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Opening of the 62nd session of the Commission on the Status of Women

Photo: UN Women/Ryan Brown
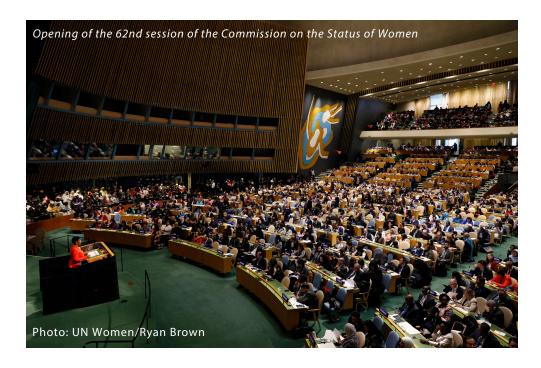
A Cultural Perspective on Women's Empowerment in Senegal

By Son Excellence Aminata Touré

Over the past three decades, the feminist global movement has set clear benchmarks in measuring advancement in the status of women and girls worldwide. Many international legal instruments have been voted on at the United Nations, the principal source of international human rights law, to define standards and norms to fight gender-based inequalities and promote women's empowerment.

The most comprehensive international legal framework is undoubtedly the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), which registered 188 State parties to date who have signed and ratified or acceded to the international agreement to prevent gender-based discrimination against women. A committee of 23 experts from different regions of the world is in charge of reviewing countries' advancement and challenges. Each year, the United Nations hosts at its headquarters in New York the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW), a global intergovernmental body that reviews progress and challenges in implementing gender equality policies in the political, economic, social, cultural and civil spheres as defined by CEDAW, also named the International Bill of Women's Rights.

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Hence, there are well-established mechanisms at the global level to evaluate progress based on agreed norms and standards defining gender equality. Yet, norms and standards are to be applied in specific cultural contexts. Although there is no question that *all* human beings, *all* women are equal in enjoying all human rights, culture, religion and traditions have a strong bearing on women's rights realization and progress pace. Therefore, to make sustainable positive changes on the status of women in the global South, especially in Senegal, it is critical to understand cultural obstacles that stand in the way of women's and girls' advancement. It is equally important to seize the positive leverages within cultures to transform them into opportunities for women and girls. However, this cultural approach for sustainable women's rights is nonexistent in international review mechanisms such as CEDAW committee review or CSW.

For most Western feminist scholars, culture, and Southern culture in particular, is analyzed through the sole angle of impediment and hindrance to women's and girls' emancipation. Yet, many African cultures and ancient beliefs value the worth and merits of women in key sectors of life.

In Senegal, applying blindly internationally accepted gender equality standards could be very misleading in understanding the true status of Senegalese women and their empowerment levels. According to the 2013 Senegalese General Census on Population, Agriculture and Livestock, polygamy - defined as the practice of having more than one wife at the same time - is very prevalent in Senegal with 35.2% of married population being in polygamous relationships. 23.1% of married men and 44% of married women are polygamous. The practice of polygamy is perceived by Western feminists as an utterly backward and oppressive cultural practice against women. If this sole indicator were to be applied to rank Senegal on the scale of gender equality, it would be among the most backward countries in the world.

Yet, Senegal has one of the highest number of female parliamentarians in the world as they count for 42.7%. Senegal ranks 7th worldwide in female representation in parliament, way ahead of the United States, Finland, Norway or France, its former colonizer. In Senegal, according to the law, all elected positions must be shared on a 50/50 basis between men and women. Political parties must present their electoral lists of candidates for parliament or municipal elections in a "zipper way" to give equal chance to both men and female candidates. In the political history of the country (which is only 58 years old as an independent state), two female prime ministers have led governments and a national Chief of Police (an overwhelmingly male-dominant institution), was appointed four years ago.

The dichotomy and mixture of conservatism in the private sphere and the vanguard advancement of women in the public life is to be carefully analyzed to understand the status of Senegalese women that is far from Western stereotypes of an oppressed and weak African woman. In a scarce-resource environment, polygamy might be a strategy for many women to access decent living standards through marriage to already married men. For women who can stand for their own, polygamy might be convenient to find companionship in a Muslim society that does not accept openly non-marital relationships.

The narrative of Senegalese history and mythology is full of powerful queens and female heroes. So, enactment in 2011 of the "Gender Equality in all Elected Positions Law" (also called the "Parity Law") did not result in any social disputes or questioning. Now, the next battle for Senegalese women's rights activists is the passing of a 50/50 law for all appointed positions.

