

## Mainstream Gender and Development Concepts and Theories at the Interface with Local Knowledge Systems: Some Theoretical Reflections

*Romina Istratii\**

**Abstract:** *The field of gender and development has been marked in recent years by extensive debates about the shortfalls of gender mainstreaming and the depoliticisation of gender and other concepts in development praxis. In these discussions considerably less thought has been given to the theoretical premises of these concepts and the implications of their interface with the epistemological and normative systems of the diverse communities in which they are employed. In the current paper I hope to undertake a more theoretical project by delineating how three foundational concepts—gender, gender equality, and empowerment—are directly linked to secular epistemologies and western gender metaphysics, to suggest how this might be interfering with effective gender and development practice in non-western/non-secular contexts. I propose that more effort may need to be put in reconstructing and theorising gender realities through local conceptual repertoires in order to better design gender interventions that are attuned to local normative systems.*

**Key Terms:** *Gender and Development | Secular Epistemologies | Religio-cultural Knowledge Systems | Gender Metaphysics | Dissonance*

*\*Romina Istratii is affiliated with University of London (SOAS) and is pursuing PhD in Religions and Philosophies and can be contacted at R.Istratii@alumni.ids.ac.uk*

**Introduction:** In recent years the field of gender and development has engaged extensively in a critique of gender mainstreaming.<sup>1</sup> Many prominent scholars have argued that ‘gender’ has been extensively depoliticised, misunderstood, or co-opted since its mainstreaming at the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 (Cornwall, Harrison and Whitehead 2007; Wong and Mukhopadhyay 2007; Bryan and Varat 2008; Moser 2014). Some seminal contributions have detailed illuminating genealogies on how ‘gender’, ‘gender mainstreaming’, and the associated concept of ‘empowerment’ have been deployed by bureaucrats, organisational staff, and practitioners over time to result in ‘development speak’ stripped of original theoretical implications (Smyth 2010; Batliwala 2010). Two *Gender and Development* issues (2005 and 2012) that were also dedicated to gender mainstreaming confirmed the same problematic patterns (Porter and Sweetman 2005; Sweetman 2012, Mannell 2012; Sandler and Rao 2012; Moser and Moser 2005).

The extensive analysis on gender discourse at the institutional and organisational level (Arnfred 2001: 81-82; Mukhopadhyay and Wong 2007: 12) is striking when compared to the limited discussion of the epistemological implications of mainstream gender discourse in non-western/non-secular contexts. In the aforementioned *Gender and Development* issues a few mentioned concerns of incommensurability between the gender ideals of the Beijing agenda and the gender realities,

norms, expectations, and constraints of men and women at the local level (Porter and Sweetman 2005: 4; Wendoh and Wallace 2005). How gender practitioners should account for local religio-cultural cosmologies<sup>2</sup> in gender analysis, theorisation, and sensitisation cross-culturally has not been systematically problematized in the existing literature however. And while religio-cultural parameters have been increasingly integrated in gender and development studies in many nuanced ways,<sup>3</sup> the findings of such empirical studies do not appear to have led to a reconsideration of conceptual frameworks and theoretical assumptions still espoused widely in the field of gender and development (see also Tomalin 2007: 1). It is also notable that the field has conventionally given prominence to theorisations that have stressed religio-cultural institutions as loci of female subordination (Whitehead 2006 [1979]; Moser 1993; Baden and Goetz 1997; Kabeer 1999b; Momsen 2004; Cornwall 2016).

In this paper I want to propose that some of the postulated shortfalls of gender and development may trace to the epistemological underpinnings of mainstream concepts used in the field. My proposition is that these concepts, by default of being theorised and reworked within a predominantly secular framework, are attuned primarily to western gender metaphysics and may foundationally conflict with local belief systems of gender. I will suggest that non-secular epistemologies may need to be given a more central position in gender and development theorisation, and to be integrated into “a methodology of

analysis, evaluation and practice” (Bradley 2011: 25) as a way to improving the relevance and effectiveness of gender sensitisation and programming in these non-western/non-secular contexts.

**Conceptual and theoretical underpinnings:** The gender mainstreaming literature includes various examples in which local women and men found ‘gender’ to be alien to their language and culture, or threatening to their religious beliefs (Abu-Habib 2007: 55; Vouhé 2007: 64; Para-Mallam et al. 2011). After assessing the reasons behind the hesitation of some NGOs in Africa to engage with gender equality discourse, Senorina Wendoh and Tina Wallace noted for example that “Religious faith and traditional cultural values are important in communities” but “these are not easily reconciled with the current concepts of gender equality imported from international agencies and donors” (Wendoh and Wallace 2005: 76). In their detailed study of the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) domestication process in Nigeria, Oluwafunmilayo Para-Mallam and co-authors interviewed men and women who expressed objections to the ideal of gender equality, citing religio-cultural alternatives (Para-Mallam et al. 2011). Similar objections were noted for gender trainings in the Francophone world (Vouhé 2007: 64). While examining possible causes for such reactions, authors have tended to emphasise the local realities and politics, the terminological foreignness of ‘gender’, or unsuitable pedagogical methods for sensitisation, but have given less consideration to the conceptual and theoretical incommensurability that these objections implied in the contexts they studied.

