

Participation of Women in Agriculture: Reality or Rhetoric?

Nompumelelo Thabethe
Ufo Okeke Uzodike

Abstract

Feminist discourses - from Women in Development (WID) to Gender and Development (GAD) approaches - have not fundamentally engaged with the structural inequalities that perpetuate women's subordination. Governments on the African continent tend to adopt a market-driven model in agriculture that emphasises women's participation as a means to achieve both subsistence and income-generation. Women have not fared well under such programmes, begging the question: what assumptions and biases underpin this approach to development? This empirical study interrogates women's empowerment in the agricultural sector by posing questions around one key issue: why do agricultural programmes fail to transform women's material conditions even where there are adequate resources in the form of donor support and female service providers? Data collection methods comprised of observations, interviews and documentary analysis. The findings reveal that the factors that arise out of the Western modernisation project are multidimensional and intertwined, with consequences that reinforce the subjugation of poor women in particular. This article challenges these silences in mainstream feminist discourses to open up discursive spaces for further engagement.

Keywords: Feminist discourses, agricultural development, socio-cultural construction of gender, modernisation

Introduction

It has long been established that women are more adversely affected by

poverty than men (Scanlan 2004; Cornwall 2003). As a result, a variety of approaches have been advocated, from Women in Development (WID) to Gender and Development (GAD). However, the introduction of these perspectives has not transformed or led to fundamental shifts in women's daily realities (Cornwall 2003). In many communities in Africa, for example, food security remains the responsibility of women (Gladwin *et al.* 2001). Common trends point to the fact that men shy away from roles that have no monetary value (The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) 2011), but also to the reality that many 'male breadwinners are unable or unwilling to provide' due to a complex set of factors (Isike & Uzodike 2011:225). Despite this reality, women's significant contributions in both the private and public spheres have not been given monetary value in many societies. Whilst women are at the forefront of food security in Africa (Bob 2008), comprising 60% of the agricultural labour force in some countries (FAO 2011) and producing 90% of the food, they only receive 5% of agricultural training and 10% of rural credit (United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM) – United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2010). Moreover, they generally work longer hours than men (FAO 2011), 'yet most of their labours remain unpaid, unrecognized, and undervalued' (Scanlan 2004: 1809). Policymakers have increasingly taken formal cognisance of the important role women play in fostering development. It is against this backdrop that the South African government's land reform policy recognises women's significant contribution to development and, as such, promotes gender equity in agriculture. This goal is explicitly described in the Land Redistribution for Agricultural Development (LRAD) programme (Department of Agriculture 2001), which aims to improve nutrition and incomes by making land available for agricultural purposes to foster rural development. As one of its key priorities in achieving this goal, the government recognises the need to target and empower women and the youth. By empowering women, the government, in turn, will meet its international commitments as reflected in declarations such as the Beijing Platform for Action (United Nations 1995) and the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (United Nations 1996). The government's commitment to rural development through agrarian reform is further articulated in the Comprehensive Rural Development Programme (CDRP) (Department of Rural Development and Land Reform 2011). The main thrust of this programme, among other things,

is to move beyond land redistribution to ensure sustainable agriculture which, according to Pilgeram (2011), is different from industrial agriculture not only in terms of its non-use of pesticides and herbicides but also with respect to its labour-intensiveness. In line with its mandate, the CDRP targets poor women in rural communities who, it is envisaged, will be empowered socially and economically through their participation in sustainable agriculture. While these developments are applauded, their overall impact on women remains weak given their continued social and economic marginalisation due to other exigent factors. For instance, Isike and Uzodike (2011) argue that deep-seated patriarchy in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) tends to hinder the effective empowerment of women by limiting or shaping their participation in political spaces.

Reflecting on barriers to women empowerment in the agricultural sector, Bob (2008) cites the lack of access to land ownership as the main reason for women's oppression whilst Mokgope (2000) and Cornwall (2003) point to women's lack of control, voice and choice in decision-making. In addition, radical feminists deem patriarchy as central to the problems experienced by women (Kandiyoti 1997). Mohanty (1997:83) considers the latter discourse, which is dominant in mainstream feminist theory, too simplistic and unhelpful as it tends to 'reinforce binary divisions between men and women'. In line with this assertion, Oyewumi (2002) reiterates that feminist theory that focuses on gender oppression while failing to engage with racial and class oppression is deceptive and problematic as it presupposes that women are a homogenous group confronted with common problems. Rather, an alternative model of development is required 'where gender equality goes hand in hand with equality between classes, races and nations' (Jahan 1995:27). Unless this happens, hegemonic assumptions will be left unquestioned, thus reproducing oppressive power (Oyewumi 2002). Based on this premise, hooks'¹ (2000a; 2000b) notion of the interlocking forms of domination is relevant to this study because it can be used instrumentally to demonstrate how gender intersects with race, social class and ethnicity, leaving some women more vulnerable than others. In the same vein, African scholars have argued persuasively for the interrogation of the notion of modernity embedded in capitalism and industrialization to unmask

