

A Regional Conversation on Southern African Cities and Towns: The Gender, Urbanisation and Everyday Life Research Project, 1992–2005

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Introduction

In 1992, the GRUPHEL network was formed to bring together researchers across the region to document and analyse the rapid change underway in cities and towns across Southern Africa. Within one generation, the lives and living conditions of people in Southern Africa have undergone far-reaching transformation through urbanisation. This network drew together senior and junior scholars to work together to invigorate the substantive analysis of the gendering of the urban everyday-experience in the Southern African region. At the same time, this focus demanded that we engage with qualitative methodologies, that we work carefully and contextually to engage with change, its social negotiation, and its manifestation in the physical and built environments.

This initial project inspired a collaboration spanning thirteen years, involving more than sixty researchers in universities and research institutes across Southern Africa, and a long-term collaboration between Swedish feminists and Southern African feminists. This Profile piece reflects on the GRUPHEL network, first on the body of literature it has produced and secondly, on its development – through a conversation with its coordinators – Matšelisó 'Ma-Tlali Mapetla and Ann Schlyter.

The programme provoked a debate on gender, women and feminism in research and practice, examined through qualitative methodologies that attempt to engage carefully with social context to acknowledge people's experiences and to build a rigorous body of knowledge on Southern African social and urban change. The programme has consistently funded and supported empirical research, and thus has built up an extensive body of

primary materials, generated by and for regional scholars.

Reflecting on GRUPHEL research highlights the ways in which the research programme has responded to gaps in the analysis of gender and African cities and towns, as well as the ways in which some urban challenges – those connected for instance to housing – have persisted and others developed responding to the consequences of HIV/Aids in the past two decades.

The first volume, published in Zimbabwe in 1995 highlights women and men as actors in a gender system which functioned according to the principles of separation and subordination at household as well as at community level. Anita Larsson frames this debate theoretically in the volume, drawing on Swedish historian Yvonne Hirdman. While open to different disciplines and perspectives but also providing inspiration to the participating researchers, this piece helped structure the earlier discussions and the volume of research produced. Housing was already a dominant theme in this publication, with papers that explored how women managed to make a home in negotiations with male heads of households (Gwagwa), or with landlords (Sithole-Fundire), or as live-in nannies with employers (Macwan'gi). But there were also papers on women's livelihoods: women in mines (Chiwawa), in trade (Zhou) and micro-business (Nachudwa). Many GRUPHEL researchers participated in a conference resulting in a second volume in 1996. In this volume, and particularly central to later GRUPHEL work, Mulela Munalula reflected theoretically and methodologically on women's rights to property, a paper that became one of the basic readings for participants in the following phases of the programme.

The next publication (1998) drew together a rich qualitative analysis of the struggles for homes and livelihoods in places as diverse as Durban, Maseru, Mbabane and Lusaka, analysing: women street vendors and their access to housing (Fadane); gender relations in the taxi industry in Durban, South Africa (Khosa); exploring the gendered nature of Lesotho urban migration (Kimane and Ntimo-Makara) and the inter-linkages between women's domestic work and housing struggles in Swaziland (Miles). Collectively, this work demonstrated that access to urban housing remains a critical problem in Southern Africa, presenting huge challenges for human settlements that reflect the politics of changing gendered social structures and broader gendered socio-economic inequalities. The research reveals that access to and control over housing are embedded in gendered power relations, in which men and women actively negotiate relationships, access to resources, and

the nature and structure of everyday life (2003). This phase of the GRUPHEL research drew together, amongst others, a regional conversation and analysis of: Home-ownership schemes in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe (Gwebu); self-help housing projects in Lobatse, Botswana (Kalabamu); gendered insecurities in new low-income housing projects in Zomba, Malawi (Kishindo); analysis of black women builders in Mpumalanga, South Africa (Radebe); and examination of the exclusion of women in the privatisation of public housing in Lusaka (Schlyter).