In conclusion, Senegal is arguably a good example to make the point about the complexity

of women's empowerment that must be analyzed through the lens of diversity, cultural and open-mindedness in order to capture, encourage and reinforce the progress accomplished and breakthroughs being realized to advance women's and girls' rights in the global South, especially in Africa and Senegal in particular.

Aminata Touré is a Senegalese feminist and the Former Prime Minister of Senegal.

Q&A with Sharada Srinivasan, Author and Editor of *Scarce Women and Surplus Men in China and India*

Interview by Kate Grantham

In *Scarce Women and Surplus Men in China and India: Macro Demographics versus Local Dynamics (2018)*, editors Sharada Srinivasan and Shuzhuo Li bring together the work of scholars trying to understand how the impacts of a male surplus and female scarcity unfold at the micro-level in India and China. Using case studies and a bottom up approach that is attentive to context and to lived realities, the collection offers insight into one aspect of sex ratio imbalance in particular – bride shortage and the prospects and strategies of single men in daughter deficit contexts. I had the opportunity to speak with Sharada Srinivasan about the motivation, process and findings of her work.

Q: Tell me about the inspiration behind the book. What was your motivation for publishing this collection of work?

The edited book is inspired by the current inadequate understanding of dynamics at work in localities where demographic pyramids are slimmer on the female side, compared to the male side. Some existing accounts are fraught with unsupported hypotheses, unclear assumptions and sensationalistic accounts, based largely on macro-level, large scale projections. Existing literature predicts predominantly an alarmist scenario in which an underclass of surplus men would be forced into bachelorhood and are likely to be the source of violence and instability towards women and society at large. The implication of a large

proportion of bachelors as a result of daughter deficit seem onerous. There is an urgent need to examine, at the ground level, processes that are unfolding in communities.

The chapters in the book use a qualitative approach, and generate insights from people's lived realities which are embedded at the intersection of a number of processes and not just demographic factors. I was a co-investigator in a research project *Demographic Shifts and Gender in Asia: 'Scarce Women' and 'Surplus Men'* (2011-14) led by Daniele Belanger, and funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, that examined the consequences of sex ratio imbalance in China, India and Vietnam. This research in turn inspired us to bring together other scholars who were trying to understand how the impacts of a male surplus and female scarcity unfold at the micro-level, resulting in this edited book.

Q: The collection documents how families and some individuals in China and India (single men, young 'scarce' women, parents) adapt to recent demographic shifts. What are the impacts of sex ratio imbalance for women that are documented in the case studies? Does women's value and bargaining power increase in daughter deficit contexts, or is gender discrimination reinforced?

At least three aspects on the connection between the sex ratio imbalance and women's status and gender discrimination, are worth highlighting. First, in spite of a concerted push at all levels for gender-sensitive, women-friendly policies and programs, and women's gains in various spheres, violence against women continues. Much of it is likely a backlash that women are experiencing as they transgress traditional gender norms and challenge male authority threatening to undermine patriarchy. It is not clear to what extent the violence is due to the scarce women- surplus men phenomena. It is useful to remember that daughter discrimination and the resulting elimination stem from the same patriarchal norms

that lead to other forms of violence against women. Macro-level narratives on scarce women and surplus men render women as victims of sexual violence and kidnapping who are likely to become more constrained and dependent on male protection, reinforcing patriarchy.

Second, while there are instances of bride price in China and dowryless marriages in India, most women prefer to marry men who are equal or higher in social status, in turn fueling the practice of dowry. Third, in China and India we are witnessing the phenomenon of "left-over" women (educated and accomplished) even as millions of men experience bride shortage. In a way both women and men are affected by the same set of marriage norms embedded deeply in hegemonic masculinity privileging traditional heteronormative gender roles and traditional gender characteristics in marriage.

Q: Who should read this book? Was it published with a particular audience in mind?

The book is intended for scholars and students in a wide range of disciplines—anthropology, economics, gender/ women's studies, sociology, development studies, public health and so on. It will also appeal to activists, practitioners in NGOs and donor agencies, policy makers and journalists.

Q: What new research or projects are you working on now?

I am currently working on two research projects. The first one is about young people who are (or aspire to be) farmers in four countries—Canada, China, India and Indonesia. This research goes against much current research and literature which is focused on why young people leave farming, and instead asks: Given the constraints they face, how do (some) young people continue to pursue a (future) livelihood in farming? The second research project examines the

relative contribution of daughters vis-à-vis sons to their elderly parents' care in India. This research is motivated by the limited attention in scholarly and policy on (married) daughters' contributions to their parents, and the link between the lack of publicly financed old-age support and sex ratio imbalance.