¹ The author prefers her pen name to be written in lower case.

oppressive power that is often left unchallenged in mainstream Western and European feminist discourse (Oyewumi 2002).

It is against this backdrop that this article reflects on the case of women farmers who participated in an agricultural programme that failed to transform their material conditions in the midst of abundance. Despite securing communal land and gaining access to finance for agricultural tools and training, the economic spin-offs still eluded the women farmers in a programme that was managed by other women. Based on this premise, the article takes a pragmatic approach to development as it examines the underlying factors that led to the project's limited degree of success. Central to this argument, the article assesses the extent to which the developmental needs of women (particularly poor women) are impacted negatively by targeted intervention schemes, which at face value are sympathetic to the empowerment of women.

The discussion begins by briefly exploring shifts and continuities in gender dynamics from WID to GAD in order to locate the key debates that inform this research endeavour. The case of Umkhambathini is then presented to illustrate the context in which local women farmers operate and the methodology that was adopted in the study. The next sections present the findings and analysis to highlight opportunities and obstacles to women empowerment in the agricultural project. The article concludes with recommendations for transforming women's material conditions for genuine women participation in, and for, development.

From WID to GAD: Shifts and Continuities in Gender Dynamics

Reflecting on shifts and continuities in gender dynamics from WID to GAD, McIlwaine and Datta (2003:369) regard the evolution as a continuum 'from a feminisation of development to an engendering of development'. However, scholars such as Cornwall (2003) argue that while the terminology has changed, there are no significant shifts in practice. WID to GAD are not neutral approaches. On the contrary, these conceptions are deeply embedded in Western feminism, which objectifies women in the South and undermine 'autonomous, geographically, historically and culturally grounded feminist concerns and strategies' (Mohanty 1997:79). These perspectives are top-down and form a major part of the modernisation project (Cornwall 2003;

Oyewumi 2002). Chua *et al.* (2000) perceive their failure to engage with women's lived experiences in totality as a fundamental flaw.

Ultimately, WID's objective was not women empowerment per se; rather, it was keen on the effective integration of women into existing economic systems. Boserup (1970) coined WID to highlight that women's oppression mainly stems from the fact that they engage in labour-intensive agricultural tasks, whilst men benefit from the utilisation of new technologies. Such programmes are mostly interested in women's productive roles whilst overlooking the structural inequalities that often leave some women more vulnerable than others. For instance, Pilgeram (2011) observed that successful farmers in sustainable agriculture possessed wealth, educational qualifications and high paying jobs as a result of their work as farmers. However, WID ignores classism and its impact on women farmers. Based on cross-cultural and universal validity, WID adopts a one-size-fits-all approach that fails to appreciate that development is relational and multi-dimensional because of the interrelationships inherent in each context (Chua *et al.* 2000). For instance, people in marginalized rural contexts are often viewed as illiterate when in actual fact they possess literacies that are relevant and useful in their own socio-cultural contexts (Street 2005). Therefore, in this context, it is apt to work with the notions of 'multiple literacies'. It is advocated with recognition that it has epistemological implications on what constitutes knowledge (2003: 77).

It is in this context of multiple realities that Mohanty (1997:80) eloquently critiques the hegemonic assumptions of Western feminism that not only reproduce 'the image of an average Third World woman', but also distort Asian and African scholarship from Third World middle-class women who end up writing about rural or working class women as the 'other'. Moreover, there is no recognition in such contexts that African patriarchies evolve; instead, 'afro-pessimism about African patriarchies is bought and resold by many Africans, with the result that men have become resistant, and women themselves indifferent, to gender mainstreaming based on a Eurocentric historical view of African gender relations' (Isike & Uzodike 2011:228). This analysis partly accounts for the slow transformation in gender and women development. Therefore, scholars such as hooks (2000a; 2000b) and Oyewumi (2002) illustrate the need to deconstruct the notion of a monolithic homogenous women's identity in order to unveil class and race privileges.