Reflecting the onset of the Aids pandemic, the 2005 GRUPHEL publication speaks to this crisis and the ways it has reshaped not only Southern African social structures, but also the gendered and generational negotiation of urban housing and livelihoods. Bless explores the livelihood strategies of girl- and boy-headed households in Maseru, while Gwebu considers the ways in which HIV/AIDS has reworked gendered household dynamics in Gaborone. The final volume in 2007 not only critically reflects on the gendered nature of the crisis but on the severity of its remaking of generational expectations and practices in our region. Kamwengo and Schlyter scrutinize the generational support systems in Zambia, Kimane and Mohale work through the legal implications and practices that shape orphaned children's access to their parent's properties in Lesotho, and Nyanguru draws into our debate the ways in which elderly women in Lesotho emotionally cope with the devastation the pandemic has wrought on their children and grandchildren.

As a sustained, regional research network, GRUPHEL has produced an extensive and crucial body of primary research. At the same time, it has brought together regional researchers from Lesotho, Malawi, Swaziland, Botswana, Namibia, Zambia, Zimbabwe and South Africa. Through extensive capacity building, the network drew senior and junior researchers together to research, write and to build a rigorous conversation on gender and its negotiation in cities and towns across our region.

Feminist Africa asked Matšelis Mapetla and Ann Schlyter to look back and share some of their experiences of the GRUPHEL network.

Matšelis Mapetla: I am a Senior Research Fellow and Coordinator of Gender and Development Research in the Institute of Southern African Studies, National University of Lesotho. For over a decade I coordinated the regional project GRUPHEL in Southern Africa. It has been about fourteen years since the undertaking of the gender research programme that brought Ann Schlyter and I together into a regional feminist/gender network researching and

interested in issues of gender relations in urbanization, planning and everyday lives of women in Southern Africa. The programme ended almost four years ago, but informal networking has continued.

Ann Schlyter: I am an Associate Professor working with gender studies at the School of Global Studies, University of Gothenburg. I have been working with urban studies in Africa since the late sixties and with a gender perspective since the mid-eighties. In GRUPHEL I was privileged to be a scientific advisor and at the same time a participating researcher on the same terms as the other participants. It was always a pleasure to work with you.

Matšelis: My institute focuses on research issues in Southern Africa, and gender studies became one of its agenda programmes that I had personally initiated. I saw the need for documentation and knowledge in my own environment. But Ann, how did you come to engage in Africa and in gender studies?

Ann: I came to Zambia as an architect student in the sixties. In addition to studies of the post-colonial situation, I was prepared by being an activist in the anti-Apartheid movement. I was appalled by the housing situation in the squatter area we studied, but also impressed by the strength women and men showed in building a home and a life for themselves. There was in George compound a development optimism that I shared.

I was a child of the Swedish welfare state optimism of the time. As a working class child, I had been raised in a one-room rented flat. The shortage of housing did not allow for a change to a bigger flat, but the family's economic situation gradually improved and we could later afford a car and even to build a small summer cottage. As a student I chose to study housing. In Africa, I found a great need of housing and a great need of knowledge about housing conditions of poor people. I became aware of the discrimination of women when studying an urban upgrading project in Zambia in the seventies. Women who were heading households somehow disappeared in the process, so that in the end only men-headed households benefited from subsidies and appeared as owners of the homes.

I continued to study the housing situation of women-headed households in both Zambia and Zimbabwe, and then of married women. Legally, married women were in a delicate situation: they benefited from the property of their husbands, but in cases of separation, divorce or death of the husband, they most often lost all rights to their home. Thinking back, I can see that I was in the company of most of the first generation researchers on women in

development who largely focused on single women and the women-headed households. I think this focus became dominant because these women were the ones who were most visible in statistics.

Matšelis: In her article in this issue of *Feminist Africa*, Elaine Salo refers to the debates on power relations in the production of anthropological research. What has been your experience of being a “musungu” researcher in Southern Africa?

Ann: Just by having the training and the resources to travel from Sweden and do research in Africa, although always on very limited funding, I have certainly been part of the global power relations in the post-colonial era. But within the academic world, I have not been confronted personally for using this power or accused for misusing it. Perhaps this has to do with disciplines. The reflexivity among researchers in the field of urban studies, a male-dominated area with a close connection to planning, may not be as well developed as among anthropologists.

