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Gender Impact Assessment: Theoretical Challenges

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Abstract

The need for impact assessment practitioners to pay attention to gender in social impact assessment (SIA) is gaining traction in the literature. The importance of understanding the impact of projects on men and women is believed to offer projects the 'social license' to operate. Usually argued from a feminist perspective, incorporating gendered ideation into SIA procedures emanates from the gender and development framework. Given that 1) gender is experienced in context, 2) the situations of women in different parts of the world are not the same, and 3) gender can be non-binary, this paper cautions against 'one-size-fits-all' gender approaches in SIA. Drawing on a case study of a community-based rural development project in Ghana, we advocate for context-specific and particularised gender analysis of the impacts of projects, policies, events and phenomena.

Introduction

Discussions on considering gender issues in policy and programme design and impact assessment have gained traction in the literature in recent times. This impetus has arisen from international organisations, not-for-profit and private sectors and individuals that are working on reducing gender-based discrimination, particularly against women. Such efforts go back to the 1995 Beijing Platform, which gave rise to various gender-based policies and actions by global agencies, including gender mainstreaming (Adusei-Asante, Hancock, & Oliveira, 2015; Diaz, 2013; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2016). Applying a gender lens in programmes is believed to 1) offer projects the social license to operate, 2) enforce the belief that equality between women and men is a fundamental human right, and 3) create an awareness of the gender non-neutrality inherent in policies and programmes (Boutilier & Thomson, 2011; European Institute for Gender Equality, 2016; Jijelava & Vanclay, 2014; World Bank, 2011). This thinking has led to the development of gender impact assessment frameworks for:

> comparing and assessing, according to gender relevant criteria, the current situation and trend with the expected development resulting from the introduction of the proposed policy … [or]estimate[ing] … the different effects (positive, negative or neutral) of any policy or activity implemented to specific items in terms of gender equality.
>
> (European Commission, 1998, p.8)

Notwithstanding, this paper cautions against a blanket application of the concept of gender and gender equality in public policy design, implementation and impact assessments. It argues that gender is a complex term, that contemporary gender conceptualisation transcends masculinity and femininity and that gender is experienced in context – the situations of women in different parts of the world are not the same. The paper draws on a case study from Ghana, West Africa, to show the complexities of gender and what results when it is applied loosely. In our view,

some contexts require gender-specific programming as opposed to gender mainstreaming, particularly milieus where patriarchy is dominant.

Social scientists assert that children learn from their culture to identify as male or female and learn to 'perform' masculinity and femininity through a process called gender socialisation (see Kimmel, 2016; Lips, 2014; Wharton, 2012). As shown in Figure 1, gender issues are far more complex than this binary conceptualisation. Beyond conventional binary gender, there are individuals for whom there is lack of congruence between the gender they were assigned at birth and their gender identity (see Kimmel, 2016). Intersectionality, another key gender concept currently receiving attention, refers to how other social identities, such as race, class, gender, sexuality, age, health, ableism, and minority status, interrelate to create overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination or disadvantage for an individual or group of people (Crenshaw, 1991; May, 2017).

Figure 1: Gender conceptual blocks
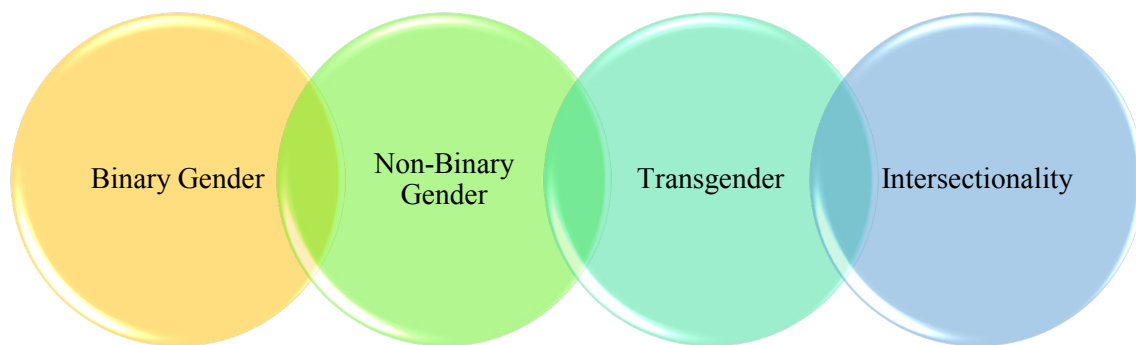
Source: authors

Tellingly, most international development programmes that seek to achieve gender equality have tended to focus on binary gender ideation (males and females), with women receiving most attention (see DFAT, 2017; Jijelava & Vanclay, 2014; World Bank, 2011, 2013). It is against the backdrop of the lack of focus on the theoretical complexities of gender that we argue in this paper that gender impact assessors need to be cautious when applying the terms gender and gender equality. Below, we present a case study from Ghana, based on which we argue that application of gender in development programmes and impact assessment must be contextualised.

Case Study: Ghana

Mapei is a village in the eastern region of Ghana with a population of about a thousand people.[1] The village is located approximately 130 kilometres from Accra, the nation's capital. It is a farming locality, focused particularly on cattle rearing and pepper farming. During the

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[1] Pseudonyms have been adopted to protect the identities of the research locality and participants.

fieldwork, the locality had no health clinic, electricity or school. Children walked for about an hour from Mapei to attend school at Nipanye. Mapei benefited from a borehole water project under the Community-Based Rural Development Projects (CBRDP). Before this, women had to walk 45–60 minutes from their homes to fetch water from a nearby river. The unwholesome water caused a high rate of bilharzia cases in the locality.