The case of the CEDAW domestication process in Nigeria, which was analysed extensively in a study by the Religions and Development (RaD) programme of the University of Birmingham, is worth a closer examination. The report makes evident that the language of gender equality in the CEDAW document was perceived to contradict religio-cultural gender norms, such as related to marriage among Muslim believers, or normative values such as exemplified in the opposition to abortion among Christian believers. Considerable objections were also raised by women and men who valued theological gender metaphysics and believed in the potential of their religious traditions to promote human dignity without resorting to imported concepts and rights frameworks. The authors mentioned, for instance, Ruth who questioned the need for western ideals of equality on the premise of theological explanations that grounded man-woman equality in the divine creation (Para-Mallam et al. 2011: 18). Androcentric objections to CEDAW fuelled by selfish or ideological interest to secure the continuation of girls’ and women’s abuse can never be justified and were rightly contested, but it is important that objections citing religio-cultural worldviews be given careful consideration. This is because I believe that they point to potentially

fundamental incompatibilities between local gender metaphysics and the key gender theories and concepts in the field.

In what follows I first discuss the theoretical genealogy of gender with recourse to feminist thought and some key conceptualisations of gender equality and empowerment within gender and development scholarship, prior to attempting to outline what these epistemological limitations may be. While this article aims to reach gender and development theorists and practitioners, recourse to some feminist philosophical conceptualisations is necessary in order to trace the epistemological and theoretical underpinnings of mainstream concepts employed also in development discourse. These feminist theorisations are neither exhaustive nor conclusive; however, they have been especially influential in the formation of foundational concepts and gender analytical frameworks and are thus selected for discussion.

**‘Gender’:** Gender was introduced within development discourse to differentiate the socially constructed status, roles, and responsibilities of men and women from their biologically sexed anatomies (Whitehead 1979; Moser 2014: 6). Gender was conceived as a vector of inequality to draw attention to processes by which the biology of the sexed subject is transformed into social relations of inequality (Kabeer 1994: 65). As the product of the women’s movement in Euro-America it entered the field of development studies under Marxist discourse at a time that feminist-minded development practitioners started to preoccupy with the exclusion of women from economic advancement (Kabeer 1994: 23, 50). Gradually, attention was transferred from capitalism and colonialism as forces of human oppression to sexed bodies and the ways in which this biology was interlinked with ideas of femininity and masculinity to result in women’s economic, professional, and social disadvantage. In this way, the notion of social construction progressively extended beyond status, roles, valuations, and relations to subsume women’s and men’s subjectivities/identities within power-laden social processes.<sup>4</sup>

Such theoretical progressions must be traced to feminist philosophy, and especially western theories of gender metaphysics—broadly defined here *as theories of the origins, expressions, and aetiologies of gender, especially in relation to sex*. The common understanding is that ‘gender’ was appropriated by the feminist movement in the 1960s from psychology,<sup>5</sup> and it was employed to signify the mutable, socially defined attributes and roles of men and women, while ‘sex’ was reserved to describe the female and male biology (Friedman 2006). According to Christine Delphy, the progression from sex to sex roles and ultimately to gender was strategic and aimed to ‘denaturalise’ the social woman (Delphy 2001: 418). In early conceptualisations the implication was generally

that gender was grounded on sex, what Linda Nicholson has seminally called ‘biological foundationalism’ (Nicholson 1994). Gayle Rubin, for example, in a seminal 1975 paper referred to the ‘gender/sex system’ which she conceived as “a set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied” (1975: 159). This summarised her perception that female oppression is a product of a pre-existing normative framework, perpetuated in kinship systems, which gendered people by their sexed bodies. By recourse to psychology, Rubin was also the one to integrate more explicitly sexuality into gender, linking heteronormativity to a pre-existing patriarchal status quo. She called for ‘a genderless (but not sexless) society’ which meant that individuals would continue to be seen as anatomically different but this anatomy would not determine their sexuality, identities, positions, and behaviours in society.

Gradually, theorists started to give attention to how classifications and language determined how bodies became intelligible in society, which led to the category of sex as naturally dimorphic to be problematized (e.g. Fausto-Sterling 1993). Simultaneously more metaphysical questions started to be asked about the nature of gender. Whereas originally many questioned notions of femininity without doubting the possibility of essential femaleness (Nicholson 2009: 63), under the pressure of (secular) poststructuralist theorisation of a constructed ‘self’ essential conceptualisations became untenable (Alcoff 1988; Dietz 2003: 407-408). Not only were both sex and gender de-essentialised, but also demarcations between sexed bodies and gender were overcome (Gatens 1983; Butler 1990; 1993). In more recent paradigms the aim has been specifically to deconstruct and subvert notions of ‘naturalness’ and gender categories because these are associated with (western) humanist essentialisms and therefore suppression of individuality (Alcoff 2006: 139-144).

