more rarely so perceived by poor African women.

Fifth, to be participatory a process must be understood and controlled by the participators. Many PR efforts involve highly complex structuring of sub-groups, role playing, etc. These may be quite different from any referent in the cultural context into which they are inserted. Most participators may be unable to understand, internalise or control them. The danger of Orwellian manipulation is only too clear from some PR worker's prideful explication of the elaborate processes they **imposed** to secure 'participation'. Nor is the problem gender neutral. The weakest and the least familiar with Western cultural processes and procedures will be the most excluded or manipulated. In practice these are **women** - particularly, but not only, in rural Africa.

Sixth, any outsider intervenes - whether he is an engineer or she a facilitator. A catalyst after all causes events which would not have happened in its absence even if it is largely unaffected by them - as is the typical 'visiting' researcher, consultant or expert involved in PR who can fly away and live to research another day, another way, another place. That does **not** mean intervention is *per se* bad. If the result is empowering, including and/or providing clear functional gains for a large majority, then intervention is justified - whether by a hydrologist indicating where and how water can be secured or a facilitator triggering reflection on alternative water supply maintenance, management, allocation and cost sharing approaches. The **guidelines for positive outcome intervention** include: **transparency** (motives up front); **self consciousness** and self reflection (necessary to achieving "a"); **ethical standards** (including trying to see how participants are likely to be affected by process).

The assertion that PR is or should be "subversion" is a dangerous one. Subversion can mean many things - e.g. being hired by a foreign government in association with an elitist foundation to produce a recipient acceptable livelihood project to demobilise a marginalised community about to be deprived of its present livelihood by the funders of the foundation (as described - by an apparently unconscious facilitator - in a paper to the conference).

As a synonym for "promoting revolution" it is dangerously likely to reflect (however unintentionally) a romantic, outside view of revolution as a clean, tidy morality play. That is a perception those close to the blood, tears, agonies and failures of even successful revolutions rarely share. The role of any outsider in any revolution, except as a servant of the insiders leading it and under their discipline, is highly problematic. Certainly it neither is, nor should be, a normal part of PR or any other catalytic/facilitation process.

Seventh, any technique, approach or structure tends to have different meanings in differing geographical, cultural and temporal contexts. For example the original purpose of brothers' obligation to marry siblings' widows was to insure the widow and children against loss of access to land, house, family safety net. Hardly unique to Africa (*vide* the Bible), it has often become far less positive in present contexts. Similarly land reform through homes and home plots has been an integral component of attempting to empower in West Bengal but also of attempting to demobilise in West Negros (Philippines). Processes, procedures, policies and structures (even products) have some meaning separately, but their full meaning is context limited and context enhanced. This is as true of PR as of anything else - to assume otherwise is both misplaced romanticism and dangerous (especially to the proposed participators who unlike facilitators and researchers - especially expatriate ones - have to live with actual outcomes and rarely have their 'back to the drawing board' redesign option).

PR, WID, Invisibility and Femalestans in Sub-Saharan Africa

At least in Africa participatory research is especially problematic in respect to gender issues. In Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA) most facilitators today **neither identify nor pose gender issues**

(or pose issues in gender terms) even when functionalist common sense would seem to require so doing. Nor do most participants (even female ones) think (or at least speak) in gender terms without prompting.

Rural African women (and even many middle to senior level female civil servants) tend to be **less vocal in large, mixed groups** and on **new topics** than men. They are also less familiar with complicated procedural techniques - or at any rate to the North-western ones dominating participatory research. (That is a contextual point. It would apply much less forcefully - if at all - to Pilipina urban trade union members.) Thus participatory approaches may in fact lessen indirect, traditional women's input rather than enhance it if care is not taken in proposing group structures and procedures.

Women In Development approaches have, if anything, accentuated these problems in Africa. They are treated as "specialist" (top down) reserves and often represent wholesale importation of North-western procedures and practices designed to appease donors or mollify foreign NGOs with little African internalisation (even by many of their African female staff).

In practice they **take gender issues out of the mainstream** and ghettoise them in small, underfunded, near powerless units. When one sees a lone female cabinet minister in charge of a Women-Community Development-Youth Ministry with two-thirds of the budget in the second two and their head a male junior minister, the irresistible image is one of tossing a few rag dolls to the 'girls'. One needs gender sensitivity in agriculture, water, education and health (which is gender conscious up to a point but is usually not very participatory nor empowering beyond the narrowly functional). Only if the big battalions with resources and political/institutional clout see gender as important are real material products, relevant to real poor women at all likely to emerge. A gadfly gender unit to research, propose, catalyse can be useful, an entire parallel government for women is not attainable (quite apart from whether it would be welcomed by most African women).

Some Guideposts Toward Fruitful Research

With intense and growing rural and peri urban absolute poverty and with a fifth to a quarter of households female headed, the case for decentralisation in data provision, goal setting, articulation of strategic frameworks and operation/adjustment is, or ought to be, evident. Top down procedures usually lack the data base for adequate strategies, the capacity for articulating them, the mobilising power to involve intended beneficiaries in self-determined operation or any serious user feedback into in-course revision. And with the quite specific roles of women in SSA production and reproduction, plus the substantial proportion of female headed households, decentralisation which lacks gender consciousness and substantive female input at all stages is, even functionally, inherently flawed. That is, perhaps, the best entry point and the one most likely to gain a broad base of support for more sensitive and widespread participatory research including gender issues.