Much more is to be said about being a woman and a “musungu” in the fieldwork situation. In George in the 1960, we (my husband and I) first became known for supporting the residents’ struggle for recognition and legalisation and based on that goodwill, I developed a long-term relationship with a number of families. It was as if categories such as class and gender became less important because I was white and from Europe. Class attitudes were otherwise strong. If I had a Zambian student as interpreter, we often met hostile attitude, totally different from the way we were received if I had employed a resident woman to interpret.

There were some positive consequences of being a total outsider; I could ask stupid, personal and private questions and I was excused for not knowing how to behave. Of course, as an outsider I had to rely heavily on my local assistant for interpretations not only of the language but also of conceptions and attitudes.

Matšelis: At the National University of Lesotho, we have quite a number of international contacts and projects. But with the GRUPHEL programme I had the opportunity to develop long-standing and working relationships with feminist colleagues in the region. With a large well-funded programme, it was also easier to get acceptance for the gender perspective.

Ann: That definitely marks a shift. It was initially not easy to get acceptance for the gender perspective. In the first phase, we found no university institution willing to host the programme. Therefore an NGO – the Zimbabwe

Women's Resource Centre and Network – became the first coordinator. Even the representative of Sida/SAREC (the funding agency of GRUPHEL) for Southern Africa in the eighties advised me not to use the concept of gender, arguing that it was not understood by the scientific community. Of course, he was narrow-minded; African feminist researchers were active and supportive, but ignored by many of their male colleagues.

The distinction between sex and gender has later been contested, but initially the parallel to the distinction between race and ethnicity was useful in arguing for the legitimacy of the gender studies. We argued that sex and race were biology, while gender and ethnicity were socially constructed and could be changed. To meet critique from male colleagues, we added that both racists and sexists defended inequalities with reference to biological differences.

Matšelisio: It must also be said that we had, unintentionally, just a few but very good male researchers within the project. They turned out to be strategic because they have in fact, become some of the best promoters of feminist scholarship in universities, as well as gender activists.

Ann: Yes, over the years more and more men in Africa have shown an interest in gender studies. In contrast, it seems to be more difficult to get Swedish male researchers interested in gender issues.

Matšelisio: The GRUPHEL project put strong emphasis on qualitative methodology; it grounded theoretical generalisations in empirical evidence, and related evidence to theoretical discourses. The idea of a constant dialogue between a theorising exercise and the use of data as developed in the grounded theory approach was applied within GRUPHEL as well as in some other regional research networks in Southern Africa.

In the beginning, there was a struggle to find acceptance and legitimacy for this approach, both for the gender perspective and for the qualitative methods. There was quite another climate by the end of the project. Sometimes, though, endless discussions with some of the male researchers in the programme felt like regressing the gender struggles that the programme was trying to overcome. A few men and women felt intellectually challenged when they initially did not understand the general objectives and particularly emphasis on the use of qualitative (presenting a human dimension) versus the conventional quantitative (without a human face) methodologies. Therefore our research was criticized by my male colleagues for being unscientific!

Ann: Many of our colleagues within GRUPHEL were eager to produce direct

useful results as in applied research, while the programme aimed to enhance research capacity within the field, partly in opposition to the shallow ways of understanding often accepted in applied research, and its often underlying assumptions of linear modernization processes.

Matšelis: Therefore Ann, in a way, it is not surprising that the research got criticized from the applied research perspective for being weak in its value in changing lives in the South, and also from the feminist perspective for the researchers' failure to give something back to the researched communities.

Ann: It is an eternal dilemma, isn't it? We had no solution, but at least it was continuously debated within the programme. How did we as researchers handle the knowledge entrusted in us by our informants? I often had to argue for the value of academic knowledge, although not always directly useful for the communities concerned.

Matšelis: Our emphasis on qualitative methodology allowed us, as feminist researchers, to hear women's voices from below through our exploration of the lived experiences of women and men of different generations. This approach to research afforded the research informants an opportunity to express their needs and to define their situations, experiences, and the concepts and theories of governing that gave meaning to their everyday lives.