In parallel, post-colonial critiques raised by non-western writers and non-white women in the West brought attention to a different kind of essentialism: western feminist tendencies to universalise women’s conditions.<sup>6</sup> In the aftermath, feminist theorists steadily adopted more nuanced conceptualisations of gender to account better for diverse gender systems in the world, becoming especially attentive also to race, class, and ethnicity differences. This theoretical shift is perhaps best exemplified in the concept of intersectionality (tracing back to US racial theory), which has been conceived as an analytical tool to account for interlocking social divisions and their simultaneous impact on individual identities and social relations (Yuval-Davis 2006; Berger and Guidroz 2009).

**‘Gender equality’ and ‘empowerment’:** Within the gender and development field, gender equality has

generally been conceived on principles of sameness—same rights, opportunities, and valuations for both men and women (Reeves and Baden 2000: 2; Cornwall 2016). Exemplified in the CEDAW document, conceptualisations of gender equality take a “universalist and non-discriminatory” approach, and aim to penetrate all spheres of life (Jabbara 1989: 63). Because gender inequalities have been conceived as intrinsic to institutions and relations, most writers have emphasised the need for transformative empowerment (Batliwala 1994; Kabeer 1994: 92; Kabeer 1999b; Parpart, Rai and Staudt 2003; Kabeer 2011: 5; Cornwall 2016). Empowerment can occur at a cognitive, material, or structural level, but in recent debates the notion of consciousness-raising has been central: it is important that women are led to realise their oppression and collective power, usually through relational and experience-based reflection on deeply internalised beliefs and norms (Cornwall 2016). Such notions of empowerment imply various assumptions, e.g. that gender relations are structurally unequal, that one has reason to suspect the current normative framework, and that women’s experiences are key to (re)‘imagining’ women under a feminist ideal (Cornwall 2016: 353), pertaining to a feminist standpoint epistemology.

An influential conception of empowerment worth elaborating further has been proposed by prominent writer Naila Kabeer. Drawing from Amartya Sen, Kabeer employed the concepts of resources, agency, and achievements to define empowerment as both a process and aim whereby resources (material, social, human) enlarge individuals’ ability to practise their agency and to achieve outcomes of value to them (Kabeer 1999b). For Kabeer these three aspects of empowerment are interlinked and equally important, and ignoring one or the other can lead to misguided or inaccurate conclusions and policy-making. She admits, for instance, the difficulty of discerning truly empowering achievements and agency in light of the fact that individuals are socialised beings and internalise to some degree the norms of the societies they inhabit. According to Kabeer, in order to distinguish gender differentials originating in autonomously defined preferences from those resulting from gender inequalities, it would be important to examine ‘achievements’ in combination with the ‘agency’ involved. If it were to be shown that women practised their agency self reflexively, i.e. with critical consciousness about their needs and situations, and that their actions resulted somehow in subverting inequalities, then one could speak of empowerment (*ibid.*: 441).

Kabeer, like Andrea Cornwall (2016), seems to espouse the belief that women who reproduce societal expectations will usually do so as a result of the combination of deeply internalised values and expectations and very restrictive circumstances, which do not leave them with many alternative options (see also

Kabeer 2011: 526). This restrictive system ultimately trains women to create opportunities for themselves in the limited ways they can, often reproducing the same 'patriarchal' norms that oppress them, as in the case where mother-in-laws abuse their sons' wives. The 'choices' these women make in this context cannot be considered truly their 'own' because in effect these are shaped by their own oppression and not by autonomously defined preference. Furthermore, Kabeer seems to locate the subversion of norms and status quo in the very meaning of agency, whereby true agentive capacity is enforced where subversion of norms is achieved. Her theorisation of the Social Relations Framework in *Reversed Realities* seems to underline that powerful institutions, such as the state, are structurally gender unequal and that change can be triggered when external actors (NGOs) can act with some independence from these, or when the 'oppressed' themselves develop a new understanding of their conditions, form alliances, and develop collective power to cause change (Kabeer 1994).

**Articulating the epistemological implications:** From this brief overview it should be retained that gender theorisation has been historically premised on an explicit or implicit gender/sex dichotomy, which has been understood as one inherently oppressive to women. It should also become evident that gender (which in recent discourses may incorporate sexuality or subsume sex) is conceived as the product of social/discursive processes, which means that notions of essential femaleness (or maleness) are generally dismissed or not properly explored. The new normative of gender equality becomes increasingly reminiscent of Gayle Rubin's genderless society, a society without "obligatory [hetero]sexuality and sexual roles" (Rubin 1975: 204). While within gender and development such metaphysical implications are rarely acknowledged, these follow from the notion of a 'socially constructed' gender, and the normative values underpinning empowerment approaches that favour the subversion of ideas of 'natural' gender and gender roles conceived on the premise of natural gender traits. I want to suggest that such assumptions and directions in mainstream gender and development theory reveal the prioritisation of secular epistemology and western feminist gender metaphysics.