Because women were the most affected by the lack of potable water in Mapei, the local managers of the Mapei project ensured that they involved women in the project planning and implementation processes. Being a patriarchal society where men dominate women, especially in rural localities, it was uncommon for the project managers to engage to the extent they did (Apusigah, 2004). Most men we interviewed mentioned that the local managers told them that the project was a government initiative meant to mitigate the need for women to travel long distances to fetch water. As a result, although men were invited to the project's initial meetings, they dropped out because they saw women's high-level involvement in the project as a breach of cultural protocol.

The Mapei men became apathetic towards the project, and withdrew their support, aside from a few young men digging the wells. At the time of the fieldwork, the project was completed but was not functioning as intended because of the wrong citing of the wells. According to the local project managers, the district engineers who chose the site made a mistake, as the location did not have much water underneath. Consequently, the borehole system only worked at dawn, between 4:00 and 6:00 am, a situation that complicated the domestic responsibilities of most women in the village. A monetary token of 20 pesewas (less than $1) was charged per three eight-litre gallons when the water flowed.

During the fieldwork, we found that the borehole had been broken down for over a month because of a delay in the release of funds from the District Assembly to purchase a mechanical part to fix the system. The situation had necessitated that women in the locality revert to fetching water from the river, as they had done before the borehole was built. The women we interviewed blamed the situation on the apathetic attitudes of the Mapei men, who they believed knew more about groundwater. The local managers and other interviewees also noted that the other way forward would have been to contribute money to relocate or fix the borehole themselves and/or to form a pressure group to press the District Assembly to release the funds. However, this idea did not work in Mapei because of a perception among most residents that the initiative was a women's project. Aside from weakening the consensus needed to press the District Assembly to release funds for the project, this perception had led the majority of men to distance themselves from the project and its associated challenges. In addition, Mapei men who were economically better off and could afford the wholesome water from a nearby town were not interested in the project. Limited by their educational backgrounds, the Mapei women could only rely on the agency of their 'well-educated' assembly member to get the borehole working again. While they appreciated the efforts of the local managers, some women interviewees mentioned that a 'lady' assembly member would have been more forceful and passionate about fixing the borehole.

Discussion

The case study is clear evidence of international goodwill resulting in projects that potentially hurt communities. A blanket assumption of 'good for all' with an aim to educate and create equal opportunities and access in one context introduced blame among members of the community. In case of the Mapei, the challenges of the real world are now heightened by the process of discrimination and separation among men and women and among the affluent and poor. This paradoxical impact requires examination.

There is a need to collaborate and work with broader groups of families and communities while designing, introducing, implementing and reviewing new programmes (Hirano, Giannecchini, Magalhaes, Munhoz, & Croso, 2013; Pugh & Cheers, 2010; Weaver, 1998). Additionally, an aspiration towards an imagined sense of equality in one context may be an ethnocentric practice in another, because:

> issues such as that is labelled as a problem, the origin of problems, the target of interventions, appropriate interventions, and desired outcomes are all grounded in a particular belief system that may be incongruent with the belief system of the client.

> (Weaver, 1998, p.204)

A call for reflexive practices in consulting communities and engaging with local opportunities makes practices bearable and potentially minimises the undertones of colonisation and European assumptions. Assumed gender norms, gender conceptualisation and gender lenses as promoted by international agencies can be seen as forms of eugenics (Pugh & Cheers, 2010, pp. 49-50). First, such assumptions intrude and introduce power imbalance in relationships, negating existing local privileges while highlighting and expanding the differences it has caused. Second, the side effects of ill-fitted practices make communities (such as Mapei) or the recipient of the services more dependent on external sources, with less reliance and trust in the familiar, the local.

Research has found that highly conventional gendered identities are important in sustaining rural communities. In contrast, the introduction of modernisation has disempowered individuals (Ni Laoire, 2001). For instance, Prugal (2004) discovered that the introduction of modern agriculture changed the roles and limited the power and privilege of women in Germany. Similarly, to assume forms of practices and privileges of men as universal and analogues in the social contexts are incorrect (Flood & Pease, 2005, p. 133). Further, lessons from projects implemented in Asia and Africa support the need to collaborate and consult local communities closely and ethically to minimise negative experience and withering away of local resources (Laird, 2008). In the case of Mapei, the ignorance and othering of significant community members resulted in the presenting barriers.

Conclusion

The case of Mapei draws attention to recurring questions such as how projects, policies and initiatives can be respectful and nurturing of the indigenous communities around the world, what ethical practices and processes can and must be built into working with diverse communities, and how a complex conceptualisation of gender (a continuing legacy of

colonisation) can be readdressed. Unexamined 'one-size-fits-all' gender approaches in SIA can work against the problem it is attempting to address. Without stepping away from the ideals of women's emancipation in patriarchal society, there is a dire need to consult with the specific needs, gender roles and relations that sustain the community. Projects implementers should question whether their initiatives are nurturing and meaning-making, and processes towards new practices must be ethically and appropriately consulted to enact culturally informed practices and possibilities.

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