Simply put, the rhetoric in mainstream feminist discourse fails to acknowledge that Black African women are more vulnerable than women of other racial groups (hooks 2000a). A large population of these women labour in food gardens where the notion of empowerment remains elusive. For example, the findings of Pilgeram's (2011:378) study show unequivocally that sustainable agriculture has a racial, class and gender face and further indicate that 'despite the growing body of literature on sustainable agriculture, research examining the ways that class impacts sustainable farms is relatively limited'. Guthman 2008 & Slocum (2007 cited in Pilgeram 2011:377) argue pointedly:

...who owns and farms sustainably managed land affects who consumes the food produced. This issue is particularly salient given that farmers' markets are most often spaces of whiteness, both demographically and culturally.

Reflecting on these assertions, it is evident that small-scale farmers remain invisible in the value chain processes. Consequently, at the height of Western modernisation in the mid-1970s, the neo-Marxist feminists brought about fundamental shifts that gave rise to Women and Development (WAD) in order to critically address structural imbalances. Theoretically, the approach was progressive in that it recognised the heterogeneity of women's lived experiences, but it failed to pragmatically address the issue of power (Cornwall 2003). Based on this premise, GAD emerged in the 1980s as an alternative approach.

Embedded in socialist feminism, GAD takes particular interest in how gender has been socially constructed. It values heterogeneity and all aspects of women's lives and aims to give women space to reclaim their voice so that their knowledge and experiences are fully utilised. It goes a step further to call for reforms to the legal systems that favour male ownership in order for women to benefit as well. Despite GAD's progressive outlook, a mismatch between theory and practice still exists. Cornwall (2003) perceives GAD as another top-down approach that is too thin on tools for action. As a result, the WID approach still influences development planning in contemporary feminist discourse (Brown 2006). This is particularly evident in the available literature that is either silent or too thin on issues related specifically to the politics of difference *vis-à-vis* poor women's experiences

of oppression (hooks 2000b). In this way, contemporary feminist discourse fails to examine women's oppression critically and comprehensively. Therefore, it follows that from WID to GAD, structural inequalities related to gender, race and class have been left intact. The emphasis is on projecting a simplifying worldview that portrays 'essentialized images of 'woman-as-victim' and 'man-as-problem' or ignores the lot of marginal men' (Chant 2000; Cornwall & White 2000 cited in Cornwall 2003: 1326).

What remains implicit in all three approaches to development is an overemphasis on the productive role of women since the ultimate objective of neo-liberal development policies is to benefit the market. It is in this context that Oyewumi (2002) argues against Western capitalism, which continues to reproduce oppressive gender relations. Moreover, although the rhetoric on giving women a voice is rife, it rarely happens in practice. As Cornwall (2003) observes, both gender and participation are relative concepts with multiple meanings. Unless mainstream feminist theories engage with the concept of gender – fully recognising that it is a socio-cultural construct that cannot be conceptualised outside the social context of colonization, Western imperialism and other forms of oppression - genuine women empowerment in development processes is unlikely to be realised in practice (Oyewumi 2002). Based on this premise, Chua *et al.* (2000) rejected the WID and GAD perspectives. Instead, they advocated for a new paradigm, namely, Women, Culture and Development (WCD). The authors argue that this intended approach to development engages with culture as lived experience and considers the heterogeneity of Third World women. The utilization of participatory rural appraisal (PRA) tools is one way of enabling local people to articulate that which resonates with their own lived experiences (Chambers 2000).

Essentially, development policies, approaches and strategies - from WID to GAD - have failed to advance the agenda of marginalised women (Cornwall 2003). It can therefore be concluded in this section that the major shortcoming of mainstream feminist theories is their failure to engage with unequal socio-economic and socio-political relations between nations (Oyewumi 2002).

The Study Context and Setting

Study Site and Project Description

The study was conducted in Umkhambathini Local Municipality under

uMgungundlovu District in the province of KZN. The area is mainly rural with a population of 46 570 (Statistics SA 2007) out of a total population of 10.45 million in KZN (Statistics SA 2009). One of the poorest provinces in South Africa (SA), KZN faces huge socio-economic challenges, characterised by high levels of the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), poverty and unemployment. Available literature demonstrates that poverty and unemployment are two of the main factors that exacerbate the spread of HIV within the province, with the HIV prevalence rate currently at 39.5% - the highest provincial rate in the country (Department of Health 2011). The rate of unemployment in the province, which stood at 41.5% in 2001 (Statistics SA 2001) substantially decreased to 20.3% in 2011 (Statistics SA 2011). The agricultural sector is a key driver of the economy within Umkhambathini Local Municipality, with 6 546 agricultural-related projects followed by 1 565 community services projects (Statistics SA 2011).