Sharada Srinivasan is an Associate Professor of International Development and Canada Research Chair in Gender, Justice and Development at the University of Guelph.

Improving Knowledge Translation in Canadian International Development

By Kate Grantham

The concept of evidence-based policy-making holds that properly developed public policy employs the best available evidence and is not politically or ideologically driven. Since taking office in 2015, the Liberal government, including Global Affairs Canada, has argued that evidence-based policy-making is key to designing effective interventions supporting gender equality and the empowerment and women and girls. The Feminist International Assistance Policy also emphasizes an evidence-based approach to development assistance. Yet the transfer and uptake of research in policy contexts in Canada continues to be challenged by differences in institutional needs, priorities, and communication styles. Knowledge translation remains challenging work.

As Managing Editor of the Growth and Economic Opportunities for Women (GrOW) Research Series, I work at the intersection between international development researchers, practitioners and policy makers in Canada, and I hear from all sides about the challenges of knowledge translation. Researchers and practitioners describe the difficulty of getting their work into the hands of decision-makers, while individuals in the public sector bemoan the lack of available and concise evidence to inform their programming and policy decisions.

At the GrOW Research Series, we work to connect researchers, practitioners and policy makers on issues related to women's economic empowerment (WEE). We do so in several ways, including by accelerating the dissemination of

high-quality research on WEE through an expedited double blind peer-review process; utilizing an open-access publication platform to promote the accessibility of evidence; offering free editorial services for authors, with an emphasis on supporting global South researchers; and providing authors with editorial assistance to generate 2-4-page policy briefs of their work. We are what is known as "knowledge brokers," intermediaries who sit between and connect research and policy worlds.

Knowledge brokers help translate evidence and facilitate evidence use between research producers (individuals and organizations) and end users (decision-makers in organizations and government). In international development, the role of the knowledge broker can include: enabling access to data and evidence; synthesizing, packaging and communicating research for policy audiences; and creating opportunities for researchers and practitioners to network, share their work, and improve the communication of research results. Think tanks and donor agencies are well-positioned to play this role because they can both enable an encourage dissemination activities, and because they can connect researchers and practitioners with policy makers.

The capacity of individuals or institutions to perform these three key roles - producer, end user, and knowledge broker – is contingent. For instance, producers' capacity in some countries or organizations may be limited by time, or the know-how to package research and program results for policy audiences (brevity is key). End users' capacity can likewise be constrained by time, bureaucracy, or the accessibility of evidence. One example of this is the copyright policies of academic journals which prevent uptake of new research among public sector employees. Yet, the incentive structure of academic promotion and tenure requires researchers to publish their work in high impact journals. This requirement is particularly felt by early career academics who are competing for a shrinking number of tenure-track appointments.

Even when capacity exists to both produce and to apply evidence, research uptake is not always achieved because individuals are disconnected from each other. Furthermore, there subjective dimensions to how people make decisions based on relationships and political dynamics. Thus, knowledge brokers are important players in helping bridge the gaps that exist between research producers and end users.

Better communication and uptake of research and program results to policy audiences in Canadian development circles is important and difficult work - it requires both improving the supply of research that is reliable, timely, and written to be relevant to the policy process, as well as increasing the accessibility and use of research results by decision makers. Improving knowledge translation processes is key to both, and can be accomplished by growing the number and capacity of knowledge brokers in Canada.

Kate Grantham, PhD, is a Research Associate at McGill University's Institute for the Study of International Development and Managing Editor of the GrOW Research Series

ISID Announces Updated Designs for two Research-to-Practice Labs!

The Institute for the Study of International Development (ISID) at McGill University is pleased to announce the launch of two newly designed, virtual research-to-practice labs: The Women's Empowerment in Development Lab and The Global Governance Lab!

Both virtual labs aim to connect development academics, practitioners and policy-makers on issues related to women's empowerment and global governance, respectively. The Women's Empowerment in Development Lab is focused broadly on issues related to women's economic, social and political empowerment and well-being. Whereas, The Global Governance Lab is built around three interconnected nodes, or themes: natural resource conflicts and trade-offs, migration and refuges, and governance.

Learn more about both Labs and their affiliated projects and members by visiting the newly updated websites:

www.globalgovernance.lab.mcgilla.ca

www.womensempowerment.lab.mcgill.ca

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