Epistemology has been employed in different ways by different writers, including feminist theorists, so it is necessary to clarify how I use it. In this paper, epistemology defines the criteria and sources for valid knowledge *as related to a specific cosmology*. I agree with other writers that epistemology is "linked ultimately to worldviews" (Ladson-Billings 2000: 258) under the understanding that individuals become conscious agents within specific belief systems where they acquire the tools and standards for reasoning.<sup>7</sup> By this I am not suggesting that knowledge systems are static, or that individuals internalise absolutely the belief systems

within which they are socialised, or that one cannot be exposed to multiple epistemological systems simultaneously.<sup>8</sup> My definition only aims to draw attention to the fact that individuals are 'epistemologically situated', and that this situatedness is linked to the belief systems individuals espouse and draw their validity criteria from.

I want to show that mainstream gender and development concepts have been primarily theorised under a secular logic, while their normative underpinnings have emanated from metaphysics of gender that find primary validity in (evolving) western knowledge paradigms of gender. In view of my definition of epistemology, I will then suggest that this can curtail the ability of current theoretical frameworks to make full sense of gender-related perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours of individuals who espouse non-secular/non-western worldviews, with subsequent implications for gender and development practice. In what follows I attempt to illustrate this rationale through a closer look at some theoretical underpinnings of the three key concepts.

**'Deconstructing' mainstream concepts and theories:** A key theoretical underpinning of 'gender' discourse within this field has been the ubiquitous assumption of structural inequalities, especially manifest in conventional tools and frameworks of gender analysis and gender planning (Overholt et al. 1985; Parker 1993; Moser 1993; Kabeer 1999a; March, Smyth, and Mukhopadhyay 1999; UNDP 2001; Mukhopadhyay and Wong 2007: 18). Many of these frameworks propose to evaluate gender relations on the basis of division of labour, access to resources, or distribution of decision-making authority between female and male persons. Reflecting earlier feminist theorisations, these indicators are predicated for the most part on female and male bodies because the practitioner is encouraged to analyse gender relations by how the two types of sexed bodies divide work, responsibility, and authority. In my view, this suggests a disregard for lived gender subjectivities (including how sexed-marked individuals perceive and treat each other) and a tendency to predicate gender inequality on binary anatomies. I believe that Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí's seminal critique of gender has convincingly traced this 'bio-logic' to western epistemologies, demonstrating also the problems of transposing it to other societies. Oyèwùmí argued that western feminists' theorisation of gender inequality on the basis of anatomies reflected an inherently western mind-body bifurcation and an emphasis on visual indicators as opposed to holistic 'world-sense.' She reasoned that if 'gender' was socially constructed, it would need to be theorised on the basis of local knowledge systems and realities, which she attempted to do for the Oyo-Yorùbá society. As opposed to presupposing hierarchical gender relations based on dimorphic anatomy, Oyèwùmí analysed social roles at the level of language use, lineage rules, the institution of

marriage, and the market, and proposed that seniority and cosmology-specific beliefs about the genders were most prominent contributors to social position and status. While her critique was not without considerable flaws,<sup>9</sup> I believe that it insightfully connected epistemology to worldviews and gender theory, a relationship that this paper aims to articulate further.

Admittedly, gender and development theorists have responded to post-colonial critiques by moving toward more intersectional analytics. There is no doubt that intersectionality has added important layers of complexity in gender theory and analysis, but it should be recognised that the assumption of structural oppression remains foundational (Berger and Guidroz 2009), which can lead to cross-cultural, multiplex structures, and relations being conceived as *a priori* hierarchical. Within gender and development, in particular, discourses of intersectionality usually pertain to *multiple* “inequalities”, “lines of discrimination”, or “identities” that intersect “to produce disadvantage” (see for example related *Gender and Development* issue from 2015). However, as some feminist theorists have noted, not all divisions need be axes of discrimination—some can be cultural differences (Harding cited in Yuval-Davis 2006: 199), which means that an emphasis on ‘inequalities’ would flatten out analytical depth. It has yet to be satisfactorily explained in gender and development scholarship how differences that result from exclusionary practices can be distinguished from differences that reflect individual preferences grounded in culture-specific worldviews.

It is not within the mandate of this article to engage profoundly with feminist theory of intersectionality—only to outline adaptations in gender and development—however, it is important to note that very little discussion has engaged with the concept’s epistemological implications. Within the analytic, social divisions are generally preconceived (gender, race, and class being most potent examples), and these are theorised in accordance to how gender, race, and class are understood in prominent feminist theories. If such metaphysics are embedded in a secular logic (the epistemological framework in which academic knowledge is made and remade), the cross-cultural relevance of the analytic can be questioned. Will these social divisions be equally relevant in non-western/non-secular epistemologies? Will social divisions be theorised on the basis of social/material processes alone, or will beliefs about the spiritual/invisible realm be equally/more salient? While feminist writers agree that intersectional analysis must be context-specific, employment of the analytic rarely addresses such epistemological concerns.