GRUPHEL's multi-disciplinary style also opened up various types of theoretical approaches. Individual and collective strategies to use participatory research and consolidated collaborative and consultative methodological research processes were utilized. At the same time, we drew on and of course accepted that the qualitative analysis could be supported by quantitative data found in the literature, or as a result of a quantitative sub-study undertaken by the researcher.

Through the network, there was a continuous debate about concepts and theories. Even the basic concept of gender, though commonly defined and understood by the researchers, had to be contextualized in the location, culture and socio-economic environment of each studied country.

Ann: Notably, Caroline Moser had a great influence on gender researchers in planning. Her identification of women's needs as related to production, reproduction, and community work informed many studies in the late eighties and early nineties. Based on her writings, we had lengthy but seldom fruitful discussions about the distinction between practical or strategic needs; the latter defined as improving women's position.

Some GRUPHEL researchers – I among them – found the concept of a

gender contract a helpful and stimulating way of thinking. With reference to Hirdman, it was defined as an unwritten social contract prescribing what proper behaviour is for a woman and for a man respectively. However, our results in the end could have been reached and presented without the concept, and in some cases it was misunderstood and confused with personal contracts such as legal marriage contracts. At the same time, identity studies and discourse analysis came as strong trends within gender research which influenced the GRUPHEL research network, but the material and spatial emphasis in our studies situated us somewhat on the side of the dominating theoretical trends within feminist studies.

Matšelis: Not only were theories and approaches changing during the years of the programme, but so were the global economy and the situation for people in Southern Africa. The later phases of the research brought to light the effects of entrenching poverty and the devastating impacts of HIV/AIDS on economic relations within households, and weakening of their asset bases either because they have to save the lives of relatives or because of their vulnerable status as orphans and child-headed households for example.

Ann: I think it is impossible to do social research in Southern Africa without taking the pandemic into consideration. Certainly, it cast a dark shadow over my own last study about ageing and inter-generational support systems in Zambia. But it is also clear that the global economy and the globalised policies continue to affect large parts of the Southern African population negatively. Over the decades I have seen an ongoing impoverishment of the people in George compound on the edge of Lusaka; one that is so different from my own experience.

Matšelis: Let us conclude this dialogue by summarizing the outputs of the programme for us personally as researchers and in terms of publications. For me, the research has expanded my understanding of gender relations and generated empirical knowledge on local issues and concerns in developing Southern Africa. The case studies have uncovered and made accessible knowledge about socio-economic problems experienced by women in urban areas due to the process of urbanization itself, poor planning and inadequate housing, framed in unbalanced gender relations and a broader lack of access to resources. Through this substantive research, we have built theory and constructed and reconstructed concepts.

Ann: For me, the programme was rewarding as it meant regular interaction with researchers from eight countries in Southern Africa. As a guest in Africa,

I have always been aware of limitations in my understanding of underlying meanings when studying the everyday life of women and men, and my research has benefited a lot through the dialogue with Southern African researchers within the programme.

Matseliso: Each of the programme's phases ended with a publication. There are six main publications from the programme, with four published in Lesotho by the Institute of Southern Africa (which can be ordered directly or accessed through www.isas@isas). ISAS has also published many individual research reports. Furthermore, many GRUPHEL researchers have used material from their GRUPHEL studies when writing articles for international, peer-reviewed journals.

The GRUPHEL publications fill a literature gap, contributing immensely to literature and reference material production for scholars. The empirical evidence makes visible issues of gender, gender power relations, roles and social justice in the main. The material is also used widely in the teaching of gender studies and urban studies. The reviews have generally been positive demonstrating that through GRUPHEL work, Southern African research and reality is moving in the right direction, towards addressing systematic barriers that surround aspects of women and men's negotiation of urban lives (Matashane, Review of Southern African Studies 2007, Vol 3 # 2: 268-273). At the same time, they have highlighted that the resourcefulness of GRUPHEL has been its method of capturing the voices of the researched, adding the human dimension to grounded issues that could have otherwise too easily become lost in academic discourse

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