To alleviate poverty in the rural community of Umkhambathini, a local development agency², operating in the non-governmental organisation (NGO) sector, developed a plan to assist female and male farmers in a food security programme. The organisation, with female agricultural extension officers and female project managers, had financial resources earmarked for the development of two distinct projects. The first is a communal vegetable garden that covers 6 8640 m² of land and targets 15 women, and one man. The second project focuses on maize and cattle farming, with a total of 23 farmers, who work individually and operate from their private homes. The study was specifically interested in the communal vegetable garden with female farmers who pursue socio-economic objectives collectively in the rural village. Funds were made available to the women farmers to begin using the available land productively. They received agricultural tools and seedlings from the development agency including hoes, spades, an irrigation machine, watering cans, wheelbarrows, wildes (sickles), garden forks and hand forks. In addition, they did receive some limited but not sufficient training in agriculture.

As stated in the funding agreement, the key objective in the food gardens was to improve the quality and quantity of crops. It also aimed to

² A local development agency that was responsible for the empowerment of community members. The name of the organisation is not disclosed to ensure confidentiality and anonymity.

provide business training and marketing skills to enable women, most of who were subjected to poverty, to sustain livelihoods through food security; and to provide them with a possible means of income to improve their living conditions. Ultimately, the desired outcomes were to be achieved by assisting the women farmers to establish a cooperative association for income-generation.

It should be noted that the NGO responsible for the empowerment of women farmers succeeded in securing significant funding because it had generated a well-crafted proposal. While donors are often blamed for imposing top-down approaches wherein they advance their own agendas (Willis 2005), on the contrary, the donor for this particular project recognised and supported women's agency for economic emancipation. The local development agency was afforded space to independently formulate their own focal areas and performance indicators. They aptly argued the need to develop women and unambiguously conceptualised empowerment as comprising community ownership of the project. To ensure a shift from rhetoric to practice, this project objective was to be achieved through a constitutionally established community structure to create space for women's voices in issues pertaining to their socio-economic well-being. As discussed in subsequent sections, this vital goal was not achieved.

Methodology

The study employed a qualitative design using a triangulation of data collection methods, which comprised interviews, documentary review, and direct observation. The documentary review included an examination of the funding agreement, operational plans, a memorandum of agreement between the development agency and the farming community members, the inventory of the projects' assets, and monthly and annual reports. The funding agreement provided a clear framework with indicators to analyse, monitor and evaluate performance measures in conjunction with the organisation's operational plan, which outlined project activities, expected outcomes, and indicators of development as informed by qualitative and quantitative objectives.

A total number of 21 participants (12 female farmers, 3 independent community members and 6 staff members from the development agency)

took part in in-depth interviews, having been selected through purposive sampling. In line with participatory methodology, the design created space for project members to share their knowledge and experiences, actively participating in the analysis of what happens in practice. Data interpretation and content analysis focused on emerging themes. The next section presents the findings of the study under those different themes.

Findings and Discussion

The Context in which Women Operate

The profiles of 12 women farmers who were interviewed demonstrate that they are mainly older women, above the age of 40, who live in dire poverty. Six women farmers above the age of 50 declared that they had lost their children to chronic illnesses; however, the cause of death remains unknown. As noted earlier, the province of KZN has the highest HIV prevalence rate in SA, which increased from 38.7% in 2008 to 39.5% in 2010 (Department of Health 2011). Therefore, anecdotal evidence seems to suggest that the AIDS pandemic has an impact on the mortality rate in the local rural community. Furthermore, the women alluded to the challenges of caring for grandchildren in the midst of dire poverty, elucidating the argument that women are more vulnerable to poverty than men (Scanlan 2004; Cornwall 2003).