Many more gender and development writers have departed from historical essentialisms by turning to post-structuralist deconstructions of ‘sex’, advocating for gender fluidity as a new normative.<sup>10</sup> While such philosophical directions have provided insightful new

ways for conceiving the interface of gender subjectivities, language, and norms, their epistemological underpinnings can be equally problematic abroad. For instance, it is rarely recognised that the influential work of Judith Butler, increasingly cited in this field, reflects a certain feminist worldview that aims to replace ontology-based gender metaphysics with a social constructionist one. While Butler’s theorisation of gender as performative process opposes a pernicious ‘biologization’ paradigm, it also conceives gender categories as “always normative, and as such, exclusionary” (Butler 1995: 50). This attunes to a wider critique of Enlightenment humanism among post-modern western feminists, which has tended to translate into hostility to notions of ‘naturalness.’ It has not been recognised, however, that such philosophical critiques may be less relevant to cultural contexts that have not experienced equally the dogmatic metaphysics of Enlightenment and subsequent social sexism.

Furthermore, while a poststructuralist lens has insightfully linked gender subjectivation to normative gender metaphysics,<sup>11</sup> it should be considered that its politics of deconstruction can be counterproductive in contexts where beliefs about gender difference are especially powerful and where challenging them might cause unhelpful objections. Butler’s metaphysical aetiology of gender performativity has validity in mainstream academia because it is grounded in knowledge paradigms and validity criteria that are accepted/resonate with many western audiences: intellectual logic, philosophical syllogism, discourse analysis, etc. These same criteria (and thus the gender theory produced on their grounds) are not expected to be espoused in other knowledge systems to the same length because of the dominance of different epistemological paradigms that emanate from different worldviews. If, for example, some individuals conceive gender based on religious beliefs valued within their cosmological system (e.g. male and female is the definitive outcome of divine intervention), there is a clear incompatibility with a social constructionist ideal of gender fluidity. One organisation that vigorously opposed CEDAW’s domestication in Nigeria characteristically accused the Bill of promoting alternative gender relations and sexualities which described as subversive of “traditional Nigerian culture”, “family life and motherhood” (Para-Mallam 2006: 39). The CEDAW reactions seem to stress the need for finding ways to theorise and improve gender relations without necessitating a direct challenge of normativities because these may be valued locally for reasons not understood by a secular logic embedded in mainstream feminist metaphysics of gender.

The concept of empowerment may be more adaptable to local givens but it does not avoid similarly problematic assumptions. As a first observation, concepts of empowerment continue to be premised on explicit or implicit assumptions of pervasive inequality between

social males and social females. In Kabeer's theorisation, for example, the underlying idea is that the environment is defined by structurally unequal social relationships within which women's consciousness is shaped and oppression perpetuated (Kabeer 2011: 503; Kabeer and Khan 2014: 5). While it is necessary to employ gender-sensitive frames when analysing social realities, reducing all human relationships to social power can be limiting and misleading. This means that non-intellectualised knowledge planes, such as religious beliefs and spirituality that may partially shape human perceptions, attitudes, behaviour, and relations in some contexts, are not considered adequately. Admittedly, it has been postulated by Kabeer that the 'I' is not defined without a 'we' (Kabeer 2011: 503),<sup>12</sup> but it has not been considered that both the 'I' and the 'we' are engendered within cosmology-specific metaphysics. This conceptual repertoire will influence people's understanding of themselves as gendered, their relations with others and the environment, and even, what they will consider oppressive or empowering. Current definitions of empowerment recognise the power hidden in pre-existing normative systems, but they seem to conceptualise 'power' at a certain material/secular plane which I would submit obfuscates the multidimensionality and intangibility of human experience and socialisation.

I believe that Saba Mahmood's (2005) ethnographic study of a women's piety movement in Cairo, Egypt, highlights these sorts of issues. While not denying the poststructuralist insight that the pious women she worked with were conditioned to the normative expectations inherent in their system, Mahmood argued that liberal conceptions of agency premised on the binary of norm enforcement/subversion were insufficient to explain the behavioural patterns she observed. The women seemed to be at times critical about aspects of their tradition and reflective of their situations, but they also condoned Islamic ideals of female piety which they strove to achieve in everyday conduct. They repeatedly chose piety as their most valued achievement even if this implied behaviours mainstream feminist or secular mind-sets would not necessarily define as empowering, such as veiling or tolerating an 'impossible' to them husband (i.e. one who was not pious). To what extent it would be accurate (or helpful) to call these women oppressed is debatable, given that their subservience stemmed from what seemed to be their own desires emanating from within the local cosmological repertoire. Philosophically, the case can be made that one "might still be choosing autonomously even if she chooses subservience to others for its own sake, so long as she has made her choice in the right way or coheres appropriately with her perspective as a whole" (Friedman 2003: 19).

