Book Reviews


The ubiquity of ‘gender’ as a concept and analytical tool in current development discourse demands a critical examination of the ways in which the term is interpreted and deployed in research and policy domains. It is precisely this need that the volume, *Men at Work*, addresses in the context of developing countries. In the introduction to this volume of essays, Cecil Jackson sums up the most severe critique of the dominant gender analysis approach to development: that it has become the sole purview of women’s concerns. This collection of essays aims to turn attention to men as gendered subjects, which should ultimately reinforce our appreciation of the essentially relational nature of gender and gendered divisions of labour.

The first two essays illustrate the consequence of the relative neglect of men in gender analysis. The authors contest the stereotype of the ‘lazy’ rural African male, which has its history in colonial representations about what constituted ‘real’ work, but which has been reinforced by the almost exclusive focus of contemporary research on rural women’s agricultural productivity. Such images of men, they argue, are constructed in social and political arenas, internalised by male subjects, and find their way into research and policy paradigms.

Especially interesting is Pineda’s chapter on the emerging masculinities of Colombian men whose female partners are engaged in micro-enterprise programmes. Such economic empowerment projects have become a mainstay of development efforts targeted at low-income women, and it is important to assess the impact on men’s masculinities when women are thus ‘empowered’. In Pineda’s study, men take up work in the female partner’s home-based businesses, and concurrently reconfigure their masculine identities to encompass these domestic activities. However, their newer masculinities are built on old notions of ‘men’s work’. Yet in many cases, men are unable to adapt to this new state of affairs. Thus the essay makes a final point about the oddly persistent nature of representations of masculinity even in the face of changing circumstances.
Indeed, a good proportion of the book reflects on the ‘crisis of masculinity’ arising from factors that hinder men’s participation in both public and private spheres. Vera-Sanso raises the intriguing question of whether it is not in the very nature of masculinity to be challenged, based as it is on ‘virtually unattainable’ and somewhat ambiguous standards? Unlike women whose proof of womanhood may lie in relatively stable biological measures, “... men are required to meet standards of adult masculine performance which vary over the life course in inevitably changing social and economic contexts” (p. 182). Change factors commonly cited include adverse economic conditions and unemployment, increased female participation in the labour force, and legislation that facilitate women’s access to the public sphere. The more interesting analyses examine age, social class and race questions: If the work space is the symbolic terrain of maleness, then what are the implications for identity when age and social circumstance undermine masculine roles? I believe this collection convincingly demonstrates that, while the research literature might seek to contest hegemonic notions of masculinity, these images must be engaged with inasmuch as men subscribe to or feel pressured to conform to them.

As it is to be expected of a book that is something of a pioneering effort, the essays tend to be dispersed across conceptual and geographical space. Thus we have essays that examine agricultural work in Kenya; male domestic work in Colombia; the political work of black South Africans; community work performed by rural Zambian men in their ‘leisure’ time; and formal employment within the monetised economy in Costa Rica.

The thread that ties this collection together is in the methodological and theoretical approaches. Much of the empirical work is done using ethnographic tools; the point is made that the diverse and shifting nature of male subjectivities demands a conscientious use of qualitative methodology. Theoretically, the book has its foundations in gender analysis of development and its conventions. However, these conceptual traditions have been developed largely through studies of women. It would seem that a simple transference of concepts and methods from studies on women would miss some of what makes masculinity unique and what makes the relationships between genders so complex as to deserve the attention that this collection devotes to it.

In sum, the eclectic range of discourse presented by this collection, is not necessarily a problem; rather, it conveys an idea of the vastness of the field yet to be explored, and the variety of issues that need to be considered in gender-oriented research and policy. *Men at Work* is useful not just for researchers interested in men’s work (for whom this is a recommended resource), but for the many engaged in research on women. As this volume