Reflecting on the socio-cultural nature of gender and vulnerability as Oyewumi (2002) asserts, the findings demonstrate that the problems that Umkhambathini women farmers face are multidimensional and intertwined. They are engaged in agricultural activities that have not really secured their livelihoods. Moreover, they face problems in their personal lives related to hunger, unemployment, losing their loved ones, dealing with grandchildren who are orphans and so forth. They also expressed their frustration with the fact that their children, who have completed secondary school education under desperate circumstances, remain unemployed. Six out of the 12 women farmers interviewed had a household income of less than R1 000 per month while managing families of about 12 members per household – a figure that includes grandchildren whose parents have died. Some of the women farmers reported that social grants were the main source of income in many households, and they deem those who receive social grants to be in a better position financially.

Economic Development for Women as a Relational Process

Emerging data indicate that despite the fact that women's contribution to the family and community at large remains 'unpaid, unrecognized, and undervalued' (Scanlan 2004, 1809), optimism about the future exists. They highlighted that social capital that is generated as a result of their involvement in the vegetable garden project helped them to cope better with daily hardships. Furthermore, the women commented that the communal spirit that exists in their project has brought hope in their lives. One woman remarked: *'When I have problems at home, I cannot wait for a day in the garden where I could talk, laugh, sing and forget about my problems'*. Clearly, such assertions point to the existence and value of social capital in the midst of dire poverty. This glimmer of hope in the midst of hopelessness reiterates the relevance of 'historically and culturally grounded feminist concerns and strategies' (Mohanty 1997:79). Moreover, it was established that the relationships that the women have developed go beyond the communal gardening project. They reported that, as neighbours, they support one another through the barter system. This is evident in the following assertion: *'You cannot really die of hunger when you have your neighbours because we all barter goods and services. It is not a shame in our community to go to your neighbour to request a slice of bread'*. Similarly, another woman farmer reported how the other women cultivated her garden while she was ill. The planners in this project are challenged to not only focus on women's productive roles but to also engage with their social and cultural experiences, recognising that development is about interrelationships inherent in each context (Chua *et al.* 2000).

Bridging the Gender Gap: Women's Participation in Politics and the Economy

The conceptualisation of the Umkhambathini community agricultural project demonstrates that a lot of strategic thinking went into it. Conceptually, the developmental approach evident on paper puts farmers at the centre of their own development, thus promoting people-centred development. However, this has not translated into practice. There were no data to suggest that the women farmers influence decisions in the project. As Mokgope (2000) and Cornwall (2003) observe that women still lack autonomy in decision-making.

Emerging data resonate with this claim as women farmers had no power and control to influence decisions that affect their lives. The staff members argue that the vegetable project empowers women because they are involved in project planning and implementation. When asked about the degree of women participation in the vegetable garden project, one staff member reported that women were consulted regarding the purchase of agricultural tools (such as hoes and spades) and the storage thereof. Closer examination revealed that farmers have no decision-making powers and lack access to financial control. While the local development agency and farmers signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which outlined a platform for members to determine their own agenda, the community's role in decision-making remains undefined. Community consultations in this context could be viewed as tokenism, since the farmers are not aware of their own options in decision-making. Such observations are consistent with Isike and Uzodike's (2011:227) assertion that due to poor women's lack of power in the province of KZN, they are still perceived as 'subhuman, commodified and subordinated'. Therefore, from WID to GAD, the context in which female farmers operate has not changed (Cornwall 2003); rather it has been observed that programmes have included women as a way of garnering financial support from donors. Observations further reveal that the status quo is sustained due to the development agency's dominant approaches that mainly focus on service delivery within the modernisation project; whilst overlooking the actual process of development.

Planning for Social and Economic Development: Whose Knowledge Counts?

The development agency staff expressed their frustration at working with 'illiterate' adults who can neither read nor write. One member of staff alluded to the fact that due to this challenge the farmers are unable to grasp basic agricultural concepts, making it difficult to impart knowledge. These sentiments are demonstrated in the following remark: *'You teach them one thing in the morning, you return in the afternoon to discover that they have forgotten it'* (Staff member 2010). This statement points to one aspect of the challenges associated with development interventions that are presented in terms that assume universal orthodoxy (Street 2005). The findings further

illustrated that the women farmers have also come to internalise such hegemonic assumptions related to the racialization of knowledge (Oyewumi 2002) with staff members in the project being represented as knowers. This is a common, worrying trend in development discourse, which generally alienates poor people from their experiences, silencing them and causing them to doubt their own capabilities (Chambers 2000). A challenge for contemporary feminist discourse is to genuinely develop women's voices, and channel them through collaborative ways of knowing to assist women to gain some level of empowerment. To achieve this objective, Chambers (2000) argues that the focus should be on PRA methodologies using participatory demonstrations and visual aids. This methodology encourages 'illiterate' farmers to reflect and learn from their own experiences – a critical factor in promoting capacity building for self-reliance. This would facilitate an environment of mutual exchange of knowledge and skills, and transform constructions of 'Third World women as a homogenous powerless group' (Mohanty 1997:81).