**Epistemological incommensurability and implications for gender practice:** The previous section attempted to illustrate some ways in which foundational concepts are

linked to western secular metaphysics of gender as these evolved over time. I believe that this linkage is important to recognise because it suggests a potential for epistemological incommensurability when mainstream concepts and theories are employed in non-western/non-secular knowledge systems, with important practical implications. What such incommensurability may consist in has been illustrated in my view by Richard Eves (2012) in an ethnographic analysis of a secular HIV/AIDS sensitisation programme among born-again Christians in Papua New Guinea. It appears that the 'value-free' language of the HIV/AIDS prevention programme ignored the theological framework through which local people viewed the disease (as a curse resulting from promiscuity), and encouraged them to see sex in amoral terms. This was reflected in the slogan 'A for Abstinence B for Be Faithful and C for Condoms' that was used in awareness campaigns. For local people, however, practising the third (using condoms) was often perceived as failing in the first two (abstinence and faithfulness), and therefore contradictory to local Christian morality (*ibid.*: 67). As Eves concluded, the rejection of global AIDS knowledge was not simply an issue of mistranslation or poor communication, but ultimately deeper epistemological 'dissonance': because secular programmers valued different knowledge than did local Christians, the approach taken did not resonate with the audience. Within gender and development, similar 'dissonance' can be discerned in my view in the CEDAW domestication process in Nigeria, which was pursued by a group of predominantly secular organisations using primarily the language of gender equality. The conclusions of the RaD study suggested that a better engagement with religio-cultural leaders at the community level and an adaptation of the Bill's language to the local religio-cultural sensitivities of women and men could have led to a more positive outcome (Para-Mallam et al. 2011).

Such examples suggest that the epistemological and theoretical framework through which development practitioners conceive gender (disease or other categories) will likely affect how sensitisation programmes are planned and implemented. While practitioners have consistently employed more participatory and human-centred research and programme methodologies on the ground (Bhasin 1990; Royal Tropical Institute and Oxfam 1998; Murphy 1999; Mukhopadhyay and Wong 2007; Moser 2014), participants have rarely been invited to contribute to the theorisation of global concepts in a way that will best reflect their own cosmologies and epistemologies. Hence, Lina Abu-Habib in an assessment of gender trainings delivered in the Macreq/Maghreb region found that many participants thought 'gender' to be an alien concept and incompatible with local traditions and religious knowledge (Abu-Habib 2007: 49, 55). Maitrayee Mukhopadhyay and Franz Wong link such objections to the hegemonic, linear, and technical ways in

which mainstream development knowledge has been conventionally transferred at the local level (Mukhopadhyay and Wong 2007: 23). My impression is that the problem is not pedagogical only, but ultimately the result of epistemological hierarchies and practitioner situatedness.

A gender exercise I stood in as a Gender and Development student at the UK's Institute of Development Studies (IDS) is worth mentioning because it can illustrate well the linkage. For one typical exercise the instructor asked participants to attribute a number of gender and sex characteristics to the categories 'female' and 'male' designated on a whiteboard. The aim was to lead participants to realise that most of the characteristics could not be associated essentially with either, and that gender should be conceived preferably as a continuum. In the exercise, a few students (including myself) who identified with a non-western religious cosmology showed signs of discomfort and had trouble thinking outside of a binary framework. While problematizing stereotypical gender categories resonated with all students, the promotion of gender fluidity as factual and normative caused distress for some as it disregarded religio-cultural beliefs. Should a gender ideal premised on secular logic and social constructionist feminist metaphysics have been valued over the gender ideals of the individual students merely because such was the epistemological framework in which knowledge was imparted, which the instructor happened to *accept* as valid? When it is considered that gender trainings delivered abroad often employ concepts and ideals that are defined by the same secular logic and share similar normative underpinnings, such questions acquire tremendous ethical and practical urgency.

Another implication that emerges from these examples is that objections by non-western actors to gender-related programmes may not be always the effect of 'patriarchy' or fundamentalism as some scholars tend to interpret (Vaggione 2008; Balchin 2008; AWID 2011; Horn 2012; Sandler and Rao 2012), but possibly symptoms of cosmological incommensurability exacerbated by the introduction of foreign notions and ideals which are perceived to be oppositional to local beliefs and values. This is an important inference because it suggests that gender practitioners might be contributing to such objections when they deploy unreflectively mainstream knowledge paradigms and ideals cross-culturally, but also that some 'backlash' may be avoided if the same practitioners attune more effectively their conceptual and theoretical frameworks to *locally valued gender metaphysics*. This ultimately includes beliefs, norms, and expectations about gender (including sexuality) that are potent within a specific cosmology. To achieve this, it may be necessary to suspend theoretical assumptions underpinned to mainstream concepts and to aspire to rely on local theories of gender as embodied by local populations. It should be understood that the issue is not whether the practitioner is western or local, but rather

whether the epistemological lens she/he employs emanates from western (mainstream) gender metaphysics or local cosmologies and gender beliefs. In my view, only analytical and theoretical frameworks that are built with local knowledge of gender can point to gender-sensitization and development approaches that will reflect and reason well with local people's world views, values, and needs.