Seven areas suggest themselves as urgent priorities from data collection, women's welfare (as perceived by themselves) and functional perspectives. In each, 'women' are unlikely to be a homogenous category, e.g. juvenile, adult married, adult single, divorced, widowed, aged women's status, rights and opportunities may diverge sharply even in a single community while

on all of the areas substantial divergence (as well as broad similarities) arise among communities.

The areas are: **Workloads/Gender Divisions of Labour; Household Labour Budgets; Household Income Sources and Expenditure Obligation Budgets; Land Rights; Water and Fuel; Health; Agriculture/Nutrition.**

What are **workloads and tasks** for women, girls, boys, men? How, and why, are they shifting? In what way would new proposals help whom? How could women's and girl's (usual) work overload be reduced - remembering that time is fungible? For example, time saved by providing dependable nearby water access is available for crop cultivation, child care - or rest. What resources - from whom - would be required?

What cross **labour obligations** (women to men, men to women, intra-generational) exist and how are these evolving? (The structure is rarely simple extraction of women's labour by men. The exchanges and cross obligations are by no means usually fully equitable, but rarely approximate chatteldom.) Are women compensated for extra work on 'men's' crops? By cross-hiring among households? Additional male inputs into 'women's' activities? Husband to wife cash payments? (All are known, but no general picture has been researched.) What practicable actions can be taken to avert increasing women's total workload and/or deterioration of household food and nutritional security?

How are **household budgets** divided (rarely does an African rural household have a single, integrated budget) as to income sources and as to expenditure obligations? To what extent have food (exotic items?), child care (school fees?) and other household provisioning (e.g. fuel, water?) procurement obligations shifted from women to men with increased market involvement? What more complex extended family budgetary processes exist? Are urban-rural transfers significant? (Most surveys - contrary to popular impression - say no.) To Whom? How can women's incomes be augmented? Provisioning obligations made less onerous?

What has been the historic pattern of **land access**? Household? Individual? How was women's right to land to meet provisioning obligations ensured? If within households, how was it provided to widowed, divorced, unmarried mature women? Why has evolution of these historic secure household land use right systems usually adversely affected women? What steps (beyond recognition of female headed households and granting equal access) can redress the increasingly inequitable position of women (indeed of poor households more generally)?

Are **Water and Fuel** supply purely women's/'girl's' obligations? Or are construction (and by analogy tree planting) male and maintenance/operation female? If so what are the implications for voluntary male input into reducing women's subsequent workload (e.g. 500 metres not 5,000 distance to water)? For water source and tree management structures? For resourcing improved water, wood, tree (for various outputs) access?

How real is the apparent gender sensitivity of **health** services? How much of whose time would nearly universal primary health care save? How much would it reduce poor household vulnerability? Can community (especially women's) participation in design, provision and management (not just funding) be increased? How?

Why are women farmers largely invisible to **agricultural** extension services (even when they do, in fact, address them!)? How does this impede functional efficiency - of extension services and, especially, of female headed households but also of all small farming family households? Are new crops/techniques assessed in terms of gender impact? Do small stock, crops and trees particularly relevant to women receive adequate attention? Why not (e.g. because nobody knows which they are)? How can **nutrition** (and especially child feeding) linked to **agriculture and health services** be an entry point for participatory female-led initiatives (including income generation) as it has become in a majority of Tanzanian Districts?

These topics can be researched in many ways, but appear particularly likely to benefit from PR approaches because contexts and perceptions - of the impact of ongoing changes and the potential for desirable ones - are central to dynamics and results and because standard empirical survey techniques - even when feasible - often give a very limited understanding of products, processes and preferences.

PR In Africa or African PR?

Neither procedures nor products can safely be extracted from context - unless the aim is to produce an analogue to dehydrated water. **Participatory research and gender issues/status of women are ill-served by North-western Missionaries seeking to export basically unaltered packages** from studies in their home urban lower income areas, let alone their home universities. More important, **poor rural African women are even more ill-served** (realistically not at all). That is in a long historic tradition of initial missionary (sacral and secular, eschatological and economystic) impact in SSA. Because women's roles and status were closely linked to crops and via weather to religious positions, the initial penetration of both Islam and Christianity frequently disempowered and marginalised while because their roles were primarily in provisioning and not (except in West Africa) in commerce so did the rise of market oriented production. Similar mis- (or non-) understanding of intrahousehold work obligations and income rights has rendered some agricultural improvement and structural adjustment programmes highly female unfriendly.

What is user friendly to poor rural Africa women and what material products have the highest priority for them are questions on which **they** - not any outsider, including those African university graduates addicted to intellectual importation and unadopted replication - are the **experts**. If one is serious that these women are **subjects**, **how and what** are primarily for them to decide (not merely participate in deciding).

This is, in fairness, not a challenge unique to PRs nor to gender issues. Over the last decade and a half, SSA has - with exceptions - come to respond to foreign agendas (intellectual and social as well as political and economic) not to propose its own. The response may be negative; there may be bargaining but the underlying strategies and agendas are set by outsiders. PR practitioners should be among those most able to see that this pattern denigrates, fragments, decapitates, erodes self (as well as outside) respect. Evidently its reversal - which may be beginning - and the consolidation of exceptions, notably national and regional ones in Southern Africa, go far beyond PR or PR and Gender but it is reasonable to seek to make these part of the answer not of the problem. **Participatory research by and for African women not merely participatory research in Africa on African women** is almost certainly what most African women would choose were the choice put to them in terms

they could readily comprehend. Donors, NGOs and, admittedly, African officials and academics rarely trouble to put the choice or even to be fully aware of the problem.

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