It was further established that the development agency has not viewed illiteracy as a systemic problem that requires a totally different mindset on the part of development practitioners. The embedded assumption in the frustrated views of the staff is basically that they are working with ignorant people or, at best, the social equivalent of children. This is underpinned by the sense of hopelessness in what has been painted as a context of 'illiterate' adults. It is in such contexts that Street (2005; 2003) argues for the recognition that development is embedded in multiple contexts. Essentially, this results in a totally different epistemological framework that values knowledge gained in daily life experiences, thus making subjugated knowledge visible. The mere failure to understand ideas and concepts that were proffered in a foreign language is used to conclude that the target community or population group were in fact incapable of grasping multifarious or semi-complex ideas. In effect, this sort of reductive thinking process often complicates intervention schemes by shaping the attitudes of development practitioners in a way that not only ignores people's lived experiences by superimposing extraneous solutions, but also blaming programme failure on the community. In so doing, the inability of Western modernisation projects to engage with structural inequalities is left unquestioned and furthermore, the tendency to treat the problems that women face as universal is espoused (Oyewumi 2002).

Seen in this way, the challenge for development managers is to engage the women in a dialogue using context-specific literacies that are appropriate for their local realities. Emerging data revealed that the workshops organised for the women farmers were not contextualised. To illustrate this challenge, it was established that in some instances the agricultural training focused on abstract concepts such as different types of soil. In working with 'illiterate' adults, Chambers (2000) contends that such conceptual knowledge is not beneficial if the intention is not to utilise and/or apply that knowledge immediately. This requires a learning activity that is practice-oriented and should rely on using local languages. Essentially, the dominant use of English concepts in the training of the women farmers only served to marginalise them further.

Clearly, it is fundamental to appreciate local people's social and cultural context as espoused in grassroot development (Willis 2005). The women in the vegetable project planted and cultivated their own crops long before the development agency existed, prompting the seminal question: 'How did they survive all these years?'

The Political Economy of Rural Development

The policy implementation in relation to LRAD and CDRP indicates that rural development is often slow and complex and, as such, a major challenge for government in the best of circumstances. In addition to the multifaceted challenges that this article has alluded to, the Umkhambathini women's project was also faced with a number of complications that are often associated with the limitations of rural development such as:

Lack of Access to Markets: The objectives of the agricultural project, as highlighted in the development plans, included the formation of cooperatives to generate income. The ultimate goal was to establish a local market for the farmers. However, this goal was never achieved. It emerged that finding markets in the nearest town would be a formidable task, particularly because travelling costs are exorbitant. There is a mini shopping centre, approximately 5 km from the location of the vegetable garden, but the area is oversaturated with farmers from elsewhere who sell similar agricultural produce.

The difficulties regarding the market also serve to reveal a design flaw in the project. It is evident that in situations where markets have not been identified, organisations should not promote commercial farming as this tends to frustrate farmers in poor rural contexts. Given that the lack of a viable market has serious implications for both the Umkhambathini women as well as the development project, the development agency would need to revisit its plans with a view to finding markets for the farmers. As Pilgeram (2011) argues, agricultural markets are not easily accessible to those from poor environments due to issues of race and class. Markets are therefore not neutral. The political economy of markets needs to be appreciated so that those who have the means, power and strong social capital can consciously assist marginalised communities to access them. Expecting farmers who are excluded from the mainstream economy to find their own markets will unintentionally disempower them by exposing them to systemic exploitation. As mentioned earlier, the Umkhambathini community is accustomed to the barter system. Hence, available data suggest that this community is comfortable to limit their agricultural activities to subsistence farming. However, neo-liberal capitalism is market-driven, an approach to development which according to Willis (2005), has a tendency to undermine social and cultural practices inherent in local communities. As one participant from the maize project mentioned:

Ungawudayisela bani umbila lana ngoba bonke abantu bawutshalile? Umbila futhi ulinywa kanye ngonyaka, angeke uphile ngawo

(Where would you find markets for maize here because every family in the community has a maize garden? Again, maize is a seasonal crop, it is only harvested once a year; therefore, it cannot secure livelihoods.)