**Conclusion:** In this article I submitted that mainstream concepts of gender and development have been theorised for the most part under a secular logic, and have been disproportionately more attuned to western feminist gender metaphysics, as these evolved over time to influence gender and development discourse. I have ventured that the epistemological situatedness of key concepts and theories delimits their ability to explain perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours about gender of people in non-secular cosmologies because these do not capture fully how religious knowledge and spirituality influence some people's thoughts and actions in social living. Theories of gender equality and empowerment can be problematized on similar grounds. How equality and empowerment are to be understood will depend to a large extent (although not exclusively) on how gender is metaphysically conceived in wider knowledge systems that have influenced individual socialisation and reasoning.

It was proposed that such epistemological incompatibilities grounded ultimately in epistemological hierarchies may have important implications for gender and development practice because interventions will tend to be designed on secular thought and ideals, while normative frameworks grounded in religio-cultural cosmologies may be appraised with suspicion or be dismissed as less valid and important. This is because the epistemological lens through which gender is theorised is predominantly secular as a result of a secular academic language and logic that prevails. Therefore, while gender practitioners may be epistemologically, socially, and culturally differently situated, it is not unlikely that a large majority will be conversant with mainstream theories of gender and resort to mainstream analytical frameworks and ideals for their local gender work.

It is crucial that the theoretical reflections in this article be not confused with an argument against gender-mainstreaming. My aim has been only to propose that the current theoretical frameworks may need to be made more malleable to account for conceptual and experiential planes that western epistemology has been blind to by default of its cosmology-conditioned mould. As someone socialised in a religious cosmology, I am convinced that mainstream concepts can achieve more epistemological multidimensionality by suspending or reconsidering some of the theoretical assumptions and political ideals that I discussed. Ultimately, this critical essay is underpinned by my wider criticism of a development paradigm and practice that ignores the epistemological frameworks and

value systems of the people it aims to understand and to benefit.

In my view, a non-biased gender analysis requires frameworks of analysis that begin with minimum assumptions and can then be theorised bottom to top, employing local gender metaphysics. Non-biased gender sensitisation programmes, in turn, require the understanding of local normative frameworks and values so as to identify gender ideals that resonate with the material and spiritual priorities of local populations, but which can also instigate good change to improve gender asymmetries in the valued normative system. Like Filomina Steady, I believe that gender analysis should aim to incorporate “a historical perspective, a holistic perspective, multidimensionality, multiple time frames, multiple levels of analysis, multiple identities and realities, relational and dynamic contexts, comparative methods, oral history, life history and so forth” (2005: 321), which may grant more insight into complex local knowledge and normative systems

<sup>1</sup> The concept of gender, which the Fourth World Conference on Women held in Beijing in 1995 helped to mainstream cross-culturally, drew attention to the structurally hierarchical relations of men and women in society and underscored the agreement that gender relations needed to be transformed (UN 2002: 9). This took the emphasis away from women exclusively (what was known as the Women in Development Approach-WID) and introduced the current paradigm of Gender and Development (GAD) which is concerned with both men and women, and specifically their power-laden relations at the individual, political, societal, and other analytical levels. In this paper I am concerned with the debates that have defined this more recent paradigm, but because the latter often overlaps with WID I discuss also earlier theoretical frameworks and analytical models that appear to have been influential within the GAD approach.

<sup>2</sup> I define cosmology as holistic knowledge system and I use it interchangeable with ‘worldviews’ (which in this work incorporate both perceptions and senses). A cosmology is directly linked to epistemology (valid ways of knowing; see below), ontology (ways of being) and ethics (principles governing social relations). In this sense, my definition departs from a clearly etymological one (*κόσμος + λόγος*) which would emphasise principles governing the cosmos (cosmogony, ontology, ways the world operates; see also Kyriakakis 2012: 135).

<sup>3</sup> I am thinking here of Bodman and Tohidi 1998; Sweetman 1998; Bayes and Tohidi 2001; Greany 2006; Vouhé 2007; Meer 2007; Hoodfar 2007; Tomalin 2011; Tadros 2011; Badran 2011; Bradley 2011; DeTemple 2012; and Tomalin 2015. Many more studies have been produced on the nexus of gender and religion but these emanate primarily from the disciplines of anthropology and religious studies. They include ethnographic studies that provide in depth discussion of the complex intersection of gendered subjectivities and religio-cultural socialisation in different knowledge systems (e.g. Boddy 1989, Mahmood 2005; Masquelier 2009; Bradley 2011), and studies

that have specifically investigated the role of faith in human perceptions and behaviours (Devin and Deneulin 2011).

<sup>4</sup> How social construction is understood is not always articulated explicitly in gender and development writings, but it is clear that multiple conceptions are employed. Andrea Cornwall seems to suggest that at the level of gender and development practice former theorisations are often preferred resulting in a superficial focus on ‘constructions’ themselves (Cornwall 2007: 72).

<sup>5</sup> The understanding is that the concept was introduced by Robert Stoller, who conducted research with individuals of non-normative sexualities or sexed bodies to investigate gender development. Stoller used gender to refer to the self-identifications of transsexuals as women or men (Gatens 1983; Mikkola 2016).

<sup>6</sup> Over-time, mainstream feminist theorisations of gender were criticised on multiple grounds, reflecting both post-colonial and post-structuralist/post-modern arguments. For instance, some writers criticized neo-colonial attitudes of Western feminists to universalize their representations of women (and men) in the Third World (e.g. Mohanty 1988, Narayan 2004). Some women from the South made the point that imperialism and colonialism were more salient impediments to them than was patriarchy (Ogunyemi in Arndt 2000; Steady 2005: 317-319). A number of African scholars also mounted critiques against feminist portrayals of gender relations as monolithically hierarchical in all societies (Amadiume 1987; Ogundipe-Leslie 1991 in Masuku 2005; Kolawole 1997; Oyěwùmí 1997; Nnaemeka 1998). In parallel, Black feminists in the United States worked to bring to attention the intersecting structural and political inequalities affecting Black women which western feminists theorisation had failed to account for (Berger and Guidroz 2009).

<sup>7</sup> I think that the latest *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* by Denzin, Lincoln and Smith (2008) includes contributions that illustrate this effectively. Most contributors seem to conceive epistemologies as local systems of knowledge or modes of knowing, and show that epistemologies need not rely always on Enlightenment reason, but can equally be premised on multilogical, embodied/experiential and spiritual modes/criteria of justification as valued within local cosmologies.

<sup>8</sup> Individuals can be exposed to multiple epistemological systems, and can change their epistemological framework throughout their life span as individual consciousness becomes shaped and reshaped by human experiences. However, this does not cancel out the fact that epistemological systems emerge from unique cultural contexts and are intimately connected with specific cosmologies. Furthermore, while I agree with James Clifford that “culture is contested, temporal, and emergent” (Clifford 1986: 19), I would submit that epistemological systems are more obstinate to change, perhaps because individuals need stronger reasons to question the validity criteria that they learned to value in their socialisation. My only suggestion is that this primary effect of epistemological systems on individual subjectivities deserves more attention in the theorisation and analysis of gender realities cross-culturally.



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<sup>9</sup>Bibi Bakere-Yusuf has produced a very thorough critique of Oyěwùmí's work that outlines what some of these flaws are. I will not repeat them here, but I will note that while Oyěwùmí gives us an idea as to why Oyo-Yorùbá cultural and social systems do not align with western worldviews, she does not give as a full reconstruction of local theories of gender. In my view, her work would have achieved more if she had engaged with embodied consciousness as much as she did with linguistic and institutional analysis. Bakere-Yusuf is right to point out that there is a difference between the normative framework, and how this is embodied by living people. However, it seems to me that Bakere-Yusuf too hastily overstates the gist of Oyěwùmí's argument, which is that concepts inevitably emanate from cosmology-specific epistemological systems (which, I suggest, are premised on unique criteria of validity). Oyěwùmí did not reject the concept of gender (evident in her subsequent use of it), but the imperial practices of its theorisation. Why should a concept be theorised within western metaphysics and experience, and not within the gender metaphysics and societal experience of other societies? What justifies this double standard? While Oyěwùmí could have presented a more thorough gender analysis based on the local conceptual repertoire as embodied by real people, her argument of epistemological incommensurability deserves more contemplation.

<sup>10</sup> Andrea Cornwall, for example, with reference to Moira Gatens' and Judith Butler's works argues against "naturalis[ing] sexual difference through the deployment of gender binaries that remain stubbornly tied to the anchor of sex essentialism" (Cornwall 2007: 76). Jerker Edström, in a recent IDS publication on masculinities, also draws theoretical insights from Judith Butler's gender performativity theory, stating that "This helped to clarify the role of relational performativity or habitual and structured practices in the social constructions of gender (rather than sex explaining the patterns of our habits and performances)" (Edström 2014). Although there is no room to elaborate the metaphysical implications of Butler's work, it should be recognised that her intention has been exactly to subvert ontological notions of gender.

<sup>11</sup> My argument is not that a poststructuralist framework is unhelpful (in fact my article is deeply influenced by Butler's work), but merely that the politics-laden assumptions about the universal perniciousness of normative frameworks tend to become essentialist and are therefore inappropriate. I would argue that a Butlerian gender performativity lens can provide unique insights into the relationship between religio-cultural norms and gender subjectivities as long as this relationship is not preconceived as already monolithically oppressive.

<sup>12</sup> Here Kabeer draws from Sheila Benhabib's philosophical observation that human beings become within a nexus of associations, which ultimately challenges historical asocial conceptualisations of the 'I.'

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