This assertion serves to illustrate that the project was not based on asset-mapping and needs assessment. It further demonstrates that local people often have workable solutions to their own problems. In essence, the findings underscore not only the need for anchoring development interventions on constructive and mutually respectful partnerships between development agencies and local communities, but also the continued efficacy or value of local knowledge and cultural experience.

Unpredictable weather patterns: Beyond the non-existent market, there were also a number of other challenges that might have been anticipated and addressed through better planning. For instance, flooding in the local river prevented access to the gardens after rains in the area or in other upstream communities drained by the river. As such, necessary activities at the gardening projects come to a halt until such time that the water levels recede. The women farmers reported that they are compelled to wade across the river every morning during the rainy season. They further indicated that they usually arrive in the garden at 11am because the water is too cold in the early hours of the morning. This predicament presents another element in the political economy of rural development. Erecting a bridge for easy access is nobody's priority in this rural community because the women's livelihood strategy does not generate any profits for the markets.

Water and electricity shortages: While heavy rains make it difficult to get to the communal garden on the one hand, long periods of drought remain a huge challenge on the other. Due to the shortage of water, it was reported that vegetable gardens were not perceived as an option in the community as the priority is to access water for household consumption.

In light of the above, the political economy in rural contexts cannot be ignored. Local people have skills and knowledge that the markets do not necessarily value (Willis 2005). The livelihood strategies that are promoted are not particularly favoured since scarce resources such as water can be used to address other priorities. It is in such contexts that Chambers (2000) recognises that progress in rural development has been slow because development practitioners continuously fail to address the priorities and plans of the poor.

Discourse on Women Oppression Revisited

The notion of empowerment and participation tends to suggest that if women were to participate in decision-making at all levels of the project cycle then development would be a logical consequence. This study illustrates that such unrealistic assumptions are inaccurate as far as women empowerment is concerned. Hence, emerging findings raise a complex set of issues that engenders interrogation about the nature of structural inequalities,

particularly the notion that middle-class women can effectively represent the interests of rural women. As we have shown earlier, a development agency led by privileged women formulated a concept on how they were going to involve a group of poor women farmers from the Umkhambathini community in decision-making at every phase of the project cycle. The funding proposal outlined a clear strategy to ensure the participation of women farmers in the project from conceptualisation to implementation, monitoring, and evaluation as well as participation in sharing the benefits of development. However, this ambitious objective was not realised in practice. In response to the funding proposal that prioritised women empowering other women, the donor made the necessary financial and human resources available. However, women at the local level did not benefit. Thus, the key question that faces researchers and other observers is why? What issues should be factored into the structuring of empowerment programmes such as the Umkhambathini women's agricultural project? To what extent are women's lived realities to be linked to appropriate funding methods? Clearly, the rhetoric in mainstream feminist discourse has not seriously engaged with such questions.

These observations reiterate that viewing gender oppression as the sole problem in women development is an assumption that has become obsolete. Whilst studies by scholars such as Bob (2008), Mokgope (2000) and others have pointed to the oppression of women by men in agriculture, the case of the Umkhambathini community shows that we cannot be quick to conclude that, in the absence of male oppressors, all is well. This is a project for women by women with access to land, finances and agricultural skills and knowledge; yet, the objectives of social and economic integration eluded the women farmers. This is not always intentional; rather, it is the net result of the wider international and national gender policies and perspectives that are not often understood by programme officers responsible for policy implementation at the micro-level (Jahan 1995). This mismatch between theory and practice remains the greatest limitation in GAD approaches, which are progressive on the surface, but often fall short in practice (Brown 2006; Cornwall 2003). Therefore, this points to the interrogation of underlying factors that hinder women empowerment. For instance, whilst most writers are still limited to conventional definitions of patriarchy, Oyewumi (2002) and hooks (2000b) recognise that if patriarchy is a system of domination, even women can have access to it. Therefore, to blame gender oppression for all women's woes is easy; to engage with the intersectionality of race, class,

gender and ethnicity – is a long and difficult process, but it is more likely to lead to transformation for the benefit of marginalized women in particular.

This critical analysis assists us to recognise that the struggles of poor African women are different from those of women in other social contexts. Furthermore, there are marginalized men who are often ignored (Cornwall 2003), such as those in the case of Umkhambathini, who are more oppressed than women in other contexts by virtue of being poor and black in the South African historical context. This line of argument is unpopular in mainstream feminist theory due to what Oyewumi (2002) perceives as the insistence on gender and women's oppression as universal, so that structural disadvantages related to class and race are left unexamined. The obsession with vertical oppression, with men oppressing women, whilst overlooking horizontal oppression wherein women oppress other women, is inappropriate in the absence of men in cases similar to that of Umkhambathini. One is therefore compelled to question the spirit of sisterhood that puts emphasis on common oppression while ignoring or hiding the fact that there are women who oppress other women (hooks 2000a). While in GAD literature the focus is on lived experiences and women's voices (Cornwall 2003), middle-class women continue to speak for, and on behalf of, the working class. As a result, they continue to dominate and define the feminist agenda for the oppressed (Oyewumi 2002).

Looking Forward: Conclusion and Recommendations

This article has shown that whilst the South African government has developed progressive policies to address the needs of rural women, pragmatic challenges hinder the implementation of such policies. The government approach, which adopts positive discrimination to benefit poor women, appreciates that black, poor, rural women are more susceptible to gender oppression due to financial dependence on men. The government, having collaborated with local and international donors, ensured that access to land, equipment, financial and human resources were made available to assist the rural women farmers of Umkhambathini; however, the benefits eluded them. The development agency's funding proposal was well-crafted with a clear transformative agenda; however, the operational reality has proven more reactionary than developmental. In the absence of robust

monitoring and evaluation tools, the development agency missed the target, resulting in a mismatch between rhetoric and practice.

A number of conclusions can be drawn from the study. The findings reveal that patriarchy is systemic within the structures of development organisations, which manipulate not only men, but also women at various levels in development planning. Whilst the development agency staff were mostly women, the findings suggest that they are also not immune from sexism within the institution of patriarchy. If patriarchy is a system of domination, anyone can practise it, including women (Oyewumi 2002). It was evident in the case of Umkhambathini that the service providers were conscious of the urgent need to empower women as this was well articulated in the funding proposal; however, the outcome failed to match the rhetoric. The findings illustrate that this is partially due to the tendency within feminist discourse to de-emphasise class struggle. Based on that premise, progression from WID to GAD approaches is happening at a theoretical level; however, empirical evidence suggests that this has not been fully realised in practice. In undertaking a project that seeks to empower women in the agricultural sector, it is vital that due care is taken to ensure that women's experiences – whether cultural, social, economic or political – are factored into the decision-making processes informing the conceptualisation of the project. In addition, such community projects should primarily focus on validating and legitimising women's knowledge and experiences for genuine development to take place and refrain from adopting approaches simply because they have worked, or are likely to work, in other contexts. Moreover, the need for a robust debate on socio-economic and socio-political factors that leaves some women more susceptible to poverty than others cannot be over-emphasised.

To improve future practice, the following lessons and recommendations can be deduced from the findings of the study:

- Projects should not promote commercial agriculture when markets have not been identified. It should be the role of development agencies as facilitators of development to identify and find markets for farmers through their networks with local suppliers;
- Development agencies have to dispel both the myth that people in rural areas are 'happy poor', and the assumption that poor people can

survive without financial resources. In the context of the current global economic challenges, a project that fails to put money in people's pockets ultimately fails to foster development, which is about qualitative and quantitative changes in people's well-being;

- Development agencies should adopt a learning approach in their interventions in order to unlearn some of the mistaken perceptions related to the goal of development. This will not only lead to authentic partnerships but also to the effective empowerment of communities. To achieve this purpose, development agencies would need to assist the women farmers to constitute structures that they can use to channel their own voices and collectively engage with project managers;
- It is essential to monitor projects closely to ascertain whether they deliver on their developmental mandate or tend to become reactive.

As illustrated in this article, the assumption that development will naturally follow once social, human, physical, natural and financial assets have been put in place needs to be challenged since it overlooks pertinent underlying factors that leave poor women vulnerable to exploitation. In essence, the case of Umkhambathini illustrates the need for a complex stakeholder response to the multidimensional development challenges that the women farmers face. Any appropriate model of development should compel service providers to collaborate with other stakeholders doing similar work such as local communities, government and the private sector for a multi-pronged and holistic intervention response.

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Nompumelelo Thabethe
School of Built Environment, Development Studies
University of KwaZulu Natal
Thabethe@ukzn.ac.za

Ufo Okeke Uzodike
School of Social Sciences
University of KwaZulu Natal
Uzodike@ukzn.ac.za